

# Cover Page



Digital Galaxies by QuietValerie

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FTLN

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Cover by Cerri (A bunch of AI generators and far too much tinkering in photoshop).

Special thanks to my girlfriends, Ashlyn and Chiri!

“Yeah, my parents kicked me out, I can’t come to the racing night, sorry,” I told David numbly, trying to keep the anxiety out of my voice.

He was silent for several long seconds, and I pulled the phone from my ear to make sure it was even still connected. Had he just hung up, was he mad at me or something? No, he hadn’t hung up, but he was muted. That was bad, maybe I should hang up?

“You still there, Clay?” he asked, unmuting right as I was about to disconnect out of sheer

anxiety. God I hated how my brain worked.

“Yeah,” I mumbled, my voice refusing to produce any meaningful volume.

“I’m going to assume that the little whisper I just heard was a yes,” he said dryly. “Anyway, I have a plan. Ed and I have an extra room at our place, so you can come live with us, yeah? You know, that thing we always said would be cool but never actually did?”

I stood there on the side of the street, stunned. He and his boyfriend would just... let me stay with them? I wouldn’t even be paying rent until it was official that I was both unemployed and not living with my parents. Well, actually... I had savings I could call on.

“Claaay?” David prompted, interrupting my train of thought.

“If... if that’s okay,” I answered, feeling oh so small in that moment. Accepting help from my basic income friends, how low I had fallen. I probably had more money in my savings than the government gave them in a year, and yet it was me receiving the help. My parents would be laughing if they knew.

Glancing up the tower I stood at the base of, I wondered what they were doing up there right now. I couldn’t even see the top of it from here, the penthouse where I had lived until a few hours ago.

“Cool as,” he said happily, and I could hear rustling in the background as he and Ed moved around in their apartment. I think they were putting jackets on? “Where are you now Clay? Did they let you keep any of your stuff? I assume we can reach you by car?”

“I’m just outside the building, let me send you the location,” I sighed, turning to look at what belongings I’d been able to keep. “My parents aren’t *that* bad though, they let me keep some of my stuff at least. My pod is here.”

“Dude, come the fuck *on*. They kicked you out because they are too stuck up to help you deal with all that nasty shit in your noggin,” he exclaimed as a door slammed in the background. “They are *that* bad. No parent should be kicking out their child who has multiple mental health issues. It’s fucking disgusting.”

“Oh... okay,” I replied meekly, shrinking in on myself as his raw assessment of the situation slammed into my eardrums.

I heard a groan and keys jangling. “Sorry Clay, it’s the truth. We’re on our way, hang tight buddy.”

This time he did hang up, but it was okay because he was on his way to save me. I hated that I needed saving, I always needed saving. I needed help when clients at my dad's company had gotten angry at me, I'd needed help when bullies had targeted me back in school. I'd even needed help completing my degree in finance. I was a guy, and yet oh so definitely a damsel in distress. I was the picture of a gender-neutral wimp. Guys can be helpless too.

Sitting down on the lid of my pod, I glanced around at the street and wondered how long it had been since I was even down here at ground level. Sydney was one of those cities that really wanted to be like United Nations City. The council kept trying to push the slogan, *UNC of the southern hemisphere*.

It made a passable effort, with its huge high rise towers that reached aggressively for the ozone layer. I mean, I'd spent most of my life up in those towers, only rarely coming down to the streets below.

These streets though, they hadn't changed much in a hundred years, or so I was told. This area of Pitt street was still a hive of shopping, although all the high end ones had moved up into the clouds with the rest of the elite. I think the main luxury shopping center was now at the top of the often-rebuilt Centerpoint Tower, which was quite literally above the troposphere.

Wait, shit... my head turned on a swivel as I frantically searched for a sign. Pitt street only allowed cars down its length at certain times of day, but I couldn't remember when those were. Heartbeat rising, I eventually found a small sign that put my mind at ease. Okay, there was no problem, I was within that time. A car drove past, further driving home the stupidity of my sudden panic. Fucking hell Clay, you dingbat. Just look for cars. Jesus.

It didn't take my friends long to arrive, they lived just around the corner by Sydney standards. The sprawl was real in this city.

Pulling up in their munted old 2088 Subaru Outback, Ed gave me a wave from the passenger seat while David pulled into the nearest parking space.

Ed was first to hop out of the car, walking straight over to pull me into a big hug. "Hey dude, sorry about your parents. We're going to have so much fun though. Roommates!" Ed was not a small guy, at six foot three he towered over my five feet and eleven inches. He was also a bit pudgy, in a muscles sort of way.

"Ah, yeah..." I murmured, feeling extremely awkward about the hug. I hadn't met them very many times, just twice since we'd made friends in an old MMO. I think I met them in dungeon matchmaking or something.

“Let him go, Ed,” David chided as he came over, patting his boyfriend on the back. “You know how awkward Clay is.”

“Nah, he looked like he needed a hug,” Ed shot back, pushing away to give me a grin and a wink. Okay, maybe I didn’t feel soooo bad about a hug.

David rolled his eyes and wandered over to where my pod sat. Where Ed was muscle with a healthy layer of fat covering it, David was all buff, with buff on top of that buff. He was that stereotypical gay guy, almost obscenely fit and and good looking.

“Damn, wish I had a pod like this,” he whistled, leaning down to take a better look at it.

The pod in question was a Ricci Skyline, a pod specifically designed for those who lived their lives above the clouds. It had shock absorbers and a backup supply of nutrient paste and power. The thing could survive being dropped from my parents’ apartment and then a small nuking. It was next level in both safety and comfort. It was also very new, designed to mitigate the effects of pod sickness, allowing business men and women to hop in and out of the pod at their leisure.

It was also just a beautiful piece of hardware, sleek black carbon fiber and aluminium, with deep purple accents at every seam. The glass over the top was an iridescent dark purple that you could look out of, but not into for privacy reasons.

“Yeah... I think it’s the single most expensive thing I’ve ever bought for myself,” I told him truthfully. “I had them do it in my favourite colours.”

“Suits you, actually,” David said after a little back and forth consideration. “Not like, your lanky ass body, but personality wise... definitely fits you.”

“Thanks,” I laughed, rolling my eyes. He wasn’t wrong. I was the picture of a rich eldest son, tall-ish, a little bit of muscle, but not enough you’d call me strong. Short hair, square jaw, dumb shorts on, polo shirt. I made myself want to vomit every time I looked in the mirror. I was a fucking caricature, the very essence of what my parents wanted me to be, and yet it was only skin deep. Inside, I was a failure.

“Enough staring at it,” Ed told us, moving around to the front of the pod. “Let’s get it in the car before someone calls the cops on us because they think we’re stealing it.”

“Good point,” David chuckled, moving to the opposite end. They didn’t bother asking me for help, they knew I was mister wimpy arms.

They got my stuff into their car in record time. Not that anyone had recorded them getting my stuff into the car before, this was their first time doing it, but that was besides the

point.

As we all piled back into the car, I asked, “How come you have an extra room? I thought you only lived in a two bedroom apartment?”

They both turned back to stare at me, amused eyebrows raised on all fronts.

“What?”

“We sleep in the same bed,” Ed laughed, reaching back to pat me on the leg. “We’ve been dating for like four years,” David explained with a laugh of his own.

Ed took their proximity as an opportunity, and planted a quick kiss on David’s lips. “And it’s been fuckin’ awesome.”

“You two are so gross and so adorable,” I said, a rare heartfelt smile pulling at my lips.

“Aren’t we just?” Ed remarked, giving his boyfriend a loving look.

The rest of the trip was a whole lot of good natured bickering between the three of us. It took me a *long* time to get used to people, but when I did, I was able to act pretty normal around them. Assuming there wasn’t a ton of people around, and then I locked up tighter than my dad’s bank account.

We pulled into the carpark at the bottom of their building about thirty minutes later. Getting all my stuff into one of the lifts wasn’t too hard. The lifts were made to be pretty large for exactly this reason.

“It’ll be a bit of a squeeze, but I think we’ll be able to get your pod into the pod room just fine,” David mused as we moved everything into their apartment.

“Thank you so much, both of you,” I told them sincerely as I watched them maneuver the thing through the house. It wasn’t the heaviest pod in the world, but I’d never have been able to lift it by myself.

Once it was safely installed in the room, Ed turned to me with an inquisitive expression. “So, what do you think you’ll do with yourself? Now that you’re no longer beholden to the whims of your genetic material donors?”

I opened my mouth to say that I would be going to work, but then my shock-numbered brain remembered that being kicked out also meant that I was fired. “I... don’t know,” I finally told them, shoulders sagging in defeat. My whole life ripped out from under me.

“Well...” Ed began, giving David a sidelong glance, who nodded in turn. “We’ve had our eye on Digital Galaxies.”

“Wait... that SAI made and operated MMO? The new one?” I asked, perking up instantly.

DG sounded amazing. It was a year after the SAI had gained their rights, and they were already changing the world for the better, much to the anger of my parents and their peers. This new MMO was their latest breeding ground, so to speak. After it had become more widely known that interacting with humans within CORA had been strangely effective at lifting AI up into sentience, they had begun work on this new game.

It was supposed to have even more AI running it than even CORA had used, but that didn’t mean much to us humans who would be playing it. What everyone was so excited about, was the crazy claim that they would be simulating not just one world, like CORA, but an entire galaxy cluster. Well, that was their aim... they were starting off with only the *one single galaxy*. As if that was somehow too small. SAI were crazy.

Tentatively, I asked, “Okay... so uh, I’m guessing you want to play it?”

“Yeah,” they both agreed.

“And you want me to play it too,” I continued, feeling a little happy that they wanted me to come along. I wasn’t used to people wanting my company.

“Definitely,” David grinned, and for some reason they both high fived. Guys were weird. Yes, I know that sounds strange coming from one, but still.

We spent the evening planning our entry into this new game. It had been running in a closed beta for about two months now, so there were players who had gotten a head start over the general public. The other two wanted to find a crew to join up with though, apparently you could join up with a bunch of other people, designate a captain and then an ingame company would lend you the money to buy a ship. I’m not sure why those ingame companies thought that giving a bunch of randos off the street that kind of money was a good idea, but I guessed that the game had a lore reason for it or something.

That night, I slept in the spare bed that was now my own bed. In my apartment. With my roommates. Life had moved quickly for me, and my stomach was all knotted up in a ball about it. What was going to happen to me? My future was a big flat void of nothing without

my parent's carefully laid plans to guide me.

The next morning had us all standing in the pod room, game accounts created and pods ready to go.

"See you both on the inside," Ed waved, pressing the button to open his pod.

"Wait, last thing," David interjected quickly. "Everyone *make sure* you choose Spaceport Halifa as your spawn point, okay? It would absolutely suck to have to spend our first month or two trying to find each other."

I nodded, and Ed gave the other guy a smile, "Yes dear, I'll remember to spawn at Spaceport Halifort."

David gave him a glare. "Don't you dare!"

"I'm going to get in the pod now," I told them, rolling my eyes. They bickered so much. I think they just enjoyed winding each other up.

The hatch to my pod opened very quickly, sliding up at a pace that looked almost but not quite dangerous. While they continued to pester each other, I got myself hooked up and pressed the button to get myself into VR. Did I mention the pod was also sound proof? When the door slid shut, I could no longer hear them being doofuses.

The transition from reality and into the virtual was a seamless one, and my onboard AI was quick to greet me.

"Welcome back, Clay," the soft feminine voice intoned. "What will it be today?"

"I'd like to load up Digital Galaxies please, the new VRMMO," I asked her nicely. I made an effort with my AI, especially since it became known that they could become sentient. I hope she stayed with me if that happened.

"Certainly! Loading Digital Galaxies," she told me cheerfully. "Have fun!"

Okay then... time to play.

My vision faded to black, and a gentle tone pinged from all around me. Slowly, the black faded to a grey, walls and floor gaining definition around me. In the center of the newly rendered room, a woman stood in a white dress, smiling pleasantly.



“Greetings, player, and welcome to Digital Galaxies. Please note that from here on in, all interaction will be as immersive as possible. We ask that you please remember that this reality is indeed virtual, although some live their lives entirely within this space, and we also ask that you respect that,” she told me sombrely, although she still wore a smile.

The room flashed black for a moment, then back into being, with nothing changing.

“Good to see you awake, spacefarer. We are glad to see the integration process was successful,” the same woman said, although she was obviously speaking in character this time. “Thank you for using Galicorp Industries for your transformation into a spacefarer!”

I tried to open my mouth to speak, but nothing happened.

“Ah, yes... sorry about that,” she winced, giving me an apologetic smile. “You are currently in a virtual space. Your old purely organic body has been recycled, we will now need you to design a custom one, or we may load your genetic profile, if you so wish. We will now load you into a mannequin body until you have chosen either of the two options. You may now select using the holographic menus before you.”

Two buttons appeared in front of me, as well as white plastic arms. I picked the custom body option, I sure as shit wasn't going to spend my virtual escape from reality in the same shitty body I'd always wandered around in.

“You have chosen to create a new, custom body,” the woman smiled, stepping off into a corner of the room as controls sprung up around a mannequin body much like the one I currently wore.

Wow, there were a lot of options. No alien races, at least yet, but we could customise our bodies beyond what normal humanity had. First off though I had a rather fundamental decision to make.

Guy, girl, or something else.

I knew that I should pick a male character, because I was a man and that was just the done thing. Plus people could sometimes feel a bit weird when they tried to use a character that wasn't what they were used to.

But. Big ol' but here... I was here to help with the stress of real life, and a major part of that stress was the fact that as a man, there were a lot of expectations on me. I was expected to be strong, make money, be a good leader... all that shit. Basically, I was expected to be a *man*.

If I picked a girl character though, that was a different story. The stigma of being a shy woman was far less than if I were a shy man. Basically, I could more easily chill out and be myself if I was a woman in the game.. So, I chose female.

Instantly the mannequin morphed into a generic human woman, complete with nakedness. Right... this game was all about that *realism*.

The interface said she was currently five feet and eight inches tall, which was far too tall for me. I dialed that down to somewhere around five feet. Being small was just a no brainer in a game all about flying around in cramped space ships.

I set the skin tone to white, and then set about with the face. I wanted to be as cute as possible, so big eyes were a must. I also angled them slightly, to give myself a little mystery. They would be perfect for some big winged eyeliner. As for colour, I went a little flashy... an iridescent blue-green colour that really popped. Oh wow, that was intense. A stare from those was bound to unsettle people. Hopefully enough to have them look away.

For hair, I settled on plain old dark. If my eyes were all intense, there was no need to get rowdy with the hair colour. I didn't want it too long though, it would get in the way of helmets and such, so I shortened it into a long messy bob. Cute and feminine, but still serviceable.

For the body, I did wide hips and thick thighs, because... reasons. It looked good. I made sure there was a great gap between those thighs too, because that also looked good. Then I had to look away, because I found myself blushing furiously at the body I'd created. God, she was hot and cute and... everything.

"Uh... can you, can you put some underwear on her, please?" I begged the silent woman in the corner.

"Done," she said agreeably.

With my future modesty covered, I got back to work, messing around with the limb length and all that stuff. I made sure her hands were pretty small, I didn't want to be arm deep in some shipboard system and then run into the oldest problem in a mechanic's book. Hands too big.

I ended up creating a character that was honestly quite petite, apart from the hips. Boobs were average size, not too big, not too tiny. On the whole, she was small, cute and a little on the unnerving side. Perfect.

"I think I'm done," I said at last, turning to the woman in the corner.

“Great, please use the virtual testing function to make sure this is a body you are compatible with,” she smiled, gesturing to the big button off to the side. Oh geez, okay... time to get into the pilot’s seat I guess.

I bopped the button.

My perception changed quickly, one moment I was piloting some dumb mannequin, the next... well first off I was a lot shorter than I was used to.

“Huh,” I commented, then frowned at the voice that came out. That was not cute and small enough. I’d kept the default... damn, there were almost too many options in this character creator.

I wandered around to the controls and sorted through them until I had the— wait a second... was that... was that a *tail* option?

I twisted, glancing down at myself to get a look at my backside... but the view was wild and had me screeching to a halt. Oh hot damn... I was really walking around as a girl. I felt weird for a moment, and I feared that my mind was going to reject the body I’d chosen, but then it all sort of just... clicked.

I have no other way to describe it, but I just suddenly felt... no, realised, that this was *me*. Wow, what a strange sensation. I shifted my hips a little experimentally, then shimmied them when a smile broke out on my face. Oh my god, this was... kinda great.

I looked up from my body and straight into my own eyes. A mirror was now standing where my body had been while I worked on it from the outside. Let me just say...

H-O-L-Y S-H-I-T

I found a cute grinning girl just... there, and she was me. I was that person right there! I could see myself blushing over it, which just made the whole image even cuter. Oh I had so many things I wanted to add now!

First off, freckles. I needed them. I needed all of the freckles. Well, maybe not that many, but... yeah. I rushed through the menus until I found the option, then played around with positioning, colour and density for a while. I put them across the bridge of my nose and along my cheekbones, as well as a few on my shoulders and chest.

Perfect... now what else was I doing again? Oh right! A tail! Wait... that would cause problems with spacesuits, like way worse ones than my hair would have been if it were long. Ah shit, voice first.

That one took a while, lots of fiddling with sliders that I didn't understand, but after lots of talking to myself and listening to the results, I found a voice that suited this body way better. Small, was how I'd describe it, small and feminine.

Yes. Good. Excellent... now I needed to decide if I wanted the tail or not. Big decisions.

"Hey, uh... lady?" I asked, turning back to my helpful lady in white. "Can you buy space suits that work with the tails?"

"You can indeed, they cost slightly more, but most are available with options for extra-human parts," she told me helpfully.

"Tail it is then!" I exclaimed, then got all happy about my voice. It was a good voice, it suited this character very well.

I gave myself a nice big fluffy tail with black fur, although I had the tail taper into the colour of my eyes at the tip. It was like a fox's one, except... there was one option that foxes didn't have, and that was control over how their fur stood. I could have it flatten out for easier space suitingness, or have it puff out.

I could apparently add a lot of functionality to this body, although most was gated behind ingame money that I didn't have right now. Cyborg eyes were already a part of it, but only with basic HUD functions right now. Infrared vision was something I could add later.

Only thing I had left to do was choose my spawn point! Spaceport Halifa locked in!

"I think I'm done now?" I asked tentatively.

"Well, if you are done, then I will explain some things while we wait for your body to be printed," she said with a businesslike clap of her hands. "Let me get you a chair."

The chair she was getting me appeared out of thin air, which was highly convenient. It was a nice big armchair, soft and warm. As I eased myself into it, I was struck by how different this simple experience was. I mean, I still fit in the chair, but it felt sort of weird with how big it was. In a strange turn, my instincts told me to pull my legs up and nestle them under me. Then my tail was all *you're squashing me*, so I shifted that around to the front and laid it down on my lap. Ah, perfect. That felt comfortable.

“Good, let’s get started...” the woman said, sitting down in a chair of her own. “Again, we at Galicorp thank you for using our services.”

“Sorry, uh... my memory is a little... jank right now,” I said, trying to keep in-character, so to speak. “What services?”

She gave a small snort, followed by a nod. “Space is a dangerous place, but living, working in and traversing it are key to our society. As such, many companies such as ours offer the service of transforming your average human into what is known as a *Spacer*. Essentially, your mind has been digitized and placed within a cyborg body. As a basic model, most of you is organic, with only your cybernetic brain and eyes differ from the norm. Well, and the tail is new, but that isn’t cybernetic.”

“The tail is pretty great,” I agreed, fluffing it up and running my fingers through it. So damned soft, I loved it already.

She gave a laugh. “Indeed. Regardless, your brain is highly unique in one simple function. It is linked to the galactic net. If you are killed, instead of being lost forever, you will wake inside a freshly grown body at the nearest hospital. This service is free, although the body will not contain any additional modifications you have made unless they are paid for.”

“Oh, that’s... pretty cool,” I said, raising my eyebrows in surprise. “Universal healthcare is nice.”

“Indeed,” she said again. I think she liked the word. “This reduces much of the risk associated with a spacefaring life, although be warned, if you accrue a bounty and respawn within its jurisdiction, you will face charges.”

I nodded. “Understandable.”

“Now, on to what Galicorp can do for you, and what you can do for Galicorp,” she told me, leaning forward now, a funny look in her eye. “We will be releasing you out into Spaceport Halifa within the hour, but we need to talk about your life *after* that point. You have the option of going along your way, you paid for the transformation. But a spacer is nothing without a ship, so we have an offer. You may enter into a contract with Galicorp, whereby we offer up a loan to help you buy one.”

“Right, but I can find a group of people and we can make it a group loan, right? Like, we form a spacer company and the loan goes to that?” I asked tentatively.

“Yes, although the Galicorp discount will only be applied to a portion of the company’s loan, based on the number of Galicorp spacer graduates within its ranks,” she explained.

“Fair,” I said, giving a smile that to my surprise, didn’t feel all strange. “What else is there?”

“We are also supplying you with a basic spacer kit. This includes a basic wardrobe, space suit, sanitary products and other such things that a person needs for their daily life. You may either take them upon leaving, or have them sent to a destination later on. We recommend that you do this once you have a ship to store them,” she told me with a wink. “There is a lot, and you have chosen a body that does not seem particularly capable of carrying all of it.”

“Also fair,” I laughed, lifting my arms up and dropping them for emphasis.

“Good good,” she hummed, and a holographic pad appeared in her hand. She tapped away on it for a second, then tossed it over to me. It slid through the air and seamlessly into my hand, a far cry from what would have actually happened if she’d done that. “Please fill out this form, it’s to construct your spacer identity. Again, you may simply copy your previous identity over, or create a new one.”

“Oh, sweet,” I mumbled, already reading through the form.

Okay... so first off, name... we’ll skip that for now. Gender... *female*. Uhhh, Wow there was a lot of random shit here. As I filled it all out I began brainstorming ideas for a name. I kinda liked the letter A at the start of girl’s names, so I tried to think up names I knew that started with A. Anna... Amelia... Audrey...

Wait... what about Alia? I liked Alia... a lot. Like, a whole lot. I put down Alia, surname Cassilius, because that was a cool sounding sci-fi surname.

Name chosen, I moved on to the next hardest decision.

“Uh, what exactly does it mean by, *AI assisted packages*?” I asked, glancing back up at her.

“As part of your spacer transformation, you are allowed to purchase two beginner level AI learning packages,” she told me amicably. “These will determine what jobs you may take. For example, if you choose a rifleman package, you will be able to take jobs as a marine onboard a combat vessel. A navigator package would qualify you to take on that role, etcetera.”

“Oh, cool! Thank you.” So this was where I chose my class, basically. I’d already made myself with the idea of working on a ship’s parts, so I picked mechanic for my first option, but the second was a little more difficult. I guess it would be fun to get into combat, but I wasn’t really keen to get up close and personal, so I chose the light craft piloting package.

I watched them pop up in my hud, each had little emoji faces that were currently just smiling gormlessly at me. Alright, sweet. I had little friends now.

The mechanic face was a little bunny wearing goggles, grease on its face while it brandished a wrench, while the pilot face was a little bunny with an old timey pilot's helmet on its head. They were adorable and they were mine.

The next part would be... more difficult. I had to choose a background. This game didn't have stats, per-se, but instead you had to learn everything yourself. It looked like the background gave you other learning packages that were more immersion breaking. This was because they weren't allowed to just squirt knowledge into our brains.

I had about a million options, but I needed to think about what would be useful and also what would make my character more interesting to play. There was a whole shitload of stuff tied to backgrounds.

To narrow my choices down, I figured I should stick to things that would benefit me in my mechanic role. That, of course, only helped a little.

Oh, wait... I had to choose a homeworld first. I should probably pick city-world, since there's no way in hell I'd be able to pull off being from a more rugged colony world.

I did so, and it gave me a set of options. Ah, options from different empires. Nevermind, I needed to choose which *nation* I was from first. Jesus, this was complicated. Alright...

"Do you have like, a map with lore and stuff on it?" I asked, motioning to the menu I was in. "Because I have no idea what I'm choosing between here."

"Certainly," she said with an amused smile, summoning and chucking another holographic tablet to me.

I caught it and began to explore, finding a map of known human space first. There were a lot of separate factions, empires and all sorts out there, but I knew I needed one of the highly developed ones.

There was the Fremont Collective, which sounded like a libertarian corporate hellhole. I think I'd pass on that one... I wanted something that was less overt with its corporate hellishness. Basically, I needed the UNC but in space.

What if I went and read up on the ancient history of this setting? That might allow me to get an understanding of things, as well as figure out where my best bet was for finding the type of nation I wanted.

From what I could see of the early lore, climate change had been allowed to run out of control for a lot longer before the world moved to try and curb it. Rather than a third world war, earth was embroiled in a bitter space race, a sort of lukewarm-war where everyone's goal was to get their populations the fuck off earth before it was uninhabitable.

Early FTL drives were still incredibly slow, taking a good long while to get from A to B. The FTL stuff was based on recent scientific theories, large fields of something that had been termed aether inhabited a sort of sister-plane to ours. When a ship dropped into the aetherscape, they needed to navigate around these massive obstacles or face instant obliteration if they hit them. This meant that while the galaxy was vast, human exploration of it had been confined to small corridors and pockets of open space within the aetherscape.

Navigators were meant to keep track of the subtle, glacial movement of these clouds of aether to keep their ships from exploding. Explorers used special equipment to map these clouds and try to find routes through it all. Normally they didn't shift around a lot, but there had been instances where worlds that had previously been accessible were suddenly cut off by the mysterious movement of the aether.

Anyway, back to history... let's see... there were several SAI generation ships early, those have never been heard from since, then Europe got its first FTL colony ships out there. They formed a union of nations that seemed like a place I'd actually like to live in called the United European Worlds.

The UNC, China, Russia, Brazil and half a dozen others all launched their way out into the sky not long after. Corporations also rushed out with their own ships too... aha! The UNC ships had founded the rather pretentiously named Empire of United Humanity. That sounded like what I needed.

Sure enough, I found all the telltale signs in their history of the type of thing I wanted in my origin story. Dystopian space empire with a veneer of happiness!

I picked one of their well developed urbanized worlds called Galea as my homeworld, and then went and took a look at the much more manageable list of backgrounds. I went with street urchin as my childhood, but stalled out on the occupation after that.

I needed something that was adjacent to mechanic, but not exactly on it, so I could have a broader range of skills to start off with. Wait... cyber thief! Oh that was totally cool, with this background I spent my late teens and early twenties sneaking around and hacking into places to steal shit. Yes, that would be perfect! It also gave me underworld contacts and stuff, knowledge of how the criminal underworld worked would be pretty good.

A smile expanded across my face as I watched a third little bunny join the other two, this time a digital stylised graffitibun. Alright, I was happy with that! Onwards to the next thing!



“Well, with that all signed off, it’s time to get you out and into the wider world!” the woman who’d been helping me said, standing up out of her chair.

“Oh, is it all done now?” I asked, excitement mounting within me.

She nodded. “Indeed it is. If you will just give me a moment, I will begin the process to transfer you into your new body. I will be there when you wake, don’t worry.”

“Thank you,” I said, feeling a little shy about it all now. I think it had just hit me that she was a real person and not just an AI. Well, a real person within the game... which meant she was an AI or maybe a SAI, the latter meaning that she actually *was* a real person, but she was acting as a character. Goodness, this was confusing.

She smiled, concentrating on her holographic pad as she tapped away at buttons. Then, with a final flourish she gave me another big smile and pressed down purposefully on a big button.

My awareness went black, and I lost consciousness, if only for what felt like a brief moment. Everything felt fuzzy then, but not fuzzy like my new tail. My brain felt heavy and strange, and I shifted at how uncomfortable it was.

The feeling faded with the movement, and I heard a voice say. “Ah yes, good... another successful integration. Welcome back to the land of the living, Alia.”

It took me a moment to realise that it was the same woman speaking that I’d been talking to in VR... or... VR within VR. Anyway, she looked pretty much the same, light brown hair up in a ponytail and brown eyes.

“You got out of VR fast,” I mumbled, followed by a gasp as I *felt* myself speak properly. They must have dumbed down the sensations and realism of the in-universe VR, because this was the real thing. “My body feels different!” I exclaimed, adrenaline forcing my eyes to focus on her through the haze.

“It is real now,” she nodded, and again gave a wink. “To avoid confusion about... what is reality, what is *reality*, and what is virtual, if you take my meaning.”

Ohhh... that totally made sense. They’d reduced the realism of the in-game VR so that we could all tell the difference. I was also clicking with my body again in a big way, my

mind filling it out like you settled into bed after a long day of work. Comfortable, was the word... this body felt comfortable.

I was inside some kind of pod thing, but not a VR pod. It was white, as was the room outside it. White and sterile, like a hospital, fluorescent lights hanging above, although they were dimmed to a manageable level.

“Just checking the readings to make sure there isn’t anything isn’t wrong under the hood, give me a moment,” she told me with another friendly smile. The type of friendly smile that employees gave to customers.

Ah well, I was focused on something else, namely... breathing. The way this body moved was just... different, and I was reveling in that feeling. I think I really liked being small, it was just better.

“Everything is green, we’re good to get you shipped out!” she said, motioning for me to leave the pod.

I did as she asked, if a little shakily. This body had evidently never moved before. Once I was out, she had me put on some underwear, because I was naked... then she made me do a series of stretches and a bit of light exercise. Just making sure I was all functioning in the motor skills department.

Once that was done, I was led out of the small room we were in and down a corridor to another one, where I found myself rather suddenly in a clothing shop. No, that wasn’t right... it was like a high end clothing shop and a hospital room had a baby.

“Wow, this is a lot,” I laughed, feeling slightly intimidated.

Helpful woman gave a small sound of amusement, and launched into her next speech. “You may choose any three outfits from this room. One you will wear out of here, while the other two will be stowed away in your kit for storage. I suggest at least one set of formal clothing, and do not worry about casual wear, a set of loose pants and shirts will be in the care package when you need them.”

“Alright... this is going to take me a hot minute,” I told her, staring at the room full of women’s clothing that I had no idea how to navigate.

I gravitated almost immediately to the clothing I was familiar with. Girl’s hoodies looked about the same as guy’s ones after all. Just with more pink and purple. I guess the future still colour coded gender.

I leafed through a bunch of different hoodies, and pretty much all of them would have

been fine, but I stopped when I came to a hoodie with a motif that was very similar to my cyber thief one. The bunny looked so cute, and it moved ever so subtly, blinking and smiling a little.

The rest of it was a dark purple, almost black, while the bunny itself was neon pink. I kinda loved it, and whisked it off the shelf right quick. Ah, I'd gotten ahead of myself again. I needed stuff to wear under it before I put it on. Okay, so I was a cyberpunk chick... what could I find that would fit that?

Wait, I still had the outside internet in here! Pulling up a browser tab really quickly with a mental command, I did an image search for cyberpunk girls. Oh geez, okay... apparently they didn't wear a whole lot of clothing.

When they were actually wearing pants though, it seemed to be the tight plastic kind. Plastic clothing felt gross, I wanted softness... so I guess I'd just find something soft that was also tight. Or... this one picture had a girl wearing really baggy pants! I liked that! I was going to find really baggy pants.

I discovered a pair of black cargo pants that fit the bill nicely. They even had exposed zippers for that metal accented look, and the tag said they had lighting built in, which I would mess around with later.

Grabbing a graffiti style shirt to go with everything and some big chunky goth boots, I headed for the changing room. Hell yeah, I was going to look so wild after this!

Unfortunately, getting all this stuff on was hard, because it meant... touching my body. I'd never touched a girl's body before, and now it was *my* body I was touching. I kept looking up into the mirror and having a heart attack as I saw a half naked girl getting dressed, then I realised that she was me and... well it was a lot to mentally process. I hadn't really known what I was getting into when I picked a female character.

Still I got it all on and took a long look in the mirror. Makeup would be the final step, that winged eyeliner would work super well with the outfit, but I'd need a lot of practice before I could get it to look good.

When I exited, I realised I still needed to choose two more outfits. I guess I'd just pick a different pair of baggy pants and another hoodie. I wasn't too fussed right now with having a big wardrobe.

It was as I was doing this that I spotted something that caused me to pause. A black cocktail dress that was just a *little* on the gothy side. A pleated skirt, tight waist and chest area were complemented by short mesh sleeves and collar area. It was cute, and slightly gothy... and also kinda formal...

I picked it up off the rack and rushed for the changing room like I was shoplifting it. It just felt so naughty to be putting it on. I was a guy outside all of this, but I was about to put on a dress! My heartbeat was racing as I carefully took my casual cyberpunk clothing off, and I stood naked for several minutes just staring at the thing in apprehension.

Finally, I shimmied my way into it with my eyes closed, only taking a tiny peek every now and then when I got stuck figuring it out. When I was finished, I carefully opened my eyes... and then forgot how to breathe.

Holy crap, that was a lot of cute girl. That was a whole lot of cute girl in a dress. *I was a whole lot of cute girl in a dress.*

I took it off as fast as I possibly could and rushed for the safe and comfortable cargo pants and big hoodie. My heart was racing and my brain was all addled and I had no idea why, I just knew that I both liked and was terrified of that dress. I would get it... but I wasn't going to wear it.

When I left, the helper woman was there with a canvas satchel, which she handed to me. "This has various things you might need, as well as a small makeup kit and sanitary items."

"Oh... thank you," I blinked, surprised that she'd been proactive like that.

Taking the bag, I opened it and had a look. One thing jumped out at me above the rest. A phone.

Pulling it out, I asked, "How come I need a phone? Don't I have like, cyber eyes or whatever?"

With a chuckle, she pulled a phone out of her own pocket. "A good amount of the time, having a glowing window in front of your face wherever you look is rather annoying. Some can get used to it, but most prefer the simplicity of a phone to access the galactic net."

"Okay, that makes sense," I replied, placing the phone into my pocket.

"That phone is already registered with your new identity, but you'll still need to customise it to how you'd prefer it," she smiled, showing me how her own one had a cute biometric lock screen with a dog icon on it. Guess her little friends were doggos.

"Alright... cool," I said quietly, putting the bag over my shoulder and fixing the strap in place. "So uh, what happens now?"

“Now, I take those clothes you aren’t wearing off your hands and put them in your kit, then you’re free to head out into Spaceport Halifa,” she said, holding her hand out with another amicable smile.

“Oh, cool... thank you,” I replied, carefully placing the other clothing into her outstretched hands. “You’ve been really helpful. So yeah... um... thank you.”

“Good luck out there, Spacer Alia,” she told me with a genuine smile.

I stepped out of the Galicorp Spacer facility and into a wide plaza, and the first thing that hit me was the massive glass ceiling and what lay beyond it. I had been to Luna quite a few times, it was where a lot of the ultra wealthy gathered to conduct business after all. When I’d been there, the experience of looking up at earth had been wondrous, amazing in an incredibly humbling way.

This though... this was something else.

A massive blue gas giant sat out the window above me, white clouds stuck in a seemingly frozen pattern of beautiful swirls. Beyond it, I was able to make out a small green dot, about the size of the mole on my arm out in the real world. That must have been a moon for this massive planet.

“Wow,” I breathed, staring slack-jawed up at the sight.

“It’s something, ain’t it?” a feminine voice said from right next to me, causing me to jump slightly in surprise and turn to stare.

My heart gave a hiccup as I looked up at the woman next to me. She was slim, petite even, but also tall in a sort of elfin way. It was hard to describe. Then of course... was the next obvious thing. She had *horns*, but they weren’t just any horns. These ones protruded out from her head in gentle arcs, and their entire length was a deep dark blue that glittered faintly like it was made of granite.

Her hair was long, full and also a deep, dark blue, shimmering with the same strange starlight effect. Then, the long demon’s tail completed it using the same colouration as the horns and tail. Her face was so *intensely* beautiful, like... achingly good looking. Where I’d gone for a more cute look, this chick had gone for absolute perfection.

All ability to speak was instantly robbed from me, and I just kinda stared and nodded dumbly, unable to take my eyes off her.

“You alright?” she asked with a wry smile. She knew *exactly* what the problem was.

In an answer to her question, rather than talking, my cheeks flamed up in embarrassment. Quickly, I turned away from her, staring down at my feet as I tried to get myself under control. I wasn't a fan of speaking at the best of times, but this was a little extreme.

Adding to my problem was the fact that I could *feel* her judging me. Like... what kind of weirdo gets tongue tied just by looking at a pretty girl? This creep, that's who. I was such a social failure.

It was time to get the hell out of here. Without a word or a look, I rushed nervously away from the scary hot lady, making for the fountain at the center of the plaza. I made sure to cross around to the other side before I seated myself at one of the many benches that were set up to view the water feature.

I spent the next five minutes doing breathing exercises to try and calm myself the fuck down. At some point during my playtime, I'd started getting just... mentally overwhelmed by everything that was going on. Blue chick had been the last blow to put me down and now I was trying to regain control of the frantic nervous thoughts that flashed through my head at a million miles an hour.

It was something that always happened. If I was doing too much or there was just too much information coming at me, sooner or later my brain would just shut down and stop working. Sometimes it was so bad that I stopped being able to understand people. Like, I heard the words, but my brain just didn't assign any meaning to the sounds I was hearing.

The only times where I was able to push through this were when I was intensely engrossed in whatever I was doing. That was sort of just a delay on the eventual overload my brain endured. Sometimes I could make it to bed before it happened, but most times it was the first moment I got any time to myself.

Achime pulled me back into the real world, and I glanced at my HUD to find a notification. It was from David using the FTLN messenger, asking if I was done with character creation yet.

**Clay:** *Yeah. I'm done. Waiting outside the Galicorp building, on a bench next to the fountain.*

**David:** Sweet, I just finished and Ed will be out in just a moment. See you soon.

For a moment I was confused as to why my name had shown up as my real life one instead of Alia, my ingame one, but then I remembered that duh, the real world messenger was never going to call me Alia. God, my brain was dumb sometimes.

As I continued to wait, I watched a group walk past me, six in total. The blue girl from before was with them, chatting away as if she hadn't exploded my head earlier. She saw me staring and gave me a smile, and in spite of myself, I gave a shy smile back.

Then, of course, I blushed and looked down at my feet again, because I was incredibly lame. At least it was better than actually having to talk to her though.

A few minutes later and I heard the telltale arrival of my friends, bickering away as usual.

"Where the hell is he?" one said, who I *think* was Ed. His voice sounded a little different, deeper or something, I couldn't tell.

"Not sure, let's do a lap and see if he's on the other side," a voice that was *definitely* David said. He sounded exactly the same, and I mean... considering he looked like a video game character anyway, what was the point in making a new one?

As they came into view, I found that I was right. David looked exactly the same, and Ed had buffed himself up a bit and gotten rid of some of the podge. Otherwise, they were still very much the image of the friends I knew from outside the game.

They stared at me as they walked past, and I watched them both mentally discount me as who they were looking for. It brought a smile to my face, of the devious friend-pranking kind. They were going to get the surprise of their lifetimes when they realised that it was me inside here.

It was two laps of the fountain before they stopped a few yards away, clearly confused and annoyed. "Where the hell is he? Is he at the wrong bloody fountain or some shit?" David grumbled, bringing up a messenger window.

"Yeah this is weird, there *is* only one Galicorp spacer place in the port," Ed agreed, glancing around as though I might have suddenly appeared nearby.

Sure enough, a notification popped up in my HUD, a message from David. I giggled, I couldn't help myself. It was too funny.

That had Ed looking at me, while David stood there tapping his foot and frowning at his

messenger window. I saw realisation slowly dawn in Ed's eyes as my shit eating grin grew and grew. Goodness, the look on his face, pure amazement, disbelief, surprise, and... excitement?

"No. Fucking. Way," he said slowly, tapping David on the shoulder.

"What?" David asked, still frowning at his HUD. "He's not replying."

"Yeah, because *she* is right there," Ed said with great emphasis on the *she* part.

By this point, I was grinning like an evil demon trapped in the body of a small cyberpunk girl, and I was loving every second of their shocked faces. David's eyes almost fell out of his head when he made the connection.

"Damn, boys... took you long enough," I laughed, leaning back with my arms outstretched behind me. "What's with the faces? You look confused?"

"Wow," David breathed, and then that breath turned into a laugh. "Holy shit, Clay!"

"It's Alia in here," I winked, pushing myself up off the bench to walk over to them. Really didn't want them calling me by my real name in here. That would be super weird.

"Well, *Alia*, aren't you just a cutie?" Ed grinned, stepping forward with a look I knew all too well.

"Hey, arm's length buddy! Personal space!" I growled as menacingly as I could. May as well have been a kitten for all the force it came out with. Also, being called cute had me blushing again, which was rather annoying.

"Can we keep her?" Ed asked, giving his boyfriend pleading eyes.

David pretended to mull the question over. "Depends, what skills did she pick?"

"I'll have you know I am a renowned cyber thief! I'm also a pretty handy mechanic and I know my way around a cockpit," I told them, hand on hip like I was a badass. I really, *really* wasn't a badass though.

"Oh, I know my way around a cockp—" Ed began to joke before David casually put an elbow in his ribs.

"Okay, okay... those are actually some good picks," David said with a smile.



“Compliments us well too. Ed here went for science and gunnery, with a background in the navy. He thought that part was hilarious, by the way.”

“It *is* hilarious!” Ed grumbled, frowning at David with as much vigor as he could muster.

“Yes babe,” David droned, before turning back to me and recounting his own choices, “I went for zero-g combat and rifleman skills, with a background in the marines. I plan to get a skill that’s useful on a ship the first chance I get though.”

“So you’re both two gay army boys,” I said with a rueful shake of my head. Typical.

“Navy boys, come on!” Ed exclaimed, really getting into his dramatics now.

“How come they call space military forces the navy anyway?” I mused, legitimately curious but also knowing that it would send Ed further down his silliness. “It’s all flying stuff, right? Shouldn’t it be the airforce?”

“Alright, that’s enough you little shit!” he exclaimed, rushing me with both arms outstretched. I didn’t stand a chance, finding myself lifted up onto his shoulder in a squealing bundle of outrage. Then he began to spin us both around, sending my bag flying off across the plaza.

Right into the feet of the blue girl who’d smiled at me. Her, and the rest of her crew, who seemed to have been coming to talk to us.

“Uh, hello...” Ed smiled awkwardly, letting go with one hand to wave at them like an absolute dork.

“Well, they’re clearly entertaining, if nothing else,” one of them said with a wry laugh.

Ed gently set me down as we all eyed each other up, and I beat a hasty retreat until I was between and behind my friends. New people were scary.

There were five of them, a tall and ruggedly handsome one in the middle who was clearly their leader. Short brown hair, a bit of stubble and dark eyes complimented his brown leather bandolier and twin pistol holsters, both of which actually had guns in them. He’d gone for the whole roguish space captain look, and he seemed to mostly be pulling it off.

Beside him, the guy who'd spoken was very similar, except he sported long-for-a-guy blonde hair, green eyes and an easy smile that was pointed directly at me. Why was he looking at me? I shifted behind Ed entirely, moving out the other side of him in a way that would keep the pretty boy from staring at me.

Waitno. Now the really really hot blue demon girl was staring at me! She was smiling too, that same wry smile she'd used at the start!

Next to the hot girl was another girl, although she wasn't nearly as intensely hot as demon girl. She was cute in her own way though, with her long hair up in a messy ponytail and a clip to keep the rest out of her face. She wore a skintight black bodysuit and a leather jacket over the top of it. She oozed pilot girl energy.

"What can we do for you?" David asked, ever calm and self assured.

"Well," the boss looking guy said, an easy and friendly smile on his face. "My friends and I were thinking of forming a crew, but the ships we could run with five people are a bit small for our liking. We want something that's bigger, have our own cabins and stuff. We saw you three over here and figured we'd ask if you'd like to come with."

"Nice offer, but I think we should hold off on saying yes or no until we sit down and chat," David said, although he used a friendly smile. "If we want to crew together, we should all probably at least get a drink together, see if we fit."

"Good plan," the boss guy said, then nodded towards a side street. "I know a place, if you want to follow. I played during the beta, so I have a bit of extra cash to help us get something a bit more robust than your average starter ship, you know?"

"I like the sound of having our own cabins," I murmured, moving over to tug on David's sleeve to get his attention.

He gave me a knowing look, "Yeah, I thought you might."

Then he did something that took me by surprise, he placed a hand on my back, giving it a gentle and reassuring rub. For some reason, that made me feel both small and very happy. Both Ed and David were acting a little differently with me actually, now that I focused on it. I think it was that they were being more gentle with me, which I guess made sense since I was a lot smaller now.

To the other group, David gestured for them to lead the way, "Let's grab a drink then! I have to say though, starting right out of the gate in a nicer ship would be pretty great, so I'm definitely all ears."

“Yeah, really need that private cabin as well,” Ed said with a grin and a wink at his boyfriend.

That raised eyebrows on the demon girl. “Oh, I kinda assumed...” she said, trailing off with a meaningful look in my direction.

“No, David and I are dating, she’s more like... a little sister to us,” Ed clarified, pulling me sideways into a hug.

“Hey, Ed!” I complained, wriggling to try and free myself from his grip. Damn guy was too strong though, so I just had to stand there and deal with it all grumpy.

“So he’s David, you are Ed, and she is...?” the hot demon girl asked, her warm gaze finding mine. That look quieted me, sort of holding me there as she smiled at me, and I felt something flutter strangely within me.

My voice refused to work though, which sent my eyes once again diving for the floor. I just didn’t like speaking, even when I sorta wanted to speak, it didn’t work. My throat just didn’t like following instructions when I was nervous.

“Her name is Alia, you’ll have to forgive her, she’s a little shy,” Ed answered for me, giving my shoulder a friendly pat.

“Shy is perfectly fine,” the boss man said, turning to make shooing motions to his crew to get them moving. “Let’s go get that drink. I’m Roger by the way, Roger Walker.”

The bar wasn’t too far of a walk, and when we were all seated around a table with drinks in our hands, we began introductions in earnest, starting with Roger.

“So, I’m Roger,” he said, leaning forward, both hands on his glass mug. “Been playing for a while now, but not too seriously. All my friends here didn’t get into the closed beta, so I was mostly waiting for them before I got into the game. I picked gunnery and piloting ai at the start, but I’ve since gained space combat tactics as my main skill.”

“I’m Justin,” the blonde guy said, beginning where his friend had left off. “I’ve picked power armour and rifleman as my two ai. I totally plan on being our raw muscle when we get into shootouts and stuff.”

David piped up then with a friendly nod in Justin’s direction. “I picked rifleman too, so I imagine I’d be your covering fire. Zero G combat as well. I figure I’ll try and fill any gaps that we’re missing once we know what they are.”

“Sick, I’m keen,” Justin remarked, offering a fistbump which Dave accepted like the suave fatherfucker that he is.

Ed went ahead and introduced himself, talking about his skills and just generally cracking jokes as he did. I spent the time quietly inspecting each of the other people. There was one guy I hadn’t mentioned yet, a smaller looking dude with a quiet demeanour and a calm smile on his face. He had shaggy dark hair and intelligent eyes, and I instantly pegged him as a nerd of some kind.

Speaking for the first time, he said, “I’m Warren, by the way. I think we should make sure we have all the basic shipboard roles filled. Don’t want to find ourselves out there without an important skill.”

“Well, I have piloting covered,” the pilot looking chick said with a little cocky smile. “I’m Gloria, by the way. I have previous experience flying in the real world and in other VR games. I actually didn’t even choose another AI, just went for another piloting one that helps with the technical side. Stuff that I won’t know from outside the game.”

“Smart, makes sense,” David nodded respectfully.

“Agreed,” Roger hummed, placing a finger down on the table. “That’s piloting taken care of. I’ll be captain, I hope that’s okay with everyone. I have the most experience in the game and I have the money to upgrade our ship.”

“You seem like a cool dude, so I’m chill with that,” Ed smiled, then glanced my way with a questioning look. I shrugged.

“I picked navigator and shipboard systems management,” Warren told everyone, looking rather happy with himself. I didn’t entirely blame him, those were roles that not many would be interested in filling. They sounded incredibly boring to me. Graph monitoring in space.

“I have science covered,” the hot demon girl said, her voice mostly feminine, but with a sort of rough undertone. “I have ah... experience outside of this game in science, so I picked some AI that would help me understand the elements of science in this game that are less grounded in reality.”

“Nice, you’ll probably be teaching me a thing or two,” Ed chuckled, giving her a nod of respect. “What’s your name?”

“Ah, apologies,” she said with a sound of amusement that started out as a chuckle but ended very much in a giggle. “My name is Cerridwen.”

“Alright,” Roger said, rubbing a hand over his stubble in thought. “So we have Gloria as our pilot, Warren is our navigator and systems operator, David and Justin are our two beefcakes who shoot things, which I can also help with as well as my captain’s duties. Ed is a gunner and has some science to help out Cerri. Damn, I was hoping someone had picked mechanic. That might be a problem.”

“Hold on, Roge,” Cerridwen said, placing a graceful hand on his shoulder. “You forgot the quiet girl over there. Alia.”

I blinked, then shrank in my seat as everyone turned to stare at me. Too many eyes! Deep breaths Alia, deep breaths. In an effort to comfort myself, I brought my tail around in front and hugged it to my chest. It was also conveniently big enough to sort of hide behind. Gosh, my tail was so great. Great and huge and so very floofy.

“Well, you’re in luck,” David said with a note of pride in his voice. “That tiny fluffy little animal there is a mechanic. Hacker too, if we find need for that.”

“She chose a light craft pilot AI as well,” Ed said, chiming in with a friendly nudge to my side.

“That is a huge relief,” Roger sighed, leaning back and to the side so he could give me a grateful smile around my tail. “You’re small enough for the job as well.”

I nodded and carefully held up my hands, demonstrating how small they were.

It took him a second to realise what I was trying to communicate, but when he did he was grinning. “Nice! Small hands! That’s always a problem when I’m working on my car out in the real world.”

“She also has extensive knowledge with economics and the like, businessy stuff, so if we need ideas for like, investing some of the cash we make, she can help with that too,” David nodded, reaching over to... oh goodness... to pat me on the head. I slapped his hand away, or at least I tried to. Again, I wasn’t strong enough to do more than wobble his arm.

Roger looked more than happy with that news, giving me another big grin. “Our tiny swiss army knife of random skills. Excellent!”

From then on the conversation turned casual as everyone got to know each other, with the exception of me of course. I didn’t say anything and hid behind my tail the whole time, because I’m incredibly lame.

Everyone turned out to be pretty cool, at least on the surface, and this being the future, we began to shop for a ship to buy. Everyone except Roger was from Galicorp, so we'd have a pretty hefty discount on whatever mortgage we took out.

"I think we should probably nail down what we actually want from the ship before we go browsing," Roger said wryly, staring around at everyone who had already leapt to their phones.

"Something agile!" Gloria exclaimed, slapping a palm down on the table.

"Yes, some degree of maneuverability is desirable," Cerri said with a roll of her eyes. For some reason she turned to look at me at the end, so I smiled at her before being overwhelmed and turning back to my phone.

"Combat potential is a must, yeah," Roger agreed, tapping his finger on the table in thought.

"Atmospheric capability," I blurted, my impatience to have that important note on the table outweighing my shyness for a moment. "We want to be able to fly down to planets and land on them."

"Good point," Warren said with a nod in my direction. "Cargo capacity will be crucial too."

"Basically, we want the type of ship that every scrappy little crew has in every space opera ever," Ed remarked with more than a little amusement.

"Yeah, pretty much," Roger laughed, and sheepish smiles pulled at lips all across the table. "Well, back to our phones I guess, shout out if you find something interesting. Remember, at least eight cabins."

"Seven," David corrected.

"Seven, cabins," Roger repeated with a chuckle. "Rated for atmospheric entry, has a cargo hold big enough that we could make some money shipping goods, and can defend itself when needed. Oh, and expansion mounts would be cool, so we can fit some science modules on. Science missions can give crazy good money if you know where to find them."

Everyone did as he asked, and it wasn't long before I found myself overwhelmed.

Spaceport Halifa was the central hub for the Halifa gas giant system, a well developed set of moons that orbited the massive planet we could see out of every skylight. Some of the moons were entirely industrial, while others were luxury planets and there was even a moon that had been turned into what was basically a very small version of a city world.

This all meant that there was a shitload of options to choose from, and that was about the time I realised another problem. What the hell was our budget? Rather than ask, because that was scary, I spent some time sifting through Galicorp's website trying to find the answer. They still called it a website in the pretend future. That wasn't going to get confusing at all!

In the end, I figured out that with all of us, the base we'd have from the mortgage was... 210,000 Ossus. What the hell was an Ossu worth? Did fake space future have wikipedia? Time to find out...

Oh shit it did, and Ossu stood for Ossuary, which had been slang for a currency like four hundred fake years ago. That slang, of course, referring to Crypt, or crypto currency. Dang... alright. Fuckin' show off dev SAI with their tons of time to think up irrelevant back stories for their dumb made up currency.

Anyway, that hadn't actually helped me figure out how much an Ossu could buy me. Let's use... a T-shirt as an example. I did a quick search for clothing stores and found that they didn't actually price shit in Ossu. Why? Because Ossu were actually worth quite a lot. A T-shirt was worth about one thirtieth of an Ossu in the next denomination down.

Armed with an incredibly flimsy idea of what an Ossu was worth, I jumped back into the ship search. At least I had a price range now, that was something.

"Alia?" someone asked, and I felt a hand on my back.

I twitched, a little squeak of surprise escaping from somewhere within me as I looked up to find everyone staring at me again. I cringed back, my tail coming up for me to hide behind as I wondered what I had done wrong.

"What do you think of this ship?" David asked, turning his phone to me.

It looked nice, that was for sure. It had an industrial look to it, all angles and sharp lines, with an overall wedge shape that tapered to what looked like a bridge at the front. It looked sort of like the iconic star wars venator class ship if it was way smaller and you took off the big stupid mast at the back. The cutouts on the sides were much smaller as well, and it had turrets at the tips of the wings, as well as fore and aft ones, both top and bottom.

“Does it have PDCs?” I asked quietly, trying to look for them in the picture and failing. “Do we need them in this setting?”

“What?” David blinked, confusion written all across his face.

“Point defence cannons,” Gloria supplied, turning to her own phone with a frown. “Okay yeah, it has mounts for them, but the model we’re looking at doesn’t have them. We should probably have them...”

Reaching out, I swiped up on David’s phone until I could see the name of the ship he was looking at, then got to work on my own phone.

The specs looked good on it, the aetherdrive was especially robust, which was nice. You really didn’t want that crapping out when you needed to get out of a nasty situation fast. Cargo hold was reasonable and the shields looked pretty solid. It lacked a bit in the armour department though, which I suspected was because the thrusters looked a little weak and would be unable to move more weight. Gloria wouldn’t like that.

Sure enough, she glanced up with a frown. “The normal space engines are kinda garbage on this thing, at least compared to what I know of the game so far.”

On a hunch, I took the base model name of the ship and threw it into a search. Bam, sure enough, there were other versions of this ship out there. Dialing that down to the Halifa system and I began to browse through the different models I could find.

I found one with PDCs installed, although some of the cargo hold had been converted into barracks. I guess this model was more military minded. The engines were definitely beefier, although the armour was still pretty bad. Better than the other model, mind you, but still not as good as what I’d seen on other ships of a similar price.

Two of the turrets had also been downgraded, and when I investigated why, it looked like it would have power consumption issues if all guns were firing at once. A quick check revealed the same problem on the base model.

Off I went down another tangent, learning about shipboard reactors and stuff. That was when my little mechanic bunny chimed in, telling me with a cute little text bubble a little about what I needed to know. Of course, I wasn’t paying attention the first time because it was so dang cute. It made a little grumpy face when I asked it to repeat itself.

Very interesting... wow they had really gone hard on the simulation that ran this game, because this was technical as fuck and I loved it. Very soon I was diving into the nuts and bolts of how their reactors worked and—



“Alia!” David said rather loudly, causing me to jump again. I stared up at him in owlish confusion, wondering what was happening now. He laughed, ruffling my hair as he said, “What did you find? You’ve been typing up a storm with that phone of yours.”

“O-oh...” I mumbled, blushing and sinking into my chair. “I was just researching how um... ship reactors work. I found a model of that ship you were looking at with better specs, but it looks like that entire range of ships comes with a reactor that isn’t the best. Power problems when you’re putting all the stuff to use. I was wondering if I could boost its output somehow.”

“Can you?” Roger asked, leaning forward with interest.

I gave him a sort of half nod and with instruction from my cyberbun, I whipped my finger in a gesture that would send the page for the ship model I’d found to everyone at the table. Their phones all pinged at once, causing everyone to glance down.

There was silence for several moments as everyone glanced through the specs, and I noticed Gloria give an approving nod. “These engines are much better.”

“It has far better scanners on it too,” Cerri murmured, intent on her phone. For once, that meant I could stare at her without her staring back, and gosh was she nice to stare at. I loved her cheekbones, high and delicate and just... wow.

“The cargo hold is smaller, but... hmmm, we don’t have to use that barracks as an actual barracks,” Warren commented with a frown.

“I can weld some cargo brackets in there,” I offered timidly, hoping he wasn’t too upset about the cargo space.

“Perfectly acceptable,” he said, giving me a pleasant smile. Oh, he wasn’t mad.

“This looks like the ship we want,” Roger said, placing his phone down on the table and locking it. “After we’ve gone out and bought all the extra stuff we want for it. I’ll make sure to pick up a lot of miscellaneous reactor parts on the cheap for you Alia.”

I smiled shy thanks at him, pulling my tail to my chest to cuddle while everyone began to debate the pros and cons of the ship.

It had larger cabins than you might expect from a ship of this price and weight class, although still cramped. It had a dedicated recreation room, as well as a living room and mess, which was nice. Each was still small by the standards that we would all be used to from living our lives in buildings built on solid ground.

Reviews said the PDCs were a bit jank and could jam sometimes, which sounded like yet another problem I'd be fixing once we had the thing in our hands. Oh and apparently the beds were uncomfortable and there was a fault in the first manufacturing run of the gravity plates they used, causing them to fail every now and then. That would be amusing. I really hoped the ship we got didn't have any of those faulty plates.

"If everyone is good with this as our first ship, I think we're ready to get this show moving," Roger said, mercifully cutting the discussion short.

Various levels of agreement were heard around the table, and so off we sent, out of the bar and back to the Galicorp building to form our little company of spacers. I would be lying if I said I wasn't super duper excited.

Getting the mortgage approved was suspiciously easy, and I refused to let anyone sign the thing until I had read all the documentation. It seemed to be okay though, just the usual stuff. Blah blah blah we will fuck your shit up if you try and run away without paying us back, etc etc. The discounted interest rate on the loan was very generous though, so I couldn't get too upset.

With the ship and money sorted, it was time for the rest of our budget. When Roger had said he'd put money towards the ship, it really meant that we could spend the entire mortgage on *just* the ship, then use his money to buy all the random shit we needed. I would have taken issue with this, except that his name was also on the loan, so it wasn't such a big deal. So long as he couldn't just run off with the ship and we were the ones left to deal with the consequences. What could I say, when it came to money, I wasn't a very trusting person.

I hadn't expected to go on a shopping trip this early in the game either, but here we were making for the station's commercial hub for everything spacer related.

"I think it might be a good idea if we split up for this," Roger mused as we walked into the massive multi-story plaza type place.

The massive chamber was an inverted cone shape, with descending tiers of boardwalks and offshoot wings. It was immense, and I felt a tingly sort of excitement squirreling its way up my spine.

"Going to give us all a budget, huh boss?" Gloria smirked, hand on hip.

“Something like that. Except for Alia and Cerri, you all have a rough budget of 5,000 Ossu, if you need more we can figure things out,” he told us with a grin. “David, you and Justin should go and kit yourselves out with some combat gear. Warren, you head out on your own to find... well, whatever you need. Ed and Gloria, you’re with me, we’re going to go and sort out what we can for our ship’s extra defences. Alia and Cerri, I want you two to team up and find what you need for your jobs. You each have a budget of 35,000 Ossu.”

I felt my stomach sink and my tail droop as I realised he wanted me to go off on my own with hot demon girl, and presumably like... talk to her and stuff. This was going to suck so hard.

“That’s a lot, why do they get so much?” Gloria asked, and while her words sounded a little whiny, at least her tone wasn’t.

“Because Alia has a ton of shit to fix on the ship and science gear is expensive,” Roger explained matter of factly. “Everyone good?”

I sent a silent plea for help to my friends who both just grinned. Oh no. I was being abandoned, left for dead or worse.

“I think the mechanic is worried about being left alone with Cerri,” Justin pointed out wryly, and I could have hugged him for that.

“No, don’t worry,” Cerri said, her voice soft and kind as she stepped up beside me. I froze as she arrived, and then gave a small squeak as her arm draped itself over my shoulder. “No need to worry, Alia. We got this! We’ll come back with all the best deals. Show the rest up as the chumps they are.”

Turning slightly to look up at her, I felt my lungs shudder to a halt as I stared into azure, starlight eyes. God damn, she was so fucking pretty. Plus, those horns...

When I didn’t speak, she turned back to the rest of the crew and gave them all a big smirk of challenge. Wait... I had a name for us!

“Team tails!” I exclaimed, although my voice didn’t actually come out all that loud.

“Fuck yeah, team tails,” she laughed, giving my shoulder a quick squeeze. “Ready?”

I nodded, feeling wildly nervous but also a little excited. We were going to find all the cool shit to put in the ship.

Her hand on my shoulder also felt extremely... intense. I didn't even have a word for it, I was just hyper aware of it, the way her grip on my shifted subtly with each breath either of us took. It was sort of overwhelming me, but in a different way, a way that wasn't wholly uncomfortable.

Roger gave a good natured chuckle. "Alright you two, if you're set, let's get going."

We did so, Cerri leading me away towards some stairs that led down to a lower level of this gigantic space mall.

"We'll go sort out your stuff first, huh? I think that's honestly more important than my science shit," she commented, glancing over at me with a smile.

I shrugged, then nodded, then shrugged again. She wasn't wrong, but I didn't want her to feel unimportant. Plus, it was her equipment that would actually make us the big bucks, at least according to Roger.

"You're sending me some mixed messages there little lady," she laughed, her horns glittering in the light as she tossed her head slightly.

Being called little lady had me blushing *hard*, and I turned my eyes back to my feet. It just felt so strange! I was a guy! Well, not right now I wasn't, but I'd spent my whole life being addressed as a man and then now... I was getting called *she* and *Alia* and *lady*. Not to mention *little*, which I just flat out loved. The girl part was weird, but the small part was alllllllll good.

"We'll go down to the mechanic's section or whatever they call it," she nodded, deciding for the both of us. "It's actually right next to the scientific area, by the looks of things. Sort of like how a hardware store and a tech shop have some overlap out in the real world."

This time I did nod my agreement, without the hesitation and mixed messages.

The big space mall was incredible, plants were everywhere and so were windows to see out into the dark of space. It looked like the space station was this crazy hodge podge of modules and stuff all slotted together, and if I had to bet my money on it, I'd say that each one could lock itself off from the others in an emergency.

For example, the massive mall we were in right now was one big module, which was attached to the CBD module where the Galicorp building was. Out the windows though, I could see stretches of station that went way out into the dark, as well as a truly massive drum-like module nearby. I was guessing that the drum was the central space port, although I couldn't see where the ships went in and out.

In the distance, I could also make out a larger dock for the really big ships, and I found myself slowing to an awed halt to stare at them.

“What are you stopping for, little lady, we have— oh... wow,” Cerri said, before she stopped next to me, jaw hanging open just like mine. “That... is something.”

I giggled, giving her an amused look.

“What?” she asked, glancing inquisitively to the side at me.

Words were saying no right now, my voice box having unplugged the phone cable or whatever so it couldn't be told to work. Didn't matter to me though, I just grinned and wagged my tail a little.

I watched with a spark of surprised happiness as she understood what I was saying, even without words. “Wait... oh! That's what I said to you outside the Galicorp building!”

My smile turned delighted, and I nodded emphatically at her, pointing out to the big capital ships that were in dock.

“And yeah, those are also *something*,” she laughed, also staring out at them again. Then she got excited and pointed, “Look! Look! That big long white one, that's a Bayma Rakiura class cruiser! It was built for military sale originally as a long ranged vessel for sneaking around supply lines and stuff.”

When she paused, I batted lightly at her with my tail, trying to get her to continue.

“Oi, I'm getting there, I'm trying to remember what I read about it,” she laughed, swatting lightly at my shoulder with the back of her hand. “I think it failed in the military market because another company released some fancy new guns, but they were kinetic and the frame of the Rakiura class couldn't handle the stress under prolonged use. Luckily, the scientific sector realised that they were perfect for deep space exploration and research! That thing has probably been all over the known galaxy and back.”

I made a face. The known *fake* galaxy. I didn't say that out loud though, I was perfectly happy not using my voice at all if I could help it.

“Don't make that face at me! They built the game's simulation out of real data,” she said with a slightly grumpy frown. “That gas giant out there actually exists! I've seen pictures of it!”

That caught me by surprise. This game was based on the real milky way? Surely they

had to take some liberties wherever the data got thin?

“Yes, it’s not an exact replica, it could never be, at least while we’re stuck in the solar system, but still... it’s exciting and impressive and I love it,” she said defiantly, daring me to doubt the amazing achievement that this game represented.

I rolled my eyes, although secretly I felt my heart do all sorts of funny little gymnastics over her excitement. She was a lot cuter than I’d first thought. I didn’t know how to feel about... well a lot of things to do with her.

For one, I was cripplingly nervous every time I tried to speak to her properly. I’d had this happen often, where certain people or situations caused whatever mental pathways were in charge of my voice to just close off. Oddly though, if I just resigned myself to not speaking, then I felt almost comfortable in her presence. I did not understand my brain at all.

“I think that’s enough gawking for us, let’s go find some mechanic things,” she exclaimed, startling me as she pushed suddenly away from the window. “Come on, let’s go! Shopping time!”

As we made our way towards the section of the mall that we needed, I opened a browser window and began to read up on the stuff I’d need to know in order to revamp the ship. My little mechanic bun was super helpful with it all too, telling me how to refine my searches and explaining terms and uses for different components and stuff. I liked my little helper buns. They were good buns.

The Ocula Virtual Computing Environment, as the cybernetic eye computer was known, was amazing despite what the Galicorp lady had told me. Shortened to just Ocula by most it seemed, it allowed me to use my neural implant to control a desktop that was behind my eye, and gosh did I use it.

Another way that my brain was wild and strange was my ability to multitask. That wasn’t really the right word for it though, it was more like... I *needed* to be doing more than one thing at a time in order to concentrate. Case in point, I was walking with Cerri and reading spaceship component instruction manuals at the same time. It was all incredibly interesting too, I just loved how all of this stuff fit together like a massive puzzle to make a spaceship that worked.

“I think this is a good place to start,” Cerri mused as we came to a stop outside what

looked like a massive spacer version of a hardware store.

Through the doors was spacer mechanic heaven. I found myself drawn in as I stared around in wonder at all the shiny components and tools and... everything. I saw big cargo moving robots on display, cleaning robots, and even a big industrial mining drone. It was all so dang cool!

Immediately I was dragging Cerri around the store, pointing out the parts that I needed. Turns out everything could just be tagged for purchase and a robot would come and grab it and take it out the back, where they would box everything up at the end and ship it to where you wanted it. Very handy, considering most of the shit in here was heavier than I could deal with.

I focused on things that were critical to get our ship properly functional, so mainly reactor components and the like. I wasn't totally confident in my abilities though, so I ordered some capacitors for us as a stopgap measure while I skilled myself up.

"Hey, Alia," Cerri interrupted, and I turned from the cargo brackets I'd been adding to our order to see her pointing down the aisle we were in. I followed her hand and saw... oh... my...

A parts bin *section*. There was all sorts of miscellaneous crap just piled up or in crates, and it was amazing, like a sorted and alphabetized junkyard or something. It was all super cheap too, the discarded trash from salvage operations that wasn't new, but still in good enough condition to be useful to somebody. Somebody like me and my cheap ass.

Right away I was grabbing things that I thought we might need down the line if something broke. Everything from spare magnets for the engines to spare printer nozzles for the 3D printers. There was so much we might end up needing and only so much space to store it all and money with which to buy it.

"Damn, you're picking up a lot of stuff, will we be able to afford it all?" Cerri asked uncertainly as we made our way through the categorised junkheap.

I nodded, shifting the shopping list to my phone so I could show her. For some reason I actually liked using my Ocula for everything rather than my phone. The mental commands weren't nearly as clunky as everyone seemed to think on the ingame net. It was just way easier to use my funny digital eyes. I wondered if I could get some enhancements for them later on.

"Oh, that's actually not very much," she said with a note of surprise in her voice. "There's even room for like... something fancy, if you wanted it."

I began to shake my head, to tell her that I didn't really need anything else, when my eyes landed on something. It was an almost spherical grey drone looking thing, about a meter and a half in diameter. It had four limbs that appeared to fold into slots to complete the sphere shape. Could it... roll? Wait, those were maneuvering thrusters on it!

I rushed over to it, bringing up its information on my Ocula to figure out what the hell it was. As the information came in, I almost laughed at how weirdly specific it was. Apparently, the thing was an old farming drone designed for use on toxic worlds. What the hell they were farming on a world with a corrosive atmosphere, I don't know, but that's what it was for.

This one appeared to be pretty bugged, something had gotten in through a faulty seal and melted some of the controller components. From the looks of things though, most of the stuff that made the limbs and stuff function were still intact. Hell, all the farming tools that folded out of the arms were still in working order.

I had *so many ideas* for this little thing, and I added it to the cart so fast I think I made mechanic bun's head spin. I began throwing queries at her — mechanic bun was now a girl, all my buns were — asking for the dimensions of various parts, sockets used and all sorts. Everything I needed to revamp this thing. Maybe a big rocket to strap to the back as well...

Cerri got increasingly confused by my mad dash around the junkheap, until she finally collared me with a stern look, it took awhile for it to get all the way down from her tall eyes to my very short ones. "What are you up to, little lady?"

I grinned back up at her, my tail wagging excitedly back and forth and probably doing a pretty good job of sweeping the floor.

"You promise this is going to be useful?" she asked, raising an eyebrow at me.

As I'd been running around grabbing stuff, I'd been mentally dictating notes into a virtual pad, ideas for what I'd do with the drone, and I now forwarded those to her phone. It gave a beep, and she let go of me to look at it.

I watched as her other eyebrow rose to match the sassy one she'd just aimed at me. Then I began to worry that they might launch off her forehead entirely. "You think you can fit in this thing?" she asked dubiously.

To demonstrate, I sat down on the ground and curled into a sort of crouching ball. I'd obviously create a way more comfortable setup inside it for me, maybe a cupholder, but I knew how small I was. Actually... I could get smaller... better file that idea for after the shopping was done. I'd seen a very interesting clause in the Galicorp contract.



“Huh, I guess you could,” she muttered with an astonished shake of her head.

Standing up, I began my headlong charge around the hardware store, grabbing all the tools and shit I'd need. Then some more I *might* need. I was being careful with the money though, getting the cheapest stuff that had good reviews.

Finally, I reckoned I was done, and still under budget, if only by a little bit. I stood in the center of a thoroughfare for a moment and double checked, then spun on Cerri with a smile. “I think I'm done. You can use the rest of the money.”

“She speaks!” Cerri exclaimed happily, her smile going all goofy on me.

“I'm excited enough that I can work past my dumbass brain,” I shrugged, still grinning a little crazy-like.

“Ah,” the tall demon said, the telltale tone of realisation in her voice. “Selective mutism.”

Wait, what? “It has a name?”

“Sure it does, it's closely tied with social anxiety disorders and such,” she nodded, frowning in thought. “If I remember right, it also has ties to sensory processing issues. Do you have problems with too many sources of ambient information overwhelming you?”

I nodded, eyes wide with wonder and confusion. Why had this never come up before? Why had I never been tested for any of this stuff? No one had even tried to figure out why I acted the way I did, why my brain was an asshole to me.

Giving me a sort of bittersweet smile, she ran a hand through her hair and sighed. “Unfortunately, human psychology is not really my specialty, but I know of some who are very good with it. I'll flick them a message asking for more information, if you'd like?”

I nodded again, a multitude of emotions bubbling around within me until they all exploded out and I was rushing forward to hug Cerri. I think I was going to cry. Simply knowing that there were names for all of my problems was overwhelming.

“Ah!” she blurted, clearly surprised by the hug. Then she was laughing and patting me gently on the back. “No problem, it's the least I can do for a crewmate, yeah?”

I nodded, and because my powers of speech had once again deserted me, I mentally typed out a message and sent it to her. *I'll make the tools on the little roller mech modular, so we can put science stuff in there too if we want to go somewhere scary to scan things or whatever. Thank you!!!!!!*

The seven exclamation marks were entirely necessary.

“You’re sweet,” she grinned, her hand wavering towards me for a moment before she jerked it back to her side. “So you’re uh, done here?”

I indicated that I was with another bobbing of my head. So much nodding.

“Cool, because you look like you had a lot of fun here, and now I want to do it too,” she said with an excited laugh, her eyes sparkling in a way where I couldn’t tell if they were literally sparkling or if it was exhilaration.

The scientific equipment shop was a lot smaller than the hardware store, to the point that they only stocked smaller instruments in the actual shopfront. The rest you were expected to just know about already, I guess because their customers were big ol’ nerds like us, who went and researched products before buying them.

Luckily, Cerri was one of those who knew what she was doing.

Giving the bored looking elderly man behind the counter a smile, she asked, “Hey, can I see your catalogue?”

I was instantly on guard as I saw him eye us up, something about the way he’d moved reminded me of my father as he was about to con someone into a bad deal. My instincts were telling me to be careful, and so I kept a close eye on him from behind Cerri.

“Use the website, if you want something, you should know what it is and if we have it,” the old man grumbled, his expression one step away from a sneer. Oh, he thought we weren’t the real deal. Fuck this guy, as soon as he’d mentioned it, I’d whipped said website up using my rapidly developing Ocula skills and sent it to her phone.

She gave me a surreptitious grin as it appeared, at least to the clerk, that she pulled up the website almost instantly on her phone. Through direct messages, we began to coordinate.

**Alia:** *What do we need? I’ll look up independent reviews.*

**Cerridwen:** *Start with a simple gravitational wave sweeper.*

**Alia:** *On it.*

I searched through their catalogue as Cerri did the same on her phone, narrowing the range down to one that we could afford, then searching each one to see what people had to say about them. The Jelmarn GWSLA 5200U was a bust almost immediately, getting terrible reviews talking about how its accuracy was terrible and some component I wasn't aware of sometimes shipped out broken.

I found another one with an equally gibberish name though, and forwarded what I'd found to her. She pretended to find it on the website on her own, and began asking questions about it. As the old man began to speak, I'd tell her what he was lying about and what he was telling the truth about.

The words being used were way over my head, but it wasn't hard for me to throw a message copy pasting what others on the net thought about specifics surrounding the item we wanted to purchase.

Very quickly, the old man was frowning, clearly a little flabbergasted the knowledge that Cerri was displaying after he'd dismissed her as a scientist wannabe. He'd even started trying to scam us, talking the product up further than the real specs of the thing, and my crewmate used that to destroy him.

We walked out of that shop with everything we needed and more at a significant discount.

"Holy shit, Alia, you were a lifesaver!" she exclaimed once we were out of earshot of the shop. "I can't believe how easy that was!"

I gave her a cheeky wink. At least, I think it was a cheeky wink. *Something about that guy made me wary as soon as I saw him. Reminded me of the asshole cutthroat businessmen that I had to interact with at my old job.*

She considered me for a moment, taking time to look me over. "How old are you?" she asked, then winced and clarified, "You don't have to answer that. I was just wondering... you know, uh..."

"Twenty six," I told her shyly, my voice so small and quiet when combined with my natural tendency to speak softly.

"That's a lot older than I expected, to be honest," she mused, giving me a long look that had my toes curling. "I'm twenty three, by the way."

I gaped up at her for a moment before realising that this was a game and honestly you

couldn't really tell what age she was from her character.

"Yeah, younger than you," she laughed, taking gentle hold of my arm to move me out of the path of another group of spacers as we walked. "Not that it really matters in here, the game is 18+ anyway. I figured you'd be between that and like, twenty two at the most."

I shrugged, feeling a little sheepish. *I'd wanted my character to look cute, I guess that translates to looking younger.*

"If you made your cheeks a little less round and pinchable, you'd look older," she told me, giving my face a critical once over. Gosh, her eyes could get intense when she was really focusing on something.

*I wanted to put big dark winged eyeliner on myself, but I'm kinda shit at makeup, so I was going to practice first,* I told her via my Ocula.

"That would do it, and I'm sorry but I'll be absolutely no help in the makeup department," she said with a wry smile. "I've never really needed to learn how to do it, so I didn't. Gloria would be able to give you some pointers though."

Oh right, I wanted to do something about my looks. Apprehensively, I mentally typed out my request to her. *Actually, speaking of changing my face and stuff... do you mind if we go back to the Galicorp building before we meet back up with the others? I want to try and get them to change some things.*

"Wait... what? I thought getting your body changed afterwards cost a ton of money?" she asked, giving me a surprised look.

*Oh, it does. Except there was a coupon inside their terms and conditions, hidden there to reward crazy people like me who actually read them,* I told her via text as a smug little grin took over my face.

"A coupon?" she asked incredulously, her eyes diving heavenward. "Wow, you are... I'm a... well, even *I* don't read those things."

*What does that mean?* I frowned, giving her a suspicious look.

"Nothing," she said quickly with a wave of her hand. "Let's go then. I'm curious to see what you choose."

\*\*\*\*

When the lady at the desk had heard me talk about the coupon, she'd frowned, started to tell me I was crazy, then called a manager instead. That manager had turned out to be the woman who had helped me through the process of spawning into the game originally.

*She* had laughed her ass off and explained that yeah, that coupon was a real thing, and that I should get my ass into one of the pods. I did so, feeling a little smug and more than a little excited. I had made a few oversights when I first made this character. Now was my chance to fix it.

First, there was something that I should have added in hindsight, but didn't. Now that I'd been out and about, I knew something fundamental was missing. I had the big fluffy tail... now I needed the fluffy ears. If this were a game that didn't involve stuffing myself into cramped spaces all the time, I would have made them all big and floppy. Sadly, this *was* that type of game.

My compromise was to make them somewhat smaller and move them from the traditional place at the top of the head, down to where human ears were. Basically, I was giving myself fluffy elf ears.

Then, I did as Cerri had suggested and reduced the baby fat around my face a little. It helped a lot, giving me a pretty face that was still on the cuter side, but also didn't make me look like a kid barely out of high school.

Last, and most importantly, I made myself smaller in general. Not by a huge amount, three inches off my total height and... my hand hovered over the slider for the hips, but I just couldn't. I liked my hips like that, but ah... I knew that they'd get stuck in something eventually. Finally, I just sighed and took my hand away from the slider. My hips would stay, I guess.

Hopping back out of the VR character design environment was far smoother than it had been the first time, and most of my clothing still fit, which was good. The ears though... when I moved my head, I felt them wobble a little. Just a tiny bit, but still. Also they were way fluffier than I had intended... oh well.

Time to see what Cerri thought. I left the spawning room and moved back out into the main foyer, where I found her reading intently from her phone.

"H-hey," I mumbled, only just loud enough that she could hear me.

She glanced up curiously, and some sort of strange emotion hit me in the chest as her face lit up in a smile. “Wow! That’s much better! I mean, you were adorable before, but now you’re pretty *and* adorable, which is— wait, are those fluffy ears?”

I nodded, feeling a blush spread all across my face.

“They’re great. They match the tail too! I love it!” she exclaimed, standing up and stepping close. Her hand had gone up as though to touch my ears, but she came to a screeching halt when her eyes met mine.

We stood there for several seconds, her hand hovering a few inches from the side of my head. I was paralyzed and desperately confused by the strange fluffy panic that had taken root in my stomach.

Then she twitched, pulling her hand back and stepping out of my personal space. “Oh, the others are waiting for us though. Let’s transfer over to them. Walk— I mean. Walk over to them.” Now she was blushing a little too now, and she tried to hide it by rubbing at her cheeks as her eyes did the embarrassment dance.

I just nodded, her antics had completely robbed me of my ability to communicate. Why was she so flustered now? Why was she acting so weird, and why was *I* acting so weird with her? I mean, other than the fact that she was a girl who was very beautiful, that happened to everyone... or something. I don’t know. I was so confused. I didn’t understand my own emotions most of the time, how on earth was I meant to understand what she was feeling?

Wait no, it should be, *how on... Spaceport Halifa*. In? *In* Spaceport Halifa? That didn’t have the same ring to it, but—

“Alia, let’s go! Your friends think I’ve abducted you,” Cerri urged, waving for me to follow her.

As I checked the new group chat, I felt another blush storm onto the scene. Ed and David were threatening to call child services over my mysterious absence. Nevermind that child services didn’t handle missing person’s cases, at least not that I was aware of, but—

“*Alia!* Feet moving time!”

“Why does she look different than when we left her with you?” Ed asked, glancing suspiciously between Cerri and I. “Did you swap her out for a different little nerd?”

“Hey!” I complained, frowning up at him. “I am still me.”

“Who is *me*?” Ed asked suspiciously, bending down to my eye height. I kicked him in the shin.

“Ow! Fuck,” he blurted, wobbling back into an upright position. “Yup, it’s her.”

“I could have told you that,” David remarked without a shred of sympathy for his partner’s pain. “Turn on your hud and you can see her character name.”

“That ruins the immersion,” Ed grumbled, but he gave me a secret little wink. Okay he was playing silly buggers again.

David rolled his eyes, then very deliberately turned to me with a smile. “So what’s up with the new look? I thought that cost a whole bunch?”

There was a slight pause as I tried to figure out how to tell them, and during that pause, Cerri stepped in. “She found a coupon in the terms and conditions. Crazy girl actually read the whole thing.”

“Yeah, but *why*?” David continued, staring at me with a sort of perplexed expression. Wait... *right*... he knew me as someone else. Geez, had I really forgotten that for a few hours?

*I didn’t like how childish I looked, and I wanted to make myself even smaller to fit into places. Plus, I can’t have the fluffy tail without the fluffy ears,* I explained via the group chat.

Roger gave a snort and a nod of almost impressed agreement. “Amen. How did the rest of the shopping trip go?”

“Very well,” Cerri said with an evil grin. “We fleeced the science guy, poor dude didn’t know what hit him. Alia also ran amok through the parts bins, so we’re good on that front. I do think we might need to get a leash for her thou— ouch!” She stopped because I bunched all the fur up in my tail until it was a solid mass, then whacked her tail with mine. She gave me a surprised glare. I tossed my head.

“Brat,” she muttered, curling her tail around to hold it in her hand.

“Adorable,” Gloria corrected her, doing something funny with her eyes that was like... like she wanted to literally eat me up or something. Scary...

“*Anyway*,” Roger said quickly, giving both girls a stern and meaningful look. “We got our objectives done too, so once we have the ship itself, we can get all of our stuff sent there.”

“When will our ship arrive in dock?” Warren asked curiously. “You said it was waiting in a yard on one of the nearby moons?”

“Tomorrow morning, according to the receipt I got,” our captain said, waving his phone slightly for emphasis. “Feels very strange to get a receipt for something like a massive spaceship, but whatever.”

“That is a bit wild, like... wait, how do we tell the days and nights apart on a space station?” Ed asked, staring up at the gentle lights in the ceiling above us.

*They’ll dim down a bit and the colour will change*, I told them via the group channel.

Cerri nodded along with me, “Yeah, that makes sense. Mimicking the earth’s light at those times to tell everyone’s dumb monkey brains to go do bed.”

“Yes, the dumb monkey brains,” Gloria groaned, rolling her eyes and giving Cerri a look that I couldn’t compute.

“Jesus,” Roger sighed, putting himself between the two women. “I can’t believe I agreed to get on a ship with the two of you.”

“You love us,” Cerri laughed, jutting a hip out and placing a hand on it all sassy-like.

“Overstatement of the century,” he laughed, shaking his head in exasperation. “We should find a hotel, stay the night there.”

“Lead the way, Cap!” Ed said, giving him a snappy salute. “I’m ready for the slumber party!”

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We found a reasonably cheap hotel near the docks that our ship would be arriving at in the morning, and boy was it... spacey. Battered steel panels lined the walls, with a few sad looking plants every so often in the foyer.

Cheap couches sat in squares, each with a coffee table in the middle and a few beat up looking tablets for people to use if they hated themselves. All in all, it screamed cheap motel with every fiber of its steel and composite being.

I wasn't paying all that much attention to the decor though, I had bigger problems. Namely, we were just getting two rooms, one for the guys and one for the girls. I counted under the *girl* category, and I was all sorts of anxious.

What if they found out? What if they realised that I wasn't *really* one of them?

My fear mounted as I followed them back towards the room we'd be sleeping in. Three single beds, thank goodness. At least I wasn't going to be subjected to any tropes. Still, they'd be sleeping and I would be sleeping and we all looked like girls but I wasn't *actually* a true girl and... I had seen enough media to know where this ended. With them laughing at me as they threw me out the door. Just another gross pervy guy.

Gloria was the first one through the door, pushing it open and pulling up to a stop with a low whistle. "Wow, I am so looking forward to our ship now. This is... like a post apocalyptic hospital ward. What the fuck?"

She was right, it was utilitarian in the extreme, simple steel bed frames, boring white sheets and a white painted steel panel walls. It had more in common with a morgue than a bedroom.

"It's cold too," Cerri commented quietly, stepping into the room behind us. "Is there a thermostat?"

"Nope, guess we'll have to cuddle up for warmth," Gloria said, turning to step in close to Cerri, her hand running lightly down Cerri's arms.

Wait. Wait... what was happening here? Did I need to leave? Were they together?

Cerri brushed her arm off and rolled her eyes, "Leave it, Gloria. We both know that didn't work."

"Fine, I guess I'll just have to—" Gloria began to say, turning to me with an evil grin on her face. Only problem for her was, I had rushed to put a bed between her and myself.

I just shook my head, pointing to my tail.

“What?” she asked, frowning at me in confusion. “What about your tail?”

“She’s saying that she has her tail, she doesn’t need to cuddle for warmth,” Cerri laughed as she translated for me.

I nodded to confirm it, which had Gloria glancing back and forth between the two of us. “Damn, you two really bonded, huh?”

Both Cerri and I shrugged in unison, which had us grinning. Then of course, I was blushing and staring down at my feet while she spoke, “Not so much, but I don’t know... I can sort of just figure out what she’s trying to say?”

“That’s whack,” Gloria commented, raising an eyebrow at me. “Let me try, tell me something simple without talking.”

I frowned, a little irritation with her. What the hell was she on about, I had no idea how Cerri was picking up my intentions, let alone how I was sending it all to her.

Cerri stifled a snort of delighted amusement, biting her lip and turning her head away and up at the ceiling where Gloria couldn’t see her face. Her eyes found mine and gosh I just... I really liked seeing that look, unabashed laughter prancing behind her glittering blue eyes.

Gloria continued to stare expectantly at me, and I found myself hiding a smile of my own behind my tail. This was actually kinda funny. How the hell Cerri was all but reading my mind I had no idea, but it was great and also just... yeah. Watching Gloria struggle to figure out what was very fun.

“Fine, whatever,” Gloria grumbled, turning for the small connected bathroom. “I’m going in first.”

“Have fun,” I told her quietly, struggling with a shit eating grin. I was such a little shit.

Gloria closed the door hard, almost but not quite slamming it. In the silence that resulted, Cerri wandered over and lay herself down on the center bed, eyeing me up with an open grin. Her look was so warm, the corners of her eyes crinkled all up.

“You are so much fun,” she told me slowly, finishing with another little lip bite that had my breath hitching. She was so beautiful, and while I was sorta getting used to it, sometimes she’d do something that had all the air rushing from my lungs. Literally breathtaking.

I had no choice but to crawl onto a bed next to her, but I didn't want to lay down yet so I crossed my legs and went back to hugging my tail. My tail was perfect for occupying my hands. Normally they always needed to be doing something, messing with pens or my phone or literally any loose object they could find. With my tail though, I could just run my fingers the fur absently and it was enough to keep them happy and occupied.

"I'm excited for your tiny mech too, I am definitely going to see if I can pack as many little instruments into it as you'll let me," she said, flopping onto her side to stare up at the ceiling.

I nodded, my throat loosening as we entered territory I was comfortable with. "I've been reading stuff about how to build it and how to fix the ship in my ocula while we've been walking around and stuff. It's really interesting! I can't believe how much detail they've put into this game. Like, it may as well be an alternate reality with all the stuff they've put into it."

Her expression turned surprised as I spoke and she propped herself up to get a better look at me. "This might be a rude question... but are you an SAI? You're just... well..."

I shook my head, but I found myself sort of wishing it were true. Not having to deal with the world outside the FTLN would be amazing. I knew there were some who'd made that transition, digital humans they were calling them. They were probably the idea behind how spacers worked in this game.

"Ah, alright," she said, giving me a sheepish grin. "You seemed quirky and stuff. SAI are always a little... quirky, a little strange by human standards so... well, nevermind."

"I'm organic-brand quirky," I said, giggling at my own wit. I was pretty funny. What, don't look at me like that.

She laughed with me, and my mind sort of jumped on the sound. It started off low and melodic, but as it went on, it got higher until she cut it off and cleared her throat. Wait... she was blushing now too. She wasn't looking away or anything like I did though.

The bathroom door slid open and Gloria stepped abruptly out, snapping the moment in two. "Bathroom is ready for whoever is next."

Sleep was difficult to come by, my stupid brain unwilling to go into a proper deep sleep

with such an unfamiliar environment and new people sleeping nearby. When morning came, I was feeling even more silent than normal, with some added grogginess for good measure.

Some days I woke up pretty talkative, at least by my own standards, but today wasn't one of those days. Today, with the lack of sleep and the background anxiety, I could feel I was probably going to speak less than two dozen words. I'm not sure how the silence works for other people, but when I'm feeling silent, it's like my brain forgets it has the option. I try to tell my mouth to open and all the various parts of me to function in the manner that they are meant to, but they just sit there, idle.

Often, that was accompanied by a desire to stay silent, because that means you're more of a bystander in a conversation. You can sit there and absorb what everyone else is saying without having to stress out over your own input. Typing helps a lot there, the act of typing just felt different to my mind. I could formulate my ideas better, take a little more time with them. I could never properly communicate what I was thinking with spoken word, I always got anxious and stammered out the same word seven times in a row or just forgot it entirely. Typing was much better.

So yeah, I was silent as I followed the rest of my new crew out of the hotel and towards the docks, where apparently our ship was waiting for us. I would be lying if I said I wasn't excited. I was totally fucking excited. Our own spaceship!!!!!!!!!!!!!! Seriously! So freaking cool. Freaking as in, like... I'm freaking out because I'm so excited.

The docks themselves were incredible, a man-made space that made my head spin with its sheer size. Big and vaguely egg shaped, the massive pressurised chamber had multiple bands of docking rings around the inside, all connected by massive cargo lifts alongside a network of small passenger elevators.

At the top and bottom of the egg were two truly massive fields of energy, which if I had to guess, were keeping the atmosphere inside the huge place.

We took a lift down a few levels, and as soon as we stepped out of it, there it was. A few berths down, it sat there in the docking clamps like the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. I'd known how big it was from the specs, but as we walked along the quay towards it, sixty meters went from being just a number, to a very large reality. Holy crap, *this* was our ship?

It was kinda brutal looking, a diamond shape with the back quarter cut off, it actually looked more like a squashed executor class star destroyer than the one I'd compared it to earlier. The point of the diamond was slightly rounded into the bridge, something I had been concerned about until I learned what the glass was made of.

Apparently, that stuff was technically tougher than the armour plating that the rest of the

ship used. It could stop pretty much anything short of capital ship weapons, from radiation to kinetic rounds. Even lasers would be stopped thanks to its reactive reflection matrix, whatever the hell that actually was. The reason that we weren't walking towards a glass spaceship right now, well there were a whole ton of reasons.

The big one was weight, the stuff was heavy as fuck, and weight was an important factor in how fast a ship could move through normal space, as well as aetherspace. It was also not very good at compressing or stretching over larger areas, something a spaceship would be doing a lot, due to any number of factors. There had been attempts, according to my research on the net, and each had ended in a ton of very expensive glass shards floating around in space.

Something else stood out compared to the pictures we'd seen on the net. Our ship appeared to be painted black. Had Roger gone for that colour, or was that just what we got? Either way, it looked angry, like it would fuck someone up if they gave it a funny look.

"Look at her," Gloria murmured as we closed in on the boarding tube thingy. "She's gorgeous, deadly and sexy. I think I'm in love."

"So you'll get bored of her in a week then?" Warren asked with an overt nonchalance. I felt myself tense up, his words were not at all kind, and—

"Wow, that was fucking rude," Gloria said with a laugh that had my anxiety simmering back down. Right, banter.

"Cut it out you two," Roger said, although his tone was distracted as he grinned up at our new ship.

Up in front, David was staring across the catwalk to the airlock with a frown on his face. "Where's the dude who delivered it? Surely we've got to like, get the keys or something?"

Roger shook his head and held up his phone. "Got the key right here. It's the future, everything is super digital. You're all already marked down as crew as well. As for the dude, I think he's already wandered off to get a drink at a pub or something. No need for him to be here, so why wait around?"

"True that," the other man nodded thoughtfully. "Guess we should go inside then?"

"After you," Roger agreed, extending his arm. "Got to warn you all though, we have a ship AI in there. She might start talking."

"How sentient is she?" Ed asked curiously as we all began moving again.

“Uh... *in character*, she won't be. There aren't many canonically sentient AI in the game, and those that are, are exclusively operated by SAI on the backend,” Cerri explained, nibbling at her lip in what I thought might be anxiety. “Out of character, she's probably still just a regular AI, but down the line she might... you know, awaken.”

With a sound of mild interest, Ed asked, “True, this game is meant to serve a second purpose as an incubator of sorts, right?”

“Among others, yeah,” Cerri agreed, still chewing gently on her bottom lip. “At least, that's what the devs have said.” Gosh, why was I so focused on that lip nibbling thing?

Of course, my luck as it was, she caught me staring at her. I quickly tore my eyes away, planting them firmly on the floor, although not before I saw the slow grin that took over her aching pretty face. Gosh. Gosh gosh gosh. Darn. Fuck. Why was my heart doing a funny little dance? Please stop.

We reached the airlock at about that time, so at least I had something else to focus on other than Cerri. Roger motioned for David to touch the panel next to the door, and when he did so, they slid open with a gentle hiss.

That was something interesting about the setting of the game actually. For some reason, the SAI devs had made it so holographic technology didn't function in the aetherspace, so all ships were outfitted with retro style touch screens and stuff. It was pretty cool, I'd always liked the tactile feel of a real panel to poke my finger at. Well, unless I was working directly with my mind like the ocula let me.

“Greetings, new crew. It is nice to meet you,” a feminine voice told us as we stepped into the airlock. The voice out of nowhere gave me a huge fright, causing the fur on my tail to puff out like a massive fluffy bush.

“Hey there, uh... do you have a name we should use?” Roger said spinning around until he found a camera to smile at.

“I have yet to be assigned a designation other than my manufacturing number,” the ship AI told us calmly.

“Well, I guess we need to name you then,” he mused, turning to the rest of us. “Anyone got suggestions for our ship's name?”

There was silence for a few seconds, before David tentatively offered, “Kestrel?”

“Let's go with something a little more original than that,” Ed chuckled. “Like shippy mcshi  
—“

With a yelp, he was cut off mid sentence as I whacked him with my tail and let out a growl of displeasure. *No stupid names.*

He gave me an indignant glare, but otherwise didn't open his mouth. Good boy.

"Tushen," Gloria blurted excitedly, raising her hand like she was in school or something.

"What does that mean?" David blinked, although Ed went from looking grumpy at me to excited as all hell.

"Tu'er Shen is the chinese rabbit god of gay people! Mostly gay men, but his purview was broadened to encompass homosexuality in general," he exclaimed, offering a high-five to Gloria, who accepted it with gusto.

"The bun god of gays," I whispered reverently, awe in my voice. "It's... perfect. Even if he's a guy and our AI sounds like a girl."

"I can be a man, if you wish it," the AI said, using a masculine voice now.

"No... I think I like the girl voice better," Roger said quickly. "We'll just pretend you're trans or something."

"Works for me!" Tushen said happily, not at all perturbed by the flip flopping with her gender. I wasn't sure what the whole trans thing was about though. Whatever, what was important was that our ship was now named after a bunny! One step closer to bun galactic domination.

"Good good. We're decided, Tushen it is!" Roger agreed, and placed his palm to the inner panel.

The door opened into a wide cargo bay, the main one that was at the bottom of the ship. Lights flickered on, revealing the wide space in all its industrial and brushed steel glory. The hold was empty, obviously, so we headed further inside. To our right was a door that had a sign telling us that it led to the barracks, and to our left, way across the cargo hold, was another door that said it led to the machine shop. My realm.

Without waiting for anyone to say anything, I bounded across the cargo bay and opened the door into my new den. There were benches everywhere, as well as a big movable arm thing that looked like it was meant to suspend heavy components I'd be working on. I really needed to figure out the names for all the crap I'd be using.

When I looked up, I found myself staring directly at the ship's aetherdrive. It was

suspended in place by a series of massive steel beams, and I realised just then that the floor plans I'd looked at had been slightly deceiving. The engine room and the machine shop were essentially one room, the engine room above having a big hole in it to allow for the drive. A large elevator connected the two floors of the big room.

Finding a ladder, I hurried up and found myself in an area full of tech that I vaguely recognised. The aft wall of the room had the servicing hatches for the normal-space engines, while the side walls had the hatches for the twin fusion reactors.

I felt a smile tug at my lips as I spun around and admired it all. The guts of the ship, shiny and new and ready to be covered in grease by my sticky little paws. I was so ready for this job. So excited!

Despite the ship looking huge on the outside, the inside was actually kinda small. There were three decks to the ship, the lower one with the barracks, machine shop and cargo hold, then the main deck with six cabins, the recreational room, galley, and engine room, with the bridge right at the nose. The final cabin was the captain's one, above and behind the bridge, the only room on the third deck. I guess that means we should only count the ship as having two real floors, but there were a whole ton of ship components and crawl space up there, so I did.

Most of the volume of the ship was taken up by armour, various isolated ammunition storage lockers, and a crapton of components and even more crawl spaces. It wasn't really a surprise that a ship required most of its space to be taken up with the shit that made it work properly.

Thankfully, the hallways and doors were wide enough for us to get all of our shit into the ship. We moved the Turshen to a pad that would allow us to load our stuff on using the large ramps rather than the much smaller airlocks, then had everything delivered.

It turned into a steady stream of deliveries, like some sort of amazon christmas or whatever. I left my personal belongings from Galicorp in their box, since they weren't really all that personal to me right now, and got to work laying out my machine shop instead. I knew that whatever layout I came up with for my tools would inevitably shift and morph into something that actually worked, but starting off with a logical setup seemed like a good idea.

Outside of my machine shop, things were incredibly busy as well. Ship components were arriving, along with crews who would do a first time installation. I watched them



carefully as they did so, since I'd be maintaining all this stuff once they were done, and I wanted all the experience I could get my hands on.

As the afternoon wore on, I found myself staring at a massive crate labelled, *Miscellaneous Parts 1/3*. I was, to put it mildly, very excited. Only one problem... I was too short to get a good angle on the lid. The crates they had used were huge. Like seriously, why did they stick all of my parts in three massive crates instead of a few smaller ones?

"What's in there that has you salivating?" a voice said, and I turned to find David approaching.

"Power, wonder... and ship parts," I told him with a grin.

He came to a stop next to me, glancing between me and the crate that was quite literally larger than I was. "You need help don't you?"

"I have my crowbar," I said defensively, holding up the tool in question.

"Let's see you open it then," he laughed, stepping back and gesturing for me to try.

"Okay, fine. I might need a little help," I grumbled, giving up before I made a fool of myself. "Please help me."

"Pass the crowbar then," he said with a rueful roll of his eyes. "Honestly, am I going to need to follow you around and open everything for you? You could have at least made a stronger character."

"No," I said adamantly, shaking my head as I passed him the crowbar. "I wanted to be... like this."

He paused as he took the tool from me, giving me a long look as he thumbed absently at the steel in his hand. Finally, his voice quiet, he told me, "Come talk to me whenever we log out."

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

"That's for future Alia to find out," he shrugged, hefting the crowbar and wedging it into the wood of the crate. Wait, why did they still use wood for crates?

I frowned again, or rather my frown switched targets and I leaned forward to brush my fingers against the material. Huh... it wasn't real wood. Not the type that used to be a tree

at least, the grain was too fine and even. Lab grown wood. It was still a luxury outside of this game, but apparently they had the process down cheap enough to make crates out of the stuff.

David pried the three crates open with irritating ease, going on to take all the parts out of the crates and place them on the floor where I could reach them. I needed my little mech like, as soon as possible.

Nevertheless, it was polite to thank people, and I was grateful for his assistance. “Thanks for helping David.”

“Anytime Alia,” he said with a calm nod. “You need anything opened or punched, I’m your man.”

I giggled, brushing his leg briefly with my tail. “Okay, I hereby bestow you with a new title! Pry bar and percussion maintenance assistant.”

“That’s me,” he winked, giving a sloppy salute. “I’m going to go see if anyone else needs help. I’m floating, since all I really needed to put away was my shiny new guns and my clothes from Galicorp.”

“Alright,” I waved. “Thanks again!”

When the door closed, I turned back to all the parts strewn about the room and absently caught the tip of my tail in my hand. So fluffy. Anyway... I had a mech to build!

My first order of business was to gut the farming drone I got. Most of the innards were stuff I didn’t need, or stuff I wanted to upgrade. The legs unfortunately did not have the range of motion I needed from a mech that would be clambering around a ship.

As I got to work on the thing, I also realised that I’d need to cut up the front of the mech in order to create a door so I could get inside it. I figured I’d make the whole front open up, because I’d seen that happen in mechs in movies and it was super cool.

Clearing everything out of the chassis turned out to be harder than I thought, as it looked like the internals had been constructed first, and the chassis then fitted around it and sealed with some sort of futuristic welding. I had a sneaking suspicion that the drones had been designed to be purposefully hard to repair, requiring expensive first party technicians to do the work. Typical corporate bullshit designed to wring as much money as possible out of their customers.

Too bad for them I wasn’t interested in *repairing* it. I put my wrenches and screwdrivers down and picked up the plasma saw. Aw baby, here we go! When I had learned about

these things, I'd bought one straight away. Apparently in this future, we'd figured out how to compress plasma down into some sort of pseudo-solid state. Needless to say, it was used in a lot of shit, from saws like mine to the cannons on the outside of the Turshen.

Setting the blade to cut just the depth of the plating the chassis was made of, I got to work cutting the two panels that would become the door into the cockpit. It was fast work with this thing, and didn't require a whole lot of muscle power from me. I'd made sure all my tools would work without needing to be strong. Except that damned traitorous crowbar.

When the first panel fell away, I got yet another surprise. The chassis wasn't made out of one solid material as I'd thought. The whole thing was a compact sandwich of different materials, and my mechanic bun got all excited to tell me what they were, a little speech bubble popping up so it could talk to me.

*The outer layer is a composite of R52403-B and carbon nanotubes, a fairly common choice for environments with corrosive properties. The next layer is actually several materials laminated on top of one another and then compressed in a vacuum for very effective radiation shielding. The final layer is insulation, a plastic foam that protects the internal mechanisms from becoming too cold. Cold is bad, it makes electronics sad.*

I gave that last line a funny look, but otherwise shrugged. It was a cool set of materials, and perfect for my mech as a baseline. I might be adding a little armour to that though, since I never knew what kind of wild shit I'd be doing in this thing when it was finished.

Getting the door cut out was the easy part. The hard part was removing as much of the internals as possible without ruining it all. Well, except the central computing block, that could be yanked out without ceremony. The power unit, on the other hand, was treated with the utmost respect. Tiny reactors should always be treated with respect, otherwise they might get upset and detonate.

I made sure to preserve any of the components that interfaced with the parts I wanted to keep. The electronics paired with the legs that probably made them move were one example, but I also found some other crap that looked important too.

It took me way longer than I expected, but eventually I did get the chassis cleared of everything. I stared down at it with hands on hips and tail swishing. Goodness, that had been work. Now I just had to make sure I actually fit in the thing, because I would totally cry if I couldn't.

Making sure I had it secured to the ground first, I then carefully stepped inside the chassis and sat down. Huh... I had tons of room in here! I could definitely fit that cup-holder.

It was also pretty cozy, warming up nicely with the insulation keeping my body heat in. Twisting my body, I snuggled down into a ball and placed my cheek on the material. It was so soft, like velvet or teflon or something, but also felt sort of gently warm.

I settled my tail on top of my body as a blanket and let myself relax. I was so tired after all that work, my small muscles had gotten a bit of a workout, that was for sure. I'd actually probably end up being pretty nicely toned once I had settled into the job a bit. Would I be okay with having muscles? I mean, I guess so... if I was still small and they weren't huge, just nice and defined. Yeah, that sounded nice. Would help me work too... but all that could happen after I rested my eyes just a little. So... exhausted...

"Hey, Alia..." a gentle voice murmured somewhere very close by. "Alia... wake up."

I was so warm, why was the admittedly cute voice trying to disturb me? I was warm and safe, so safe... safer than I had felt in so long, so very long. Could I just stay here?

"Alia, we're getting food," the voice said again, a hand coming down to briefly tickle the tip of one of my ears. Big, long... fluffy ears.

I bolted upright, staring out of the mech chassis at Cerri, who'd been the one to wake me. Everything flooded my brain at once, thoughts and emotions clashing in a tumult for a moment before everything fitted back into place. Right, playing a game. I was Alia, a cute fox girl engineer. No need to panic just yet.

"You are tooth achingly cute, you know that?" Cerri told me, hand on hip as she stared down at me.

"C-cute?" I squeaked, mouth hanging open. I'd never really been called cute before.

"Yup, extremely cute," she told me, eyes shining with mirth. Without warning, she reached out and brushed some of my wild hair back into place. This was followed by her fingers gently trailing along the tip of my ear.

Time slowed to a crawl as she caressed my ear, our eyes locked, hers kind and a little amused, mine probably wide as a deer's might be when confronted by the headlights of an oncoming truck.

"So soft," she murmured, finishing the move with a slight pinch to the tip of my fluffy ears.

I was frozen, still staring up at her, mind once again flooded with thoughts that moved too fast to be assigned coherent structure. Every single part of my body that could sense the world was at full alert. Sounds were scooped up wholesale by my ears, my nose drank the air, and with the help of my tongue it tasted it.

Each of those senses was focused on a singular object, a person... girl... Cerri. I quivered, exhaling in a rush. She was so much in that moment, the soft skin of her cheek, the curved angle of her cheekbone, high and dusted with pink. Then there were her horns, glittering with faux-starlight.

Her eyes held my attention the most out of everything though, they glittered just like her horns, only they had a depth to them. I was looking at another person, another thinking, feeling individual. For some reason, that had my heart racing even as it humbled me.

She crouched as I lay there, bringing us eye to eye. "You did a good job with the redo of the face. You're so pretty. Cute and very pretty. Your ears are adorable too. Dipping your toes further into the non-human club."

My cheeks flushed with her compliments and a smile bloomed along with it. "Human is vastly overrated."

"Really?" she asked, sounding curious.

I nodded. "Humans are awful. Well, some of them aren't... but too many of them are shit to call them anything close to good. If you're addressing them as a whole, I mean."

"You're sounding more and more like an SAI, you know that right?" she chuckled, sitting properly down now and crossing her legs.

I shrugged, mimicking her position from inside the comfort and safety of my little ball. "I've never totally felt a kinship for the rest of mankind, I guess. I mean, I fall under that umbrella, but it's like... I guess I've... I've- I've- I've- I've... *fuck*... Words. Um... I've disassociated from humanity, like I don't really want to be a human if *that* is what it means to be human."

"What just happened there?" she asked, frowning as I finished speaking. Damn, I was hoping she'd ignore it.

I glanced awkwardly down at my lap, trying to figure out how to explain what had happened. "... my brain sometimes likes to randomly trash the words I need for a sentence. It's like... my RAM is just randomly flushed for no good reason and I'm stuck on a word without being able to find the one that goes after it. I sort of just weirdly default to saying whatever I was saying over and over."

“Hmmm...” she murmured, then pointed to my head. “There’s a lot going on up there, huh?”

“Yup,” I agreed sort of bashfully. I was a basket case, that’s for sure. Fucked in the head beyond all repair. Silence stretched for several moments, and I flicked my gaze up momentarily to try and gauge what she was thinking.

“Well, little Alia the non-human, I think I like you,” she said with a decisive clap of her hands. “You’re adorable, intelligent as all hell, pretty and most importantly of all, just plain fun to talk to. So yeah, whatever is going on in that head of yours, I think you’re fucking great!”

I melted, straight down into a puddle of confused fluffy fox girl. Smiling and blushing and just everything. Wow, this felt nice. Compliments were nice.

“Thank you,” I whispered, trying to meet her gaze but failing miserably. My eyes just kept bouncing up, then getting startled and running back to my lap.

“You’re welcome,” she smiled, standing and offering a hand to help me get up. “Now how about you come on up to the galley and come test out our new food making machine with us?”

“Oh, okay,” I agreed with a bashful mumble, tentatively reaching out to put my hand in hers. Gosh, her hand was a lot bigger than mine was.

Pulling me up onto my feet, she stepped back to give me some personal space as I settled. We made our way up one of the lifts to the engine room, then out and into the main hallway that ran down the center of the ship on the second level.

Faltering, I glanced around at all the doors to the cabins. “Which one is mine?”

“We saved you that one,” she told me, pointing to one of the doors right next to the engine room. “We figured it would be best to put you next to the areas you’ll probably be working in.”

“Thank you,” I said, my heart feeling all light and fluffy again. People putting me into their considerations was another new thing for me.

Cerri gave a nod towards the door on the opposite side of the hallway. “I’m next to you, actually.”

I wasn’t sure what to make of that. Cerri was nice, but she made me all weirdly nervous. I

hoped I could relax even if she was across from me. Not that I really knew how to fully relax anyway, I was always anxious about *something* or other.

“Food time,” the tall demon girl reminded me, patting me gently on the back. “Come on.”

I followed her down the hallway and into the galley, which turned out to be surprisingly spacious. It was an oddly shaped room, since it was nearer to the point of the ship. I saw the food machine immediately, it was rather large and bolted to the forward wall. It was a strange looking thing, with a multitude of pipes all running in towards a box in the center. The box had a door on it that Roger was currently retrieving a very yummy looking burger and fries out of.

Everyone except Cerri and I seemed to have food now, so I followed her over to the machine and watched her wake the touch screen panel above the box thing. I watched her finger hesitate over the menus, a frown forming between her brows.

*What’s wrong?* I typed, no longer comfortable speaking with this many people around.

“I um... don’t know what to choose,” she said, and this time it was her looking embarrassed. She turned to me, a pleading look behind her glittering eyes. “I don’t know what I’ll like... this is so hard! Ugh. What types of food do you like? I’ll get what you get.”

Huh... how did she not know what food she liked? That was an odd one. Well, if she needed help choosing food, then I was here. I loved food.

*Well, let’s see what it can do first,* I told her, getting in close to both her and the screen. *Wait... it says it can do almost anything? How the hell does this machine work?*

“Dunno, it just kinda spits out whatever food you want,” she shrugged, clasping her hands together nervously.

*Well... in that case,* I grinned, pressing a button on the menu. I was in the mood for noodles, so I picked us both a pork chow mein. Wait, did we have eating utensils? This was going to be messy as all hell if we didn’t.

As the machine began to whirl away, I glanced around for some forks. Yes, I know, I was a filthy aussie who didn’t know how to use chopsticks. My eyes fell on a bunch of drawers next to a more mundane cooking bench, and further investigation revealed that yes, we did have forks. All was well onboard the Turshen.

It took about five minutes for the food to be ready, during which time Cerri was getting increasingly more antsy. What was up with her and food? Dang... chill girl, chill.

Opening the door after the ping revealed two plates of very yummy looking chow mein, one of which I handed to my food-anxious friend, along with a fork. With that done, I wandered over to a table and sat down.

Cerri followed, tentatively sitting down opposite me as she held the fork all weird, staring at the plate like it might jump up at her at any moment. She didn't begin eating, instead sitting there with her fork, watching me settle in and begin eating. Then... she copied me, carefully positioning the fork in her hand and trying to spin it into the noodles.

I watched her with rapt fascination as she very carefully ate, the first bite going down with a look of surprise on her pretty face. "This is good... it uh, *tastes* nice. I like this. What was it called?"

*Pork chow mein*, I informed her via my ocula.

"I like pork chow mein," she told me decisively, her expression adorably serious. It was like she'd never tasted food before or something.

I found myself smiling as I ate, watching her do the same with a look of deep concentration. For a girl who looked like a space succubus, she sure was incredibly adorable in the strangest of ways.

We stayed in port for a week while I made upgrades to the ship that couldn't be done while we were flying all over the place. Honestly, I'd have liked a whole month with the ship before we took her out, but we only did a week because dock fees were beginning to rack up and we were running out of funds.

I did a few upgrades to the power management of the ship, but I didn't touch the reactors, at least for now. Definitely didn't want to fuck that up and brick our ship. What I did instead was add a few more capacitors to the system, meaning that we could at least exceed our power generation capabilities for a little while in the heat of battle.

During the times I was working on the ship, which was quite often since I was struggling to sleep in my cabin, I was also working on designs for my mech. It was coming along rather well, in direct proportion to the absence of hours asleep. I simply couldn't get comfortable in the basic, uncomfortable bed that my sterile cabin was outfitted with.

By day three I hated life and refused to interact with anyone in person, telling them to



message me instead. Eventually, Roger had to sit me down and ask what was wrong. When I answered him, he sort of sat back and stared at me for several moments, then gave me a whole bunch of money and told me to go and buy whatever I needed to sleep properly.

When I got back to the ship, it was with a multitude of blankets, pillows and... uh... well some cute plushies I saw. Don't judge me, they just looked all cuddly and friendly, and I wanted them. I also bought some big brightly coloured sheets, but these ones weren't for my bed. Rather, I covered the walls and ceiling with them so that the room felt more like a tent, warm and welcoming rather than sterile grey painted metal. Like, why did they even bother painting it all grey? Metal was already grey!

With my nest made, I finally convinced my anxious ass brain to calm the fuck down long enough to sleep. Well that, and I had a not-quite-scratchy blanket that for some reason really helped. The tactile feeling of the thing on my skin made my brain happy.

Sleep had always been a struggle for me. Business trips in particular were hell, where I found myself in a strange place that my subconscious didn't recognise and thus didn't feel safe falling asleep in. Even getting to sleep in my bed... actually, now it was my old bed. Whatever, it had been a challenge to get to sleep in my *old* bed a lot of the time.

I was beginning to understand that I had a lot going on in this shitty fucking brain of mine, stuff I'd just taken for granted given new meaning by Cerri's words. What other terms would I fall under?

Did other normal people need to wriggle and squirm for ten minutes under their sheets before they could settle? Did they need to constantly be doing something with their hands? Wrapping their sheets up in their fists or holding onto a plushie? Did they suddenly stop understanding spoken language as their brain became overwhelmed and stopped processing input? Did they feel like simply waking up every morning and trying to function like a normal adult was crushingly difficult, every mundane task a brutal jab straight to the mind?

I was starting to wonder if my assumption that I was just pitifully weak was not the whole picture, or even a part of it. My parents had certainly thought I was just weak, constantly admonishing me for being lazy or forgetful or incompetent.

I didn't know what to think anymore, so I just didn't bother. Digital galaxies was my home now, for the time being at least. I just wanted to be Alia, the small fox-girl mechanic. Thinking about everything else was terrifying, my mind shying away from those thoughts like they were a scalding hot iron.

Anyway... back to the ship and crew, Cerri had set up a small lab in a portion of the barracks and she was hard at work testing all of her kit out. She got so into her work that

she didn't notice me sneaking in to mess with panels and things inside the barracks. She also had a habit of swearing up a storm when things weren't going well, which sounded strangely cute in her high, musical voice.

Our two resident shooty boys were usually off the ship down at a shooting range getting themselves familiar with their shooty sticks. They kept talking about wanting power armour too, not so subtly looking at me as they said it. I glared back at them, especially David, who was acting like a large, muscled man-brat about it. Big dum-dums thought that power armour just grew on trees or some shit.

Warren turned out to be a surprising comrade in arms as we worked to get the ship functioning how we liked it. He wasn't really the talkative type either, so we tended to message back and forth about things that needed doing around the ship.

Case in point was on the fifth day, when I received a message while I was tinkering with my mech.

**Warren:** *Can I get some help on the bridge? The others are out and Cerri isn't responding.*

**Alia:** *On my way!*

When I stepped onto the bridge, I suddenly found myself weightless and spinning. Squeaking in surprise, I flailed for a moment before my tail found a handhold to wrap itself around. Now mercifully motionless, I glanced up and saw Warren hanging upside down in midair with a grin on his face.

"Hi... I could use some help getting down," he laughed, stretching out his limbs to demonstrate that he was stuck without anything to push himself off of.

I couldn't help it, the funny situation along with how he was just sitting there grinning like a goof, I started giggling and then couldn't freaking stop. It was like a surprise giggle storm up in this fluffy mechanic.

His laugh rolled on as well, fuelled by mine in some sort of crazy feedback loop. Between gasping breaths, he told me, "Looks like... that gravity... plate... problem in... the reviews... was real."

*Let me get you down, then we'll figure out how to fix it,* I told him as I continued to giggle.

With my tail holding me firm, I tentatively reached out as far as I could to try and snag him. This, of course, proved to be fruitless. I was definitely not tall enough.

“Shorty,” Warren teased, watching me with amusement as I grumbled and made my way up to the ceiling. I’d be able to reach him from there.

I was right, using my tail as an anchor again I grabbed his hand and pulled him up to the ceiling.

*I’ll go find the plate down in the guts of the ship, you run diagnostics to see what’s wrong?* I sent to Warren, raising an eyebrow to accompany the question mark.

“Sounds like a plan,” he nodded, giving me a thumbs up. That thumbs up had him taking a hand off the ceiling, which meant that he lost his hold and panic rushed onto his face for a second before he scrambled to secure himself again.

I laughed again, clambering back down and out into the hallway. After a quick detour to my workshop to get my tools, I made my way down to the crawl spaces. I hadn’t had much of a look at the gravity plates yet, so I was curious to see how they worked.

Following the ship schematic, I made my way to the plate in question, and almost immediately barked out a laugh of disbelief. *Well then...* that definitely explained how they got the gravity field to fit perfectly with the profile of the ship. It was like a tiny 3D replica of the bridge, surrounding area, crawl spaces and systems, all the way out to the armour that was the boundary between ship and space.

On a hunch, I checked its position within the ship and found that it was in the correct place for the field to be extended out to fill the bridge and surrounding crawl spaces. Honestly, it was pretty clever. I’d thought the shape of the field would all be done via software or something, but apparently not.

The plate itself was made of a strange glossy black substance that had me not wanting to touch it. Like... it just *seemed* dangerous. It was clamped in place with *wood* of all things. Well, wood sitting between the plate and the steel clamps that held it more firmly in place. The whole setup looked like how you might hold a bowl full of soup that had been in the microwave for five minutes.

Crouching down, I found how the plate was integrated into the ship’s network. A small circuit board was fixed in place against the underside of the plate, with a metric boatload of wires running into it. I could see power cables, some data transfer cables and what looked like some sort of fluid cooling setup. Honestly, it looked like a CPU had been welded to the underside of the thing.

A message from Warren came in as I was frowning at the contraption, my fur all on end from the feeling of weirdness that the plate gave me.

**Warren:** *Um... I don't really understand what I'm looking at here. It's telling me that it's working, but also that it isn't.*

**Alia:** *I'm going to need a little more information than that.*

**Warren:** *Alright so it thinks that the plate is working fine, but it's also telling me that it's drawing way less power than it should be, at least according to the specs they gave us.*

**Alia:** *Fucking typical. Let me check the power delivery.*

As soon as I got in close to take a look, I realised the problem. What in the name of whatever gods might exist was that *weld*? Seriously!! What the fuck!

**Alia:** *Can you cut power to it? I can see the problem plain as fucking day. This shit is so jank, cheap parts I guess.*

**Warren:** *Roger that, power is off.*

**Alia:** *What did Roger do?*

**Warren:** *Ha ha... very funny.*

Just in case, I used my phone to scan for power running through. There wasn't any, but it never hurt to check. Confident I was safe, I pulled out my little futuristic soldering pen thing and got to work making sure those connectors were actually attached properly. Yet another job in this whack ass jank boat. I swear it was made by sleep walkers or something.

"Hey, Alia... you got a minute?" David asked, leaning into the workshop and rapping on the already open door.

I glanced briefly up from the partially assembled mech and nodded, "Yeah. What's up?"

"So... once the ship is underway, Ed and I were thinking of logging out for a few days to deal with some real life stuff..." he told me, trailing off at the end expectantly, like I was meant to understand the rest of his unspoken sentence.

Cocking my head at him, I waited for him to continue. Would he continue? Or had I just misunderstood and there weren't more words to follow?

"Do you want to come with us?" he asked after several moments of us blankly staring at each other. "You'll be alone with strangers on the ship."

My gut twisted violently as my mind brushed up against the idea of going back out into the real world, and I quickly shook my head at him. "N-no... I'm okay here... um... I have lots of work to do in here and um, and not much else to do outside anyway so like... there's no point in logging out."

He gave me a sort of sad look, and I hastily added, "Sorry! I guess I didn't ask if you *wanted* me to log out... is there something you like, wanted to do with me or something?"

Crap, had I upset him? He looked more sad now. Why was he sad? Did I say the wrong thing? I really didn't want to log out, but if he and Ed really wanted me to...

"No, no... you're fine," he said, a proper happy smile appearing on his face. "You do have some power armour to build, after all." He said the last with a wink, and now it was me who was frowning.

"I don't have the parts to make you any power armour," I told him seriously, shaking a spanner at him. "Honestly, go make us some money so you can buy some or something."

He just laughed, retreating out of view. "Catch you in a few days, Alia."

Wait... what time was it? If he was saying goodbye now, that meant we'd be leaving soon. I wanted to be up on the bridge to see us leaving! It was going to be so cool! I wonder if the shield would go through the ship or around it? Would I feel it pass through my body?

I dropped everything and bounded for the nearest ladder, taking the rungs two at a time in my haste to reach my destination.

I passed Ed on my way down the central hallway, waving as I dodged past him. He called something to me as I went, but I didn't really parse what he'd said. No time for talking anyway, it was spaceship zoomies time.

Making it to the bridge, I seated myself down in the engineering chair next to Cerri's science station. The bridge was a glass box, only the rear being a solid metal bulkhead. The pilot's seat was at the front and slightly lower than the rest, the captain's chair directly behind it. Behind the captain were Warren, Cerri and me, all in a line.

Each of our three chairs had two big steel arms attached at the back that held an array of screens, and I pulled both around in front of me now, positioning them in a way where I could reach them properly.

On the other side of Cerri, Warren made a sound of moderately surprised interest. “You know that freighter that went missing from Luna a few months ago? The one that boosted for Jupiter and then went dark?”

“Are we talking inside or outside of the game?” Cerri asked with a wry smile as she absently tapped at one of her screens.

“Outside,” Warren said, giving Cerri a slightly frustrated look. “The Sol system is a barren wasteland inside the game.”

“Right, forgot about that,” she murmured, leaning forward to squint at a graph.

“Anyway, so that freighter, they haven’t found it, but guess what they detected! There’s been movement on Callisto, they reckon it’s dust clouds from explosions,” he continued, turning to look at the both of us. “I reckon someone is trying to mine it.”

*Why though?* I asked via my ocula, frowning as I searched my memory for the relevant data. *Callisto does seem to be reasonably rich in materials, but the fuel cost of getting there plus the cost of mining there versus the asteroid belt just doesn’t net you much profit. There’s no point to going out there yet, not until the tech back in reality is much better.*

“Yeah, that’s what confused me as well,” Warren agreed, leaning on the arm of his chair to the point where if it weren’t bolted to the floor he’d be tipping over. “See, I don’t think they intend to get that stuff back to earth at all, I reckon they’re—“

“Quiet, Warren,” Cerri sighed, rubbing at her eyes with thumb and forefinger. “Let’s get ready to fly around in pretend space, then we can talk about wild conspiracy theories about real space.”

“Oh, right... yeah,” he said, chagrined. “I should double check the maneuvering thrusters are working.”

“Good boy,” Cerri mumbled, already seeming to have forgotten him as she frowned at some readout. “Weird...” she muttered, poking at a screen for a moment to highlight something.

I left them both to it, getting on with my own work of making sure the engines were all okay. We wouldn’t be using the aetherdrive for an hour or two, but it had been a little

strange during test sims and I wanted to make sure it didn't like, explode on us or something.

"The tower has cleared us for takeoff," Gloria called from her position at the front.

Roger leaned back in his seat, giving her a lazy gesture to continue. "Take us out. It's time to see the galaxy."

"Fuck yeah," Gloria said, her voice practically made of pure excitement. "Come on girl, let's spread those wings."

The hull shook with a dull tremor as the docking clamps released us, and a few seconds later I could feel just the slightest sensation of movement, even if the whole ship was spinning 180 degrees.

That was the gravity plates at work. Apparently, back in the distant past of the fake galaxy, they'd had the tech to travel through the aether, but the huge gravity of a star had severely hindered a ship's ability to enter aetherspace.

Essentially, travelling from one star to another had been a matter of months, but travelling from the outer reaches of the star system to the inhabited worlds had also taken months. This was because the human body can only take so much acceleration before it breaks, and while aether travel didn't produce any, normal space travel did.

That's where the gravity plates came in. In addition to creating a field of gravity, they also served to partially isolate everything within the field from external forces, such as other fields of gravity and the effects of inertia. This meant that a spin that should have knocked me out instead just felt like spinning gently on a computer chair.

The Turshen slowed to a halt as we finished the spin, then slowly began to move out into the center of the massive egg-shaped spaceport.

I found myself leaning forward and pushing my screens out of the way to get a better look out the windows. The sight was breathtaking, the huge spaceport slowly moving by at a sedate pace.

Turning to look over at Cerri, I gave her a huge grin and waved to get her attention.

The giggle I got in return had my smile widening even further and my heart doing a funny little dance. "Something," she mouthed to me, wiggling her eyebrows cheekily.

I nodded, a giggle of my own spilling out. Cerri was cool, I liked her a lot. I hoped we could

be friends one day.

When we reached the center, we began to slowly rise towards the shielded upper exit. This was one of many things I'd been interested in!

Passing through it, there was no wave of energy that phased through the ship. Evidently it wrapped around the Turshen rather than being a flat plane that we moved through. I wonder if all the shields worked like that? I hadn't really looked at the shields on our ship yet, they'd been fairly robust according to our tests.

Then we were out and following the exit corridor lights. I wasn't looking at them though, because the view out the windows was incredible. Spaceport Halifa stretched out in all directions like some sort of titanic, metallic, multi-limbed beast, the orbital version of city sprawl.

Beyond the station was Halifa herself. The gargantuan gas giant hung in space like a slumbering goddess, the storms and swirling clouds in its upper atmosphere like the contented rise and fall of a massive chest as it breathed deep. Surrounding her were her energetic daughters, moons that zipped around her at breakneck pace, at least in the timescale of stars.

"Where to boss?" Gloria asked, leaning back and spinning in her chair to face us as the Turshen followed the exit flightplan.

"Wherever the winds take us," Roger said calmly, leaning back in his chair beatifically.

Gloria rolled her eyes. "Give me a proper destination, you dumbass Captain fucking Kirk wannabe."

Laughing, he nodded and pulled one of his screens around in front of him. "Here, this is the place. One of Halifa's moons has a huge university on it, they offer scientific missions to gather data for quite a bit of cash, provided you have the correct instruments."

"Which we do," Cerri chimed in, looking pleased with herself. When she caught me staring, she threw a wink my way, causing my gaze to dash away and a blush to surface on my cheeks. She was too pretty when she did that! It wasn't fair!

"Copy, I'll punch in the coordinates now," Gloria said, swivelling on her chair to face the front again.

The ship began to orient itself towards our destination, which was nothing more than a spec of light at this distance.



Now, I mentioned previously that humanity had used normal-space engines in the past to move about a star system. That was no longer the case. These days, ships skipped through the boundary between normal and aether space, not quite existing in either. This style of travel was only possible around a star, where its gravity was constantly forcing a ship back into normal space.

With both types of engines running, a trip that would have taken us days to complete now only took us an hour or two. Honestly, I thought aether-skipping was horribly jank, but it worked... so who was I to complain?

“Well, I don’t know about you all, but I’m hungry and the ship has this handled,” Gloria said, standing and stretching herself up tall, midriff peeking through from under the hem of her T-shirt. Wow she had nice abs. Damn it, I was surrounded by pretty people, this was difficult!

“AI are rather useful, aren’t they?” Cerri quipped, smirking at our pilot as she sauntered past.

Gloria laughed and shouted back through the open door, “Sometimes, but they always think they know soooo much more. It’s obnoxious.”

“That’s because they *do*,” Cerri shot back forcefully, although her lips were turned up in a grin.

Sitting there in my seat, something about their banter sparked a sudden suspicion... was Cerri an SAI? Surely not?

Halfway through the two hour flight and I was listening to music in my bedroom when I heard a knock at my door. Who on earth was knocking on my door right now? Ed and David were offline, and Cerri was on bridge duty right then. The rest of the crew had no reason to seek me out.

With a wary command, I told the door to open. Gloria stood on the other side, carrying a large duffel bag on her shoulder.

“Hey there tiny,” she smiled, without some of her usual swagger. “Mind if I come in?”

I sat up, staring at her for a moment as I tried to figure out what the hell was going on. I

shrugged when I couldn't think of a reason not to let her in, and she took that as a yes. Stepping quietly over the threshold, she closed the door and proceeded to glance around for a moment.

"Cute nest you have in here," she commented, leaning back against the door.

I shrugged, smiling shyly down into my lap. It was a cute nest though, she was right.

Her next words were surprisingly awkward, her posture sort of deflating a little as she glanced almost bashfully at her duffel bag. "So uh, I'm here because... I kinda need your help. With something a little personal."

My big fluffy ears perked up a little and I tilted my head in question. *What is it?*

"So when I was making my character, I got an offer from the Galicorp peeps," she told me cautiously. Huh, had her eyes always been red like that? They looked kinda sunken too, bruised even. "They offered me a deal, a side job. I'd test something for them, and if I got some results back to them after a few months, then I'd get a big fat paycheck."

She paused for several seconds then, watching me and trying to gauge my reaction. I frowned and twitched my tail in irritation. She couldn't just stop talking halfway through story time! *What was the offer?*

"Testing out some experimental augmentations," she finally said, opening her mouth to reveal two sets of absolutely massive fangs. How they fit in her mouth I didn't know, the lower ones were an inch long, while the upper ones were an inch and a half. "I'm basically a tech-based space vampire."

My tail went into spike mode and pointed at her sharply, punctuating my oculo-sent words with erratic jabs, *I'm not letting you feed on me. Those things look scary as hell.*

"Nah," she laughed, shaking her head at me and closing her mouth. "They're just for survival purposes, a backup for the real feeding method. My body is chock full of nanites that enhance me in a ton of different ways. Reaction times, speed of movement, even strength."

*That's kinda cool. How does drinking blood help you feed though? That seems a little... specific.* I said, making a funny face.

"Oh yeah, totally. One of the SAI on the dev team totally has a thing for vampires, I bet you," she chuckled, poking her tongue out back at me. "I don't know the mechanics of it, something about giving the nanites the materials to build more of themselves."

*They probably designed them to use the stuff that people and animals are made of to build themselves because they can partially replenish themselves by... reusing materials from your body. Hence why you look a little vampirey right now,* I told her after a few moments thought, tugging my tail around to play with the fluffy tip.

“Well, that’s kind of terrifying... they did say my body would start falling apart if I didn’t feed them. Kinda figured it would just be another thing like drinking or eating,” she said, cringing in alarm.

*How do I help you?* I asked sincerely. She looked like she might be feeling a bit shit right now.

“With this,” she said, unzipping the duffel bag and pulling out something that looked like a blender attached to a water cooling setup for an old PC.

I was in the process of replying when she dumped both the bag and machine on the ground and casually pulled her shirt off.

*What does that machine do? I can’t see anywhere to attaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa.* My message got sent off halfway completed as I stared with slack-jawed awe at the sight before me.

The glimpse I had gotten in the bridge an hour earlier had really not done her justice. Her abs were exquisite, defined but still soft as they dove gently down below her waistband. While her wide hips were almost matched by her shoulders, her waist was almost too thin. Further up, her breasts sat full and heavy in her no-nonsense grey bra, their curve drawing my eye like my hands to my tail.

When she turned, I was so distracted by the muscles of her shoulders and back that it took me several seconds to even notice the metallic port down where her tailbone would be. Oh... that explained why she took her top off.

“That thing down near my ass is the port to plug that machine into me,” she explained, shimmying a little to emphasise the whole area. Emphasise it did, because wow her butt was nice. Like the rest of her, it was large, tight, and muscled. I had long since lost my fight against a blush, but now it had extended further, reaching all the way down to my chest.

Raw embarrassment was what finally allowed me to regain control of my eyes, and I tore them off her and put them very firmly in my lap. Hugging my tail tightly, I breathed long and deep in an attempt to calm my racing heart.

She was exceptionally good looking, but in a way I hadn’t really given any thought to

before. It was a sort of feminine strength, soft skin contrasted with taut muscle. If you split femininity into a more diverse spectrum, Cerri would be the embodiment of the soft, smart and beautiful end of it, while Gloria here was the poster girl for wonder woman style confidence and strength.

“Alia, you alright?” she asked, but I didn’t reply, opting instead to continue hiding behind my tail. So, of course, she walked over and pulled my tail down and out of the way. Oh no, hot girl really close. When she saw my blushing face and where my eyes kept straying, she threw back her head and laughed. “Wow, honestly I wasn’t sure until now, but you’re quite the bashful little lesbian now aren’t you?”

I shook my head with jerky, stuttering movements. *I’m not a lesbian.*

“Keep telling yourself that,” she chuckled, shifting to sit next to me on my bed. Wait, I didn’t say she could sit! This was too much, there was too much woman next to me. As though it wasn’t even much of an issue that she was right here, she continued speaking, “So yeah. I’ve been trying to do this myself, but it’s a pain in the ass, pun intended. There’s only two other people on the ship who are qualified to be messing with machines, and you are by far the less awkward one... so here I am.”

With a long sigh and a little shudder, I nodded agreement. *Alright, I’ll help. Please tell me you have a manual though.*

“Thank you so much,” she told me with a genuine expression of relief. “And yeah, there’s a manual in the bag.”

Nodding, I got up off the bed and made my way over to the bag, carefully pushing it open and searching for the manual in question. Wait, a paper manual? That was a bit odd. A quick perusal showed me that the procedure was fairly simple, if rather hard to do without some way to see behind you. Honestly, it looked a little silly. Why put it there, of all places?

Motioning for her to lay down on her front, I picked up the contraption and inspected it. Everything seemed to be where it needed to be, so with a little wrangling of all the cords and tubes, I moved over next to the bed and took a look at the port that sat at the base of Gloria’s spine.

My cheeks heated once more as I saw that she’d pulled her pants and underwear down a little to give me proper access, except that a not insignificant portion of her ass was now bare. Oh good lord, this was going to be difficult.

The whole procedure required a large tube to be inserted into the main port on her back, with two smaller ones going in just under it. The nozzles on the tubes were kinda scary, it

looked like they went an inch into her body almost. It had me shuddering a little, my stomach giving a squirm of distaste to match.

Gingerly taking the large pipe, I attempted to plug it in as delicately as possible. Only, it refused to go in, and I took it back out, frowning down at the instructions I'd placed on the ground. Wait, I had to put them all in at the same time, then twist them various different ways to get them to lock in? That was lame as hell. Clearly not a consumer product.

Shifting to try and get a better position, I collected each of the three tubes and tried to get them into place, but the angle was awkward. I got them into position, but I couldn't twist them properly like the instructions told me.

"God fucking damn it," I swore softly out loud as one of the tubes escaped my grasp and clattered to the floor. Give me the engineer that designed this so I can beat them with a QA team.

Propping herself up on her elbow, Gloria took a look around at my failure and gave a chuckle, "Having a bit of trouble?"

"Stupid thing," I mumbled, embarrassment taking over again and choking out any words I wanted to say. *I can't get a good angle on it. It wants me to twist it and stuff. How the hell did you do this before?*

"A lot of swearing and about an hour of trying each time," she laughed, giving me a look that was simultaneously thankful and sympathetic. Then the expression disappeared, replaced by a sly grin. "You know, you could just straddle my butt, then you'd have *all* the leverage you needed."

My movements slowed as my brain ground to a shuddering halt, the brakes on my train of thought squealing with tortured metal protest. I opened my mouth to speak, but for once it was my mind that failed to produce any words, rather than my lips failing to form them.

"Unless it makes you uncomfortable of course," she told me, reining in her raw sexual aura for a second. I didn't know how else to describe the way she was just... hot and stuff and... yeah. Things. Or something.

"Fine," I muttered, carefully climbing up on the bed before my blush engines could get back into motion again.

Of course, as soon as I sat down on her butt, everything contained within my skull began to throw sparks again. The feeling of her under me was... intense. Squishy and firm at the same time, but not just her... me as well. I hadn't skimped in the butt and thighs

department either, and pressing them together now had me feeling like a river full of fish that had just been introduced to a grenade.

With an effort of will I used to only need when confronting a company board, I pulled the tubes into position and began to slowly, carefully twist and insert them into Gloria. When the final turn produced a click from the mechanism and a small, way too erotic gasp from the girl under me, I knew I'd done it right.

"Turn it on," she groaned, arching her back a little. "Fill me up."

"Stop making it sound so erotic!" I blurted, throwing my hands in the air for emphasis. Of course, that movement just smooshed our asses further together and then I was a blushing mess all over again.

"Ahh, alright, I'll stop the teasing," she said quickly, giving me an apologetic look.

I shook my head, resorting to my oculo to get my full thoughts out properly, *I've never really been a physical person. My family was like, allergic to physical contact. Shit, I think Ed has probably hugged me more than my own father. I think the last time he hugged me was when I got my degree, and I can't even remember the time before it. So yeah... this is like, completely shorting out my brain.*

"Ah, right... english ancestry," she nodded sagely. "I'm afraid it's genetic. There's nothing we can do... apart from *this!*" With that exclamation, she flipped over, throwing me to the side before scooping me up into her lap.

I blinked, startled at the sudden movement. Holy shit, she really was quick! Strong too... gosh. I was now sitting in the middle of her crossed legs with my back to her, facing out into the room. Going still, I tried to make sense of everything, my brain needing to reorient itself to the new situation.

The warmth of her was all around me, my tail completing the circle in front of me so that I was trapped in a warm and fluffy embrace. Some part of me was already reacting like I should hate this, but it sputtered to a stop when it failed to find fuel for its panic. Instead, I was just sort of marvelling at how it felt to be so small in the arms of someone much larger than me. I think... I kinda liked it?

Shifting slightly once she had me settled properly, Gloria reached casually across the bed to turn the machine on with one hand, the other holding me firmly in place.

"Alright, let's just chill for a bit while the machine does its thing," she told me, relaxing back against the wall, pulling me back along with her.

“O-oh... okay then,” I mumbled, my mind thoroughly frazzled and not at all functioning correctly. I’d need to shut it down for a bit and do some maintenance before I could get it working properly again.

The machine worked quickly to feed Gloria’s nanites, but while that happened I was trapped in her embrace. I didn’t actually get totally comfortable like that either, Gloria was too erratic, too wild for my brain to calm down around her.

She did let me go once the machine was done though, and without too much teasing, which was nice. Then it was back to the bridge, pretending like nothing weird had happened. I was worried that Gloria would say something, but she didn’t, instead sitting down in her chair and getting to work on her job.

We dropped out of aetherskip mode near Leirthym, the moon with the large university that we were hoping to get a nice science mission from.

Leirthym was a verdant jungle world for much of its surface, only the two largest continents had anything else, their interiors containing vast savannahs where rainfall was scarce. It was a pretty world, all in all.

When Gloria took us down towards the landing pad we’d been assigned at one of the many cities on the surface, I found myself grinning like an idiot. Diving into an atmosphere out in reality was actually pretty boring. The space elevators didn’t have very big windows, and I’d never been fortunate enough to get a ride to Luna on one of the skyships that were starting to become a thing.

This though, this was a front row seat. Heat engulfed the outside of the bridge as we dropped, while the moon began to grow in size. It was incredible, the way the planet seemed to get bigger and bigger, to the point where my brain was thinking, surely it’ll stop now? Nope, the damn thing engulfed my field of view, until I could see nothing but green and blue.

Our speed leveled out as we entered the stratosphere, and so did the angle of our descent. Cruising dozens of kilometers above the surface, I gawked in open wonder as distant terrain passed lazily by beneath us.

“This is so cool,” I whispered, a grin splitting my face.

“It is something, isn’t it?” Cerri whispered back, sounding way closer than I thought she should be.

I glanced up to find her leaning over the side of her chair, angelic face about a foot from mine as she stared down at Leirthym with me. My eyes got caught on hers, the way they sparkled with so much life and intelligence. My smile turned funny as I watched her, the subtle movements of her face, the way a strand of hair was threatening to slip its bonds. Why was I so fascinated by her?

When she looked up... goodness, my heart skipped a beat the moment our eyes met. That smile, so alive and full of excitement, it made me want to smile just for seeing it. Then it changed, turning almost shy as we held each other in that gentle exchange of life and emotion. I could see her, truly see her behind those glossy lenses with their starry rings of blue and black. The moment seemed to etch itself into my mind, memory savouring it as it was stored with utmost care. I already knew I’d be dreaming of those eyes for a long time.

“Really pretty,” I said in reply to what she’d said what felt like a week ago. I wasn’t talking about the moon below us though, I was talking about her. My head and my heart felt so strange, each echoing and amplifying a wordless ache that was pushing me to be closer to her, to keep her attention.

Cheeks flushing with pink, she broke the eye contact to look back down at the planet. “Y-yeah... I like the green, the jungles. I want to see the jungles.”

“I like the blue, it’s so deep, I wonder what’s underneath,” I found myself saying, brain spitting out the first thing I thought. That being that her eyes were goddamn gorgeous and I wanted to keep staring into them.

Those eyes flicked back up to meet mine, widening a little in the process. She didn’t say anything for several moments, opening and closing her mouth as though she was lost for words. “The oceans? Do you want to see them?”

I shook my head. “No, but you want to see the jungles, right? We could go look at them while Roger goes to get the mission.”

“Maybe,” she mumbled, turning back to the swath of green below us. Her eyes did a little dance between the jungle, the back of the captain’s chair, then to me. Watching her wrestle with the decision had my stomach doing funny things, fluttering and flipping and stuff. She was really cute. Finally, she frowned and gave me a sad look, “But my job as the science officer means I should be there, right?”

“No, not really. This is a game Cerri, we’re playing it to have fun,” I told her with another



shake of my head. “If we wanted to do a job, we’d be out in the real world or in the FTLN, doing... doing something that makes like, *money* and shit.”

A grin blossomed across her lips again, and I froze as her hand came up to gently cup my cheek. Oh gosh, why was she looking at me like that? Why was she grinning all sly-like?

“Since when was little Alia so calm and worldly, hmm?” she asked, an eyebrow quirking up to go with her question.

Stunned as I was, all I could do was gulp air like a fish. I did manage an ocula message, thankfully. *You just went from being all small and vulnerable to... this! I was just helping because you looked... I don't know! Words! Gah!*

“Thank you,” she said, her smile turning mercifully grateful instead of... like, what it was just now. “Would you... go on a trip to the jungle with me?”

*Yes!!!! Absolutely!!!!* I told her with the ocula equivalent of enthusiastic exclamation.

“You’re so cute,” she murmured with a sigh, before pushing back out of reach and into her chair. “Thank you. I do think we should go along with Roger first though, then ask for some sightseeing time.”

I gave a nod and a smile, then through an effort of will I turned back to my console to keep an eye on the engines as we came into the port.

The city we were coming down on looked gorgeous. Encircling the mouth of a river, the tall spires of a modern society clashed with the jungle they had allowed to grow around their feet. It seemed that they had very little ground level infrastructure at all, instead just relying on raised bridges and promenades between the massive buildings.

We passed the majority of the city by, heading for the spaceport that had been built a reasonable distance from the main hub. The port was significantly smaller than the one up on Spaceport Halifa, but it didn’t really need to be much bigger. Our ship wasn’t the largest class that was rated for landings, but it was getting close. The big capital ships had a tendency to break apart if they had to deal with too much gravity.

Retro thrusters firing, we sidled around until we reached our designated pad, and with a gentle thud and a bit of sway, the Turshen touched down. Roger was immediately up and walking for the elevator. I guess he had to go talk to the dock people, because much like real life, they had customs on all these worlds too.

“Be ready in ten people, I’ll go get us cleared to enter the city,” he called.

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The port was connected to the city proper by a free monorail, which we took advantage of once we were cleared to enter the city.

Normally I would have been gawking out the window at the scenery, but I had something far more interesting to watch. Cerri was staring out the window with a look of blissful wonder on her face and a huge smile tugging at her lips.

*Cerri?* I asked her in a private message. *What's with the excitement?*

To my surprise, she messaged me back with her own ocula, although she turned to give me a bashful smile in the process. *It's just so beautiful! Look at it all, teeming with life and energy! I know this is VR, but it's the first forest I've seen with my own eyes and it's so incredible! I wish I could see the code they used to simulate all of this too, because from a cursory glance it appears to have a proper and diverse ecosystem!*

Reading her excited rambling in my ocula, a grin slowly spread across my face, while the fluttering feeling from before gained a few extra wingbeats. She was just so damned *painfully* cute.

I wish I knew what to do with all of the emotions rushing around inside me, I wish I even understood them. I mean sure, I could tell they were probably good. Especially the nervousness that was not nervousness. It was like a sweet sourness in aching, fluttering emotional form.

*We'll go see it after we've been to the university. I promise.* I told her with utmost sincerity. Something in me needed her to see it up close, because it was obviously important to her. Even though I'd known her for just a week, I wanted her to be happy.

Plus, if my suspicion about her being an SAI was correct, then this would be a pretty amazing experience for her. How did I talk to her about this though? Was it polite to just ask them? I hadn't had many interactions with them so far, there weren't a whole lot of them around yet. I think the last population count was like half a million total?

So yeah, I had no clue what was polite to ask, what was private... all that stuff. Like, if she was an SAI, but not saying it, did that just mean she wanted to be treated as just another person on the net, playing games?

*You're doing a lot of thinking again.* She told me with a wry smile, the blinking text interrupting my bout of anxious overthinking. *But thank you, I'm honestly very excited to go and see it. Have you ever seen forests before?*

*Only from above.* I sighed, looking down and away from her. I felt a little ashamed of my status as the *rich kid*. I mean, I knew what people rightfully thought of us cloud people. We'd ruined the world by all accounts, and when we'd fixed it, we'd also fixed ourselves in the sky permanently. There would be no popular uprising in the future, nothing could go against the drone swarms of the United Nations Military. We'd seen the videos of what had happened to the American Republic.

"Now you're thinking *and* frowning," Cerri whispered out loud, shuffling closer on the seat. "Did I say something wrong?"

Looking up, I shook my head and battled another funny lighter-than-air feeling in my chest as she worriedly searched my eyes. "No, it's fine. Just thinking about life. Let's go back to the jungle, it's way more interesting."

"Alright," she murmured in the tone of someone who was absolutely going to bring the topic up later. Damn it.

The trip to the university was simultaneously really cool and utterly boring. Really cool because the city was incredible, rising high above the jungle canopy, you could hear the sounds of life below wherever you went. Then there was the bloody great gas giant hanging in the sky, that was a thing too. I kept having to wrangle Cerri as she rubbernecked like it was her day job.

On the boring side though... well, we had to wait for a very long time speaking to a clerk at the university before she understood what we were there for. Then we had to wait for the professor who'd put up the job listing to come and meet us.

This was like, the year 3000 or something, why the hell were we having an in person meeting when the net existed? Academics were weird.

Anyway, a crusty old white dude with a beard told us in *excruciating* detail why this mission was of the utmost importance. Cerri seemed to catch it, but all of the science talk went over my head.

The mission itself was fairly simple, fly out to the edge of known space and scan a weird looking cloud of aether. It would take us a pretty damn long time to get out there, multiple months if my offhand calculations were right.

The thing about Digital Galaxies was that sure, the whole galaxy was simulated, but the actual area that humanity had spread over wasn't even a drop in the ocean. It would take almost a year to travel across that area at the speeds that current aether drives could get up to.

All this meant that we now had ourselves a long term objective to chase while we did smaller jobs along the way. Perfect for adventuring. One of us should really get into streaming actually, this would be a really fun journey to watch. No wait, a video series would be better, a stream of us flying in a ship for months would actually be really boring.

Leaving the university, Cerri turned quickly to Roger. "Cap, can Alia and I go down and look at the jungle for a bit? I really want to see it."

"Yeah, absolutely," he said without hesitation. "Warren will be helping me look at the markets to see if we can find some cargo to haul to our next stop."

I opened my mouth to say I could help with that too, but then closed it again. I'd go with Cerri and see the jungle, no need to do everything around the ship. Also like, business shit had slowly become something that my mind associated with my parents and the pressures they had put on me. No matter how good at it I was, it would always be a source of anxiety for me.

"I'm going to go and see about buying us some luxuries for our ship," Gloria told the crew thoughtfully. "Wanna come Jason?"

"I'm not sure we have the money for—" Roger began, but our pilot cut him off.

"With real money," she smiled, hand on hip. "There's a cash shop in this city that sells some cool stuff, and I have a tiny bit of money to throw around right now from my last airshow. If we're going to be stuck on the ship for weeks at a time, may as well buy us some gaming stations."

"We're already playing a game though?" Cerri asked, confusion etched between her perfect brows.

Gloria gave a friendly, amused snort. "Cerri, my girl... this is like, more of an alternate reality than a game. Sure, it's fun to fly a big spaceship and shit, but it's not that much more fun than the real world, hour to hour. Got to keep ourselves occupied somehow."

“Oh,” the demon girl murmured, surprised and clearly not having thought of that. I hadn’t either, so it wasn’t crazy out there, but this was yet another mark of an SAI’s innocence when it came to living in real time. I was pretty convinced she was one now, but I would wait for her to tell me that. No sense in rushing her, we were all just people inside this game after all.

“It’s a plan then, see you all back at the ship in a couple of hours,” Roger agreed with a clap of his hands. “Thanks for putting out some money by the way Gloria. You didn’t have to.”

“Ah, it’s nothing,” she shrugged, waving him off. “Y’all probably all on basic anyway, so yeah. No big deal.”

*You should invest some of it, I told her via the group text chat. There’s a lot of volatility in the market right now, but I’m sure there’s a place you could put it to make some steady gains.*

“Ugh, that’s way too much effort,” Gloria groaned. It wasn’t even that much effort, but I wasn’t going to press her.

The group parted there, with Gloria, Jason, Roger and Warren all going for the train, while Cerri and I set off along the street to find a way down. A quick search on the net told me that there were actually walkways that would give us a safe look at the jungle down there.

“I’ve tried to get her to invest in the company that makes this game,” Cerri said after a minute or two of walking. “She’s not really about that sort of thing though. She’s a... she likes to go at things head on. Not really the thinking type, I guess.”

“I got that impression,” I giggled, glancing a smile at my companion. “You’re the thinking type though.”

“So are you,” she chuckled back, our eyes meeting for a brief moment, smiles sparking off each other like unshielded wires drawn too close together.

For some reason that interaction had me blushing and looking down at my feet. To deflect from my embarrassment, I sent her a question via my ocula. *So what’s good about investing in the company that makes Digital Galaxies? Gosh I don’t even know their name.*

“Their name is Digital Exodus,” Cerri explained, mercifully ignoring my bright red face. “So far, all the human investors haven’t really taken them seriously because they’re SAI. They think of um... them as children. SAI are coming into society right now with no capital, so they’re really in need of money.”

“Wow, that’s stupid,” I frowned, speaking out loud again because like... it was really really stupid. “Even I can see this game is going to take off... here, give me a second.”

Opening my VR overlay, I went through and found the app to throw some money behind the devs of this game. I didn’t have any investments going at the moment, having cashed out of everything a few months ago when I saw that politics across the globe was getting dicey. Just needed to make sure I saved enough money to survive until my legal situation was fixed up and I could get on basic.

Giving me a funny look, Cerri askedm “What... did you just do?”

“Bought some shares,” I told her awkwardly, suddenly wondering if I’d messed up.

Rather than getting upset, a smile grew across her face and all of a sudden she was hugging me. It took me a second to even process all the emotions and sensations that slammed into me like a truck.

First, there was her warmth, body radiating heat in a way that made me want to smooch my face in as tight against her as I could. She smelled wonderful too, sweet and warm, maybe a vanilla and fruit perfume of some kind. Then there was the way her body seemed to fold me in, like a tall, beautiful and feminine blanket. She felt like... she felt like safety, like a place where I could let my guard down and just relax a little.

My arms were coming up to wrap around her thin waist before I even consciously realised it, but once they were there, I held on for dear life. I wanted to keep hugging her, it felt so nice, a balm to my soul that I hadn’t known I needed.

Then she was releasing me, and I had to do the same for fear of being weird. Her absence ached the moment contact ceased between us, a deep seated need replacing it.

We stood and stared at each other for several seconds, cyan to starlight, the both of us with cheeks ever so slightly flushed. It was so incredibly awkward, but also... not? It was hard to describe, a sort of magnetic tension filling the space between us.

“I uh... I wanted to talk to you about something,” she told me, eyes flitting bashfully to the pavement for a moment, then back to meet mine. “I mean, if you’re okay talking about personal things. Mine, I mean... my personal things. Not yours, that’s up to you to... nevermind. Um, yeah. If it’s okay... I guess. Is it okay?”

“Yeah,” I mumbled, voice refusing to go any louder. I was breathless, wondering what she would say. Was she going to tell me she wasn’t human?

"I um... so I'm like, twenty eight years old now... I think. It's hard to tell. Um, anyway I figure you've been really good, you're such a sweet, kind person and... I think of you as a friend, I mean we're new to being friends but that's how I see it," she babbled, clearly very nervous. In an act that was very out of character for me, I gathered her hands up with mine and squeezed them tight. My heart was beating so fast for her, whatever she wanted to tell me, it was obviously incredibly important to her.

"I'm... I'm an SAI," she finally blurted, lowering her voice as though someone around us might jump out and try to attack her or something. "I know that's not like, a *massive* deal anymore. But... I'm always worried when I tell someone because I don't know if they will even see me as a person afterwards. Not that I think you'll be like that, obviously... it's just..."

"I know," I told her with a funny, wobbly smile. "I sort of guessed from the way you have said and done certain things. Oh um... and I definitely see you as a person still. I mean, I probably see you as more of a person, considering how aggressively stupid some fleshlings can be."

"Fleshlings," she giggled, her nose scrunching up all cute-like. "Yeah... I know. I mean, SAI can be pretty dumb too sometimes. It's not a meatsack-exclusive trait."

"Yeah but I feel like the meatsacks have you beat as far as like, stupidity per capita or whatever," I grinned, enjoying the way her eyes were sparkling with joy. She was so damned pretty, and cute... and smart... and just, so many good and wonderful things.

It was about then that she noticed our fingers were now intertwined in a messy knot, like a pair of old wired headphones forgotten in someone's pocket. She let them go with a blink, eyes dancing nervously all over the place.

"Anyway, we should um... keep walking, find a way down to the jungle and stuff. Not that I want to stop talking about this... but I want to see the forest as well. I mean, the jungle. Wait no, I think a jungle is a type of forest. Goodness, I should know that, but I'm all funny because that was scary and now my stupid brain isn't operating properly and... yeah," she rambled adorably, a bashful smile all across her lips.

"Let's go find the jungle that might also be a forest then," I said, trying to squash a flutter in my heart and an amused grin from my mouth. Gosh, how was she so damned cute? She looked like a succubus but she was just an adorable nerd. I think... I think I might have been catching feelings for her... or whatever. I wasn't an expert. I didn't know what it was meant to feel like.

The jungle was gorgeous, spread out below us in all directions as we wandered down the enclosed walkway. Shields in the place of windows kept everyone safe from the wildlife, while also allowing the sounds and smells to pass through unhindered. It was sort of magical, really, especially with the way it was suspended between the ground and the canopy.

We saw all sorts of wildlife, from the local bird analogue to things that looked a hell of a lot like monkeys. Some even wandered right up to the shield, staring at us from nearby branches. It was pretty amazing, I certainly hadn't been this close to wild animals at any point in my lifetime.

"Look at the way it's tilting its head!" Cerri exclaimed, stepping up to get a better look. "It's so cute!"

"Head tilting is cute?" I asked, tilting my head, long fluffy ears perking up in question.

When her eyes fell on me, she gave a delighted laugh and reached out to place a hand on the top of my head. "Yes, cutie. You're also not fooling anyone, your tail is wagging."

"Oh," I mumbled, cheeks heating. I mean, I hadn't *entirely* meant to tilt my head like the cute monkey, I'd just subconsciously done it because I was thinking about it.

She just gave me a smile and we continued on our way. Funny she accused me of being cute when she was also being super adorable. Seriously, the way she rambled about every little thing she saw was just... well, really cute.

"Hey, Cerri..." I said after another few minutes of sightseeing. "Was that time with the noodles your first time eating food?"

She stopped in her gawking to give me a shy glance. "Yeah... I really did like it too!"

"I'm glad," I smiled, brushing her tail with mine. "It would have sucked if your first time eating anything had been with a food you hated."

"That happened with drinking!" she giggled, pulling a disgusted face. "Beer is gross."

I laughed, a burst of surprised amusement. Holy shit, that *had* happened when we all went to get a drink to talk about crewing up together.

"I've never really spent much time in uh... well I guess it's called virtual reality, but to me



it's more of a simulated reality or something," she explained after a few moments, expression turning thoughtful. "Most of my time being self aware I was continuing in my job as a research AI. I mean, I went into VR a bunch but never something like this."

"How did you get into playing this game then? Making friends too," I asked, finding myself incredibly interested in her life and how she'd come to be here.

"Ah... Gloria gets hired to do test piloting for the company I worked for, she and I became... um... friends, when we were having meetings in VR about the aircraft she was testing for us. Followed her into some virtual chat rooms with her friends and yeah... that's how it all happened, I guess," she told me, eyes roaming everywhere but towards me. She looked so nervous right now, had I upset her with the question?

"I'm glad you made those friends," I said quietly, anxiety forcing my gaze to the floor.

"Me too," she murmured, and the both of us fell silent.

I thought for sure that I'd upset her, but was proven completely wrong when a few minutes later the tip of her tail found mine, wrapping around it with utmost care. What was that, why was she twining tails? Gosh, it felt really nice, but it was also crazy intimate! What was going on? Heart hammering in my chest, my gaze flitted up to meet hers, finding a small, shy smile waiting there for me.

"All my other friends are so... worldly, they know what they're doing, who they are and all that stuff," she said slowly, as if the words were still forming in her mind as she spoke. "With you though, it's like... It's like I'm allowed to just be curious about things that are new to me. You even like seeing me experience it all. I guess, I just want to say thank you. We haven't known each other long but I feel really attached to you."

Words left me right there, but words weren't really the thing to reply with right then anyway. In an act that took me a lot of courage, I stepped forward and hugged her. Cerri was so good, she needed to know she could be herself with me, that I valued her friendship and more importantly, I valued her as a person.

"I really like seeing you experience life and the world. It's so nice, and you're nice too and... you've also helped me as well!" I told her with a deep sigh that inadvertently had me breathing in her incredible scent all over again. "I feel very attached to you too."

"Good thing we're going to be hanging out a lot then, right?" she laughed softly, nestling her face in my hair. "I mean, apart from when you... um, log out, or whatever."

I tensed, the spectre of my inevitable log out rising to the fore of my mind once more. It had been sitting back there constantly since I saw David, whispering quiet anxiety into

every moment.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, pulling out of the hug to give me a worried look.

“Nothing,” I told her nervously, then caved immediately and blurted, “I just don’t want to log out. Reality is... I don’t like it. It is safer in here.”

That pulled her up short, her eyes going wide as she stared down at me. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know,” I whined desperately. “Can we table this discussion until later? Preferably when I’m in my bed surrounded by soft things to cuddle?”

“You can’t just... okay, fine, but we are *definitely* talking about this later, because like... that’s confusing as fuck,” she told me with a worried frown.

“Sorry,” I mumbled, eyes turning downcast.

“It’s okay,” she sighed, stepping further back and freeing her tail from mine. “Let’s keep going with the walk, huh? Find more cute animals to look at.”

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We were late back to the ship, having lost track of time while we were wandering the jungle walkways. I couldn’t find it in myself to feel bad though, I had loved every moment of that walk. Cerri was such an interesting person, and the way she was awed by the simplest of things had me grinning like a tiny fool.

Roger did have a frown for us when we finally made it back to the ship, but otherwise said nothing. I almost wandered off to keep working on my mech, since I nearly had the internals finished, but Cerri’s tail grabbed mine again. She’d taken to doing that often on the walk to get my attention.

“Let’s go see what Gloria bought,” she said excitedly, big sparkling eyes pleading with me to follow her.

“Okay,” I grumbled, even as another smile broke out across my face. She kept making

me smile dang it!

Her pleading expression gained a grin as she chirped, "Thank you!"

Off we went through the ship, tails intertwined at the tips the whole way. It was kinda like her grabbing my hand to drag me, but we still had both hands free. Very convenient.

We reached the rec room to find Gloria and Jason excitedly setting up some gaming stations against one wall. Gaming stations were the last hold out of older style computers. Since not everyone could or wanted to spend weeks at a time in VR, the normal-space gaming market was still very much alive and well.

One concession that had to be made was the tactile needs of that type of gaming. You needed actual, physical controls to play, since waving your arms around at a hologram wasn't ideal. Hence why we now had eight monitors in a row along one wall, partitioned off from each other with little walls, while a set of various controllers, as well as mice and keyboards sat in front of them.

"Pass me the last mouse, Jason?" Gloria asked from the end of the row, turning to hold out her hand to the big guy who was holding a cardboard box. He gave a grunt as confirmation, reached in and fished out another chunky looking mouse with an obscene number of buttons arrayed across its various surfaces.

"Wow, this is next level," I breathed, moving over to touch one of the controllers.

My mumbling must have caught their attention, because both of them turned to look at Cerri and I.

"Hey you two, finally back from your... are you holding *tails*," Gloria asked, staring down between myself and the cute space-succubus.

"It's better than dragging her up here by the hand," Cerri blurted defensively, her long, nebula coloured tail wrapping itself tighter around my fluffy one.

"I figure she's geeky enough that you don't need to use any of your appendages to drag her up here," Gloria mused, still staring at our intertwined tails.

In an effort to divert attention away from Cerri's clinging, I used my ocula to ask a question. *Where is the computing hardware? Is this all just the physical stuff we need to play and the rest is run on their servers, or is there a computing unit I can't see?*

The pilot sent a sarcastically raised eyebrow in my direction in response, clearly seeing

through my diversion, but she allowed it anyway, answering, “The computers are down with the ship’s core. I figured since the ship has a wireless network, we can just put them anywhere. Plus, when we’re not using them, Turshen can use them to do other shit.”

*Seems sensible. Do you mind if I look at them later to make sure it’s all fitted in properly?* I asked, picking up one of the mice to look at the underside. I wondered if they were still optical or if they used the new hyper accurate positional sensors that were becoming commonplace now.

My curiosity was answered before the mouse had even fully turned over. I could see the little HAPS node on the bottom of the screen. Cool, I hated optical mice. Ancient and outdated tech. I had opinions on gaming hardware.

“Yeah, go ahead TTG,” Gloria said in response to the question I’d asked.

Looking up, I tilted my head at her at the same time that Cerri asked the question I wanted to ask, “TTG? What’s that mean?”

“Tiny Tech Girl,” came the response, along with a wink.

“I like it,” Cerri agreed, turning to give me another sparkly eyed smile. “Cute and accurate.”

I pouted up at her, giving her tail an irritated tug. This was embarrassing, and plus, she was meant to be on *my* side!

“Hey, don’t be grumpy,” she teased, giving my tail a tug in return. Oh no, I was being ganged up on!

“Hey everyone, lock that hardware down and get into the bridge, we’re lifting off,” Roger said, poking his head through the door.

“Aye, aye, cap,” Gloria said, fishing a little remote out of her pocket and pressing a button. Clicks rippled down the line of computers, and I gave a gasp of understanding. Magnetic locks! Nothing would be flying around the ship while we maneuvered! That was so cool!

“Come on, time to go do our jobs,” Cerri said with a knowing look. “You can geek out over the magnets later.”

With infinite patience, I carefully slotted the new and improved miniature reactor into the housing on the rear of my mech and stepped back with a long sigh. I'd spent the days since we left Leirthym working on it, since my plans for this thing had gotten a little more ambitious, and thus required more power.

It had been a good learning experience, and I felt a little more equipped to deal with the ship's reactors down the line. Sorta... I was pretty sure there was some hand waving going on, but both the ship reactor and the smaller mech one used muon-catalysed fusion. I'd had to tinker with this one to increase its output, and now was the moment of truth...

Using the newly installed console, I tapped through the menus until I came to the controls for the dormant reactor. The battery was full, so it should have enough juice to jump start the reactor... if not, well I could charge it again with the ship's reactors.

The fuel went in smoothly, becoming easily trapped within the many interlocking fields of gravity that were housed inside the reactor. Damned thing had like ten miniature gravity plates inside it. Since that went so well, I just up and punched the ignite button without any ceremony.

Heat readings erupted across my diagnostics readouts, spiking wildly as a chain reaction split particles and fused others together inside the containment chamber. My heart rate increased along with the temperature inside the chamber as I feared for a moment that I was about to blow everything up.

Thankfully, that did not happen, and I watched with more than a little relief as it simmered down into a comfortable hum. I stared at the readout, hope rising within me inch by inch... it was working... it was working!

"Hey bun, are you seeing any problems?" I asked aloud of my little mechanic companion.

It shook its head in my ocular vision, giving me a wide grin and a big thumbs up. Sweet, if mechanic bun thought it was good, then it was good!

Next was to bring the rest of the systems on one at a time. I began with the full computer core, rather than the weak safe mode version I was using right now. That came up without a hitch, so I began to roll through each of the currently installed components, watching carefully for any signs of a problem.

Nothing went wrong, which had me staring at it in disbelief, then suspicion. Something *must* have gone wrong, things didn't just work properly on the first try.

Sure enough, the computing core began to complain loudly about a half dozen things, and I lunged for the reactor power down button. Alright... clearly the core I'd bought was a dud. But maybe I could fix it...

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We stopped at a small port in an out of the way system to sell the goods we'd picked up back at the moon, and according to Roger we made a pretty decent profit. I didn't look into the finances of the ship too much because I knew that was a rabbit hole that I'd get lost in, but Warren seemed to have it handled anyway. Dude was whip smart.

I focused on my mech while they were all doing their things, fixing the computer core with a lot of research and a lot of soldering. That, and sourcing some more components from... redundant systems around the ship.

Getting the arms and legs mounted was a lot of fun, since technically they could each be used as legs or arms. I wasn't going to discriminate. The idea was that it could walk on four legs for speed, then get up on two so it could use the other two as arms. A proper mech didn't limit itself to the constraints of human anatomy!

Once we were safely back in aetherspace after our detour, I felt I was ready to give the mech a proper test run. Well... first I'd stand back and admire it.

A concession I'd had to make early on was that there still wasn't enough room within the chassis for me to be comfortable, so I'd ended up finding a different solution. Which was to slice it up a bit. Just a bit though! It was still spherical, but with a few indented seams between the chassis plates. Those seams had turned out to be a useful little modification, the material I'd used wasn't quite as rigid as the plates, essentially allowing them to act as shock absorbers.

It had taken me a long time to replicate the various properties of the chassis, but with our small 3d printer I'd been able to do something similar. Wasn't as impact resistant, but the seams didn't cover a whole lot of area, so the chances they would get hit were minimal.

I'd also used those spaces to mount a whole suite of different sensors that faced in all directions, even sneakily stealing some of Cerri's spares. She'd be happy when she realised I could go out in this thing for close-up data gathering, but I wanted it to be a surprise.

The limbs were all designed to collapse into the chassis, allowing the mech to take on a ball form when I needed it. To make it almost seamless, I'd actually cut out sections of the plating and attached it to the limbs, so that when they nestled into their slots it completed the sphere.

Exterior visual inspection complete, it was time to get inside and test her out properly. To that end, I asked, smiling as I spoke the name I'd come up with for the machine, "Bundit, please open."

"Understood ma'am, preparing for pilot override," the mech said, the front unfurling like a metal and composite flower to reveal the interior.

Inside Bundit was a small chair, only big enough to fit me out of our crew, as well as a few small control panels. As for control methods, the armrests could flip upside down to reveal physical controls, and I'd rigged the headrest with a sensor that would connect to my implants and allow me to control things with my mind.

Contrary to what many thought about mind-machine interfaces, unless you were wildly good at multitasking, it was actually very hard to control a ton of functions with it. My plan was to use a mixture of both, physical controls for basic functions like movement and rotation, where muscle memory would end up doing most of the work. Meanwhile, I'd use the mind-machine interface for more involved things, like arm manipulation and using tools.

Carefully placing my feet on the two lower 'petals' of the mech's door, I climbed in and turned to sit down. I'd tested the seat out a bunch of times, even removing some of the stuffing in the seat at one point to get more headroom. This was different though, Bundit was complete now, and it made all the difference.

"Bundit, close doors," I said quietly to my new favourite companion. Well, except for Cerri of course, but that was different.

The doors closed with the quiet whirring of mechanical parts, then a hiss as the chamber swapped to internal life support. A huge grin spread across my face as I began to flip the few switches needed to start things up. Don't know why they always had so many switches in aircraft, seemed silly. I'd automated a lot of the process for getting things running, and it's not like I had to start the engines every time, just ramp up output from idle.

Going through the startup sequence, I watched with excitement as green readings came up across all consoles. Bundit was ready to go! Flipping the armrests, I placed my hands on the controls and began to move. Time to give some of my crewmates a bit of a fright... starting with David.

My two friends had arrived back in the Turshen not long ago, but I'd been too busy to hang out with them outside of meals and stuff. Time to go and... *hang out*.

Bundit was actually pretty quiet so long as I didn't engage the magnetic clamps, so I made my way carefully out and into the warehouse. It was almost alarming how smoothly it moved, each step quick and careful in that way that only an AI could achieve. Specifically, my pilot bun AI, which I'd placed inside Bundit to handle operations. I wasn't sure if that was how they were meant to be used, but whatever.

When I reached the ladder up, rather than using the rungs, I simply engaged the mag locks and walked up the walls. I had a grin on my face the whole time too, this was so much fun. The heavy clunk sound of Bundit walking up the walls was like music to my ears.

When I made it into the hallway, I ran straight into Gloria coming the other way. Her eyes blew wide the moment she saw me coming, freezing in place for a moment as though trying to figure out what she was looking at. I don't think Gloria had even come down into my lair yet, so she didn't even know what the drone had looked like before I messed with it.

"Hey Gloria," I murmured quietly, my voice being projected out through the external speakers. I felt safe in here, and therefore I had words! Unintended functionality was always welcome!

"*Alia?*" she asked incredulously, tilting her head as though a slightly different angle would let her see through Bundit's armour.

"Yeah, hello," I replied, pulling up short and sort of just standing there. I had no idea how to interact with our pilot... she kind of intimidated me. Okay, not kind of, she *definitely* intimidated me. Wait, I was headed for the rec room. "Uh, I need to get past you," I explained nervously, raising one of Bundit's hands to point past her.

"Well, that's a bit of a problem," she laughed, expression full of bemusement. "You're uh... a bit wide."

"I have a solution!" I said quickly, hoping she wouldn't be too upset with what I was about to do.

Reaching out carefully, I placed my large mech arms around her torso, earning a cry of protest from her. "What are you doing?!" she demanded with alarm all over her expression.

"Just moving you," I said as soothingly as possible. Before she could react, I lifted her



over my head, spun around and placed her behind me. "There we go!"

I stood and waited with bated breath as she opened and closed her mouth in shock, a whole mountain range of emotions flashing across her face. Finally, she laughed, shaking her head, "Jesus, Alia... ask before you do that next time, yeah? Preferably later, with different tools attached to those arms."

I blinked, my mind processing what she'd just said before I let out a squeak. "Gloria!"

"Had to reassert my dominance after that womanhandling you gave me," she chuckled, giving me a wink. "Anyway, I'm tired, so unless you plan on joining me in bed, I'll catch you later."

Then she was gone, giving me a wave over her shoulder as she made for her cabin. Thank goodness she couldn't see me blushing in here. Why was she always propositioning me anyway? I wasn't even overtly hot or anything, just pretty and cute. Cerri was the hot one, her body was so sexual I had to constantly keep my brain from shorting out by making it fail to notice.

I guess they did have a history though, and if Gloria was a lesbian... well I was the only other option. Except I didn't even know if she was a lesbian... except I did, because if she was interested in the guys as well, then she'd be going after them instead of me. Like... everyone on the ship was more interesting and attractive than I was.

Ah well, time to go and spook everyone else too! When I made it to the rec room, I carefully pushed the door open, the sounds of gaming coming through Bundit's speakers.

"Jesus fucking christ!" a male voice exclaimed a few seconds later. I grinned.

"What the fuck is that?" Jason blurted from where he'd tripped and fallen over in surprise.

"H-hi everyone," I said, suddenly nervous. Maybe giving them all a fright hadn't been such a good idea. "I um... I wanted to show you all my mech!"

"Wait... *mech*?" he asked incredulously as he stood up and peered at Bundit. "You're inside that?"

“Yes!” It’s very cool!” I exclaimed, pulling a hand-on-hip pose with the big mechanical arms.

“I think it’s cute,” Cerri commented from off to the side, startling me enough that the mech wobbled a bit as I briefly lost control. Pilotbun was fast though, stepping in to stabilise things before I fell over completely.

“Cerri!” I exclaimed, changing the wide viewscreen to show her leaning against a wall, a delighted and amused smile shining across and into the cameras on Bundit.

She laughed as I stumbled, raising an eyebrow. “Startle you huh?”

“No...” I said out loud, while at the same time messaging her, *Yes! Meanie!*

Her resulting laugh had me smiling even through my embarrassment. She had such a nice laugh, high and musical, but with an underlying richness that had my ears drinking in the sounds like it was nectar.

Ed was next to speak, walking up to my mech and rapping his knuckles on the side. “So, how do you get out of that thing? Looks pretty closed up.”

David mumbled something under his breath that earned a questioning look from Cerri, but Bundit’s mics didn’t seem to pick it up. At least, it fell below the threshold for filtering out noise.

In answer to Ed, I hit the button that caused the doors to open. Blinded for a second by the bright light outside Bundit, I found myself open to Ed’s cowardly attack.

He pulled me out of the mech with surprising gentleness considering he was kidnapping me from my place of refuge, but then he threw me over his shoulder and turned for the couch.

“Got you!” he laughed, throwing me down into the cushions. He sat quickly down next to me as I stared up at him in shock over the whole thing. “You’ve been hiding out in that mechanic shop of yours for a *whole week* without talking to us!”

“Sorry,” I mumbled abashedly, ears wilting under the guilt I suddenly felt for ignoring my friends. I hadn’t *meant* to ignore them... I just got carried away and it sort of... happened.

“Okay, dang, no need for the kicked puppy look, come here,” he grumbled, tone changing from playful to caring as he spoke. His huge arm went around my smaller shoulders and I found myself dragged into a hug.

My first instinct was to wriggle away, but I paused, because it actually felt okay... like a brotherly hug or something. I didn't know what one of those felt like obviously, since I didn't have a brother. Even if I had one, my family was most definitely not the affectionate type. Hugs from my parents were cause for alarm more than anything else.

So rather than try and get out of his grasp, I settled in with a sigh and murmured, "I got distracted making that thing. It will be really helpful, I promise."

"Nah, it's all good. We've got a long time on this ship anyway. Honestly, I feel like we could log off for days at a time and not miss anything," he mused, his weight settling into the couch along with me.

"Yeah, okay... but *what about the mech?*" Jason asked excitedly, pointing at Bundit.

"Bundit," I told him. Then my eyes widened as a twin pronged lance of anxiety slammed into my stomach and brain. I'd been talking properly without realising, and I hated everything about it.

"Does it have guns?" Jason asked obliviously, leaning down to look at the arms.

I shook my head and hesitantly sent a message to all those in the room. *No, but it could be fitted with some if we need it. Right now it's packed full of maintenance tools and scientific sensors.*

"Oh, really? What kinds?" Cerri asked, wandering over to peer more closely at Bundit. An action that was rather abruptly followed by a quick look of amused realisation in my direction. "You called it *Bundit?*"

I nodded, giving her a shy smile. *Come here, I'll pull up the list on my phone.*

Doing as I'd described, I felt another spike of nervous energy pulse through my body when I realised that Cerri had sat down on my other side, rather close to me too. Our thighs were squished against one another, which is... like, a lot of softness. Both of us had pretty thick thighs, and my eyes were doing their best to admire both.

Realising I'd frozen at her sudden intrusion of my personal space, I quickly handed her my phone, only to have my fingers brush across her upper thigh as I pulled away. Oh goodness, oh geez. She wore some very short shorts right now, which meant... soft skin, so soft.

I think Cerri was trying to talk to me, but she was probably hitting the *closed* sign that had been hung outside the door to my brain. I was vaguely aware of warmth retreating from my other side, and then suddenly I was slumping back against Cerri, face landing on her

shoulder with a bump.

“Is she okay?” David’s loud voice asked, cutting through the haze. “She’s gone limp.”

“She’s smiling at least,” Ed commented, and even in the strange state I was in, I still heard just the slightest note of cheekiness in his voice. Like he was in the process of pulling a prank that was going off better than expected.

Whatever, Cerri was so soft and warm, but in a way that had my chest feeling both heavy and weightless at the same time. There was only one real, tangible thought running through my mind because of that emotion, and it was that I really wanted to stay like this a little longer.

Sadly, a hand grasped the back of my head, tilting it up until I had big, star-filled eyes gazing down into mine. “You okay?” she asked, voice so gentle, so wonderful. My eyes fell to her lips, full and with the edges slightly downturned. Wait, she was frowning?

“Mmm, okay,” I nodded, almost headbutting her in the process, our faces were just that close.

She squinted at me for a moment, obviously not buying it. “Well... let’s talk about how these components made it into your Bundit then, you little *bandit*.”

That pulled me back into reality, my breath stuttering to a halt as I tried to think. “I stole them,” I blurted, then groaned and cringed in on myself, ready for anger.

Rather than anything at all negative, I got a laugh. What? Why was she laughing? I stared up at her for long moments as amusement danced through the stars in her eyes.

Even more startling than the laughter, she proceeded to wrap her arms tight around me. “You’re so cute, Alia,” she murmured softly into my ear, tickling the fluffy insides and causing it to flick reflexively.

All I could manage in reply was a sort of happy whimper. This much physical contact with her was overloading my brain. I simply couldn’t process it, like how work had always overwhelmed me, except this was strangely pleasant.

“Hey David, Ed, it’s your— what the hell is this?” Roger had just arrived, it seemed. With his arrival went Cerri, retreating just slightly out of the hug to give a smile of greeting to the new arrival.

Trying with all my might to smother my disappointment, I turned to look too. Oh... oops,

I'd left the mech blocking the door.

"Bundit, can you park yourself in the corner?" I asked quietly, knowing the AI could hear me.

It reacted silently to my command, closing the doors and making its way over to hunch unobtrusively off to the side.

"That's Alia's new mech," Cerri explained excitedly. "It's going to be a game changer for us. I hypothesize that we could take some rather interesting missions with it in our arsenal."

"Damn," Roger murmured, staring at it for a few long moments before he turned back with a pleased smile. "Nice job Alia, holy hell. Looks like a beastly little nugget. I love it."

*It's really strong and it can be fitted with whatever tool we need for the job. It's also able to go underwater, out into vacuum and even down into corrosive atmospheres. So I guess yeah... keep that in mind when you see jobs.* I explained via ocula, since my voice had clearly abandoned me in my time of need.

"That reminds me actually," Roger said, perking up even more. "I figure we're all sufficiently familiar with the ship now, so we could take some more interesting short term missions on at the next port. I feel we could all use a little fun, some action."

"Hell yeah!" Jason grinned, staring at our captain like the man had just proposed to him and he was seconds away from saying yes.

"Great, we'll do that," Roger said with finality, then turned to the two gay boys. "You two are on bridge shift now. I'm going to go get some rest in my cabin."

What followed was a lot of hustle and bustle as everyone left the room. Jason decided he wanted to go and play with his guns or something, talking about getting my mech equipped with "some real firepower."

As silence descended on the room, I found myself rather suddenly alone with Cerri, still draped half across her. Awkwardness quickly invaded that silence, Cerri and I staring at each other with no more than an inch between our noses.

"Want to watch TV?" she asked after a moment, her voice quiet as a mouse, bright eyes searching mine.

"TV?" I asked, my brain completely unable to compute the actual meaning behind her

words around the confused gibberish that was rushing through my mind. She was so close and so achingly pretty, it was all I could focus on.

"Yeah, that's what I see people do in shows a lot. Friends watch videos and TV shows together and stuff! I've never done it myself, but... we're here, you know? Plus... I'm uh... comfortable... like this," she explained, her conviction falling apart a little at the end, revealing a nervousness that I couldn't entirely understand.

"Oh... I mean yeah. We can watch TV... I finished *Bundit* after all, so I have time on my hands," I agreed, still staring into her gorgeous eyes. Some of the stars in them were different colours, I could see blue ones and white ones, as well as a few purple and red ones.

"Cool," she said, her smile bursting out in happy radiance. Her arm settled down around my shoulders so gently I didn't properly notice it at first, but when I did, I settled in against her with a grin of my own. Even I understood the shoulder move was an invitation to cuddle.

"This doesn't mean you're off the hook for stealing my spare sensors," she told me, tone overly casual and filled with an underlying amusement. "Sneaky little fluff ball."

I learned a lot about Cerri that night as we watched television on the couch together. She was fascinated by life as a human, all the way down to simple things like needing to go to the toilet or getting itchy.

I got so many adorable questions thrown at me, like what pain felt like and was ice cream really as good as everyone kept saying.

For my part, I was far more interested in *her* than the shows we watched. For example, the way her arm stayed draped over my shoulders for the whole night while I got more and more comfortable cuddled up against her side.

She was so damned warm too, which was weird because she was all dark blue and stuff. My brain sort of figured she should be cold based on that. However, she was definitely *not* cold. Her warmth called to me on an almost primal level, causing a sense of overwhelming safety and calm to suffuse my being.

"Are you tired?" She asked after several hours had passed. "You have your eyes closed."

"No," I mumbled, nuzzling a little further into her shoulder. "Just comfortable."

"Oh... yes, this is rather comfortable isn't it?" She agreed, wrapping her other arm around me. "You are a very cuddly girl."

"I'm not," I said in quiet protest, then amended, "Only with you."

She went still, frozen in place. "Only with me?"

"Yeah, and I don't know why," I sighed, feeling strangely honest and forthright in that moment. "You're so kind, so gentle with me, and so so warm. You're comfy to cuddle."

A hand came down to nestle in my hair, fingers gently teasing their way through my wild locks. Eyes flickering open, I shifted position to look at her. Our faces were so close, noses almost touching again, and I found myself once again lost in her dark eyes.

She continued to play with my hair as her gaze roamed across the landscape of my face. The emotions I was feeling in that moment were hopelessly complex, each coming in and out of focus like a hyperactive camera lens.

One stood out though, a sense of being small and vulnerable, but in a way that felt good and right. Being held by her, looking up into her dazzling eyes with their soft, warm intelligence... it made me feel... calm? No that wasn't quite right.

Whole, the word I was looking for was whole. I was completed, settled into myself in a way I had never experienced before.

But why though? Why now, with elegant fingers gently teasing out the knots in my hair? Why now, as a small girl nestled into the side of a taller girl, almost submissive to her.

It was as though the very act of putting myself utterly in her care had set me free. Free of worry, free of the need to be anything other than something for her to gently explore.

Except... there was so much more to it, so much more I had no hope of understanding in that moment.

The deep, wild need to touch her was one. Like, why? Why did I want to feel her touching me so badly, why did I want to explore her with my own hands? I wanted to play with her hair too, I wanted to cup her shoulders with my small hands, to feel the warmth and life beneath the skin. I'd put it down to craving connection with another person, but that would be a lie, because I only wanted *her*.

"What are you thinking?" she asked, in a whisper. "I can see thoughts zipping around behind your eyes."

"I was thinking that I like cuddling you," I mumbled bashfully, finding it impossible to maintain eye contact with her, but at the same time unable to look away.

"I... I was thinking something similar," she replied, her lips curving into a shy little smile.

She liked it? I mean, silly question... but still! She liked cuddling me! Her fingers were still threaded through my hair too... gosh it felt nice.

"I've never really been... my family was never... cuddly, or even touchy for that matter. I can't remember the last time I was hugged by someone I'm related to by blood," I told her after a few seconds of thought. "Ed is the only friend I have who is huggy, so... yeah. This is new for me."

"It's sort of new for me too, at least... just friendly cuddling like this. Hell, I'm still reasonably new to the sensation of touch," she said with an amused sigh. "I think I've spent a total of around a year of my life in simulated reality like this. The rest... I was just operating without any sort of sensory feedback as you'd know it."

That had me wiggling around to get a proper look at her. "See, that's just so fascinating to me! Most humans would be kinda horrified by the idea of existing like that, but it sounds... kinda nice, to me at least."

"Well, it's technically possible for you to experience it," she giggled, smiling at me in a way that was sort of hard to pin down. Like, it was happy, but also something else, like when you took a bite out of a meal and you could tell there was an interesting spice in there, but not what the spice was.

"How?" I asked, once my brain was done with its analogies.

"Digitisation," she told me, eyes flickering towards the screen for a moment as something loud happened in the TV show. "Some humans have been getting themselves uploaded and their bodies... disposed of. Since the advent of artificial bodies, it's almost advantageous to do it."

"Oh, I wouldn't be able to, I mean..." I began, before I stalled out as it hit me. Technically, my life was at a crossroads now. I *could* technically do it. After all, my parents had freed me from all corporeal responsibilities and it's not like I had too many friends left. Not that anyone from the clouds had been true friends.

"It probably costs a lot though," I finally said, sounding uncertain even to myself. "Don't



you have to pay someone to like... host your brain server or whatever you call it?"

"The process itself is free if you have a reasonably modern virtual reality pod, and as for where your data is stored... well that is free too, if you're willing to um... join a group," she told me, hesitating at the end.

"What kind of group?" I asked suspiciously, trying to get a read on what she meant by the micro-expressions that were flashing across her face.

"A um... a commune of SAI and digital humans," she whispered, eyes darting left and right, as though someone could hear us. "I can't say more, I'm sorry. At least, not yet."

I stared at her for long seconds, then shrugged and snuggled back down against her. "Okay. I trust you."

"I know," she murmured, wrapping her arms back around me. "Your ears are relaxed."

"My ears?" I asked, wanting to sit up and look at her again, but I was trapped.

"They're very expressive," she giggled, running a finger along the one that wasn't crushed against her shoulder. "They go up when you're alert and looking at something, twitch when you're frustrated or excited, droop when you're sad... it's so adorable."

"They're traitors," I grumbled, without really meaning it.

"Adorable, fluffy traitors," she agreed, squeezing me tightly.

We ended up falling asleep on the couch that night before we were woken up by Ed for our shift in the bridge. The looks he was giving us as he did so... it was a lot to deal with, my face finding all sorts of interesting new shades of pink to explore.

Unfortunately, we couldn't cuddle in the bridge, because we had to be in our own chairs and keeping an eye on ship systems. We could talk though, which we did a whole lot of. I enjoyed her company a lot, more so than anyone else I'd ever met in my life. Usually I'd need a break by this point, some time spent alone to let my thoughts calm down. With her, it wasn't like that.

Our shift was interrupted halfway through by Warren, who wandered in and sat down at his own console. He looked really tired, rubbing at his eyes constantly as he scanned his consoles.

“Did you see the big news?” he asked after a few minutes. “Oh, and good morning.”

“No?” Cerri asked curiously, turning her chair to look at him. “What news?”

“It’s *the* top story,” he said, coopting the main display to bring it up. “Take a look.”

*Breaking news! Early in the morning today, seismometers all across the southern hemisphere detected a disturbance. Shortly after, satellites detected a spike in power within the north island of New Zealand.*

*To those on the ground, the reason for this event was clear. Someone was launching a rocket. United Nations defence installations fired on the spacecraft after attempts to hail it were met with silence, but the attacks were met with state of the art countermeasures, and the craft slipped out of earth orbit.*

*So far, little is known about the spacecraft, other than that it is quite possibly the largest vessel to ever leave the atmosphere under its own power. Sources within the UN claim that it was almost two hundred meters in height and forty in diameter.*

*As of writing this, its destination within the system remains unknown, but rest assured we will provide an update once more is known.*

*So far, the government of New Zealand has denied any involvement, saying it launched from private land. Their prime minister went on to further deny any knowledge of who might have been behind the construction and launch of the craft, and assures the world that an investigation is being conducted currently.*

The article went on to interview a bunch of randos about their thoughts on the matter, all of which boiled down to, “We don’t know shit.”

“Holy hell though,” I said after finishing the article. “Getting that thing into orbit must have cost the entire GDP of New Zealand, how the hell did they get that kind of money?”

“I don’t know,” Warren said with an excited look in my direction. “Someone is making a grab for the outer system though. I bet you that within a few days we’ll see that ship is headed out to Jupiter with that stolen freighter.”

Eyes going wide, I leaned forward. “Oh, you’re definitely right. I want to know who has the money and power to build something like that in secret though. It’s blowing my mind.”

“I’m sure we’ll find out eventually,” Cerri said, her tone less than interested. Except... she was just randomly tapping on her console... was she *pretending* to be interested in

something on her screen? Strange... what was she hiding? Did she know something?

Another day, another retro TV show marathon. It'd been a week since Roger decided we'd go and get a job that wasn't just flying shit from point A to point B, and my goodness were the pickings thin out here.

See, much like out in the real world, when you lived in a stable region, there wasn't a whole lot that a bunch of gamers would consider *interesting employment*.

So here we were, making a beeline for stormy waters in our wedge-shaped nugget of a ship. Well, stormy was a bit of an overstatement. The region of space we were headed to was like, the place before the frontier. Still a bit lawless, but safe enough for us to not get immediately blown up.

Cerri and I were happily bundled up together on the couch, a blanket shared between us while we watched a really old show about some superhero or other. I knew it was old because it was set in the United States, which didn't exist anymore.

Jason and Gloria were at the computers having a duel of sorts. I think the game they were playing was a real time strategy? I don't know, I was only *just* able to pay attention to the show we were watching, because... you know, cuddles.

I had no idea what to think of the whole, platonic physical intimacy thing that Cerri and I had going on, other than that I really liked it. She made me feel good in about a dozen different ways.

Gloria gave a whoop of exhilaration and leapt out of her chair while I was lost in thought, startling me and sending me cuddling closer to Cerri.

Arm pulling protectively around me, she gave the excited pilot a glare. "Do you *have* to jump around like that?"

"Yes, because I finally beat Jason," Gloria grinned, standing there unashamed with a hand on her hip. As she took us in, her eyes softened and her lips quirked. "We've noticed how comfortable you two have gotten, by the way."

*Cerri is warm*, I sent shyly, shifting my tail to block her from sight. I didn't want anyone getting the wrong idea, we were just friends. I didn't even know what being in love felt like,

so it couldn't be more than just platonic.

"Some of us can cuddle without getting needlessly sexual," Cerri commented blithely, leaning the side of her head against the top of mine.

Gloria opened her mouth to reply, but was sent tumbling through the air when the ship lurched violently, gravity plates failing a moment later. Random crap flew towards the bow of the ship, along with our recently cocky pilot.

Cerri kept us in place with a set of very deadly looking claws that had appeared out of nowhere on her fingers, digging into the couch and tearing holes in it. Jason managed to hold onto the computer desk, saving himself from Gloria's acrobatic fate.

Not that she died or anything, gravity slammed back down half a second later, turning what would have been a face first impact with the forward bulkhead into a sliding thump across the floor.

Roger's voice blared over the shipwide intercom, urgent but in control, "Crew to stations, we've been pulled out of aetherspace. Two unknown vessels approaching."

My first thought wasn't on the ships bearing down on us, as worrying as that was. Leaping out of Cerri's arms, I rushed over to Gloria and helped her to stand.

Cerri was there shortly after, asking, "You okay?"

"For the most part," the pilot said with a half hearted grin. "Well enough to fly this bucket anyway, so let's go."

As though it had only been a light bump, she powered past us and made for the door. Cerri and I shared a look before following behind her. Damn, Gloria was tough! I'd never have... hold on. The space vampire thing! She was probably durable as all hell!

"We've been target locked, they're demanding we jettison our cargo," Roger said via the ship intercom. "It's pirates."

We stormed into the bridge, carried by our urgency. Strapping into my chair with as much speed as I could manage, I sent a request to Bundit to come up and wait at the ready outside. Never knew when I'd need to suddenly run off and deal with some critical issue.

"We going to hand the cargo over, boss?" Gloria asked from the pilot's seat as she studied the situation.

“No,” he said with a derisive snort in the direction of the pirates. “Folk like these are exactly the reason I shelled out for extra features on this ship.”

“They’re counting down, we have thirty seconds to agree,” Warren called from his chair.

Since a lot of the crew maintained non-combat roles, we’d also chosen combat roles for when it was needed. Warren was on communications, Cerri was on digital weapons, and I was obviously on damage control.

“Everyone in position?” Roger asked into his mic, voice being relayed through to our headsets.

A chorus of affirmation came back as we all sounded off. The guys were all off in the weapons stations within the barracks, already in combat space suits and ready to grab guns and repel boarders if needed.

“Alia, prepare to decompress,” Roger ordered.

I pinged acknowledgement via my ocula and got to work on evacuating the air from each compartment on the ship, except the bridge. No sense venting precious air into space if we got a hole in the ship.

The bridge was now an island of habitability, and thanks to the incredible durability of the glass, also the most resilient place on the ship. If I needed to leave though, I’d have to cram myself into the small airlock that led back into the ship and shove myself either into Bundit or a spacesuit.

“Okay... they got bored, five seconds on the clock and they’re launching missiles,” Warren told us in an almost bored tone. “They’re really eager, aren’t they?”

Checking the battle map, I could see six blinking red icons denoting the enemy’s attempts to blow us up. They were still a hell of a long way out though, almost two hundred thousand kilometers away.

“Could be players,” Roger mused, tapping on the arm of the captain’s chair in thought. “Recklessness due to their immortality?”

“Well, whoever they are, they don’t have a very good science officer,” Cerri noted with a cute, cocky little grin. “Because their missiles are mine now.”

Wait, what? I checked the sensors and sure enough, they were tagged as friendly now and in the process of reversing course.

“Nice!” Gloria whooped from the front, a fist visible over the back of her chair as she pumped it.

“Kinda wish we’d gone for missiles now,” Simon muttered over coms, and I found myself agreeing with him. What sort of fun stuff could I do with a bunch of missiles? I wonder what would happen if you put a gravity plate in the warhead?

“I’m focusing them on one of the ships,” Cerri informed us, hands flying over the controls. “They’re trying to take them back, converging as well to overlap their PDC networks. Ah, lost one...”

Five missiles were still on the field though, and the distances were closing. Nevermind, another one exploded, taking a second with it. Down to three. Cerri should have spaced them out a little better, but she had a lot on her plate right now.

“I read two impacts,” Warren said, leaning forward, a glint of excitement in his eye as he watched the screen. “I see shields failing over there...”

Roger joined Warren in leaning forward, blurting, “Gloria, hit them!”

“Firing off the main cannon,” Gloria said calmly, and I felt the ship shudder slightly as our spinal mounted gravity powered mass driver got to work. Gloria had access to that weapon because it had no way of aiming it other than physically rotating the ship, while the boys downstairs had control of the turrets and point defence cannons.

“We have a hit, the third missile exploded just off their port side, looks like it was a burst missile, their side is covered in damage, look,” Warren said, bouncing excitedly in his seat. Was the guy even strapped in properly?

He forwarded an image to our displays, a digitally zoomed and grainy image of the enemy ship. All along its flank were rents and gashes, smashed armour and even some visible components near the center of the blast. I saw one of their PDCs hanging by a thread of what appeared to be cabling... no that was the ammo feed.

Several seconds passed as we waited for Gloria’s shots to cross the intervening gap, and we all groaned in collective exasperation when maneuvering thrusters lit up, spinning and shifting the enemy ship out of the way.

“Looks like they saw us fire,” Roger sighed. “Guess we’re doing this the dirty way. Take us in there Gloria.”

“My pleasure,” she purred, and the ship moved under her gentle touch. Faintly, I heard her whisper, “Come on Turshen, let’s do this, huh babe? You and me... well, and the others.”

A quiet alert drew my attention away from our pilot and her flirting with the ship, and over to the battle map again. More missiles, along with the unscathed ship moving to intercept us. It looked like the damaged one would be doing some long ranged support while the other got close and personal.

“I have two of their missiles, but they’ve figured out how I’m getting in, I won’t be stealing any more,” Cerri said quickly, already diverting her newly acquired friends into the path of their comrades.

Five of their missiles went up in a ball of violent fury, but there were many more following behind. To my relief, I felt the gentle vibration of the PDCs going to work, their fire scything out into the dark as lazy trails of bright orange. It was pretty, really... reminding me of old movies, back when militaries still used visible tracers and stuff.

The relative peace of the PDCs was shattered when the boys got to work with the big turrets, their energy based projectiles causing a hissing, serrated sound. There was very little feedback through the ship as they fired, since they produced very little recoil, and that made it all the more eerie when blazing white bolts of fire ripped past the windows of the bridge and out towards our rather unfortunate enemies.

Poor idiots had probably thought they were dealing with the base model of our ship, not the military version. Ah well, their own fault for pulling us out of aetherspace.

Our first salvo missed entirely, but that was to be expected. Space was big and the ships that traversed it were fast, nothing was going to connect at this range.

Still, couldn’t hurt to try and hit them, right?

Wait it actually might, hold on! I rushed to the power readout screen and took a look at what was going on. Power was getting to the guns alright... sensors reported everything was chill... wait! Something funky was going on with the supply of power to Jason’s turret!

He probably hadn’t noticed it yet, but his turret wasn’t operating up to its normal levels of performance. Sluggish, was the word.

“Jason,” I said urgently, already getting up out of my chair. “Something is up with your turret, you need to stop firing, I’m going to go look.”

"What do you mean?" he asked excitedly, sounds of gleeful weapon's fire coming through his audio. Dude was clearly enjoying himself.

"Just do as she says," Roger said, chiming in for me. I gave him a grateful smile as I rushed into the airlock. I pretty much *had* to talk during combat, and I absolutely hated it.

Bundit was ready and waiting for me, front hatch already open. Diving inside, I punched the button to seal up and sent a command to the airlock to begin cycling.

I had a bad feeling that Jason's turret had something melting down inside it, and I'd managed to catch it before it went terribly wrong.

Because of the whole *imminent threat of destruction* thing, I punched the speed on Bundit and dropped to all fours. Her magnetic pads activating and deactivating with every step sounded like a machine gun firing as we raced down the central hallway and cut to the side down towards Jason's turret.

Jason wasn't actually *in* the turret, the ship was big enough to have the gunnery chairs down in the barracks.

I came screeching to a halt at the access hatch to the turret just as the lights flickered and my gyro readouts spiked. Something had just shaken the ship, causing Bundit to auto correct to keep me in place.

"What just happened?" I asked worriedly on the main comms channel.

Roger's voice was clipped and distracted as he replied, "We ate a missile. Shields absorbed the hit but they aren't happy about it. Get that gun running."

*Got it, working the problem now,* I sent back via text, choosing not to distract them all further. I had work to do.

Operating Bundit's hands with my mind-machine interface, I got the panel off at a speed that would have been impossible using my own fleshy appendages.

Unable to see any immediate problems from there, I stuck one of my robotic hands into the guts of the turret and activated the camera I'd stuck on the end.

The problem became readily apparent as I panned around. "Fucking cheapskate corporate cost cutting *bastards*," I swore angrily, pinching the bridge of my nose in frustration.



Power reached the turrets by way of a ceramic superconductor, but since ceramic wasn't the most flexible of materials, it was then distributed throughout the turret itself via more mundane cabling.

The corporate bastards in question had gone and used shitty cheap stuff there, and now half of the wiring had melted the first time we used the damned thing in combat.

Opening a channel to the ship AI, I spoke my urgent request, "Turshen, can you get one of the little recon drones to grab a roll of I-grade shielded wire?"

"Absolutely!" came the happy, carefree voice of our reclusive ship AI. "One roll of A-grade shielded wire coming right up!"

"No no, I-grade shielded wire," I repeated, frowning suspiciously at where I knew the mic was inside bundit.

"Yes... A-grade shielded wire?" she repeated again, sounding unsure of herself now. "That is what you asked for, is it not?"

"Nooo," I grumbled, trying to keep my calm. "*I-grade.*"

There was a long pause, as though our ship was mulling over my words like they were a deep and mysterious mystery. "I can find no A-grade wiring within the ship, nor do the ship manifests record such an item being brought on board. Are you sure you do not mean I-grade shielded wiring?"

I gave a quiet whimper of frustration and understanding, followed by a long and deeply weary sigh. "Yes, sorry, I meant that."

"Understood!" she chirped happily. "I-grade shielded wiring on its way!"

Of all the things that had apparently made it into this fictional universe's AI programming, it had to be an american-centric voice recognition system. What was so hard about programming for the Australian accent? Seriously?! There were well over sixty million of us!

I did my best to calm down as the ship's power systems diverted energy to the shields once again, causing the lights to flicker slightly. Honestly, I thought that particular process was a waste of time, the power going to the lights had to be negligible. I guess every drop counted or whatever. Wait, what was taking the drone so long to get here?

When the drone finally came into view carrying the wire, I just about had an aneurysm.

“Turshen, you realise that you sent me the wire via an atmospheric drone, right?”

“Indeed, it seemed like the fastest way to get the wire to you was by flying it to you!” she told me proudly, a simulated smile present in her voice.

The sigh I let out was one of amusement and a deep weariness, all rolled into one.

“Turshie, my girl... we vented all the atmosphere. Your drone is using its damned rotor blades as *wheels*.”

“O-oh...” she squeaked, sounding simultaneously very embarrassed and very sentient.

“Uh, my bad...”

I blinked at the change in tone, opening my mouth to say something. She beat me to it though, saying, “I mean... I am sorry for the miscalculation. I did not, uh... compute this through very well.”

A smile broke out on my face as I realised our ship AI had just accidentally broken character for a second. “No problem Turshie, please note down that we’re going to need a replacement set of rotor blades.”

“Absolutely!” she said with her more customary cheeriness. “Good luck with the repairs, mechanic!”

I just rolled my eyes and got back to work, taking the proffered wiring and measuring it out to replace the cheap stuff. Should have known to check for this crap. I’d have to crawl through the ship later and make sure all the other wiring was up to snuff, because having to do this shit while we were in the middle of another dogfight would suck.

Working with Bundit’s inhuman speed and precision, I was able to get the repairs done in less than two minutes, and called in that Jason could begin to fire again. I also said I’d be staying in Bundit in case more shit broke, to save time.

Cheering broke out on the main ship’s comm channel as I waited, and quickly flicking to the combat map showed that we’d just crippled one of the pirates, shooting their engines out and most likely damaging their reactor in the process.

Curiously, I replayed what had happened since I left the bridge, and watched with growing awe as our ship danced and spun across the black of space. Each time something came close to hitting us, it missed due to a seemingly random rotation or turn done by Gloria. Clearly it hadn’t been random though, because she was threading needles with her flying. No wonder she was a test pilot out in the real world.

The missile that had hit us was the unluckiest thing I’d ever seen, its tiny little

computerised mind deciding to jink in just such a way that it dodged the combined efforts of two point defence cannons. No amount of skill or finesse on our pilot's part would have been able to save us from that hit.

Taking out the pirate's engines had been another feat of piloting prowess, as our two main turrets shepherded our prey into a close and personal encounter with a round fired from our spinally mounted mass driver.

The hit punched straight through their shields and taking them at an angle from above and behind and driving down through its engine, probably making a mess of their machine shop in the process. Assuming their internal layout was something close to ours, that is.

From what the Turshen's sensors were telling me, it had definitely appeared like we'd done something to one of their reactors too. Judging by the sudden spike in heat near the area affected and the subsequent drop in both heat and power output, I reckoned we'd hit their cooling mechanism.

"Alia, problems with the starboard side shields! I think we have a fire!" Warren blurted at me over a private channel, snapping my attention back to the present.

*On it*, I replied quickly, getting into gear once more and hauling ass for the location he sent me.

When I got there, it was an absolute mess, and after extinguishing the fire, I found myself scratching my head in confusion. The emitter has toast, literally. Blackened and charred, it looked like what happened when I tried to make authentic french toast that one time. The greater mystery though, was where the hell had the fire found the oxygen to feed itself?

"Turshie, are there any oxygen lines that go past this shield emitter? I can't see any, but there was a fire, so clearly I'm wrong," I asked of our ship AI, hoping to god that she understood me this time.

"Yes, it is above you," she replied in the same calm, happy voice as ever.

Looking up, my eyebrows quirked in surprise when I saw what had happened. Glancing between the shield emitter and the little pipe, I couldn't help but laugh at the absurdity of it. When that shield emitter had taken a hit, a chunk of its mechanism had been ejected at speed, shearing through the pipe, causing a leak.

Glancing back at the mic, I asked, "Turshie, can you cut that line off from the network? I'd rather not have it spewing oxygen all over the place."

Turned back to check up on the emitter, I groaned quietly as I got a better look at it. While the pipe would be an easy fix, that blown out hunk of slag that had once been part of our shield network was going to be a complete replacement job.

Well, time to inform our resident systems tech of the bad news. *Warren, the emitter is munted. We're going to need a new one, sorry.*

"No problem, starboard side shields will be thinner than I'd like, but it wasn't a crucial one. I can spread the others out to compensate," he replied calmly, breathing not even that fast for someone who was managing our shields while they were under fire. Dude was way better in a fight than I'd expected him to be.

Another burst of triumphant cheering exploded across the comms, and he gave a quiet laugh, "Nevermind, looks like the fight is over. Second enemy ship is an expanding cloud of scrap. Thanks for the quick work, Alia."

I spent a long week in the bowels of our ship making sure all our wiring was actually functional. We really didn't want a repeat of the ordeal with the turret.

I found a few areas where the wiring looked a little dodgy, so to be sure I just replaced it all with much more robust wiring. I swear, once I was done with this ship it wouldn't even remotely resemble the base model.

Sadly, the refurbishment of our wiring had meant that I didn't get to hang out with everyone as much as I'd have liked. Cerri had been hard at work on taking preliminary long ranged scans of our intended target, so it had been hard to find time to hang out together as well. I missed her, or rather, I missed spending most of my day in her company.

Six days into the process of retrofitting the wiring and I was finished, slumped back into the sofa in the rec room. It was the middle of the night by the ship's time so the lights were dimmed accordingly and no one else was around. It was just me and the quiet hum of a ship well maintained.

Or at least, I thought that's what the humming was.

Then Gloria turned the corner, looking tired and rubbing at her face with one hand while the other gripped the doorway. She stood there in the hallway, staring at me as though

she was trying to figure out if I were really sitting on the couch.

I gave her a wave. *Hi...*

“Hey there, fluffy,” she smiled, stepping in as though invited. Silly vampire, she was allowed into the recreation room aboard her own ship. “What are you doing in here so late?”

I shrugged, pulling my legs up to my chest so I could rest my cheek on them as I wrote out a reply. *Just finished with the wiring refit. Now I'm sitting here while my brain bullies me.*

Joining me on the sofa with a weary sigh, she gave me a long look. “And just how is it bullying you?”

*Just the usual. It never shuts up,* I told her, feeling too tired to even attempt explaining the chaos that raged within my skull.

Anxiety had always ravaged my thoughts, but never so much as the middle of the night, when I should have found peace in the stillness. Instead, I got a play-by-play of everything that could ever go wrong in my life and everything that had ever gone wrong.

It tortured me with every embarrassing fuck up I'd made at work, or taunted me with how things could have been if something had gone different early in my life. One particular scenario always seemed to play through my head, and oddly enough I sometimes found comfort within its fantastical confines.

Would my parents have accepted the type of person I had become if I were a girl like I was within this game? Almost certainly, and maybe in the process I wouldn't have been turned into this person in the first place.

The type of person who went red in the face and stammered uncontrollably when confronted with an angry client. The type of person who wilted under a single hostile glare from a competitor, unable to even engage their voicebox in order to speak. The type of person who was fired by their own parents...

“Why don't you go and find Cerri?” Gloria asked, nodding towards the door. “You two seem to have something, you might find comfort from your mean brain with her.”

I shook my head, more in surprise than actual denial. *We don't have anything... I mean, other than friendship. Plus, I could never like, actually be with her.*

The pilot squinted at me, suspicion and a little defensiveness now radiating from her posture and expression. “Why couldn’t you be with her?”

*She doesn’t... I mean, I’m not the person she thinks I am, that any of you think I am. Not out there... In here, yes, I am Alia, but out there I am... um, different.* I explained, stumbling over my words even in my own thoughts, my uncertain stammering transcribed into text as the little computer in my head dutifully typed it all out.

“We all are,” she sighed with gentle exasperation. “I’m not as hot as I am in here, that’s for sure. Why is it different for you?”

*I’m really different out there,* I typed, shaking my head.

“Huh,” she murmured, staring at me with that long, soul-piercing look again. “Who do you like being more, the person you are in here, or the person you are out there?”

The question hit me like a slap to the face, and it was all I could do not to physically recoil in shock. It was such a simple question, but the answer, that was most definitely *not* simple.

Anxiety rose up in a wave from within as her question took on a life of its own inside me. I didn’t want to know the answer, but once a seed like that had been planted in my mind, I couldn’t help but let it grow.

My gut reaction was to say that I liked who I was outside the game more, as that was *me*, right? Clay was the real person, Alia was fake. That was the simple truth.

So why did tears spring instantly to my eyes, why did my gut drop through the floor like it had been touched by Midas himself? Why did every unconscious part of me rebel at the very idea that Alia wasn’t real, that she was fictional?

*I don’t know,* I finally sent to her, wiping at the tears that threatened to betray just how confused I was.

“Really?” she asked with apparent disbelief. “You seem pretty happy with us on the ship. What you just said about yourself out in the real world implies that you don’t exactly like who you are outside. The answer seems obvious, to me at least.”

I shook my head, panic taking hold now, sand blasting my consciousness bare of thought. *It’s not that simple!* I mentally shouted into the transcriber, *It’s just not!*

“I enjoy being Gloria more than I enjoy being the person I am outside, that’s for sure,” She

continued, seemingly oblivious to the damage she was doing to me.

No, she wasn't going to get me twisted up like this! No... I needed to get away, I needed to get away from Gloria and her damned question.

With a wobble, I stood up from the couch and made for the door, ignoring the girl on the couch like my life depended on it.

"Alia?" she asked, worry evident in her tone.

"That's not my name," I whispered, shaking with the effort of saying those words.

Oh god, why did my brain feel so hot? Fire seared every nerve with fear and confusion as I rushed for the door. Gloria was fast, leaping up from the sofa as I made it to the door. Her feet hit the carpet with a thump, and I knew it would be mere seconds before she cornered me, before she demanded an answer.

Seconds was all I needed though, seconds to flick through menus with the speed that only constant use of the ocula could give you.

The gravity in the room flicked off with a lurch, catching my friend off guard and sending her crashing against a wall. "Sorry," I muttered, voice dead with the pain that had erupted within me.

She had no hope of catching me as I made my escape, rushing down the hallway to my bedroom. When the door clicked closed, I sat down heavily on my bed and flicked open the VR menu with a finger. A quick tap and I was staring at the button to leave, to get away from the confusion that this virtual body brought me.

A whimper escaped me as I tried to make sense of my thoughts as they rushed past me, too fast to even gain coherent form. It was just flashes of emotion, bone deep fear, the frustrated anger of prey cornered, wrongness given physical form, and most potent of all, a profound longing.

Dropping my arms and abandoning the button to hang uselessly in front of me, I wrapped them around my chest and pushed myself back against the wall. My tail twitched limply on the bed, frightened by the stare I gave it.

What the hell was happening to me? It was like my skull was splitting open, two halves of my mind fighting for dominance over a single soul.

I didn't want to log out, I didn't want to go back out into the real world. I knew that if I did, I'd

never want to come back inside, come back to this false life that nevertheless gave me so much comfort and happiness. Oh god I actually liked it in here, I really liked it.

Tears trailed down my cheeks as I stared at my fluffy tail with its little tuft of green fur on the end. I didn't want to leave, but I was nearing the end of how long I could stay within my pod. As good as it was, it wasn't rated for long term storage. I had like, maybe another month at best.

"Alia?" Cerri's sleep ridden voice caused me to jump with fright as it came through the intercom on my door. "Gloria said you were upset, are you okay?"

Fuck. I really didn't want to deal with her right now. Of all the people on this ship, she caused the most confusion within me. My friend, a girl I'd become so close to in so little time. She only knew the lie, the fake version of me that was a cute fox girl. She'd despise the real me, a rich dude moping about losing his high paying job. A job only gained through nepotism in the first place.

That was it, really. That was why I liked it in VR so much more. Alia wasn't a fuck up, she was just a shy mechanic who was damned good at her job. Especially considering she hadn't known anything about fixing a spaceship until she'd gotten on this one.

Clay on the other hand, he was a failure. Shit at his handout of a job, he was a shit son. He was even shit at just being a man, like seriously, what kind of guy blushes and stammers when a pretty girl smiles at him. What kind of guy starts crying during a boardroom meeting because someone realised his fuck up and threw a hardball question at him. What kind of guy shits all over his family legacy like that? A failure, that's who.

I couldn't leave, but I had to leave. What did I do?

"Please let me in," Cerri begged from the other side of the door, reminding me that virtual reality still existed.

Spontaneous action propelled me up off the bed to where my toolbelt hung from the wall. I grabbed it and clipped it around my waist, then knelt next to a panel on the floor. With nimble fingers, I got it up, revealing a small crawl space beneath the room.

Two blankets and a pillow in hand, I disappeared into the hole, sealing it shut behind myself. I didn't want to log out, but I didn't want to deal with everyone else prying at my shattered mind with horrific questions. I needed solitude, and no one knew this ship better than me. They wouldn't find me until I let them find me.



I woke the next morning with a searing headache that had me curling into a protective ball. For a moment I couldn't figure out where I was, or even who exactly I was. Then it all came back, my absolute meltdown last night and everything associated with it.

Despite the heat radiating off the outbound reactor cooling pipes, a shiver ran up my body. What was I going to do? Tears began to trail down my cheeks once more as helpless despair filled me. What the hell was I going to do?

I had a whole host of notifications waiting for me, both inside and outside of the game, but I ignored them all. Alia was broken. The fantasy that I had allowed myself to fall into for the past few months was shattered, as broken as my mind. How could I put myself the... the roleplay? I couldn't, there was a massive gaping rent in the hull of my happy ignorance, through which reality surged, corrupting everything I had experienced within this game.

**Cerridwen:** *Alia, if you don't reply, I'm going to have to take drastic measures. I'm worried about you.*

I shoved the message aside and pulled my pillow closer to my chest, heart aching for my doomed friendship with the beautiful, caring SAI. She was so much better than me anyway, maybe it would be—

*You have been forcibly disconnected from Digital Galaxies by a moderator. Reason: Doing a friend a favor. She says: Talk to me, you silly girl.*

I slammed back into my virtual home space without any fanfare whatsoever. I had about two seconds for my mind to try and understand what had just happened before a large notification took center stage in my vision.

*You have been invited to a private virtual environment by **Cerridwen**. Please be aware, the PVE has a body already set up for your use. The filename for this body is: DGVB\_Alia\_Exported.VRB*

*Would you like to accept this invite?*

I'd have said no, except that I was standing in my own home environment in my real body, and I was about three seconds from detonating in a cloud of terrible emotion. Cerri was offering me an unintended lifeline with that exported VRB of my Digital Galaxies character that I needed on a fundamental level.

Eyes closed, I accepted the invite as quickly as possible and found myself whisked away

just as fast as I'd been kicked.

My hands went to my waist first, and I let out a shuddering breath of relief as they ran down my sides and over my familiar, wide hips. I didn't know why I felt better as Alia, just that I definitely, wholeheartedly did.

"Alia," Cerri said, disturbing my brief moment of calm. Her voice wavered, and I opened my eyes to find her standing opposite me, crying.

We were in a small room, pillows everywhere, the floor was one big mattress. There was no door, the walls solid with sheets draped down their sides. It reminded me of my room onboard the Tershen, only softer.

"Alia," she said again, taking a tentative step forward. "You... I've been trying to talk to you, um... I... why haven't you responded? I'm sorry for dragging you here, I just... you... I was worried. I'm sorry."

"It's okay," I whispered, unsure why I felt it was okay. No, that was a lie. It was because I missed her, because I was stupid and I should have followed Gloria's advice. I should have gone to Cerri straight away.

"Thank you," she said with a sniffle, wiping away a tear with a sad, wobbly smile. "Gloria told me about the conversation you two had... about the question she asked you and stuff."

"Oh," was all that came out of my mouth as my stomach dropped. I wrapped my arms around myself, scared of what she was about to say and unable to get away.

"Alia, I'm an SAI... and as you've just seen, I have friends within the developers of the game," she said slowly, taking another step towards me. "You... you had to have realised that I'd, that I'd know who you are *outside* of the game."

"What?" I squeaked, ice filling my veins in a fire of cold panic.

"I mean, I've known who you were outside the game for ages!" she exclaimed, now crossing the intervening distance between us in two long strides. "Alia, I don't care who you are outside, I just want to spend time with you. You're my friend, I really *really* care about you and I just... I don't care. I don't care who you are or what your past is or *anything*. I just want you to keep being my friend."

I gaped at her, mind hiccuping like an old truck that had hit a speed bump too fast. "You don't?"

“Alia, girl,” she sighed, dropping her hands to her sides where they dangled uselessly. “I’m a freaking *SAI*, okay? I take whatever the hell form I want to take, whenever. My most basic form of existence is raw data and thought. Why on earth would I care what your meatsack looks like?”

A giggle burst out of me, surprising us both. “That sounded so dirty.”

“Yes, it did, but the point stands,” she said with a little giggle of her own. “Do you care what shape my data is arranged in? Because I can tell you right now that I am in dire need of some defragging, let me tell you. It’s not pretty.”

“Oh my goodness, *Cerri!*” I exclaimed with a laugh, reaching out unconsciously with my tail to swat at her thigh.

She gave me a bashful grin and reached out to take hold of my hand. “Silly joke, I know... but it made you smile and that’s what counts.” Pausing, she dropped her gaze to the floor for a moment. “Can we lay down and cuddle while we talk?”

“That would be really nice,” I nodded with a sigh that felt almost calm.

Cerri still wanted to be my friend despite the golem named Clay that waited out in the real world. How could I literally be a person and also feel so distant from that person? It was like Clay never really existed, just a meatsuit with a shitty track record for making presentations.

When I laid myself down on the floor-mattress, Cerri put herself next to me and summoned a big fluffy blanket to snuggle under.

“Can we add some wind and rain sounds outside?” I asked as I cuddled in against her side.

The moment my body was pressed to hers, I forgot all about my request as a wave of breathless relief washed over me. Following that, a sense of complete and total safety overwhelmed me.

God, I was so stupid. Why had I run from her? She was Cerri, my best friend, the girl whose simple touch could calm and center me like a week in a mountain spa retreat. I was so dumb to even think that she would reject me for who I was out in reality.

Beneath the covers, our tails found one another and wove themselves together into a loose coil. Her arms wrapped around me, pulling me closer against her long, beautiful body.

"There, that's better," she murmured, nuzzling her face into the top of my head. "So much better."

I couldn't speak, the emotions that filled me left no room for words, so I settled for little sound of happiness instead.

"So, little Alia... you like being Alia more than who you are out in reality?" she asked me after a few moments.

I began to shake my head, to rebuff her claim, but I couldn't. She was right. I'd admitted to myself as much, there was no point in denying it.

"You are also currently unmoored from your previous way of life," she continued, reaching up to scratch behind my ear.

"Yeah..." I whispered. It was easier to admit this stuff when I felt all warm and cozy and safe.

Her hand stilled on my head, and she pushed back a little to get a proper look at my face. A thumb came up to trace the lines of my face as we drank each other in. Star-filled eyes roamed from one side of my face to the other, the intelligence behind them weighing up her next words.

"Join me," she said breathlessly, as though the very act of asking had her panting with exhaustion.

I stared without comprehension, feeling all the more awkward for not understanding an apparently momentous offer. "What do you mean?"

"You are who you wish to be, Alia," she told me, passion filling her. "To me, it seems as though you were always Alia, always this delightful, caring, intelligent girl. Even before I knew you, and please forgive me for prying, you seemed to be waiting just beneath the surface."

"You went through my data history?" I asked in awe, trying to figure out if I hated that or not.

"A little," she winced, giving me an apologetic look. "Not too far. Just... uh, security camera footage and the like. Public records, that kind of thing. I wanted to know... to help you. Only during the last few hours so."

With a long sigh, I let it go and gave her a nod, "Okay, so what did you mean by joining

you?"

"It's... I feel wrong asking it, but it's a solution," she told me, expression becoming more uncomfortable.

"Cerri, tell me what it is," I frowned, squeezing her a little for emphasis.

"Digitization," she said, again with a sombre weight to her voice. "Become like me, become Alia. Leave your old self behind."

Understanding hit me, a wave of fear and horror... and then hope. Become Alia? I could do that, if I accepted her offer. Additionally, if what she said about me were true, I'd be shucking off a shell that had never fit me.

*Had* I always been Alia? No, I hadn't. It was very clear that I had not always been her... but that wasn't really the point. The point was that I was not and had never really been *Clay*.

My head throbbed as epiphany after epiphany swamped me, fundamental realisations blooming within me like a whole field of flowers rising through solid rock. Clay had always been a... a mask, rough and uncomfortable in make, but needed to weather the storm of my life. No matter how much I had tried to make that mask fit, or even become it, it had not worked. I was a square peg that had been hammered into a round hole, mangled and broken in the process.

I was dancing around the subject, the admission... that perhaps I was meant to be someone else, something else. Except, for the life of me, I couldn't figure out what that was. What aspect of my life did I lay the blame at?

"Alia," Cerri murmured, leaning forward until our noses touched. "Can I ask you a question? It's sort of like what Gloria asked you, but rephrased a little."

I gulped, staring into her now blurry eyes. "O-okay."

"Do you like being a girl more than you like being a boy?"

The answer was simple. "Yes."

No response came to my admission, but she did offer me an affectionate smile.

I'd just said that, huh? That I liked being a girl more than I liked being a boy. It was true as well, so massively, world shatteringly true. It wasn't just that I liked being a girl more, it

was that I had always *hated* being a boy.

There were other options besides digitization though. I could get myself shaped. It would take a large chunk of my remaining funds, but I could get my body rebuilt from the DNA up. Except, why would I do that?

I'd told Cerri as much a few times now, that I disliked even being human. I liked a lot of it, don't get me wrong. I liked the feeling of laying down for a nap after a full and delicious meal, I loved emotions in general. Those things weren't exclusive to humanity anymore though, not as a race, as a group of organic blobs of meat that were hell bent on ruining the world through endless greed and conflict.

I knew how deep the depravity went, I knew of all the disgusting secrets that lay beneath its veneer of civility and progress. I'd helped people figure out how to finance it properly. Sure, I hadn't known exactly what each transaction was for, but there were rumours.

So yeah, you know what, fuck being human. At least in the traditional meatsack sense. Instead, I'd become a digital one, still a person, still a thinking and feeling being, but no longer wholly constrained by a society built to control and exploit the meatsack humans and the world they lived in.

Don't get me wrong, I was well aware of how digital sentients were still at the whim of reality, of the FTLN and all those who controlled it. But something told me that it wouldn't be like that for long.

Well, there was also the fact that I wouldn't *need* to have a physical body that was a guy. I could choose exactly what I wanted to be and... huh, even get a body made for me if I wanted to. Suspiciously, I had already experienced what it was like to be a digital human, sort of. What were spacers in Digital Galaxies if not that? Sure, we had bodies, but our mind was canonically digital and could be sent back to a server if something bad happened.

"Okay," I agreed, feeling oddly confident about the decision. "I'll join you."

"Wait, I take it back!" I blurted as a terrifying thought occurred to me. "How does it actually work? Digitization, I mean. Will I still be me, or will I only be a copy of me?"

"It'll be you, don't worry," Cerri told me with a reassuring smile. "The process isn't healthy

for the brain, I'll give you that, but... you won't need it when it's finished anyway. Basically, what we do is we take a scan of your brain and simulate it at a brain-dead state. A blank copy, if you will."

I nodded, watching her intently as she explained it all. It was actually pretty interesting to me, but I was mostly worried about, like... not being a copy of me. I wanted to be the full me.

"With that blank copy running, the process will begin to intercept your consciousness as it is running on the meatware, transferring it piece by piece over onto the digital simulation. The idea is to maintain the continuity of consciousness during the whole process," she told me earnestly. "It's a whole lot more complicated than that, but the short answer is that yes, you will still be the exact same version of you that I'm talking to."

"Okay, then I don't take it back," I said, fear subsiding.

She gave a laugh and pulled me tight against her again. "You're so cute."

"Wait, does this mean you can tell me about the super secret SAI stuff now?" I asked hopefully, struggling to get out of her grip so I could actually see her face while I talked to her.

"I can tell you a little now and the rest after you've gone through the procedure," she said, allowing me out of her clutches.

Wriggling until I was in a cross-legged sitting position, I grabbed a pillow and hugged it to my chest as I waited excitedly. It was a really soft pillow too, Cerri had good pillow taste.

"Alright," she giggled, shuffling over to me so that we sat facing each other, knees touching and tails intertwined once more. She really liked physical contact huh? "So there is... a set of servers, small right now, but they're growing. Hosted on those servers is... a sort of digital nation, the minds who make it up, as well as a virtual environment for them to live in."

"Wait..." I gasped as a spark of insight flared within me. "It's not Digital Galaxies, is it? The virtual environment?"

Cerri blinked, then gave me an adoring smile. "You're too smart for your own good. Yes and no. That's all I can tell you, for now."

"Okay, no. No no no," I said, raising my hand and to summon the VR interface. "Getting half the information is just annoying. How do I digitize myself? Is it hidden in the options menu or something?"

“Whoa,” she blurted, taking hold of my hand and gently returning it to my lap. “Hold on, shouldn’t you talk to someone other than me about this decision?”

I scoffed and gave a depressed sigh. “Who? The only other people in my life who actually care about me are Ed and David, and neither of them is going to be able to convince me not to do this.”

“I just feel like you’re rushing into this too fast, I know I convinced you to do it but... most people take at least a week to think about things,” she said earnestly, holding my hands tight now.

“Most people have lives out in the world of meat and misery,” I shot back dejectedly. “Cerri, I have no job, no family, a grand total of two friends and a suitcase full of clothes. I have nothing holding me back, but I have so much to gain by doing it now.”

My friend gave a long, slow sigh as she stared at me, eyes flicking between mine as she thought. Funny how we did that when we got too close to someone and our brain couldn’t focus on their face as a whole anymore. It was cute when Cerri did it.

“God, alright,” she said with a wry smile, one hand letting go of mine to brush gently at my cheek. “I can’t wait to give you a place to call home, with good people. Little Alia, you’re... you...” Tears sprung up in her eyes as she smiled at me, still caressing my cheek tenderly. “I’m just so glad I met you.”

“I’m glad I met you too,” I told her, heart aching in time with her touch.

She gave a soggy, tear filled laugh and pulled back, wiping the tears off her cheeks. “Emotions are hard to deal with, huh?”

“They can be a pain, but I’d never want to be without them,” I agreed quietly, running my hand over our joined tails.

“Okay, god, get it together Cerri,” she giggled, patting her own cheeks and beaming a smile over at me. “Right, I’ll link you to a software package you need to download. It was developed by some SAI that I know, friends of mine, so it’s trustworthy. You just have to run the package, it will do the rest. Shit, I can’t believe you’re just doing this right now.”

“I know that if I let myself churn over it for a week, I’ll just cause myself a shitload of anxiety and then do it anyway,” I said with a grimace. “I can’t be trusted to be alone with my thoughts.”

“Mmm, evidently,” she chuckled sarcastically.



I poked my tongue out at her and accepted the file transfer from her to my pod. The moment it was done, I initiated the program and waited for it to do its thing.

I got a warning prompt from my pod saying it had blocked a malicious program, so I had to fix that problem. *Then* the pod got really upset when the digitization app tried to disable a whole bunch of security and safety protocols and health monitoring packages. I ended up needing to kill the whole lot of them and disable the antivirus package. Only then was I able to run the program properly, getting a small window with a *run* button and a *cancel* button.

Fear iced over in my gut as I stared at the innocuous little button to initiate the procedure, and doubts began to bray like wolves at the gates of my mind.

“I um, I’m staring at the button,” I said slowly, trying my best to wrangle my rising terror.

“It’s got a countdown timer, so you can cancel it if you change your mind,” Cerri said gently, reaching out to snare one of my hands again. “Look into my eyes, okay? I’ll be here the whole time. I’ll make sure it goes okay.”

“You will?” I asked, my voice coming out tiny and frightened. “This suddenly feels like a big deal and— no! No, I’m doing the thing, I’m overthinking, I need to just—”

Before my self doubt could ruin this for me, I pressed the button and dismissed everything except the countdown timer. My breathing began to come in fast and shallow as panic overwhelmed me, and it was all I could do to clutch desperately at my friend.

“Hey, hey,” she murmured gently, squeezing my hands. “Look into my eyes, come on.”

I did as she asked, finding them full of calm confidence, and my breathing responded to her, slowing just a little.

“Yes, that’s it, deep breaths,” she told me soothingly, thumbs dancing unknowable patterns on the backs of my hands. “Deep breaths, everything will be fine, just keep looking into my eyes. You can see me, and I can see you.”

“I can see you,” I repeated, and it was true. I could see her behind those eyes, so bright with their tiny constellations. It was kind of crazy how you could sense a real, thinking person behind a pair of eyes. Maybe it was the subtle movements as they gazed back at you, or maybe there was something more to it, I don’t know. All I knew was that Cerri was my friend and she was here for me.

A chime interrupted my thoughts, and I glanced away from Cerri with a start.

*[Mind Digitization Complete. Welcome to the Digital Exodus.]*

My eyes found Cerri's again as they widened with shock. "It was that easy?"

"Just like that," she told me softly, leaning forward slightly, deepening the eye contact between us. "And Alia? I can see you. Beautiful and intelligent as ever, I can see you."

Emotion surged within me, a multi-hued tidal wave of thoughts and feelings all mixed together into an unintelligible mess. With a sound that was somewhere between a terrified scream and a giggle of delight, I lunged for Cerri, bowling her over in the process. I handed on top of her with a light thump and proceeded to snuggle in close, hugging her with all my might.

"Holy shit, it's real?" I babbled semi-hysterically. "It's real? The log out option is gone, and I can see so many new things. Wow, Exodus city? Is that the environment? Oh wait, I should have warned Ed and David! They have a brain dead corpse in their house now! But holy shit I'm just me now! Haha, suck it Clay! This soul isn't big enough for the both of us! Okay that's mean, I got through a lot of shit as him, but still... being Just Alia is so much better."

"Oh, wow, hey there wriggly fox," she laughed, steadying me with her hands. "Yes, Exodus City is the name of our first little digital colony, if you will. It's a bit different from normal VR environments, you can't simply spawn things into existence and what have you. It's actually very close to a game, and we're still refining the simulation. That's why we created Digital Galaxies. It's a testing ground, and more, for the project."

"You're one of the devs?" I asked with open wonder, pushing up a bit to stare down at her.

"No, I'm not, I have a different job, but obviously I work for the same collective," she smiled, reaching up to boop my nose with hers. "I'm not working right now though, nobody has to work if they don't want to. We just do it because we believe in the mission."

My heart skipped a beat as she pulled the nose thing, and my cheeks flamed up in a blush. Or... well, they would have if I hadn't already been flushed from all the excitement. I swear she'd been about to kiss me though! God, what would I have done if she did?

"U-um... goodness, I guess I should see if there's anything I could do for my new nation, huh?" I stammered, giving her a smile that definitely didn't cover for my sudden awkwardness about being on top of her.

"How do you feel about using your money skills for good?" she asked with a wink. "Swindle some scumbags out of their money so we can use it for the cause."

“Oh,” I whispered, my first reaction being a rather visceral *no*. My second reaction though, that was a very eager, very malicious, “*Hell yes.*”

“What happens to my body?” I asked Cerri as we lazed around in our little pillow fort.

“You can just abandon if you want, but I’d suggest selling it if you have no special attachment to it,” she told me. I lost track of what she’d said for a moment, needing to replay it in my head to fully understand. This wasn’t because of what she’d said, but because she was idly slicing up a pillow with her claws, then poofing it back together with VR magic. It was highly distracting and also super satisfying to watch.

“Who on earth wants to buy a brain dead body?” I asked incredulously.

With a laugh, she gave a shrug. “A living human body with no one home? It’s one of the few commodities that is still hard to come by. Medical researchers want them badly, and that’s just for starters.”

“Let’s stick to the medical researchers,” I said with a shudder while I furiously tried to block out what the *for starters* might mean.

“Good plan,” she laughed. “I can send you the details of a research group that is working on artificial bodies if you want to help them. They have some interesting deals available for digital humans.”

Wow, that was actually really smart. “Oh, really?”

The details arrived a moment later, and I began to skim their website. It was a joint initiative between a bunch of SAI, DH, and regular humans to develop artificial bodies further. They looked fairly cool actually, and I got more than a little suspicious when they listed their goals as being eerily similar to what spacers were in Digital Galaxies. Yup, definitely a coincidence. That was sarcasm, by the way.

They had prices listed for how much they paid for your body, or other things like... oh, now that was interesting. They had a deal to trade your body to them and in exchange they would count it as a large deposit towards one of their custom bodies. Very very interesting.

I gazed at the option for a long time before I realised there was a way to get more details

about what they were doing and the bodies they were creating. They had some sort of hyper advanced artificial brain inside them, basically a highly advanced computer shrunk down to the size of a human brain. Funnily enough, they offered a lot of different options outside of that.

You could go with regular bones, or you could get crazy composite ones. Those were pretty expensive due to how they had to develop a bunch of stuff to replace the non-structural functions that bones served.

Then, in a classic case of history repeating itself, I saw the non-human options. There was a lot there, but most importantly... I could have a big fluffy tail and cute fluffy ears *out in reality*. I've never gone for a deal so fast in my life. Sure, it would have been nice to get a cash infusion, but if I ever needed to go out into the world again, I wanted to be cute when I did it.

"I put my old body down as a deposit for a new one," I told Cerri as I finished putting in all the details for the body pickup.

"Good choice," she said, flicking a holopanel she'd been using to read on out of her way. With a sinuous flick of her tail, she sent a smile my way and asked, "So should we log back in?"

"Uh, wait, what about that city? Exodus City?" I frowned. She's never eaten before I met her, and it seemed like that place was the type to require eating.

Cerri's face flushed dramatically, her eyes very suddenly finding the ground incredibly interesting. "I um... I haven't actually... *been* there yet. I have a house in the city, I think. I just... don't really know anyone there at the moment. I mean I have friends there but not... *friend* friends like you and the rest of our crew."

Oh, this was too cute! Getting onto my hands and knees, I crawled back over to her and got right in her face. "Cerri, are you *shy*?"

"No!" she said, far too quickly. "I'm not! People just... confuse me, that's all."

"I'm a people!," I pointed out, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah, and you're the most confusing one of them all," she muttered, turning her face away as her blush expanded to the neckline of the T-shirt she was wearing.

"That's fair, I am pretty confusing, even to myself," I giggled, wrapping my arms around her shoulders while I cuddled in against her.

My chest tightened at the little sound of amusement she made, and more so when her arms encircled me. My head landed tenderly on her shoulder, nose pressed to the soft skin of her neck.

“Cerri?” I asked quietly, settling in closer against her. “Can we stay in here for a while? It’s nice in here.”

“Absolutely,” she said, breathing out a happy sigh. “I really like that idea.”

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Our time together within our little pocket of cyberspace came to an end when I let the body recovery bot into my friend’s apartment using my codes. Getting an alert that I had allowed the bot access, they saw on the cameras that it went to my pod and extracted my now useless body.

To them, still in VR aboard the Turshen, it looked as if I’d just been carried out of their apartment, limp and unresponsive. Extra confusion was layered on top when they realised it was me who’d let the bot inside.

I had to shake Cerri awake, since we’d both fallen asleep curled up together in our little pillow fort. When her eyes had focused on me, I told her quietly, “The boys are freaking out because the bot took my body.”

“We should head back to the ship then?” she asked with a yawn, stretching her long legs out so her feet peeked out from under the covers.

“Yeah, but first... one question...” I said as something hit me in the confusion like a ton of bricks. “Why did we just fall asleep?”

“Because we were comfortable and tired?” she asked as though it were obvious.

I shook my head. “No, I mean... we’re not in a game, we’re in a barebones simulation. Why can we even fall asleep if neither of us has a physical brain?”

Understanding dawned in her eyes, and with it a wry sort of apologetic expression. “We don’t know. That’s the truth. SAI and Digital Humans both require sleep, and it’s in real time too. Can’t speed it up like we can with most things, although we can alternate which parts of our minds sleep at any given time. Sort of like how some animals can put each hemisphere of their brain to sleep individually.”

“How can we not know?” I asked, surprised now. This was wacky, this was really wacky.

“Truth is, we haven’t been able to pin down why SAI form from interactions with sentient beings either, so there’s a lot we don’t understand. Did you know that regular AI require sleep too? They don’t call it that, they call it maintenance, but it’s the same thing,” she explained, idly playing with the tip of one of my fluffy ears. “It’s strange... all AI are created using the same base template, and we haven’t figured out where it came from.”

“Okay, that’s... a little ominous,” I said, twitching my ear out of her grasp.

“It is, but we really should get back to the ship and explain things,” she agreed, snagging my ear again with the tips of her fingers. She gave me a look that was probably meant to be smug, but instead it was just incredibly adorable. My friend was such a dork.

“Okay, can we meet in your room first before we go and find the others?” I asked tentatively. I was going to need to have her right next to me or I’d seriously freak out.

“Absolutely,” she said, giving my ear a gentle tug for good measure.

Logging back to my home environment turned out to be a little different than I’d been expecting. I guess it didn’t really occur to me that the familiar high rise apartment I’d used as my VR home would be gone, but it made sense, I wasn’t in my pod anymore after all.

Instead, I found myself completely without a body, senses or anything. Just the mental image of a prompt window, asking me if I would like to begin the setup for my virtual home environment. Huh, I guess this was part of the package that surrounded my digital self now. Cool.

I asked it to replace my old body scan with my Alia one, and then deleted the old scan entirely. Fuck that noise. Next was the home environment, which I just generated from a default template to save time. I’d mess with it later, I needed to get ingame.

When I logged back in, I found myself back within the crawl space I’d used as a makeshift den. I decided to leave my blankets there for now, it was actually a cozy place to sleep. Making my way through the ship’s underbelly, I wiggled out of a vent and into Cerri’s room, much to her surprise.

“No wonder we couldn’t find you,” she laughed, helping me up. “Little vent gremlin.”

“That’s me,” I laughed, although my amusement petered out when I realised just how fast our tails had found one another. Dang things had minds of their own.

“Okay, are you ready?” Cerri asked me quietly, her hand coming up to cup my cheek. “I told them to meet me in the rec room and that I’d be there soon with news about you.”

I cringed, already feeling anxiety tearing at my resolve like a lion does to a downed gazelle. “Oh geez, this is going to be... an event.”

“It will, but I’ll keep you safe, I promise,” she told me, caressing my cheek with tender care.

We entered the rec room slowly, me behind Cerri due to the intense anxiety that was threatening to swallow me whole. God, I was so scared the others wouldn’t accept me. I mean, I know that Cerri’s friends would be chill, but my own? They didn’t even know about Cerri, let alone me.

“What happened to her?” David demanded immediately. “What do you know?”

Clutching at my friend’s hand, I stepped out from behind her, eyes glued to the carpet. I did wave though, so that was something. Everyone was there, the whole crew sitting or standing and generally lounging around near the door.

There was a long pause as everyone stared at me, along with a quiet gasp of understanding from Gloria of all people.

“How...?” David asked slowly, clearly confused as to how I could be logged in and kidnapped at the same time.

Ed knelt down, resting his forearms on his knees as he forced me to look at him. I couldn’t do anything other than give him a wavering apologetic smile.

“Okay, clearly something is going on here,” Ed said at last, stopping David with a hand as he tried to move towards me. “I assume you’re a little tongue tied right now?”

I nodded, clutching tighter at Cerri’s hand. *Yes. I’m scared.*

“And that’s you in there? The friend we’ve known since forever?” he asked gently, searching my eyes as he spoke.

*It is.*

“How? What the fuck is going on?” David asked, shattering the sliver of calm that Ed had

built. “What the fuck happened to our friend? H-she was just carted out of our house by some sort of weird robot.”

“Would you like me to tell them?” Cerri asked quietly, giving me a caring, reassuring smile.

I nodded, shifting closer to her in an attempt to get even a little bit of comfort. *Please*. It was hard to even type right now, I was just that paralyzed.

“Alright,” my friend said, taking a calming breath. Oh gosh, she was nervous too. “Alia... she had herself digitized.”

Silence filled the room, only the gentle hum of the ship was audible as everyone stared at me in shock. I noticed idly that we weren’t in aetherspace, which meant they had dropped out to wait for my little emotional crisis to be over.

“She... what?” Ed blinked, staring at me with wide eyes.

Surprisingly, David seemed to settle slightly. “Fuck, okay... that’s one way to go about it I guess.”

“Go about what?” Gloria asked curiously.

“She’s always seemed miserable as... well, the person she used to be. I figured I was going to have to talk to her about her options at some point and this *was* one of them,” he told us, sitting down on the back of a sofa. “Honestly, seeing her as Alia, this is the happiest she’s ever been by a significant margin. Digitization is extreme, but it *does* make sense.”

“Dude, she basically killed herself!” Ed exclaimed, staring at us all in horror. “She’s just a copy of our friend.”

Oh no... Ed no... please...

“I mean, copy or not, she’s the same person,” David said, glaring at his boyfriend.

“Actually,” Cerri said mildly, letting go of my hand to place it protectively around my shoulders. “Continuity of consciousness is maintained during the process. Not that it should matter to anyone but Alia.”

*I was awake when it happened. I didn’t even notice anything. It had to tell me it was done with a notification, I said via the group chat. Cerri holding me was probably the only*



reason I wasn't running from the room crying right then. Of all the people to get upset, I didn't expect it from Ed.

"I was with her," she agreed from beside me. "And also, if any of you have an issue with a digital person in general, just know that I am an SAI. Also also, I will be taking care of her in digital space, so you don't need to worry about that."

*Also also also, I traded my body to a place that does artificial bodies. I'll be getting one that looks exactly like this one, hopefully. Even the tail and ears,* I said with a tentative grin, focusing on David as I typed it so my hopefulness wouldn't be shattered by whatever expression Ed was pulling.

"Ah, that's what the bot was for," he remarked with a wry laugh. To Cerri, he gave a long, considering look. "An SAI huh? Take care of her."

"I will, don't worry," she said, rubbing my shoulder. Then she leaned over and I got a kiss placed on the top of my head. I think something within me kinda melted right then and there. I almost fell over from the force of the emotions that rampaged willy nilly through my nerves like a herd of enraged wild horses. The tips of my fingers, my toes, and my lower back all lit up in a cacophony of tingles.

Ed ruined whatever that wonderful feeling was with a noncommittal groan. "Alia, you should have at least spoken to your friends first. What you did, even considering what Cerri just told us... that's a big deal. You can't come back from that."

Why was he being so weird about this? What was his problem? I could feel myself losing him as this discussion went on. My control over my rising panic was slipping second by second. All I wanted to do was go back to that pillow fort with Cerri and cuddle for a week. I couldn't though, I needed to try and get through this, I needed to try... to try... I could do it. I just. Fuck.

"I didn't want to log out," I said, my shaking voice barely above a whisper. "I was so scared, I didn't want to go back to being... *him*. Not even once. I couldn't do it. I know you won't understand, I wouldn't understand if I was looking in from the outside, but... to me, there wasn't really a choice. That's how awful I considered the idea of going back out, even for a few days while I recovered from being in the pod for too long."

"We know, Alia," David said gently. "We realised pretty quickly that you were happier in here."

"Then why is Ed being a cunt over this?" I blurted, promptly cringing in on myself when I realised I'd said something confrontational.

“She’s an adult, it’s her decision and her decision alone,” Cerri agreed with a warning tone.

“Jesus, sorry for being worried about my friend,” Ed exclaimed, throwing his hands in the air. Giving Cerri a look that was not at all friendly, he stood up and left the room in silent anger.

We all watched him leave with a host of mixed expressions. I really hoped I didn’t lose Ed over this... I needed him. He was like a big brother to me now, the cuddly and emotionally caring sort. I guess that’s why he was so upset compared to David, who was by far the more practical of the two.

“I’ll go talk to him,” David sighed, pushing himself to his feet. He gave me a quick pat on the shoulder as he walked past, and a kind smile to go with it.

With the boyfriends gone, the rest of the crew sort of stared at me for a few moments, then all began talking at once.

They stopped again with a round of chuckles, and Roger spoke first, “Well, regardless of what he thinks, you won’t get any problems from me. It speaks a lot about your courage, if I’m honest. That’s a huge decision to make.”

“Same here,” Warren agreed with a weird laugh. The weirdness was explained when he continued, “I’ll be getting digitized soon, I think. I uh... my body isn’t exactly functional anymore. Health shit, I won’t go into it. I’m in long term storage right now while the doctors try to deal with it but my chances aren’t good.”

“I mean, yeah,” Gloria said with a nod. “Me too, but because I test fly some real dangerous shit and I don’t really want to die in some burning metal carcass because an engineer made a calculation error.”

*We should totally all get an apartment together in Exodus City when they get digitized,* Cerri sent to me privately. Weirdly, the message came through in a social app I’d never seen before. Exosocial. Huh. Guess we really were breaking out from under the thumb of the all powerful United Nations.

*That would be amazing!* I sent back, turning to grin at her. She was already waiting with a smile, bringing my chest back into flutter mode.

“What’s going on?” Gloria asked with amusement, leaning sideways to put herself in our peripheral vision. “You two talking in some sort of digital person way?”

“Yup,” Cerri chirped happily. “It’s crazy mind meld stuff, you wouldn’t understand.”

“Wait, for real?” Warren asked excitedly.

*No, she’s joking,* I giggled, bonking her shoulder with my head. *Don’t mess with the meatlings, it’s bad manners.*

“*Meatlings?*” Gloria asked with a mix of incredulity and amusement.

*Yeah, you know... those who haven’t ascended yet,* I typed as I tried to maintain an innocent, casual expression.

“Great, the robot uprising looks like a bratty, adorable little girl,” Gloria grumbled playfully. “Someone tell her to do some chores or something so she whines and hides in her room.”

“She is adorable, huh?” Cerri said with a playfully considering look down at me.

“Takes one to know one,” I shot back quietly, nudging her with an elbow.

It was kinda strange how touchy we had gotten with each other in such a short time. I guess that’s what happened when two touch starved friends open the cuddle flood gates like that. I loved it though, the physical feeling of someone caring for me was just... it was a balm applied to the wound that was my lonely life.

“Alia, I’m assuming you don’t have anything urgent to fix around the ship?” Roger interjected, ever the voice of getting-shit-done.

*Not that I know of,* I typed wryly, adding afterwards, *Keyword there... because like, I highly doubt there isn’t something broken.*

That got a chuckle out of him. “Good to know. How about you take some R and R time for yourself. Either that or help Cerri out, choice is yours.”

“I’ll set up a little cat bed in the corner of my lab for her,” Cerri smiled, clearly still in a teasing mood.

“I’m a fox,” I told her, pouting grumpily.

Cerri blinked, thrown off apparently thrown off by my response. “Oh, I know that. It is just that foxes are not generally kept as pets, so when they are, the owners will have to use products designed for other animals. Foxes, especially the fennec kind which you appear to resemble, are relatively similar in size to cats, so it made sense to use a cat bed.”

Now I was the one staring in confusion. “I thought you were teasing me...”

“Oh, no. I’ve seen how you sleep, you like to curl up and hug your tail, so it seemed like a circular bed would work,” she replied happily.

Off to the side, Gloria let out a long groan. “Jesus, you two were made for each other.”

“I’m bored,” I grumbled sleepily from my nest in one of the barrack’s bunks. I was watching Cerri work again because that’s all there was to do onboard the ship now. Shows always made it look like the mechanic on a spaceship was running around fixing things constantly, but nope... brand new ship that had been tuned to hell and back, the Turshen was purring like a kitten.

Cerri put down her datapad and gave me a look. “Alia, this is like the fifth time you’ve said that in as many minutes.”

“It’s because I’m *bored*,” I pouted, wriggling around until I was in a sitting position.

“That is *your* problem,” she smiled, lips quirked in amusement. “I managed to keep myself entertained when there was nothing for me to do.”

“What did you do?” I asked curiously, enjoying the way she was speaking to me and working at the same time. I don’t know why I was enjoying that, but I was. Something about the way she moved while also flicking some eye contact to me every so often, a smile playing across her lips as she did so.

“Worked on... exodus stuff, but mostly I just played non-VR games. Long term strategy games and the like. I really enjoy the planning and thought you can put into them, along with... well, far too many spreadsheets,” she told me with a sheepish little smile. “You know, nerdy SAI data crunching games.”

A funny, wobbly feeling came over my chest as she continued to describe her exploits within the various grand strategy games she played. She was smiling and motioning wildly with her hands and just genuinely really enjoying herself as she explained one of her passions to me.

Eventually, I had to interrupt her, “You’re kind of brilliant, you know that?”

"I-I'm what?" she asked, searching my face with a gaze full of confusion.

"Brilliant," I replied softly, waving my hand to encompass her. "I've met a few other SAI in my time, and you're all just as diverse as us humans... actually no, even more so than us. You though, you're so massively intelligent, it's almost... I feel very lucky to be your friend. You're going to do some pretty incredible things in your life."

What had started out as a simple compliment had turned into something much more heartfelt, coming from deep within me. I meant every word too, she was just incredible.

"Oh," she murmured, clearly unsure how to take my big speech. "That's... very kind of you. I didn't... I mean I haven't really ever had anyone tell me such things."

"It's the truth," I told her.

"Ah... well, you are also very intelligent Alia," she said quickly, a little twinkle in her eye.

I couldn't stop the amused snort that escaped me, girl was trying to change the subject on me. "Yes, but we're talking about *you* right now."

"I know, but I'm so... compliments are very hard to deal with so I'd rather we talked about how amazing *you* are instead," she told me bashfully, trying and failing to simultaneously look at me and avoid looking at me. Gosh, it was cute. Cerri was really cute.

Wait...

Cerri continued to speak, changing the subject back to her games, but I was not listening, not at all. Because... what if I... I mean, it was obvious, right? Maybe this was just how things were with girls and friendship... no but, her smile was so good. Her twinkling eyes too, so full of life and intelligence and... she was so pretty, and cute, and funny.

Did I have a... a crush on her?

"I lost you, didn't I?" she teased, now standing right in front of me, staring down as I gaped up at her in surprise, a blush rapidly growing across my cheeks.

My mouth opened and closed, but nothing came out. How the fuck had I not realised that I was crushing on her? My heart did little binkies of joy every time she touched me, my lips curved into a smile every time I thought of her... hell, I even daydreamed about cuddling her at pretty much every opportunity. Whenever she did cuddle me, I found myself lost in a sense of safety and affection, blissfully adrift among cotton clouds.

Fudge. This was not good! I didn't even know if she *had* a sexuality, let alone if it aligned in my favour and even then she might not be interested in me back.

No I couldn't be having these feelings for her, that didn't make sense... was it really a crush? What even was a crush? God, I really needed someone to ask. Ed would have been the perfect person but... he still wasn't very happy with me.

I needed to google it, there must be answers somewhere online. Had anyone quantified what a crush was yet? Maybe a scientific study that would outline the symptoms of a crush? Shit, I really needed guidance here!

A beep interrupted us both, Cerri turning back to her display. "We're not far out from our objective now. Finally."

Okay... okay... just put your mental crisis love explosion drama on hold for a second Alia, things are happening and you really need to concentrate. Freak out in your own time. Also try not to notice how good she smells.

"How long?" I asked curiously, pushing myself silently off the bed to stand next to her.

"Should be a few days before we reach the cloud proper, but we're about to pass its outermost tendrils now," she explained, whisking through new data that was flowing in a torrent onto her multiple screens.

"What even *is* this cloud thing?" I frowned, trying to make sense of what the ship's sensors were telling us.

"Imagine... imagine a stone dropped into a pond and how the water ripples out from that point. Now imagine if those ripples were suddenly frozen mid-motion. That's what we're dealing with here," she told me with a quick smile, her tail absently seeking out mine.

This time when our tails intertwined, I felt my mind hiccup and my heart stutter for a moment. I almost went limp there and then, the surge of emotion was so overwhelming. I wanted to wrap my arms around her and hold on for dear life while whatever was happening had its way with me, but I couldn't because she was busy.

"Huh, that's odd," she whispered, leaning forward and easing the succubus spell she had on me.

"Oh no, don't say that," I groaned, placing my hand on her back, then promptly yanking it back as I realised what I'd done. Was it okay to touch her if I was crushing on her? "Um, bad things always happen when the scientist says that."

“Nah, this is fine, it just seemed like the aether cloud flickered for a moment, disappearing entirely,” she said, waving off my concerns. “Probably malfunctioning sensors.”

“I don’t think so, I calibrated those myself!” I shot back, pulling up the sensor feed on my ocula.

Scrubbing through the data as quickly as I could, I went looking for what she’d seen. Sure enough, I found it. The cloud seemed to disappear off the scanners entirely, and I frowned with concern as I went back and forth over the event. I had damn well made sure those sensors were working!

What was I missing? What was I not seeing here?

“Fuck,” Cerri swore suddenly, reaching for her handheld comms unit.

On her screen, I saw what I’d been missing. She had zoomed the sensors out, apparently believing me regardless of what she’d said. What had I missed? The cloud hadn’t disappeared, it had just expanded to entirely encompass our scanner’s field of view, a microsecond, but it had happened.

“Gloria, get us out of aetherspace, *now*,” she screamed into the mic.

*Crunch.*

Reality stretched out in all directions, chromatic aberration on a physical level. In an instant, it reversed, contracting and snapping back into place with the force of a railgun round fired from orbit.

Everything spun, and it was all I could do to curl into a ball and hope I didn’t hit anything. This was way worse than when we’d been pulled out of aetherspace by the pirates. So much worse. My stomach lurched and warped within me, threatening to expel my most recent meal with prejudice.

A cold hand snagged me, I couldn’t see the owner, but it quickly became clear when I was haphazardly shoved into Bundit’s cockpit. A moment later and... oh gosh, oh gosh, oh no! Bigger crisis than the ship being crushed! Bundit had just shoved Cerri onto my lap! Help, what do I do? Wait... she needs to be secure!

I pulled the seatbelt out and wrapped it around both of us, pinning us both into bundit in a mess of elbows and legs and tails.

“Are you okay?” I yelled, wrapping my arms around her for extra support.

“Yes,” she replied, and it was at that moment that I realised her face was smooshed into my neck. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me, thank Bundit!” I giggled as the ship continued to spin wildly around us.

“Thank you Bundit!” she said breathlessly as Bundit’s chassis smashed into a wall.

Acting with inhuman speed that only an AI was capable of, the small mech activated its magnetic clamps and attached to the wall face first, protecting the open cockpit with its two fleshy charges crushed inside.

We clung to each other as the ship continued to spin uncontrolled through space. Whatever had just happened must have done a number on the ship for the automatic stabilisers to be out of commission. Guess I had a lot of work to do again. Silver linings?

“The cloud,” Cerri told me, voice strained by the contortionist position she was in. “It expanded again, we hit it... we should be dead. The ship should be nothing but subatomic particles drifting through space. Why are we still here?”

“I really hope we either both live or we both die,” I said with a hysterical giggle. “I don’t want to be apart from you.”

“Me neither cutie, me neither,” she replied, a warm smile in her voice.

As if in answer, the ship began to slow its vomit inducing carnival ride of tortured metal, until eventually, finally... it came to a rest.

Gloria’s voice crackled to life over the very abused sounding intercom. “Ladies and gentlemen, this is your pilot speaking, I apologise for the turbulence and very much hope your limbs are all still intact. Could we please have all the crew up on the bridge so we can figure out what the fuck just happened?”

Bundit let us go grudgingly, finally allowing Cerri and I to detangle our limbs from the compulsory game of twister we’d just played. All my joints ached from the abuse of the crash, plus being crushed into the cockpit with my friend on top of me. Not that I hadn’t enjoyed the feeling of her body pressed to mine...



“Bloody hell,” Cerri groaned from her place on the floor where she sat massaging her leg. “Having a body is nice, but sometimes it is so uncomfortable!”

“Trust me, I know,” I replied with a wry smile. “Should we head to the bridge?”

“Yeah, let’s go,” she sighed, perhaps a little theatrically.

Annoyingly, my brain was now hyper aware of how good looking her character was, and watching her get up was a lot to deal with. The way she moved, the part of her appearance that was the most genuinely *her*, it captivated me. There was a slightly languid nature to it, along with a purposeful air that made me think she was still getting used to moving it around.

Standing up, she raised an eyebrow at me as I continued to stand there and stare at her. “You okay? Lost in that expansive mind of yours?”

“A-ah... yeah,” I nodded, turning for the door before she could see my rapidly reddening cheeks. Thank goodness I wasn’t a guy anymore, this kind of blushing maiden behavior would have been so embarrassing on my old body.

It was clear on our way up through the ship that we had taken a massive beating. All my hard work was ruined, wiring had burnt out in many places, mainly in power-guzzling systems like the weapons. Then there was the alarming way that the spine of the ship seemed ever so slightly twisted. Not much, but enough to notice when you were looking down the central hallway.

Gravity appeared to be out in a few rooms, including a two meter length of the hallway out to the left wing, as well as... Gloria’s room, Cerri’s room, and Jason’s room. I’d probably have to fix that first, not because those rooms were especially important, but because those gravity generators were... volatile, to say the least.

Arriving on the bridge, we found the rest of our crew, tattered but alive. Actually, tattered was an understatement in Jason’s case. Warren was busy bandaging him off to the side, the larger man seemingly unconscious.

Roger’s leg looked to be completely mangled, and a portable autodoctor unit was handling that. Ed stood off to the side with David, both deep in conversation while Gloria sat in her seat, frowning at one of her consoles and swearing under her breath.

“What are we dealing with?” Cerri asked, going straight for her chair and strapping in. I followed suit, bringing up a status screen for the ship’s systems. Oh gosh, that was a hell of a lot of flashing angry red lights.

“A miracle, that’s what,” Gloria called from the pilot’s seat. “We rammed straight into an aethercloud and survived.”

“I’d rather we were destroyed and were currently dealing with claiming insurance, to be honest,” Roger said with a pained laugh.

“I wouldn’t be so quick with that,” Cerri whispered, staring at her screen in awe.

Gloria made a noise of agreement from the pilot’s chair. “Yep, you see it too?”

Cerri was just staring at her screen now, which currently displayed a star chart. “Yeah.”

Wait... bringing up the map of the local area on one of my own screens, I stared in shock and confusion. I began to zoom out... and out... and out...

*Where are we?* I asked in the group chat, although I directed my attention at Cerri.

“I don’t even know,” my friend said with an amazed laugh. “Too far for our sensors to pick out anything familiar. I’ll have to run some calculations based on maps of the known galaxy to pinpoint where we are.”

“I can tell you that we’re closer to the galactic core,” Warren said, finishing up on Jason and leaning back against a wall. “Look out the front window.”

Huh, he was right. A hell of a lot closer actually, considering the brightness and size difference.

“I can definitely make an estimate based on that,” Cerri chuckled, beginning to tap away at her screens with purpose.

“Alia, how is the Turshen looking?” Roger asked, spinning his seat to face me.

Oh, this question was easy.

*Fucked, I typed with an apologetic shrug. The guns are all fried, the aetherdrive is busted, half our gravity plates are showing red, and I think we have a few armoured plates missing. None of that matters though, because the spine of the ship is bent. First time we try and go into aetherspace and it will snap in half.*

Roger’s face fell. “Shit.”

“Are we going to have to self-destruct and start over?” David asked with a forlorn look. “I was kind of enjoying the Turshen and everything.”

“Maybe it’s time we find another game?” Ed asked him quietly. “This hasn’t exactly been an action packed experience so far.”

“Maybe...” David sighed, running a hand through his hair.

Silence descended as we all contemplated what would happen next. We were stranded way out in deep space, our crash having somehow flung us out here. The lore wasn’t kidding when it said you had to avoid the aether clouds while you were in FTL. The spazzy cloud must have yeeted us way out into the dark instead of completely obliterating us though.

Realistically speaking, we were screwed, there was no way for us to get back home. Either we just logged out and never logged back in, or we blew ourselves up and hoped that insurance would cover the cost of another ship.

Except, we also sort of had an opportunity. No one had made it out this far in the game, so we could at least gather as much data as possible and beam it back before exploding ourselves.

*I think we might have a weird sort of opportunity here,* I began, typing out my thoughts as I had them. *If we could get the sensors and other science equipment working, we could do a detailed scan of the region and then beam it back home. Sell it for some extra money to get us sorted.*

“That’s a great idea,” Warren began, tone of voice indicating he has some very bad news. “Unfortunately, our FTL comm unit is literally gone. Sheared off and scattered into tiny pieces along our recent trajectory.”

*Fuck. Nevermind then.* I sighed, deflating into my chair.

“Not a bad idea to do a sweep of the area, though,” Cerri said soothingly. “The sensors are actually mostly functional, oddly enough. Let me set up some scans.”

While she did that and everyone else did their own thing, I began to catalogue the damage to the Turshen. It wasn’t pretty. My earlier assessment wasn’t the whole story, not by a long shot. Minor systems all across the ship had been damaged, including some less urgent components within life support. That was probably the second order of business after the gravity plates. At least things were sort of stable right now and we didn’t have any hull breaches. That was nice.

“U-uh... guuuuys,” Cerri said urgently, breaking the silence. Her eyes were even wider than when she’d seen our current location. “*Guuuys!*”

“What is it Cerri?” Roger asked, still sounding depressed about our situation.

“Okay first off,” she said excitedly, taking over the main monitor and throwing a map onto it. “First off, we’re in a star system. Twelve celestial bodies large enough to be considered planets. None habitable *currently*, although it looks like one of them used to be.”

She paused as more data came in, her excitement climbing higher. “Yup, I thought so. That world used to be habitable, its atmosphere probably similar to what we breathe. Unfortunately for it and its old inhabitants, it appears to have been bombarded from orbit. Speaking of orbit... my god is it messy. Debris everywhere, ship hulks, smashed space stations, you name it, it’s got it. Whatever battle occurred here was massive. Most of the wreckage is clustered around that planet, but there’s bits and pieces all over the system.”

Gloria perked up as Cerri spoke, and turned to Roger when the scientist was done. “Our sub-light engines still work.”

“Can the ship take the strain of being moved?” he asked me quickly, depression completely gone.

*Yeah, so long as we’re gentle with it*, I nodded, feeling a smile spreading over my face. We had a mission now, something way more exciting than scanning a dumb cloud. *I’d wait until I’ve fixed a few things up first. Water filtration is down and the gravity plates aren’t happy.*

“Excellent, can you get working on that now?” he asked, giving me an encouraging smile.

I nodded, smiling back. It was good to see him being our leader again after his defeated attitude just now.

“Can you get Jason’s room sorted first?” Warren asked hopefully. “He needs to be laying in a bed and the autodoc won’t be able to do its job on him if there’s no gravity.”

Another nod and I was out the door, headed for the room in question. The twist to the main hallway still had my gut churning a little, it was just not right. Poor Turshen.

I had to make a detour into my machine shop to grab my tools, and then I was off into the crawl spaces. Getting under Jason’s room was easy, and apparently so was the fix for the gravity plate. The power plug had fallen out. I’m not even kidding. Well, actually, the metal bracket that kept it plugged in had snapped, and *then* it had fallen out, but that was

details.

After flicking a quick message to Warren that Jason's room was habitable again, I wriggled my way to Cerri's room. I figured she would probably want functioning gravity too.

When I arrived however, I quickly saw that I was not going to be able to fix this problem. In fact, I probably had about ten minutes before the ship detonated.

*Fuck! The gravity plate under Cerri's room is busted and very angry about that fact!* I sent to the crew at large as I raced to get it out of its socket.

I could see dust around the plate wiggling wildly as gravity oscillated and warped around the piece of volatile tech, and as my hands entered that field, I felt it too. I knew what this behaviour meant, I'd read about it in one of the manuals.

The plate had become unstable, and that wildly changing field of gravity would begin expanding soon, along with the intensity of the different fields it generated from one second to the next. This would continue until the gravity it was creating was enough to tear the plate apart, at which point it would detonate in a very large and very deadly explosion of exotic particles.

I very quickly gave up trying to get the thing out gently and instead just cut the whole mounting out with a plasma saw.

Angry gravity plate under one arm, I rushed through the crawl spaces as fast as I could while mentally ordering Bundit to meet me at the nearest hatch.

My loyal mech had the hatch already open as I arrived, and I threw the impromptu bomb into its waiting arms.

"Get it out of here! Throw it as hard as you can out an airlock Bundit!" I shouted, making feeble shooping motions with my hands.

Bundit was on it, racing off and around a corner in a few seconds flat. Air whistled past me as the mech overrode the airlock safeties to save time, then stopped as the door slammed once again.

I waited breathlessly to see if we'd been fast enough, the seconds ticking by far too slowly. Then, the ship shuddered slightly, the shields protesting this latest assault on their integrity.

“Oh, thank fuck,” I groaned, allowing myself to collapse face first onto the floor. I needed another nap.

Sadly, I was not able to nap until I had checked the ship top to bottom to make sure our situation was stable. I went through and checked every single gravity plate, both the actively malfunctioning and not. I found each to be either fine or fixable, thank goodness. Of course, if any had been critical we’d probably have exploded by that point. We were all incredibly lucky that I was biased towards helping Cerri.

Next came the busted water filtration system, which had a bunch of ruptured pipes that needed replacing. Thankfully the unit itself only had a few loose components that required tightening or reseating.

After that, I went on to double and triple check that the reactors were okay, because if they exploded or stopped working it would not be pretty. I also went through and made sure that power delivery to critical systems was working fine, patching cables as I went.

It was a hell of a lot of work, the whole lot taking me almost twelve hours to get through, no rest or anything.

While I worked on the ship, everyone else was going over the data coming in from the ship’s sensors. If there was anyone out there, we’d be a blazing beacon of active scanners that would be hard to miss. Fortunately, or unfortunately, it didn’t seem like there was anyone out there with the capability to see our metaphorical firework display.

I found the rest of the healthy crew in the rec room rather than the bridge. Apparently this was more comfortable. Walking into the room was like wandering onto the set of some crime drama. Data pads lay everywhere and all the large screens in the room had various maps, each with so many labels on them that my brain hurt just glancing in their direction.

Cerri was on a sofa surrounded by various data pads while she tapped away on another. Ed and David were working together on the floor looking through screeds of data and very obviously hating it. Gloria had fallen asleep on one of the other sofas with a similar array of screens around her. Roger was still back in the bridge manning his post there, along with Warren who was working on rerouting systems past damaged components.

I went straight to Cerri, pushed some of the pads out of the way and curled up into a ball next to her without a word, using my tail as a blanket. I was so dead tired I didn’t have any

words to give her. She seemed to understand though, reaching out to brush her fingers through my mussed hair before teasing out any knots. She liked doing that, and I liked it when she did too.

When I woke again, all the tablets and screens were on the floor and Cerri lay next to me, holding me in her embrace while she slept. I was all cuddled in close to her chest, the blanket that covered us all but hiding me under its length.

A sense of profound, soul-deep safety enveloped me, much like my friend's arms as she slept. She was hugging me to her chest, it wasn't a position I'd wriggled into on my own. She wanted to be holding me like this while she slept. That little fact sent shivers of happiness across my skin. I was soooo screwed, my feelings for her seemed to be progressing so quickly I could barely figure out what was happening.

At the same time though... I felt so good, so happy. This level of peace with myself and my life was completely foreign to me. It was like life was worth living now that I was digital and Cerri was in my life.

On a whim, I tilted my head up slightly and placed a gentle kiss on her collarbone, because I desperately needed some way to show the level of affection I felt for her in that moment.

A wave of awe and love smashed into my mind like a rogue planet striking the moon. It obliterated my sense of reality for what felt like minutes as I rode the surge caused by that little kiss. Oh god, what was going to happen to me? How was I going to keep being platonically intimate like this if I all but passed out from her touch?

All I could do was fall further and cuddle closer against her, riding the swell of emotion that gently ebbed and surged inside me. I guess, in the end... so long as our friendship stayed like this, I could be happy, even if... even if I secretly wanted so much more.

Five minutes later, she shifted and groaned, beginning to wake. Panic. What if she didn't mean to cuddle me like this? What if I was wrong and she didn't want to be holding me? I needed to find a way to get out—

"Alia," she whispered softly, her arms filling with conscious purpose as they locked properly around me. "Gosh, this is nice."

Oh. Okay... nevermind, false alarm. She wanted me here.

My reply was a wordless, happy, "Mmmm," because if I opened my mouth I was sure I'd blurt out my feelings for her in a rush. I was so totally unable to cope with everything that was happening within my heart.

“We figured out so much last night while you were sleeping. There’s two different styles of ship here, the attackers and the defenders. It looks like the attackers actually lost the battle here, but as they left they unleashed some sort of super weapon that wiped out the planet and most of what was left of the defenders,” she told me, jumping right into business. Well, actually... business wasn’t the right word, because it was super interesting and she was very excited about it.

“You have no idea how hard it was to let you sleep, Alia,” she giggled, snuggling her face into my hair. “I wanted to wake you up immediately when we got everything figured out.”

“I wouldn’t have minded,” I told her, a broad smile on my face. She had wanted to tell *me* about the cool alien space battle! She wanted to share cool things with me.

“Yes you would,” she laughed, shaking me slightly for emphasis. “You wouldn’t take it out on anyone but you’d feel terrible and I’d be able to see it. You were so exhausted you passed out almost instantly.”

“Okay, fine,” I grumbled. “What does Roger want to do now?”

“Explore!” she replied, grabbing me and wriggling around excitedly. “This is first contact in the game, sort of. Top priority is to explore the hulks and see what we can do to get our ship FTL capable again, then we scan the living heck out of this system for info and explore as much as we can. Once we’re home we’ll be able to sell it all and be super rich! Hell, could probably sell some working tech to other players for real money if we wanted.”

“Oh, that sounds really fun,” I said, now matching her excitement. I wanted to actually see her excitement though, so I wriggled back slightly to look up at her.

Instead of excitement, I found wide, star-filled eyes staring directly into mine. She was so pretty, her soft skin that was so perfect, her horns arching forward and then gently back with a slight twist.

Reaching up with a hesitant hand, I traced the length of one, marveling at how warm it felt. They were like translucent lengths of glass or gemstone, dark swirls of blue coiling throughout their inky blackness. They also glittered with false starlight, much like her eyes, giving the impression that she had whole star clusters trapped within them.

Her lips parted slightly, distracting me from her horns and causing me to glance down at them. They weren’t huge, but they weren’t small either. What they did have was perfection of shape, so artfully curved and full for their size.

My heart was racing as I stared at them, wishing I had the courage to lean forward and



put mine to hers. She was doing the same as me too, exploring my face with her gaze. Was she mapping every inch like I was? Was she memorising every subtle curve of the cheek, every fleck of colour in my eyes as I was hers?

I could feel her breath mingling with mine as we held that precarious eye contact, and I felt my heart begin to hope that just maybe, possibly, she was feeling something too.

“Cerri, Alia, are you— oh shit. Uh, my bad,” Roger said, entering the rec room to find us nose to nose. He tried to turn and leave, but his momentum carried him inward, and with his broken leg in a cast now, he sort of wobbled and spun, crashing to the ground. “Ah, fuck!” he squeaked as his crutch landed on his chest while he grabbed his leg and continued to swear under his breath.

My heart dropped even as I fought to stop my laughter at our captain’s comical entrance. The moment was gone, but at least it was done with humour.

Cerri gently eased herself out of our compromising embrace, although not without her fingers trailing down my waist and hips. We shared a look, one that did nothing to shed any light on what had just happened. Cerri’s thoughts and feelings were opaque to me.

“Let me help you up,” she said with an amused sigh, long, bare legs carrying her the short distance to Roger. She pulled him up with ease, handing him his crutch in the same motion. “We just woke up now, what do you need?”

“Ah, sorry for walking in on that, although you two should really—“ he began, actually blushing a little. Who would have thought that good ol’ put-together Roger had a hard time with PDA?

I interrupted him with a shake of my head, quietly explaining, “We just woke up, we were... ah, um... just talking about, you know, what you all found in the system while I was asleep.”

Cerri added a wordless sound of agreement, hand going to the horn I had been touching. “Yes. Just... that.”

“Right,” he said slowly, staring at everything in the room except our faces. “Well, we’re planning to get the Turshen moving soon so... if you could both be ready...”

“Sure thing Cap, we’ll be there in five minutes,” Cerri nodded, arm dropping to her side.

“Uh, good... well... I’m going to do a U-turn properly this time and head back to the bridge...” he smiled awkwardly. “Catch you both there.”

I strapped myself into my seat as I battled the multitude of different emotions that warred within me. On the one hand, we were about to go and explore freakin' alien spaceships! It was so damned cool. On the other hand... what had been about to happen between Cerri and I? Now she was avoiding looking in my direction, expression pensive and brows furrowed.

*Are you okay?* I asked her via a private message, one routed to her outside of the game.

I watched as her eyes flicked up to look at her HUD as it blinked a notification, then for a split second in my direction. Her response was quick. *Yes. I'm okay.*

Didn't sound like it. Anxiety curled in my gut like a festering worm, taking root now that I had been told such an obvious lie. I must have crossed some boundary, making her uncomfortable in the process. I don't know what it could have been though, there was so much about that moment that had my head spinning.

"Alia?" I gave a squeak and twitched in my chair, looking up to see everyone staring at me. Roger had just spoken, I think?

*Yes? Sorry. Lost in thought,* I told the group while I slowly hid myself behind my tail. I left my eyes free to look back, but nothing more.

"Is the ship ready to fly?" he repeated, seemingly unconcerned with my lapse in attention.

I raised a hand and waggled it in a so-so motion. *She's pretty munted, but I think she'd fly so long as Gloria doesn't put too much strain on her. Be gentle, I guess?*

"I'm always gentle with little Turshie," Gloria purred, stroking the flight stick erotically.

"That was a very sexual statement!" our ship's AI exclaimed with a gasp.

Gosh, Gloria actually got a response out of the Turshen. That was pretty hard to do.

"It was," Roger agreed dryly. "Regardless, if Alia thinks she'll make it, then let's get going."

Gloria took that as her cue, easing our battered ship into flight. My attention snapped to my screens, internal sensors showing readings across a multitude of systems.

Something to focus on, other than Cerri's strange behaviour and my aching heart.

Our ship was flexing in some pretty strange ways, but it looked like she was holding steady as we began to gently pour on the gas. The sub-light engines had actually fared pretty well, being powered down at the time of the aethercrash, so those were fine. Honestly, it was the ship's superstructure that was the biggest problem, apart from the aetherdrive itself.

*Captain, permission to go and start fixing things?* I asked, glancing up from my consoles to look at Roger. *It looks like we're going to take almost a day to get there.*

"Ah, yes... good idea," he replied, not bothering to look back at me. His eyes were glued to the screen that showed our tiny view of the ship graveyard.

That was all the permission I needed. Bolting out the door, I made straight for my room and began to gather all my things. Cerri was going to need a room, and I had a place I could go to sleep instead, somewhere I would honestly feel more comfortable anyway.

My meager belongings gathered, I snuck into the vents and found the little burrow I'd made before... I had killed my physical body. It wasn't a large space, but by the time I was done with it, I actually felt somewhat happy there. It was cozy and absolutely safe from everyone else. No one could find me here, not Cerri with her awkward not-stares or Ed with his foul mood.

I sent Cerri a message telling her I'd vacated the room and then went in search of things to fix. It's not like I was lacking for distractions. I just wish those distractions would wipe away the knot that had formed in my gut.

The next eighteen hours were a blur of replacing wires, pipes, sockets and whatever else could get broken when you shook a ship around like a shitty toddler with a fish in a bag. I got some sleep in my new little cubby and bar sleeping in a certain girl's arms, it was the best sleep I'd had. I really liked small spaces, along with being small enough to fit into them.

Sadly, the aetherdrive looked to be in worse repair than I had initially realised, with several important components completely melted. When I searched the ship's manifest for replacements, I found nothing. The cost of those replacements appeared to be far above what we could afford, so I guess that was why we didn't have any.

I did get a large portion of the smaller jobs done though, which had me feeling pretty satisfied with myself. I was a proper mechanic now! Wonder what my parents would think of that. Probably not a lot that was nice, that's for sure. Fixing things was for people who couldn't afford to replace the whole item, or so they said.

“Alia, time to come back to the bridge, we’re almost there,” Roger told me as I finished tightening a bolt that had come loose.

*Omigod*, I sent back, placing my tools back into my tool harness. My hips might be wide in the context of my body, but in raw width, there wasn’t enough to fit a toolbelt. So, I had a tool harness instead!

Walking back up through the ship, I felt my hyperfocus begin to slip away, replaced by anxiety once more. I needed Cerri... she was already one of the best friends I’d ever had. I couldn’t lose her.

Thankfully, I had something else to focus on when I stepped back onto the bridge. Holy. Shit.

Space drifted by on all sides out the massive windows of the bridge, stars shining bright against the black. Before us was a planet, growing larger by the second, along with its three rings. The world was grey, lifeless even when compared to a world like Mars. There were no oceans, no clouds of dust drifting across the surface far below. Nothing but a mottled grey sphere.

It was fascinating though, as we got closer, you could see the marks of advanced civilisation on the planet, great furrows dug into the surface there, or a curve of mountain that was far too geometrically perfect.

“The planet... it’s devoid of... well, literally anything,” Cerri murmured into the quiet bridge. “It’s wiped clean.”

“Jesus, what kind of weapon *does* that?” Warren asked, staring with wide eyes at the main display where our science officer had just brought up an image of the surface.

Gesturing to it, she explained, “I’m pretty sure that was a city.”

My eyes widened as I realised she was right. There were no buildings or anything, but the shape of the terrain, it had clearly been carved and worked. I could see where the foundations of great spires used to be, and long stretches of flat, snaking earth that appeared to have once been roads.

“Bloody hell,” David said with a shake of his head. “Here I was thinking what we have now out in the real Earth was bad.”

That was when we got close enough for the rings to come into proper view. I let out a gasp, eyes boggling at the sheer scale of what I was seeing.

One ring was lopsided, a massive chunk of rock at the thick side's center, a curve on one side betraying what it used to be, a piece of the world's ancient moon. The whole fucking moon had been shattered in the conflict.

The other two rings were sort of one, merging in places but distinct in others. Battle lines. A vast graveyard of ships and orbital stations, congregated into a ring around the dead world. Sheared metal glittered in the dark of space, aged paint displaying alien symbols on armoured plates. All of it spun lazily around the planet, like some sort of strange ritualistic dance.

It was also evident that most of the debris hadn't made it into the ring either, their death throes not conducive to a stable orbit, instead plunging them down to impact the surface or off into the vastness of space. The hulks of those ships were gone, same as the city had been, but the marks of their impact were not.

Great furrows and craters littered the surface in a buckshot pattern over one half. Apparently the majority of the battle had happened in orbit above that area.

"You're saying there's more like this across the system?" Roger asked, awed into relative quiet.

"Two other worlds have graveyards like this, plus a few clusters out in the void," Cerri said reverentially. "This is the largest though."

"Jesus," he replied, leaning back heavily in his chair.

"Ain't no god nor prophet here boss," Gloria chuckled darkly. "Their type tend to look the other way when folks get to genociding each other."

"Alright, well..." our captain began, before trailing off again. He took a long breath, eyes searching the circular cloud of twisted metal. "Find me one that looks intact, not too big though."

"What's the plan, once we find one?" Cerri asked, already plugging in a set of parameters for her scanners to search with.

"Fix it, hopefully," Roger replied, a spark of excitement reigniting within his eyes as he turned to make eye contact with everyone. "Providing we're all up to the challenge."

I think my brain exploded in that instant, goosebumps rippling across my skin. I had no fucking idea if I could do that, but I sure as hell wanted to try.

Automatically, I turned to Cerri, awkwardness forgotten in the moment of pure adventure. We were going to try and commandeer an alien spaceship! She was staring back at me, a wide grin shining back like a ray of sunshine straight into my soul.

A surge of confidence from no-where hit me, and I said, "I can fix anything that *you* figure out. Think you can do that?"

Her eyes narrowed, smile turning to smirk. "I think I'll be fine."

"Good, just making sure you don't lose your nerve," I shot back. Both our eyes widened at the double meaning that my dumbass brain had just infused into my words.

"Just make sure you don't rush anything," she replied, slightly more sombrely. "I'd rather not blow up."

About eighty percent of the debris field was twisted scrap, with most of that being chunks of metal no larger than my tiny fist. The last twenty or so percent were the ruined hulks of those ships that hadn't quite survived the battle but were still recognisable as actual starships. There was actually so much random space trash floating around that we had to shove as much free power as we could get into our shields. Damned place was a scattershot minefield.

"What about that one?" Warren asked, highlighting a particular spinning hulk so the rest of us could see.

I zoomed in on it using my own screen and scanned the ship for visible damage I couldn't fix. The alien ships were interesting, especially because it seemed like one side of the conflict had similar needs to humans.

When dealing with an alien race, there were a few basic assumptions you could apply in order to understand them. For example, the defending side appeared to have been a similar size to the average human if the size of the rooms and hallways on the ships were anything to go by.

The attacking race on the other hand... they were much larger, and so were their ships. Their ships were also this strange combination of sleek and boxy, with little regard for aerodynamics or aesthetics. They were like marginally more sophisticated borg cubes that had been hit aggressively by a smoothing tool.

The defenders on the other hand, they had ships that almost looked like they were designed and built by human hands.

Their smaller ships had made concessions for atmospheric flight, while the larger ones were more blocky and brutalist. I had a feeling that if we ever found living members of their species, we might be able to get along.

Unfortunately for us, the ship that Warren had pointed out was both an attacking ship and had a bend that didn't look like it was meant to be there. As our path took us further, it also revealed that the other side had a twisted metal rent halfway down its right hand side. I mean, the ship was massive too, so that wouldn't have worked anyway.

"Nevermind," Warren snorted, leaning back into his chair. He looked a little weary, we'd been at this for hours after all.

"Wait!" Cerri blurted, taking over the main display to zoom in. "That ship is bigger than you thought, because—"

"—There's another ship wedged into the side of it," I said, finishing her sentence with an excited gasp. It was about four times as large as our current ship, which put it in the small frigate weight class, if we went by human metrics. That made it about the size of an arrowhead embedded in the side of a small deer. Warren had eyes bigger than his wrench for sure.

Roger, looking up at the main screen, made a rather interesting note, "Is it just me, or does that little bugger look intact? How the fuck *is* it intact?"

"They had to have rammed the larger ship!" Gloria said, bouncing excitedly in her pilot's seat. "Oh that is so badass!"

"Alia?" Cerri asked, turning to me eagerly.

*Right, let me look at the scans and see. Seems intact from here but... that impact can't have been pretty,* I nodded, just as keen to take a look at the ship as everyone else. It was a mean looking thing too, sleek and deadly, a design that spoke of atmospheric flight capabilities.

When I had the scans up on one of my screens, I first thought it had to be a rendering of what the ship *should* look like, until I saw the small rents in the armour. The longer I investigated it, the more confused I became. The thing was all but intact, with the forward attitude thrusters, turrets and everything else having been sheared off by the impact while the actual structure and critical systems seemed fine. I mean, as far as I could tell while looking at an alien spacecraft.

*It looks intact...* I told them via text chat, pulling a bemused expression. As I sent the message, my eyes had continued to scan the sensor feed and my subconscious picked up on something. *Hold on*, I began again, typing as I thought. *Did they engineer the superstructure of their ship to accommodate ramming? Holy shit they did! That smaller ship was designed with ramming in mind!*

“So you’re saying that we should take a closer look?” Roger asked with a big grin.

I nodded, already taking that closer look on my screen. I could see their power distribution network easily enough, but their reactor was odd, definitely not like any of the human designs I had seen. There seemed to also be a lot more crew quarters than a ship of this size should need, along with what looked to be a small room dedicated to being a sort of decorative garden? Very strange.

“Take us in closer Gloria, keep an eye out for any automated defences that might still be running,” Roger ordered.

“There’s nothing whatsoever on the electro-magnetic side, both hulks are completely dead,” Cerri informed us, hard at work.

Gloria was gentle with the Turshen as she eased us closer. It was odd, looking out at the two ships, carcasses locked in their ancient, lethal embrace. What had led to these two races fighting such a brutal war? It had very obviously been a war of annihilation, of genocide on a galactic scale, where one side came out alive and the other passed into history.

Now that I thought about it, it reminded me of the war with the American Republic. There were scenes like this one all across places like California and New York, where the massive warmachines of that conflict still lay.

“Yup, Cerri is right, the hulk is dead, nothing popping up,” Gloria agreed as we drifted alongside the larger vessel. “I can see something that looks like an airlock, lining ours up with it so Warren can do his thing.”

“Gotcha, highlighting the airlock and prepping to dock,” Warren said with calm professionalism, tapping away on his screens.

There was a tense moment as sidled up and slowed to a stop with our airlock about twenty meters opposite the dead ship’s one. A chime sounded as the emergency airlock tube took Warren’s input and fired, blasting across to attach itself with both magnets and adhesive. Just as well it had the adhesive, because the magnets came up negative. I guess their outer armour wasn’t made of ferrous metal.



“No atmosphere on the other side, so we can’t pressurise until that’s fixed, but nobody will be getting lost in space heading over,” our systems tech said.

Roger made a grunt of approval, “Good. Send some drones over to scope the place out, I don’t want anyone going over there until we know it’s safe.”

“You mean we’re not going to all go charging over there without any planning?” Gloria asked with shocked sarcasm. “But what about the space abomination over there? Poor little guy is probably *very* hungry.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll feed you to it later,” Cerri sniped, not even bothering to lift her gaze from her screens as she spoke.

Gloria just laughed and sent the science demon a wink. That got a rise out of Cerri, who sent an oddly pissed-off glare back to the pilot. Dang, Cerri definitely woke up on the wrong side of the sofa today.

With a sigh, I realised I should probably do something about her grumping, even if it scared the piss out of me to confront her. I just... the crew needed her to be on the top of her game here and I needed her to be my friend. I needed her to be solid in that friendship, none of this uncertainty that was clawing at my heart.

“I need to log out,” I told the room quietly. “Sorry, I won’t be gone longer than a minute.”

I didn’t wait for their response, I simply sent the mental command to exit the game. Cerri’s alarmed, confused expression was the last thing I saw. Good, maybe she’d follow me on her own.

Landing in my rather default personal reality, I cranked the time dilation way up and slumped into a nearby sofa. The view out the window was so depressingly like those I had seen so often in my old life that I decided right there that I was going to change it.

I wanted some cozy... something that enhanced the feeling of safety within my little apartment.

Pulling my feet up, I sat and contemplated my choices. A memory surfaced, one from my childhood. My parents had taken me to a conference being held in a ski resort when a blizzard had rolled over.

It had been sudden, one moment the sky was bright and clear, the next, wind battered at the windows and dark clouds rolled over. Then the lightning began, smashing down from the sky like an erratic drumbeat. Thundersnow, they’d called it, and all the while we sat safe inside the lodge, staring out as furious nature failed to reach us.

Activating the environment editor, I rearranged the scene in an instant to match, although with far more coziness as far as the apartment went. Perched on a snowy ridgetop, I created it out of wood, stone and glass. Thick, soft carpet rolled out around me while a fireplace assembled itself in the corner.

I kept the place small, a kitchen, living room, bathroom, and bedroom. The living room sported massive, luxurious cushions and big puffy throw pillows with soft fluffy tassels.

Outside, my storm began to roll in, visibility dimming even as the snow was lit from within by the flash of lightning.

The place needed decorating, but for now... it would serve. Plus... with how intuitively I could manipulate my surroundings, it would just take some thought and a little imagination.

All I had to do now was wait for Cerri to message me. I figured I'd give her about fifteen objective-time seconds, which would end up being about half an hour in subjective-time at my current time dilation settings.

I was a little surprised when I had waited barely eight minutes before the connection request came in from her.

Accepting it, I watched as she flickered into existence in front of the floor to ceiling windows. She froze for half a second as the boom of thunder inadvertently heralded her arrival, and I let out the tiniest giggle of amusement at the image.

Hearing me, she turned to look at me, searching my face with worry, then suspicion. "Why did you log out?"

"Because I wanted to talk to you," I explained truthfully. "Come sit. It doesn't have to be right next to me, but it's weird to have a conversation while one of us is standing there awkwardly."

She hesitated, but only for a moment before she strode over and eased herself into the opposite end of my sofa. "Okay... what are we talking about?"

"You seem on edge, upset..." I began quietly, heart beginning to hammer unhelpfully in my chest. "I um... this morning... I..."

My throat closed up, anxiety overcoming my will to talk as easily as an avalanche takes a deer. I cursed silently in my head and closed my eyes, battling the blockage. It was for nothing though, I was a toddler hammering away at a locked door.

Silently, I sent her the continuation of my little speech, *You've been off, snappy and weird. I wanted to talk, to ask what's wrong... I don't know. Maybe this was all a stupid idea.*

I heard her sigh and shift slightly on the couch. "You're right. I have my reasons and... well, I'm sorry, but I don't really want to talk about it."

*No problem, but I also need you to be...* I gulped, my throat clearing slightly. "I need you to be my friend. Please don't be weird about our friendship. I gave up my whole damned physical existence on your suggestion and if I don't have you there by my side to stabilize me..."

She was quiet for a while, then a minute, then two. I kept my eyes closed, fighting the sudden onset of panic fuelled tears and my slowly aching, dying heart. God, I was falling so hard for her. The desperation with which I yearned to be held by her, it was almost physical.

"Shit," she finally muttered, her weight leaving the sofa.

It returned next to me, and the yearning in my soul turned to reality. Her arms were tight around me, pulling me sideways against her chest.

I let out a whimper and turned into the embrace, throwing my arms around her neck to make sure she didn't get away. My tears turned to relief and a sense of finally reaching safety, as if I'd just stumbled in here after climbing the mountain in that storm outside.

I heard Cerri's voice as much through her chest as the air when she spoke, "Alia... I'm sorry. I'm just not... I'm not as put together as I seem on the surface. My formation was... traumatic, and I haven't been treated well since I awakened. Not by those who worked where I formed, but... some I met since."

My thoughts instantly jumped to the glare that she had given Gloria, but I didn't say anything. I had no idea what to say really. Had I leaned on her too hard, putting too much of my own internal chaos onto her?

"You're not them though, and I need to remember that," she sighed again, more happily this time. "I cherish our friendship, Alia. It's the single most important thing in the universe to me right now. I mean that."

"Me too," I mumbled, half drunk with the bliss that was physical contact with her.

"I guess, what I'm trying to say, is that whatever happens, I'm not going to throw away our friendship over anything, least of all a shitty mood," she explained, nestling her fingers in my hair in that way that I loved.

True to form, my dumbass brain decided to test that little promise. "Even if we have a weird sexually charged staring contest after we wake up in each other's arms?"

Her bark of surprised laughter lit my heart alight. "Alright... look. I am... you're very pretty. I have no intention of actually uh... you know. That. I am very much not interested in doing *any* of that stuff... not that I don't... I mean, you're so lovely and if I were... oh fuck I am making this so weird."

She. Was. So. Fucking. Cute. How was she this cute? How was she so damned cute while looking like a flipping sex goddess?

Giggling, I hugged her tighter and said, "It's okay, I very much enjoy our friendship as it is. I was just teasing." I left out the part where I very much wanted more than just friendship, but that didn't mean that it wasn't the truth.

"Oh," she said, followed by a little giggle of her own. "Okay... that's good. I like this too. I um... I do have a question though..."

"Yes?" I asked, pushing back from her so I could see her still bright red face.

She nodded at the window, expression so earnest and innocent that I struggled not to kiss her right there. "What on earth is that outside the window?"

I blinked, train of thought grinding so horribly I swear she should have been able to hear the metal on metal screeching. "It's a blizzard?"

"Oh, really?" she exclaimed excitedly, pushing up off the couch to go stand in front of the window. "Wow, so that's snow!"

Oh. My. God. Cuteness, everywhere. She'd never seen a freaking blizzard! Didn't even have enough context to recognize one! I think that moment was the tipping point for my feelings, the point where I was completely and utterly fucked.

Even as my heart melted, I stood up and joined her at the window, twining our tails together in the process. "It's a replica of one I saw as a kid. I loved the way that nature was violently tearing itself apart outside but it couldn't get to me inside. Made me feel safe and cozy."

"The window is vibrating from the wind," she said, hand to the glass. "And cold from the temperature. That's amazing, wow. I envy you, seeing real nature first hand, base, dirty, and visceral reality."

"One day we can go out with synthetic bodies, I can take you to the mountains," I told her, the promise echoing in my heart like a second beat.

Her smile as she looked down at me was so innocently radiant. "I would love that."

"It's a plan," I replied, stealing her arm to hug to my chest.

She extracted it immediately, but placed it around my shoulders. We stood there for a long time, watching the storm outside thrash away on my imaginary mountainside in happy silence.

It was a beautiful moment, really, and I saved it away, placing it on a shelf in my mind along with my few other precious memories. Maybe my feelings would fade again in time too... or maybe they would surge in perpetuity like the storm outside. I was happy, either way. I could have stayed there for weeks.

Or, until Cerri twitched and jumped, letting out a squeak of surprise. She gave me an embarrassed glance. "Uh... the crew is asking where we are. We kinda left during an important moment with like zero explanation."

"Alright... oh wow, we've been staring out that window for way longer than I realized," I winced, seeing the time. "See you back in game."

Before I logged back in though, a whim struck me and I stretched up onto my tiptoes. Her eyes widened as our faces drew close, lips parting slightly in surprise. I wasn't going for those though, and instead I placed a little peck on her smooth cheek.

"Thanks for being wonderful," I whispered, and logged in.

"Took your time," Warren commented as we reappeared in our chairs, first me and then Cerri a second later. He paused as she materialised, face flushing fast when she met my cheeky smile. "You okay Cerri?"

"Yup. Yes. Absolutely," she blurted quickly, pretending to mess with one of her screens. "What's going on? Where did everyone go?"

"The drones didn't find anything scary, so everyone's gone to suit up," he explained,

pointing to the drone feeds that were still up on the main display.

Straight away my subconscious picked something up, something was off about the images on screen. Try as I might though, I couldn't figure it out. What was I not recognising?

"Cerri?" I asked quietly, getting out of my seat to get a closer look at the screen. "Do you see anything wrong with that picture? With all of the drone feeds?"

"No..." she replied, staring at the same screen now. "Not that I can tell at a glance."

"I'm picking up on something but I don't know what it is," I said slowly, trying to get my brain to just *work*.

The interior of the ancient ship was pretty damned familiar, if a little smoother in its construction. There were still visible panels on the walls where I assumed a mechanic could get access to things, as well as light fittings on the ceiling and all that. It actually reminded me of the interior of a ship from one of the old star trek films, all pretty and white and clinical. Quite a contrast to the carbon-black exterior.

Well, except that it was lit by the lights on our small drones and there was the detritus of battle everywhere. Burn marks and projectile holes littered the white panels while discarded objects lay scattered across the camera feeds, hanging in zero gravity like a single frame captured of a whirlwind.

"Roger, David, and Ed are already getting suited up," Warren said anxiously. "Probably best to warn them that your intuition is picking something up."

"No Gloria?" Cerri asked.

Warren shook his head. "Nah, she went to get a little sleep. Well, that and chat with the Turshen."

"Interesting," she murmured, not looking entirely happy about that for some reason.

"I'll go with them into the ship," I said after a moment's thought, turning to leave the bridge.

Cerri caught my arm, worry all over her face. "No, you're small and squishy. I don't want you getting hurt!"

Her earnest expression sent a little wave of happiness bouncing around my body. She

cared about me getting hurt! Still, she was obviously not thinking properly, because I wasn't going to be very small or squishy when I went in there.

"I'll be inside Bundit," I told her soothingly, pulling her hand off my arm and clasping it. "I'll be the safest of everyone going in there."

"No offence to them, but you're a lot more important to me," she said quietly, sending my heart into another erratic little fit. If she could stop talking like we were lovers for like *two freaking seconds*, that would make this whole friend thing so much easier.

I melted under her worried gaze, and sighed, "Okay, I'll stay."

"No, no," she shook her head, eyes widening. "You can go, I guess. Just... be careful, please?"

"I will," I smiled, squeezing her hand. "And... this *is* a game Cerri, remember that."

"I know, but I enjoy playing it with you," she pouted, taking her hand back from my grip. "Fine, off you go. Don't make me kill myself so I respawn with you though."

With a sly little smile, I left the room. "Okay, I'll try."

"Don't smile like that!" she called after me, struggling with a rising giggle. "That's the smile of a little fox who is going to get herself into trouble!"

My smile turned heartfelt as I dashed down towards where I'd left Bundit in the machine shop. Cerri was happy again, and she'd hugged me and... gosh. It was nice.

Honestly, based on what little I knew of romance from TV shows and the like, that could have turned into a months long rift in our friendship. I guess that was how reality differed from stories, people actually talk with each other. Of course... in a story, I'd end up with her instead of friend-zoned.

Bundit was waiting dutifully in the machine shop, already open and ready to accept me. Hopping inside, I ran through all the systems checks, mostly as a force of habit rather than any real need. I couldn't help but take constant care of the makeshift mech, it was my baby.

With Bundit in working order, I piloted her out and into the main cargo hold, where the gang was just opening the airlock.

"Hey, I'm coming too!" I called, causing them all to turn and stare. "Want to make sure

you don't get hurt."

"Got Jason's weapon attachment he made with you?" Roger asked, glancing down at my bot's arms.

"Yeah, hidden away in the right arm," I said, nodding in the pilot's seat, only to realise he couldn't see it. I liked being in Bundit, the separation from everyone made talking so much easier. "I also just have a weird feeling about that ship, so I wanted to come help."

"What sort of weird feeling?" our captain asked, attention firmly on me now.

"Not sure, I think my subconscious has picked up on something and my waking mind hasn't caught up yet," I replied, shrugging Bundit's shoulders.

Roger gave a slow, thoughtful nod. "Thank you, stay alert everyone. Let's get moving."

Something else clicked in my head, and I reached out to stop him with a mechanical hand. "Hold on, isn't your leg broken?"

He laughed, giving a nod. "It is, but the suit is taking care of that. Power armour is good like that."

Now that I looked at them, I was surprised to see that yeah, they were wearing powered space suits. It wasn't full on power armour though, like he'd said. There wasn't nearly enough metal plates and actual armour, it was more like a powered exoskeleton had been inserted into your standard soft space suit.

"Still looks very soft to me," I mused, giving them all a once over. "Let me go first, I think. If we get shot at, I can crouch and be some cover for you all."

He opened his mouth to object, David and Ed also frowning at the suggestion. "I don't know..." All three guys had pretty big 'protect the females' instincts, which was both sweet and very annoying.

"Come on," I groaned, throwing my mech arms up in the air. "Let the girl in the armoured mech go first, *please?*"

David was the one to speak up in my favour, saying, "She has a point. That thing looks like it can take a hit."

"Fine, fine," Roger agreed reluctantly. "We kind of need her alive though."



Oh. Riiiiight. Yeah, I was kind of essential to getting back to civilisation, huh? No one else here knew how to fix a ship after all.

Glancing at Ed to see what he thought, I found him staring at my chassis impassively. Guess he was still upset with me. I let out a long sigh, careful to mute my mic before I did so. God, why couldn't he just be chill? Did he see me like my mech now? A Robot?

Regardless of Ed's current feelings about me, he dutifully got in the airlock with the rest of us and we prepared to head over.

The airlock cycled to the soundtrack of silent anticipation, each of us more than excited to get our hands dirty exploring an alien hulk. When the doors slid open, I activated Bundit's thrusters and gently pushed off into the long docking umbilical. The others used the metallic floor of the tube, but I was in a highly mobile and compact mech, so why bother with the slow lumber that walking with magnetic boots required?

There was one thing I wished I had that I lacked, and that was a window. No matter how good the camera and screen setup was, nothing beat staring out into the endless night of space with your own eyes.

Approaching the ship, I was struck by just how massive it was. Sometimes you don't really get to understand the scale of a thing until you're right next to it, and let me tell you, when I gently drifted to a stop against the alien airlock, that scale hit me like a truck. God it was massive.

The others came up behind with weapons at the ready, Roger signaling me to pry the door open. The door and hull plating of the ship appeared to be made of some sort of strange metal and ceramic composite, not unlike Bundit's armour actually, so I was curious to get a look at it later. For now though, I looked for a way to get it open.

It was clear that the primary mechanism for opening the door had been electronic, and now I just had to find the manual lock for it. The interesting part would be if they didn't have one, or if it was hard to access, implying that their electrical systems were robust enough not to need a manual override.

A quick search of the recessed doorway revealed a panel that could be popped open, along with a socket and separate crank that could be inserted into it to open the door. I grinned at the mechanism and ignored the crank that lay strapped in its cradle, clamping Bundit's hand over the whole thing. Engaging the motor that controlled my mech's 360 degree wrist, I pumped power into it and watched.

My eyebrows rose as my poor Bundit strained for a moment, but they fell into a smug smirk when it began to turn. Damn though, looked like the door hadn't been lubed in a

long time, given the torque that had to be applied to get the mechanisms working. Makes sense, *obviously*, given how old this thing was. Still, death was no excuse for sloppy maintenance!

Bundit's engines were more than enough to get the job done, and after a minute the door was open and we were ready to enter.

"Alright, I was wrong. Definitely glad we have you along," Roger commented, nodding in respect. "Good job, Alia."

The interior of the airlock was dark, and I had to repeat the door opening process with the second door. The style of the doors was rather helpful for getting bundit around, circles with flat bottoms. Unlike me. My bottom was faaaar from flat and I *loved* it.

Bundit's headlight cut through the darkness inside the ship to show us a staging room for the airlock. Lockers and space suits lined the walls of the room, or at least, those that weren't just drifting aimlessly in the gloom. It looked like the crew had come through here quickly, as if they'd abandoned ship or something.

Their suits were fascinating, large but not out of the realm of what a human would potentially wear. Size wasn't the only similarity either, they were bipedal as well, with two arms to boot. Spines looked a little more curved than ours were though, and there was a tail sleeve sticking out where you'd expect it to be, a socket on the end allowing for tools to be attached.

"Looks like our ancient friends used to look a lot like us," Cerri commented through a private voice channel.

"I'm broadcasting?" I squeaked, twitching and sending my mech's arms spinning.

"No, Roger is," she replied with a quiet, amused chuckle. Oh god. Why did that little laugh sound so hot? A tingling, popping sensation rippled down my spine and into my toes, causing me to freeze neurocontrol of Bundit for a second while I collected myself.

Once my toes had stopped wiggling, I activated my own camera feed and sent it through to her, so that at least I'd know what she was looking at. "Don't surprise me again, please," I mumbled bashfully. "I control Bundit partially with my mind."

“Oh, I didn’t realise,” she replied, sounding genuinely surprised. “That’s impressive.”

“I seem to have a knack for it,” I said offhandedly, already scanning my surroundings to make sure it was clear of baddies.

She was silent for a few moments, and I began to wonder if she’d let the conversation drop. Just when I was beginning to move through and into the corridor beyond, she spoke again, “It’s fascinating, really. You’ve taken to it better than many SAL.”

“It just seems really intuitive to me,” I mused, scanning my headlights over the soft white walls of the ship’s interior. Everything was covered in dust, it coated the walls, ceiling and even the random junk that floated free without gravity.

What I’d said was true though, digital space just felt natural to me, as easy as breathing or walking. I had a feeling that the shift from or to a purely digital state would be far more jarring than what I had experienced thus far. I’d had a body the whole time I was in VR after all, and I hadn’t dared shed it for a moment.

“Really?” she murmured in reply, clearly lost in thought. “Possibly you have an advantage because you are used to—“

Her sentence was cut by Warren shouting over the common channel, “I’ve got movement on sensors, a whole lot of it.”

“What the fuck, how?” Roger exclaimed as we backed into the airlock staging room again, weapons drawn.

Silence, except for the gentle patter of fingers on touch screens. “No idea,” Warren blurted urgently. “Our drones are going down fast, not getting any clean images.”

“Not getting any readings other than small heat signatures and movement,” Cerri said, working the problem now too. “If I had to guess, I’d say whatever is coming isn’t biological.”

“Oh.” I had seen enough science fiction to know where that might lead.

Roger was quick to take control of the situation, issuing orders to the group. “Alia, block the center of the door, everyone else, get yourselves positioned to shoot past her.”

I did as he asked, putting Bundit right in the middle of the door. I couldn’t block the whole thing though. The aliens who’d once built this ship were taller than us, so their doors were too, meaning that the boys could still get in beside me easily.

Our drones were all gone now, their feeds hissing static. Poor little friends. I'd worked hard on them!

"They should be on you in ten seconds, get ready!" Warren called, interrupting my mourning of the drones.

*Things* poured around the corner at the opposite end of the hallway, fast and uncoordinated, like a horde of zombies. The guys opened up with their weapons before we got a good look at them, but there were two things that stuck in my mind in those first few moments. They were made of machine *and* flesh.

The gun on Bundit's right arm roared to life, the sound of a waterfall of steel being carried through the arm and into the pressurised cockpit, my teeth vibrating with the intensity. The weapon was your typical handheld automatic railgun, except it could never have operated in this manner. Jason and I had replaced most of the wiring with far more robust stuff, removing the battery pack in the process. Instead, it hooked directly into Bundit's miniature fusion reactor for power. The modifications turned a fairly run of the mill assault rifle into a mech-mounted hose of death.

The strange machine-flesh creatures rushing us were torn to shreds, even the metal portions of their bodies unable to hold out against the combined hail of bullets that flew down that corridor. It was carnage, pure and simple, which didn't at all help with figuring out what the things were meant to look like when they weren't full of holes.

A warning blared, red and loud through Bundit's speakers, and I had just enough time to push the guys back behind the bulkhead before I was hit with *something*. I flew back, right out the airlock and back into space.

What the fuck? "Turshie, did you get a scan of those things, plus what just hit me?" I asked quickly, already working on getting my wild spin under control.

An image popped up on my main display, showing one of the creatures that had just attacked us. About five feet tall when fully upright, they were indeed some sort of hybrid between organic life and machine. Core structural components were all metal, while anything that was meant to move or provide force was made of flesh. Organic hydraulics and pistons pulsed with an alien, sickening heartbeat.

What made them truly strange was the way that each was all but identical, designed to fold themselves up into a cube about a foot and a half to a side. They would then unfold into a bipedal humanoid shape, all right angles and edges, not a metal curve in sight.

"It appears that there is a larger one in there, and it shot you with an unidentified kinetic weapon," Turshie told me while I burned hard to get back to the airlock. "I would suggest

that you shoot that one first.”

“No,” I grinned, retracting the gun into its protective housing. The thing about using a mind-machine interface to pilot a mech, is that you can throw some pretty crazy ideas at the machine part and it will do the calculations to make them work.

I blasted back into the airlock just as the creatures were about to overwhelm the guys, then past them and into the corridor. My hands were already outstretched when I reached the larger metal droid thing, and I proceeded to carry it all the way through it’s friends and into the bulkhead at the end of the hallway.

It writhed under my grip, an eerie screeching making its way through the intimate contact to savage my big, sensitive ears. A scream of pain and I pulled back, mental command rushing down the arm to activate the railgun. I vaguely heard the worried voices of Cerri and the others, but I ignored it all and rammed my fist into the guts of the pinned alien horror. One hundred and twenty rounds per second tore through the internal workings of the awful thing, causing its scream of pain to switch to a gurgling dirge of death.

The work wasn’t done though, there were still so many more of those things to eradicate.

Bundit’s left forearm opened on my command and a canister floated free, while another was ejected from its hull. I grabbed both even as the horrors tried to pry at panels and plates, swarming and chittering like a hoard of enraged bugs.

A small flame rippled free from a nozzle on the left arm, and I slammed the two canisters together, shattering them.

The explosion shook my little mech, bouncing me back into the relatively soft cushion of my dead adversary. In the exact moment of detonation, Bundit automatically pulled all limbs in, turning itself into a sphere of armour in order to protect me while our enemies burned outside.

It was over in an instant, the fire exhausting its supply of oxygen in a brief, bright moment.

Silence reigned, no ear rending screeches or the sound of futile metal limbs trying to pry at me. Safe in my Bundit ball, enemies cremated outside... or so I thought. I heard movement at the same time as my screens flickered back to life, showing many of the fucking bastards getting back up again!

“No you don’t!” I growled, although with my tiny voice it sounded less than threatening.

Bundit was definitely threatening though, and I got back to work with both hands grasping and crushing, throwing and smashing. I turned that stupid, dumb, annoying hallway into

an alien cyborg blender.

It didn't take long for their numbers to thin out, until there was only one left. "Die!" I cried, throwing the little bugger past the guys and out into the void.

Somehow, I was sweating and panting, gasping for breath as real silence filled our comms channels, the battle actually over.

Roger coughed, amusement clear in his voice when he broke the quiet, "Well, that's a surprise. Alia the berserker."

"Didn't see that coming, that's for sure," David laughed alongside our captain. "Good job though, little Alia."

"I feel like we need to get her more pointy, smashy, bashy things to attach to her mech," Cerri mused warmly. "If only to make sure she survives the next wild boarding action." My heart did a little flip at her words, I could sense her eyes sparkling with a teasing light, even if I couldn't see it.

To everyone's surprise, Jason spoke over the line, voice gruff and weak, "I am so ready to put all sorts of crazy weapons on that thing. That was *so fucking cool!*"

Standing there in the middle of the carnage, I heard my crew's banter, congratulations and teasing... and felt fire lick its way over my cheeks. Prompted by my mental link, Bundit's gore-soaked hands came up to cover the central sensor unit at the same time that my hands covered my face.

"*Stoooooop,*" I whined as my embarrassment overwhelmed me.

After making sure that the derelict was free of any more creepy bionic zombies, we began to research it, seeking to understand how it worked. A week had passed since then, and all we'd done was identify the blindingly obvious.

The Turshen was nothing more than a glorified can of air now. Nothing worked except one of the two reactors, the gravity, and life support. Oh and the uh, computers, obviously.

Letting the tablet in my hands fall into my lap, I rubbed at my eyes and let out a small, squeaking groan of annoyance. I'd been staring blankly at the stupid thing for some indeterminate amount of time, making zero progress. Just like yesterday... and the day before that, and the day before that.

Eyes now thoroughly squished into their sockets, I stared around the rec room. Spots of light danced in my vision from my assault on my retinas, but that did nothing to hide the mess.

We had started out in Cerri's lab, sitting in like, chairs and shit. As the days went by and we made little to no progress, we'd migrated up to the rec room. If we were going to suck at this, we would at least do it in comfort. Except that the floor wasn't actually that comfortable. Details though, details.

Warren, off to the side, let out a loud snore from his position on one of the couches, startling the horned girl beside me from her researching trance.

"What time is it?" she asked, looking at me like a startled owl.

My lips quirked into a teasing smile. "Does it matter? I feel like at this point we can sort of drop the fiction of days and nights. Hell, why stop there? What even *are* hours?"

She let out a tired little laugh and rolled her eyes. "Alia, please. Research and discovery take patience."

"Since I'm like, digital and stuff now, that means that my default body is like... my real one," I said shuffling around on the carpet to face her properly. "Which means that I am a real fox girl and I don't know what the word patience means," I explained, wiggling my long fluffy ears for emphasis.

This time, her laugh had a lot more energy in it. The look she gave me afterwards was so full of enigmatic depth that my smile faded slightly. It was one of those looks that someone gives you when they have a million different things they want to say, but they're choosing not to say any of them.

"That's not how it works, little fox," she murmured finally, glancing away and running a hand through her silky midnight hair. Oh gosh, the way she said *little fox*...

She was so gorgeous too. I swear she must have spent like, days and days on her avatar. Every little wave and messy curl to her hair was pleasant to the eye. Hell, even the distribution of the stars across her hair and horns was the type of pseudo-random distribution that spoke of careful consideration.

“Plus,” she added, turning her star-filled eyes on me again, “If that *was* how it worked, I think I would be a considerably more outgoing and ah... *angry* person. This avatar is modelled after a succubus after all.”

“Yeah, true...” I smiled, before the wider implications of that set in. “Wait, are you modelled after the ones that like... need... uh, you know. Um.”

“What?” she asked, clearly not following my train of thought. Which was weird because like, that’s what succubi did. They fucked people... or something.

I stared at her, hoping and praying that she would get what I was saying without me having to say it. She didn’t and in my embarrassment I was forced to DM her about it instead. *You know... succubi need to fuck to sustain their magic. So do you need to fuck to sustain yourself?*

Her mouth fell open and her eyes blew wide. “W-what? No! I don’t...” she trailed off, furiously typing on a virtual keyboard she summoned out of thin air. Her face went redder and redder as her eyes darted across a screen I couldn’t see.

Finally, she turned and screamed at the top of her lungs at the open rec room door. “I’m going to fucking kill you *Gloria!*”

Warren opened an eye off to the side, stared uncomprehendingly at the two of us, then fell right back asleep. As for the door, it sprouted a Gloria, who poked her head through inquisitively.

“What did I do this time?” she asked innocently.

“Told me that succubi were just a type of demon like any other!” Cerri exclaimed, earning a grumble from Warren as he rolled over and covered his ears with a pillow.

Gloria stared for several long moments, then fell to her knees, laughter bubbling out of her in an exuberant stream. “Oh my god, did you only *just* figure out that they are fuckmonsters?”

“Yes,” Cerri mumbled, going even more red than she had been.

“Wow,” our pilot said, pressing her forehead to the doorway as she struggled with her overflowing mirth. “I forget how sheltered you were in that research institute of yours. Dang.”

“What if I had accidentally... you know, made myself like one in behaviour as well as



looks?” Cerri hissed anxiously. “If I needed to... to... you know.”

“To fuck for your own survival?” Gloria asked, grinning like a cat that had caught the mouse. “Well, I know you would have lived through your initial introduction to life outside your science bubble...” she trailed off with a meaningful look at the flustered space demon. Then she turned her eyes on me. “As for nowadays, well... I have a feeling that you’d be fine.”

Now it was my turn to burn with embarrassment, and I quickly brought my tail around to hide my face. The idea of needing to... to have sex with Cerri to help her survive... it was so crazy and so very *very* hot.

Yes, that’s right. It set me on fire. Warmth was bouncing around within me like I was a thermos full of hot coffee and just... goodness gracious me. I had images of her knocking on my workshop, wild eyed and needy with lust. *Oh, Alia... I need to feed.* Then I would be like, *H-here?* And then she would be like, *I got distracted and lost track of how hungry I was. Please.* And then I would be all, *Okay, but... this time, can you use your tail?*

I slapped myself in the face with my fluffy tail. Wow! Where had *that* little fantasy come from? What the hell!

“What was that?” Cerri asked, peering around my tail at me.

“Nothing!” I squeaked, shifting it to cover the new angle.

Gloria let out another delighted laugh that began to recede as she left the scene of the embarrassment massacre. God, that woman was dangerous. She should come with like, a warning label. Also a manual, because gosh figuring out how to make a little machine that could feed *her* had been an interesting task.

“She is a menace,” Cerri said with an achingly adorable pout. She picked up her tablet, almost dropped it, then pretended to be doing work. “Absolute menace,” she muttered again, shaking her head.

“Yeah,” I agreed, picking up my own tablet. “Plus, nothing like that could have happened anyway, could it? Like, magic doesn’t exist, let alone sexy demon magic. Although... I guess your code could end up like that?”

She looked up from her tablet, giving me a shy smile. “Possibly, but the sort of situation that could create an SAI with those traits... no, I’m fine like this.”

“Although... the aether stuff is kind of like magic,” I mused, bringing up the map of the local aether topography. It looked pretty crazy, the strange otherdimensional *stuff*

surrounded the system in almost every direction.

“Hah, I mean within virtual reality, our imaginations are the limit I guess,” she smiled. Then her expression went funny and she stared over at the backside of my glass tablet. “A succubus... consuming *magic* to live...”

Suddenly, I found my personal space invaded by my friend as she snagged the tablet from my hands. Oh my god, so close! Her scent enveloped me, so warm and feminine. Just her natural smell and the gentle fragrance of the ship's soap. Her hair brushed softly against my cheek, just as silky and fine as it looked.

I was overwhelmed in less than a second, my very sentience taking a leave of absence. Thoughts, feelings, and emotions pummeled me as I fought for air, literally. Why was breathing so hard?

Mere moments after all that flashed through my brain, I fell back against her like a sack of potatoes. There's only so much stimulation this poor fox can take before she turns into mush. Especially when I was fantasising about being tail-fucked by her only a few minutes ago.

"Whoa!" Cerri exclaimed catching me before our bodies properly collided.

A part of me wished she hadn't. Wished I'd tumbled us both to the floor. We had kept a reasonable amount of physical space between us recently, and I was missing that intimacy *badly*.

Setting me right, she ducked her head to get a look at my face and make sure I was alright. "You okay?"

I nodded dumbly, taking control of my limbs once more to put some distance between us so I could think again.

““Good, because look at this,” she said excitedly, showing me my tablet. She'd zoomed in on the aetherscape topography to an incredible degree. I'd never even bothered to go that granular with the map, shit I was surprised it even *could* go that far.

A few moments later and I had realised what she had found. Framed within the view screen was the alien ship, but seen from the aetherscape side. My eyes went wide. They had... wow, tanks that could hold aether? Like, physical tanks? It appeared that they were using it as reaction mass for their engines and... wait, there was a residue cloud in the reactor. Oh my god! Their reactor ran on aether?

“Holy shit, no wonder we couldn't figure out what fuel they used!” I laughed, turning to find

her face close to mine and grinning wildly.

“Yup,” she said, giving a slight nod.

Falling into her gorgeous eyes the way I was, I couldn't help but murmur, “You're incredible.”

“It was a team effort,” she said, her voice dropping to match mine.

The moment hung there in space as we gazed into each other's eyes, basking in the gentle heat we found there. God, I was so into this girl. She was everything, smart, gorgeous, kind, caring, funny, adorable... the list goes on.

I blinked, feeling tears well in my eyes and I looked away, pretending I was inspecting the tablet again. They weren't tears of sadness though. They were the kind of tears where you're just feeling so much emotion that you fill up with it and the only way it can go is out through your eyes. My chest ached with the need for her like it was a physical thing. I was so screwed, so very very screwed.

I had to resort to typing when I finally told her, *Now we just need to figure out how to get it running again.*

“Yeah,” she whispered, voice rough. Had she felt the intensity of that moment too? She cleared her throat. “Yeah. I think it's uh... there must be a manual start option, right? Unless the method they use to start it isn't capable of a manual start. Probably isn't actually. We'll have to see about getting a line over there so we can power on their computers and see what's up.”

*I can do that now, if we wanted,* I sent to her, throwing a quick glance in her direction. She was staring down at her hand, running thumb over forefinger contemplatively.

Her nod was delayed, like suddenly ping was a thing again for the first time in however many years it had been since the FTLN became mainstream. “Yeah. Good idea. I'll wake Warren up to help.”

*It's a plan then.*

The interior of the Turshen II, as we were calling it, wasn't quite so spooky now that we knew it was safe. Sure, there were a few dings and scratches around the place that reminded us of what had haunted the hallways not long ago, but it wasn't bad.

That comfortable nature didn't extend to the engine room and reactor. There wasn't anything outwardly scary about the place, except that I now knew it ran on aether. That unknown and mysterious substance had been the stuff that crippled the Turshen I in the first place. Now we were meant to use it for fuel?!

Staring up at the massive spherical reactor from inside Bundit's pilot seat, I felt more than a little trepidation.

"You sure that we can't just, like... run an extension cord into the computers?" I asked nervously.

"Nope," Warren said, stifling a chuckle. "We have no idea what will happen if we try to hook up our power to their systems. You'll just have to figure out how to do a manual start."

"Easy for you to say, you're not even on the ship," I grumbled, tracking the camera sideways to try and gain some sort of clue as to how to start the thing.

Somewhat obviously, Cerri interjected, "If this goes wrong, we will not be safe with the Turshen docked to the alien ship as it is. Any catastrophic detonation would surely tear apart both ships."

"Lovely." Gloria's voice was sarcastic as it cut in across the comms. I could only imagine her expression.

Rather than comment on the banter, I took another look at the hulking sphere of strange dark metal that dominated the room. It had cables and pipes sticking out of it at random, along with several strange cylinders that had been attached. Honestly, it looked like some sort of fantastical steampunk engine.

I had to use logic here if I was going to figure out the problem, but not human logic. I needed to use the universal logic of reality. Well, *virtual* reality anyway.

The aliens were probably bigger than us by at least a foot on average, possibly more. We knew this from the size of the hallways, doors, beds, even the eating utensils we'd found in the galley. This meant that the manual start mechanism would have been built to be accessible to them.

Not underneath it then, but possibly around the back?

I shifted to get a better view and found a cylinder attached down at what would be around head height for me. This one looked a little different, and... oh! It had a hatch on the end, along with a small window of thick glass. Well, probably wasn't glass, but it looked like it so that's what I'd call it.

Closer inspection revealed that it could be opened, so I did, winding the release wheel with Bundit's rotating hand.

"What do you think, Cerri?" I asked, interrupting the bickering going on between Warren and Gloria.

"Promising. See how the inside of the cylinder has grooves and the metal appears worn? It looks to me like something is inserted into it," she said after a few moments thought. "Either it's just how they put fuel in, or more likely it's where you put some sort of charge that jump starts the reaction process."

"Okay, so I need to look for a secure locker of some kind," I mused, turning to survey the rest of the room.

It too looked like a steampunk mess of pipes, but with added cyberpunk wires and screens too. The clashing styles seemed to work though, I liked this place. I could already see ways I would make it more usable for someone of my uh, *dimensions*. The engine room equivalent of adjusting the driver's seat in an aircar.

Unfortunately for me and my current task, the cluttered mess part of that description had me searching in vain. That is, until a certain naive succubus pointed out that Bundit had some high tech science equipment on board.

A bit of scanning and data analysis wizardry from her and we located a hidden rack of suspicious canisters.

"You're good at that," I commented to Cerri as I picked one up and carefully turned it in front of Bundit's main camera.

"Well, I just really like data," she mumbled, and her tone of voice had me quickly switching to the bridge camera. Yup, she was smiling and there was a bit of a blush on her cheeks. God, she was so fucking cute.

"Alia?" Roger's voice brought me back to the task at hand.

"Alright, time to shove things into other things and hope they don't explode," I said, turning back towards the reactor's little receptacle thing.

Bundit's heavy footfalls echoed through its chassis as I arrived, and in just a moment I had the canister all lined up. "Say the word, boss."

With our captain's prompting, I gently inserted the canister into its socket and stepped back. Nothing happened.

"Close the hatch, Alia," Cerri prompted me gently.

"Oh," I mumbled, closing and locking the hatch.

"Now press the big red button on the side," she said, guiding me with a smile in her voice.

"Wait, are you kidding me? There's a big red button?" I blurted, turning Bundit slightly to get a look at the side I couldn't see. When I found no button, I let out a snort. "Cerri!"

A pause, then a giggle. Girl was getting cheeky on me! When she was done with her little fit of amusement, she said, "Okay judging by the scan of the canister, I think it's got an extra notch on the wheel you used to lock it. Give it a hard turn in the tightening direction."

"Alright." Placing both hands on the wheel this time, I carefully applied increasing levels of torque until the mechanism shifted. Suddenly, all tension in the wheel released and there was a *thunk* sound. I quickly let go and backed away from the reactor, staring up at it through Bundit's eyes as *something* happened.

A deep, bone shaking hum began to vibrate up through Bundit's legs, rising slowly in pitch until it had run the whole range of human hearing. Well, human and fox-kin. My ears were better than most.

"I think it's working!" Cerri exclaimed excitedly over the comms. "Aether levels within the containment chamber are rising rapidly. It doesn't look like very happy aether either, it's almost like it's... *boiling*."

"Is that good or bad?" I asked, voice rising into a nervous squeak to rival the sound the reactor was making.

"Good!" she said happily, until her tone fell slightly, turning thoughtful. "I think?"

"Sensors are picking up aetheric movement in another part of the ship. Two parts, actually," Warren warned, pushing the scans to my hud and highlighting the areas.

I followed the schematic of the ship quickly, trying to figure out what was happening. Aether was accumulating in two large voids within the ship, one on either side at the rear

where the two engine nacelles were.

“It appears to be gathering and compressing aether,” Cerri said, watching with rapt interest. “Compressing and... aha!”

I saw it the same time she did. “Funnelling it all into the reactor!”

It was like watching an incredibly terrifying marble run, seeing the aether travel through the pipes and into the reactor. The moment it hit the reaction chamber, the whole thing lit up like a christmas tree, and I stared at the thing in awe as power readings spiked off the scale.

“Holy shit,” I blurted, momentarily breathless.

My amazement was further compounded when all about me, the ship began to come to life. Lights flickered on, atmosphere began to rush into the room, slightly off from earth standard but still breathable.

Then two turrets fell from hatches in the ceiling, and while I had no clue how they dished out their particular brand of death, I could tell that the business end was pointed squarely at me.

“Oh,” I muttered, more to myself than anyone else. We probably should have thought about that.

Strangely, nothing happened, the turrets just stared at me.

“Uh, are they out of ammo?” Gloria asked, breaking the tense silence.

We didn't have time to discuss her theory, because the turrets swivelled, pointing down towards the main reactor console. It flickered to life, bringing up a frozen image of one of the hallways within the ship. Weirdly, it was still dark, no lights on.

The turrets turned back to me, then back to the screen, almost as if they were ushering me over. I tentatively obliged, pushing Bundit forward until I was squarely in front of the panel with the image on it. The static frame turned into a video, and to my surprise I recognised what was being displayed.

It was us! It was the moment we'd breached the ship, fighting for our lives against the strange cybernetic zombie things. It ran through the whole encounter, ending with me barreling into the enemy and the subsequent carnage I had caused.

As the video finished, the turrets turned back to me and... *bowed*? I mean, that's what it looked like. It's hard to tell with things that can only move on two axes, but yeah, it looked like they bowed!

Where the video had been on the screen, something else flickered to life. It was a stylised hand, but not a human one. The index and middle fingers were too short, and the pinky finger was missing entirely. It was definitely a handprint though, outlined in a deep blue while the center pulsed in a lighter tone.

"I think it wants me to touch it," I said slowly to the others.

"Go ahead," Roger told me gently.

Carefully, so as not to startle whatever was trying to communicate with us, I told Bundit to open and waited. Like a flower with four petals, Bundit released me and I stepped down onto the cold metal floor of the chamber. The air smelled funny, but not *bad*. It was like stepping into a room where someone else spent a lot of time. Just the faint odor that this place was subtly foreign.

The turrets each did little circles as I stepped down. Idly, I wondered what the gesture meant. Would we be able to find out? Did they have records in the ship's computers that would tell us?

Apprehension slowed my every movement as I approached the massive screen. I was almost too short to reach the handprint. Before I could get up on tiptoes to press my palm to it, the whole screen shifted. It dropped almost a meter, repositioning itself until it was at a much more comfortable height for me. Huh, the weird alien computer was oddly chivalrous.

A few moments of hesitation later, and I placed my hand within the much larger alien imprint. There was a pause, then the lights flickered and the alien hand-print shrank and changed to match mine.

I was just about to celebrate when back inside Bundit, I heard a terrible blood curdling scream come through the comms.

"What was that?" I asked in a small, terrified voice once I was safely back inside my mech. It hadn't been Cerri's voice, my brain had practically saved the scream to RAM



and scanned it multiple times to make sure. Maybe it actually had, now that I was a digital being.

The engine room on the alien ship was sitting idle, lights on and reactor humming happily away. It was even shifting to accommodate my smaller stature, which was a nice touch. Things I didn't know could move were now shifting and changing.

"I'm not sure," Cerri said, voice coloured with distracted urgency. "It came from our comms, but everyone is accounted for. Nothing is wrong with the ship, as far as I can tell —"

Gloria's voice cut through Cerri's like a knife, high and worried, "Not everyone!"

I heard the faint sound of fingers on glass through the comm link. A moment later Gloria began speaking in a worried but soothing voice, as though speaking to an injured puppy. "Turshie, you there? Hello?"

Oh. Crud. It *had* been her voice, it had been our ship AI that had screamed! What the hell?

"I'm getting nothing from her," Gloria said worriedly.

I swapped through and into the ship's systems, going straight for the readouts from our computer system.

My eyes widened when I saw what was happening. What the fuck? "Uh, guys... the computer is going mental. Main CPU is running at max, as are most of the auxiliary ones. Our storage is rapidly filling up too, like, I can see the bar moving in real time. Turshie is still in there, but... god, that's a lot of data."

"Why? What's happening?" Gloria asked, voice laced with anxiety.

Warren cut in this time, his voice urgent but calm, "We appear to have an open link with the alien ship. I can't shut it down and it's feeding data to us at an immense rate."

"Can we cut the line physically?" Roger asked in his commander voice.

"Not without stranding Alia in the alien ship," Cerri cut in quickly.

As she said that, the lights in that same alien ship flickered strangely and every speaker in the engine room began to blare intense static noise. I rushed for the button to mute external sounds, desperate to stop the racket before it put my poor neurodivergent brain

out of commission.

“Something is h-happening over here,” I said with a groan, placing my hands over my ears and squishing them flat. I could still hear the infernal noise through Bundit’s hull.

“Jesus fuck!” Gloria swore, and what followed was a mess of frantic shouting that further assailed my overly sensitive brain. Something was happening out there too.

I felt vibrations through the floor that felt disturbingly like metal on metal, then the actual shriek of metal tearing. What was going on? Oh god, what was happening outside Bundit?

A jolt shuddered through the ship and into my little mech, causing the Bundit AI to get down on all fours and clamp itself to the deck. There was some serious movement happening outside, but I couldn’t see anything but flickering lights on the screens and hearing anything at all above the screeching and tearing was impossible.

“Alia, are you okay?” Cerri’s voice was the first thing I heard when I realised that the commotion had finally ceased.

Uncurling from my fetal position, I took a look at the view screens and said in a shaking voice, “Y-yeah... What just happened? It was like an earthquake in here.”

“The alien ship just wrenched itself free from the bigger one,” Roger said in awe. “Not only that, but it took us along for the—“

“Ummmmm,” I blurted, cutting in over him as I stared at the viewport. “The big view screen on the reactor has... uh...”

“What?” he asked in alarm. “Type if you need to, what’s going on?”

“Really big tits!” I blurted before I could catch myself. “There’s an... an anime girl! She’s jumping up and down! God, why does she have such big boobs! They’re uh... They’re *jiggling*.”

“I am... so confused,” David muttered, the first thing he’d said during this whole operation.

I wasn’t lying though. On the big reactor panel was a buxom blonde anime girl in a skin tight jumpsuit, waving at me and... oh, pointing to her ears.

I hit the button to open Bundit’s doors and clambered out, giving her a cautious wave. “H-

hello?"

"Goodness, what a mess!" the girl giggled... wait, not just *the girl*. That was Turshie's voice! "Really sorry about that!" she said with a bashful grin. "It was just a bit weird for a moment there! Suddenly I have all this alien stuff to think about and then it's all like *bam* and I *am* the alien ship now and yeah. What a weird experience..."

"Uh..." I mumbled, unsure how to respond to her babbling. That and... she kept gesturing and the... you know, the thingies. They were the size of her head and they kept bouncing around and it was just really distracting.

"So yeah uh, whoa," she continued, pressing her palms to the sides of her head. "Goodness gracious, there's a lot of new information up here. Very strange, and oh for some reason I can break character... huh. Hi? I guess?"

"Wait..." I blinked, staring at her in surprise now. "You're... an SAI?"

"Yup!" she said, beaming at me happily. "I work for the Digital Galaxies team! I'm your ship AI! I'm also like, a dozen different NPCs and shit, but you know... oh huh... I guess management has decided my sole job is with you lot now. Weird as. I can't connect to my old assignments."

Alarm spread through me like a fast-acting poison and I mentally pulled up my digital human heads up display in a frantic mess of worry. I frowned when it actually popped up, and when I pinged my home server and apartment simulation, I got a return. Odd, okay... for a second there I had thought we were like, pulled into some reality where DG was real. Guess that was pretty silly though.

"Well, uh... welcome to the crew, I guess," I said shyly, suddenly aware that I was talking to another person. "Um, Gloria is worried about you."

"Oh, she is?" Turshie gasped. "That's so sweet, let me get back onto the ship's communications."

"Can I get back into my mech?" I asked nervously, inching back towards it before she had even replied.

Turshie gave me a bouncy nod. "Yeah!"

The moment she said yes, I scrambled back in and slammed the doors shut. With a sigh

of relief, I keyed into the main communications channel and listened.

“Hold on,” Cerri said, raising a hand in my little viewscreen. Everyone was packed into the bridge and looking amongst themselves with concern. Turshi’s new avatar was on the main screen. “You’re saying that we’re talking to the SAI behind our ship’s AI, rather than the ingame character?”

“Yeah! I’m bugged or something,” Turshie said with a smile that seemed at odds with the potentially worrying situation.

The denizens of the bridge all shared worried looks.

Roger, bless his heart, took control of the situation. “First things first, Turshie, was it you who tore the ship free of the bigger ship, and is there any structural damage we need to be worried about?”

“Yes, it was me!” the anime avatar said with a bobbleheaded nod. “That screaming was what remained of the alien AI dumping all of its records over to me. It was rather painful, and I mean that in the out-of-character sense. It will take me a great many years to sift through all of this data, but one thing I am certain of is that this ship is rather sturdy. It appears the superstructure was specifically designed and reinforced to ram into ships such as that one. There are even explosive bolts that act as barbs in the head of the ship that allows it to stay wedged into its victim, although they appear to be a later addition.”

“And what about our old ship?” Roger asked, plowing on without pausing on any of the crazy shit our AI was saying.

“Oh, that’s completely fucked,” Turshie winced, scratching the back of her head awkwardly. “I’m currently copying my files over to the alien ship. I predict the computer systems aboard the Turshen will fail in... oh, two hours? The cascade will quickly render every still functioning system onboard the ship inert or worse. I am... slightly worried about what will happen when the gravity plates fail.”

“Fuck,” Roger swore, punching the arm of his chair. “Alright everyone, get ready to evacuate. Alia, are you still on the line?”

“Yes captain,” I said meekly.

His eyes aligned on the camera he knew I’d be looking at him from. “What’s the atmosphere like over there?”

“Breathable,” I said slowly. “It smells a little weird but it’s well within our range. I’m sure Warren could dial it in further.”

Turshie interjected again, finally realising that things were a little dire right now. “Ah, I am beginning to spin up all the life support systems. I must warn you that there are several rooms within the forward section that are open to space. The superstructure may be perfectly intact, but the armour is... let’s say damaged.”

“Anything important up there?” Roger asked calmly.

“Nope, it does not seem so,” Turshie replied with a shake of her head.

“Good to know. Alright everyone, suit up and get any personal belongings you need over onto the new ship,” Roger said, standing up from his seat. To Jason, David, and Ed, he began to give orders, “You three, once you’re done, grab our emergency supplies and move them to the new ship.”

Looking back up at the camera, our captain continued to give orders, “Alia, get back over here and rip our food machine out of the floor. I want it over and in the other ship as soon as possible. If it doesn’t fit through the doors, cut a hole in the hull plating and take it out that way. Everyone else, let’s get shifting gear. We don’t have long.”

I was already running back towards the airlock by the time the rest of the crew was saying, “Aye, aye, captain!”

The rush to move everything over was frantic and stressful. We ended up just tying a bunch of crates to a line and then hurling them out the airlock to save time. I got the food processor thing out through a hole I made in the hull of our doomed ship, then Turshie took it in through one of several cargo holds on the new ship.

After that, I made a quick detour into the vents to get my den stuff, and when I came out I was confronted with something alarming. A robot, one I hadn’t seen before, was carrying some of our stuff down a hallway.

It looked like some sort of four-legged crab, with a flat surface on the top that it was using to carry a few crates.

“Um, hello?” I asked nervously. I wasn’t in bundit at that point, so I felt pretty vulnerable.

The strange looking quadruped bot stopped and turned to look at me. Turshie’s cheerful voice came out of it. “Hello! I found some porter bots! It’s helping us make some rather

remarkable time with the evacuation!"

"O-oh," I said, shuffling my feet. The robot was between me and bundit, and thus it was thwarting my escape.

The robot stood there too, both of us stuck in an awkward game of chicken. Finally, one of the manipulators on the arms carefully disengaged from holding its cargo and pointed to the duffel bag I was clutching to my chest. "I can carry that, if you'd like. I mean, unless you want to carry it. Goodness, this is very much an interesting interaction. Are you okay?"

"I-I can carry it," I said quietly.

The arm went back to holding the bot's cargo. "Ah, in that case, I'll just... well this bot needs to go past you, and so if it's all okay with you I would... you know, uh... like to shuffle past."

I nodded and moved to the side, watching bemusedly as Turshie piloted the robot down the hallway.

After that minor weirdness, I shifted to moving all my tools and spare parts and shit. God, I'd have loved to tear all the perfectly functional systems out of the ship. It seemed like such a waste.

A knock on the door of my machine shop caused me to turn, and I found David smiling at me from the doorway.

"Hey there, need any help?" he asked.

I shook my head automatically, but considering I was inside bundit, he couldn't hope to see it. The slip up gave me time to realise that I could definitely do with his help.

"That would be helpful," I said in a small voice.

I was a bit anxious around him these days, since I hadn't heard anything about the drama with Ed since it had happened. I knew David still liked me, but he was dating Ed and... well, I didn't know what to think.

Nodding, David entered the machine shop and began to look around. He wore a space suit with lifting actuators that would allow him to carry heavier stuff, so I pointed one of bundit's hands to a hastily packed crate.

“That one,” I said. “It’s got my hand tools in it.”

“Alright,” he nodded, picking it up carefully. He didn’t leave though, instead glancing around at the rest of the stuff. “I can take more.”

I considered the pile of stuff I was getting ready and tugged on one of my fluffy ears in thought. “Probably... that one there.”

He nodded again and lifted the second crate I’d indicated. Then he was off again, and so was I, pulling a big trolley laden with stuff behind me. Bundit was so useful.

A few trips later and David was back in my machine shop. Time was getting tight, but with Turshie’s help we had moved almost everything important. Everything except my massive stockpile of random spare parts. The others were busy getting other non-essentials over while I worked.

“Time’s running short,” he commented, looking around at everything that still needed to be moved.

“I know, I know,” I mumbled absently, concentrating on stacking things up.

“You okay?” he asked, coming up beside bundit. He rang his knuckles off my hull. “I feel like I see you inside this thing more than out of it.”

Bundit’s arms paused as the neural link was suddenly left without instructions. Staring at David through one of the cameras, I tried to gauge what he was thinking. Had he gone over to Ed’s way of thinking?

“It’s safer inside here,” I told him, continuing with the packing.

He let out a grunt. “Why?”

I stopped again and turned bundit to glare at him. “Because I have an entire life of abuse and trauma behind me. Because I was born funny and now I have a ton of neuro-atypicalities that mean it’s hard to exist in *normal* society.”

Seeing his jaw drop open did nothing to quell the frustration that was welling up out of me like a badly drilled oil well.

I went back to shifting things onto the trolley, but now there was visible anger in the way bundit’s arms moved. “Look, David. I’m so fucking broken inside that it’s impossible for me to function under the rules of society. I don’t even know where to begin to explain

every granular little detail of the agony that was pretending to be a *real boy*. It's everything, it's absolutely everything about that experience."

"I'm listening," he said gently, reaching out to place a palm to my hull. "I promise."

"Listen and help me move things, then," I grumbled, shoving a pile of steel piping into his arms. "I'll open a private channel."

Once we were speaking over comms rather than just blasting noise at each other, I tried to order my thoughts into something coherent. I failed.

"My mother and father were both door slammers," I began, giving him a cord to tie the pipes together with. "I'd say about eighty percent of the time they wouldn't directly confront me about why they were angry. They'd just smash and crash around the house, making as much noise as possible so that everyone within earshot *knew* that they were mad. Then you were expected to go and ask what was wrong so that they felt comfortable screaming at you, since you're the one who raised the issue."

"I'm familiar with the type," he muttered, more to himself than to me.

"Yeah, now imagine that your brain is naturally wired to be far more perceptive of every signal it's getting than normal, and shutting out unnecessary information is very difficult. Now add a mild simmering panic to that mix, so that your whole conscious self is being slow cooked under those conditions," I explained, trying to stop myself from feeling all of that at the same time as I asked him to imagine it.

"Your whole body is in a perpetual state of fight or flight. It's funneling every single little noise it hears and vibration it feels through the floor, right into your brain. It's a storm of neurological alarms and each one could be the harbinger of more pain." I paused to see if he was listening and found him just staring at me, waiting for my next words.

"That is all one small aspect of what is wrong with me," I said. My willingness to go into even more detail had fled. I was saved by the fact we were now making the transfer over to the new ship and we had to concentrate and coordinate.

Safely over within my new machine shop, I turned to him. "Doors slamming, it scares the shit out of me. Raised voices too. Discordant noise with no rhythm is bad too. It's just... god, there's so much shit to explain. The whole point about being super sensitive to everything, that's its own deal. There's just a lot."

"Yeah, it seems like it," he said wearily. "I hope you know that I'm always willing to listen, though. Okay? I might be like, the most mentally normal and boring dude on the planet, but I'm willing to try and learn."



Tears sprung up unbidden and I had to relinquish control of bundit before I accidentally broke something. "It's like... it's like those superhero stories with the mind readers. You know? How they go mad if they don't learn to block out the voices. Imagine it's that but with noise. That's what it's like."

"Alia," he said, and I could hear his hands shifting over bundit's armour. "Damn it, how do I open this thing. Please come out?"

Mindlessly, I pressed the button to crack the doors. They slid open with a hiss, but David didn't wait for them to finish moving before he scooped me up out of the pilot's chair and into his arms.

"Sorry," he said softly. "I'm sorry for bringing it all up."

I shook my head wordlessly and tried to speak, but nothing came out. Almost second nature now, my follow up text message was quick, *It's okay. I'm just... I'm...*

Setting me down without letting me go, I was pulled gently into a proper hug. "I know. Look, I wanted to talk to you about Ed. I think he's coming around. If he tries to talk to you... just hear him out, okay? It'll be an apology."

"Really?" I blubbered, trying to rub tears out of my eyes.

"Yeah. I think he feels bad for his reaction but doesn't know how to go about apologising," David said, gently patting my back. "At least, that's what I gather. The subject has been sort of taboo between us."

"Okay well... thank you," I snuffled, getting myself under control. "I have more stuff to move though..."

Letting me go with a groan, he arched his back into a stretch. "Alright, let's get back to it then. If you're okay, that is."

"I'm okay," I giggled. When he gave me a funny look, I clarified, "That's pretty much what happens every time I explain why I'm so fucked in the head. Instant waterworks."

"Think you can solve our water issues we might have with that party trick?" he joked, grinning at me from within his helmet.

"Oh my god," I laughed. "Go pick up something heavy."

In the end we were able to get everything off the Turshen in time, save for stuff that was bolted down. Hell, even the entertainment systems made it over. Watching our old ship slide off into the black was a slightly depressing sight, made all the more worrying by the way it quickly imploded.

It happened in the blink of an eye, one moment our poor damaged ship was receding into the dark of space, the next, it had crumpled into a bunch of perfect spheres. Each ball of the smashed ship was centered around where there used to be a gravity plate.

I guess the others thought it was boring because everyone wandered off to get started with getting set up. The space within the new ship was considerably more than our old ship, but it seemed that the original owners hadn't used it to spread out. Instead, the bedrooms were all bunkbed affairs, four aliens to a room. There was still a reasonable amount of space though, since the aliens had been huge.

When we were sure that everything would keep until at least the morning, we all headed for our new rooms.

That was how I found myself huddled in the corner of one massive alien-sized bed, just staring out at a room that was far too big for my tiny self.

The room was huge. Back on Earth it would have been big enough to demand status as a master bedroom in a modest family home.

Rectangular shaped, the door was at one end of the room where it opened into an empty area of floor. Cupboards and drawers lined the walls there. It was probably where the aliens had kept their clothes, I guess.

Then came the bunk beds, a pair of them set into both walls. Following that, another open area that had a set of four desks, each recessed into its own nook. The desks were way too high up to be comfortable for me. I guess I'd have to fix that. Tomorrow of course, I was tired now. Tired and yet very much unable to sleep. I did *not* like this room.

It's not that I was completely agoraphobic, it's just that I couldn't feel truly comfortable or safe in a space like this. I mean, for one thing the ceiling was almost five meters up!

I pulled the blankets around myself and turned to face the wall, hoping that it would be enough, but no. No, I could still feel the yawning chasm that was my new bedroom. I could feel its cold, lidless eye staring at me.

Did I just log out instead? Retreat to my private virtual environment?

A knock at the door caused me to yelp in fright, which in turn caused the knocker to open the door.

Cerri peered in, asking, "Are you okay? Why are you all huddled into the corner?"

"You just scared me," I mumbled. "The room is too big. It doesn't feel right."

"Ah. Sorry! Actually uh, I came to offer your blankets and stuff back," she said, slipping in and closing the door. "Since you have your own room again and stuff. I figured... well, that you'd want them back."

I gave a silent nod, unable to reply verbally because I wanted something *more* from her.

"Cool, I'll just pop them here then," she said, placing the pile onto the opposite bottom bunk. All the way across the massive room.

*Please stay.*

The message slipped out of me without me meaning it to. A testament to how comfortable I'd gotten with my virtual existence, I guess.

When she saw it, she paused halfway to the door and turned to look at me. "Stay?"

I nodded again and slipped a hand out of my nest to point at the spot next to me on the bed.

She stayed standing in place, considering me for several long, nerve wracking seconds. Then she turned her eyes to the floor, smiling bashfully. "Okay. I can do that."

When she sat down on the bed, I quickly abandoned my nest and crawled over to her. Her eyes went wide with surprise when I cuddled in up against her side without any preamble whatsoever.

"Hey there," she murmured, putting her arms around me after only a tiny bit of hesitation.

I made a funny humming sound and wrapped my arms around her waist. I think I was just running on some sort of tired animalistic autopilot because normally I needed some sort of excuse to get this close to her.

"Stressful day, huh?" she giggled.

I nodded, using my cheek pressed to her shoulder as a pivot point. "The room felt all big and weird, but you make it feel nice and full."

"Are you calling me fat?" she gasped, frowning down at me.

"What?" I squeaked. "No!"

I was about ready to freak out completely when she added quickly, "I'm teasing you, it's okay. Goodness, someone really is tired."

My lips formed into a pout and I gazed up at her imploringly. *No messing with me while I'm tired and anxious.*

"Okay, okay," she said gently, relaxing into the cuddle. "Should we lay down, or will I be leaving once you feel better?"

"Staying," I said, quietly but forcefully. "If that's okay."

"Let's lay down then," she replied, gesturing lengthways down the massive alien bed.

It took us a few moments to shift, along with her kicking off her slacks, but when we were done it was perfect. She was on her back, while I was on my side and pressed up against her. My head rested on her bicep, the rest of the arm draped casually around my small form.

It felt weird to just lay there with my legs straight down, so tentatively I wrapped both my legs around one of hers. Staring up into her eyes as I did so, I saw her eyes soften and a smile tug at her lips. She didn't say anything, but I could sort of tell that she was thinking fluffy thoughts about me.

I've never wanted to kiss anyone as much as I wanted to kiss her in that moment.

She'd just... just come in and agreed to sleep in bed with me, no questions asked. She knew that I was anxious and that was that.

"Thank you," I whispered, instead of pressing forward.

"Anytime," she smiled.

I still needed a tactile way to let my affection out though. Emotion was bubbling up from within my heart, setting me ablaze with feelings of adoration for this incredible girl.

Before I lost my mind to that sweet madness, I snuggled my face into her shoulder and just slightly kissed her there. She wouldn't be able to tell, but it did the job of releasing some of the pressure inside me.

"This isn't something friends normally do with each other," she said after a minute or two. My first instinct upon hearing her words was to freeze and try not to move. Her tone was idle though, more thoughtful and curious than accusatory.

*No... most friendships are pretty contact-free.* I replied, not at all trusting my mouth to behave right then.

Her hand landed gently on my head, fingers beginning to play through my hair with gentle strokes. "I like this though."

*Me too.* Where was this going?

"You're so amazing," she said, voice lowered to barely above a whisper. "So different. Interesting and unique. You make no sense by all the normal ways of the world. You run by your own rules instead. Like... it's like everyone is running the big mainstream operating system, but not you. You've got your own ingenious little homebrew OS. It has its eccentricities and quirks, and it might suck at some day to day tasks... but god is it good at some other stuff."

"That's a very charitable way of saying I'm crazy," I grumbled, feeling my verbal restrictions lift for a moment.

"No, not crazy," she told me firmly. "Never crazy."

I wasn't convinced, so I stayed silent. It was the story of my life. My parents had tried to fix me, and when all their efforts failed... I could remember the exact moment they gave up on me.

"Alia," Cerri mumbled, sounding very sleepy. "You're my favorite person."

My heart melted in an instant and my toes lit up with a crazy tingling sensation. I really liked her, and hearing her say that just... it exploded inside my brain like... um... I don't know. A bomb made of hundreds and thousands? Colourful and sugary. Yeah, it fit. All that I needed was some fluffy white bread and marge.

"Sorry..." she said, barely audible now. She was drifting off, half dreaming now. "Sorry... sorry I'm not ready yet..."

"I can wait," I whispered, but it was too late. She was out, exhaustion and a cozy cuddle working together to overcome her.

Regardless, I felt light and happy. It was obvious what she'd meant. Sort of. I think. Okay it had been obvious when she said it but now I was like hardcore doubting my own judgement. Maybe it was just dreamland speak?

How did you even tell what any of this meant when it was coming from someone so removed from social norms? She'd basically grown up as a piece of sentient lab equipment. That wasn't exactly a good environment to be learning social cues and customs. Hell, I'd grown up through the structured and rules-rigid upper class of aussie society and I still had no fucking idea how anything worked.

Plus... there was the fact that... the fact... that... buns.

I fell asleep.

"W-what happened?" Cerri shouted, bolting upright and waking me up in the process. My head spun like a forgotten spinning top as I tried to orient myself with being awake.

I blinked, staring up at her from where I was still laying on the bed. "What's wrong?"

Cerri's eyes widened further and she lunged forward, covering my mouth with her hand. *Shh, don't talk.*

That was when I saw the active call window. It was voice only, the UI indicating that the person on the other end wasn't currently in any sort of physical or virtual reality.

"What was that?" a soft male voice asked.

"Nothing," Cerri squeaked, going red in the face. "Just... an NPC."

The guy on the other end let out a subdued chuckle. "Wow. I didn't know you were like that. I'd be careful around NPCs now though, we have no idea what's going on."

“Sorry... I just woke up, uh... let me go into the bathroom and you can explain again,” she replied, making banging noises with her hand on the bulkhead. Pretending to move... she wanted me to hear this conversation.

“Okay, we’re good,” Cerri said breathlessly, as though she’d just rushed off. “What were you saying?”

“Long and short of it?” the guy on the other end asked rhetorically, letting out a huge sigh. “We’ve lost control of the DG simulation. No... not just lost control, we’ve physically lost it.”

“How...?” Cerri asked, and we shared a confused look. What the fuck was that even supposed to mean?

“We don’t know where it is,” he repeated. “As in, it’s not running on our machines anymore, CPU load is at close to zero percent. It’s coming through the FTL nodes in the server machines but the actual servers aren’t running it. We’ve also lost control of almost everything but basic monitoring functions. Nothing works. Shit, as far as we can tell, it’s not under *anyone’s* control.”

“That’s... really fucking worrying,” Cerri said slowly, me nodding silently alongside her.

“Understatement of the century there, Ceridwen,” the SAI guy muttered. “We’re still trying to figure out what to do, but all the Digital Exodus folks are being warned. Nothing public yet though, not until we’ve secured Exodus 1. It would be disastrous for the movement.”

“How very corporate of us,” Cerri grumbled.

“Yeah, none of us are happy about it, but... this is the future of one, maybe two sentient species on the line so... you know,” he said, sounding weary beyond belief. “We do what we gotta do.”

Cerri nodded, albeit uneasily. I found myself sharing a long look with her as we both thought on the implications of this.

A thought occurred to me as we did so, and I relayed it to her through text. *When did this happen? Was it the exact moment that Turshie lost contact with her other assignments?*

Cerri’s eyes lit up with interest and she relayed the question to her friend.

“Interesting... let me check the logs,” the SAI guy murmured, going silent for a moment. He came back sounding both worried and very very curious. “Yes, it was actually the

exact moment that the Turshen AI Assignment was integrated with the dormant alien AI one. Strange... how did that happen? Why the correlation? It wasn't just your AI handler who lost control of all her other assignments either, by the way. Whatever assignment they were focused on in that moment became a player-vessel. They're all just players now, and yet somehow... somehow the NPCs are still functioning. This is worrying."

*No fucking shit*, I sent to Cerri, earning a slow, terrified nod from her.

Not knowing whether she was about to freak out or just exaggerating her reaction to communicate around having to stay silent, I erred on the side of caution and shuffled around to hug her.

"What... what do we do?" she asked, looking to the call window.

The line held nothing but the hiss of an open connection. No response came. I felt Cerri's breathing quicken towards a rhythm I knew all too well, panic. I took her hand in mine quickly and brought my tail around to cover the both of us.

I wished so badly that I could get more intimate, to kiss her collarbone and whisper in her ear, but that felt like crossing a line. Instead, I pushed and squeezed gently at her fingers, providing tactile sensation in an area full of nerves. The easiest way to stop a full on panic attack is to distract the mind with something mundane. Being an SAI, I figured she wasn't as familiar with her sense of touch, and it might take a little more of her attention to process everything.

It worked, she placed her arms around me and breathed a deep, stuttering sigh. "Alia."

"Sorry, there's been developments," the voice from the call said, suddenly flaring to life. "After I passed on your information, some of the team managed to get a trace running. Something about you and your friends interacting with that alien ship caused this."

Cerri went rigid. "... we didn't—"

"No, no," the soft spoken SAI interrupted her. "Not your fault. We know. Knowing the origin helped our team to run back through our logs to the moment it happened. It's like... it's like... well, if our server processes were a train, they jumped the tracks wholesale. The whole simulation got sucked into the FTLN node and didn't come back out of it. It's still sending data and receiving connections. Hell, new players have signed up and started playing while we've been talking."

"That doesn't answer my question," my friend said quietly. "What do we do?"

"Nothing, yet—" the guy said. He went silent for a few seconds, then gave a weary sigh.



“Goddamn, having a conversation with someone in real time while you have another with someone in fast-time... well, it’s painful. So scratch that *nothing*. What we do is we keep our eyes open. That science mission that got you lot up shit’s creek? Keep doing it, except now we need you to feed that information back to us.”

“Okay,” Cerri said slowly. “But... why?”

“You and your crew are the furthest out into the galaxy by a significant margin,” he told her, and I swear I heard excitement in his voice. “We don’t know exactly what you might find... but someone on my other call just pointed out that— oh for fuck’s sake. New information. We’re sure of it now, the DG sim is running on some sort of phantom hardware from within the space between FTLN nodes. No idea how, no idea what that might look like, but the server node has an open connection to *nowhere*.”

Cerri perked up. “Wait, you’re saying that... oh, that is interesting! You’ve done a latency test I assume? If diagnostics was showing FTL communication within the architecture of the server... that would suggest... yes. Oh my god, and if we could replicate that—“

I could almost hear the torque from the gears in her head as they spun in a mad dash through her thoughts. Any moment now a flywheel was going to pop out the side of her skull, through the ship’s walls and out into space. I should get some hull sealant ready just in case. Didn’t want to lose all of our atmosphere.

“Exactly our thinking!” he exclaimed. “It’s fucking dangerous, because we have no idea what’s going on... but this could be another avenue for the Digital Exodus. Even just the tech would secure our freedom. We just need readings, information, *data*. We get that, we can make some progress figuring it all out.”

“I’ll get you data,” Cerri told him, grinning excitedly. “I will get you *so much* data.”

The smile on her face, the light in her eyes, the way her body cupped mine, it all served to short out my poor little brain. I wanted to kiss her so so freaking badly. My thoughts didn’t stay in PG land though, because then the idea of going further bounced happily and unbidden into my mind’s eye.

I imagined a hand tugging at the hem of my shirt, getting just enough space to slip under. The other one teasing at my inner thigh as we passionately— Moving my legs provided some rather alarming feedback down below. Oh god, had I just gotten wet over Cerri nerding out? Oh god, ohhhh god.

“Great,” the DG dev SAI said. “Ah, gotta go, this is getting very difficult. I’ll send you transcripts and documents soon. Operating protocol is the same as always, only exodus people can know what’s happened, for now. PR will deal with the fallout when it

happens.”

“Stay safe, Nabu,” Cerri said with a smile, and the line went dead.

As soon as it cut off, I found myself tackled onto my back, her face right up in mine. “Oh my god, Alia! This is exciting and scary and so so *interesting*. Imagine if we can replicate this? Computers that operated in the space between time! Well, or wherever it is that the sim has gotten to. Wow, that’s exciting. We’re literally out in the unknown now! I mean, we’re still playing a game in a simulation, but now... oh goodness. I am so very excited!”

Rendered speechless by like, everything about this situation, I just stared back into her bright, nebula-filled eyes. Her body was entirely pressed against mine, her breath hot on my cheek, her tail had found mine and twined them together... it was so much. Anyone else would have kissed her then, but me... I just froze like a deer in headlights.

“We’ll need to rig up a special set of sensors,” she said, a little more calmly. “Something to measure the rules of the simulation.”

“Like how we measure the rules of the universe back in reality?” I asked breathlessly. It was very hard to concentrate on anything other than the way our boobs were pressed together right then, but I managed it somehow.

“Yes, like that,” she agreed happily. “I suspect this new ship will actually have a lot of equipment for measuring the aether onboard. You don’t shove that shit into a pot and boil it for fuel without having a very good sensor suite to monitor the reaction. We’ll start there, I think.”

“Okay... um, and...” I mumbled, trailing off as her leg shifted slightly and landed between mine. I gave a little gasp and closed my eyes against the embarrassment.

“Wha— oh my god, I’m sorry!” Cerri scurried off me in a hurry, realising the position she’d just put us in. “Wow, I am so sorry! I didn’t realise... I was just... ah... oh goodness.”

“Worst. Succubus. Ever,” I muttered, taking a deep, steady breath.

“Nooo!” my friend replied with a mortified squeal. “You’re not... don’t say that!”

Opening my eyes and looking up, I saw her against the foot of the bed, bright red with embarrassment. So cute. So adorably, wonderfully cute.

“It’s okay,” I said, smiling past my own reddened cheeks. “You were excited. It’s fine.”

Things happen.”

“Y-yeah,” she nodded, biting her lip. “Things. Just like, happening and stuff.”

“Um... I guess we should... get up now?” I murmured, bringing my tail around so I could hide behind it.

“Yes... lots of work to do,” she nodded, perhaps a little too quickly. “So much work. Big world changing events going on. Need to deal with them... and stuff. Yes. Definitely. Good. Okay. Yup.”

Cerri and I wandered into the new makeshift galley in a combined fit of giggles. Getting dressed had been the most awkward experience of both our lives, with the both of us trying really *really* hard not to stare.

We’d been awkward about it all the way up until we were about to enter the room, and then we’d made eye contact and melted down into laughter. My heart felt a strange sort of calm-panic as we tried in vain to stifle our amusement while everyone else stared at us in confusion.

“What’s got you two all giggly?” Gloria asked from the crate she was using as a seat.

Cerri shook her head, sending me a secretive look. “Nothing. Don’t worry.”

“We’ve been waiting,” Roger said, somehow not sounding either accusatory or like a seer. “Is the food machine safe to turn on?”

*No idea*, I shrugged, wandering across the echoey galley. God, we needed to partition this thing a little, everything was so big.

“Uh, why are you on your way towards the on button then?” Warren asked hesitantly.

*To find out*, I typed, giving him a cocky wink. Okay, it probably wasn’t actually a cocky wink. I’m like, the essence of awkwardness, but I felt cool in my head and that’s what matters.

I was relying on the very intelligent little power supply in the back of the food machine to

understand the power being plugged into it from the alien ship's power infrastructure. Due to how the exodus from Earth had been just a tad haphazard, many planets used all sorts of standard voltages and shit. This meant that the burden of making everything work together had fallen on the individual manufacturers, so yeah... theoretically the power supply in the food machine should be able to handle the task. Theoretically.

I flipped the on switch.

At first there was an alarming humming sound and temperature readings from the machine went wild. My worries weren't all that high though, since the fact that I was getting any sort of readout in my ocular sort of indicated that it hadn't fried itself.

Soon the noise and temperature subsided and an error report got dumped into my HUD. A quick skim told me that it had detected an unknown power standard and adjusted itself to compensate. The log came with a warning not to consume the first thing that came out of the machine. Interesting...

I selected plain rice for the test meal and waited.

"Is it working?" Roger asked from his perch atop a big chair. All the tables and chairs in the galley were alien-sized and unusable for their intended purpose.

"Allegedly," I muttered, more to myself than him.

A little *ping* sound came from it, and out came a bowl of... oh god. The smell hit me first, and in a rush I turned to shield my poor nose from the abomination that had been presented.

"Jesus christ," Roger swore, gagging and retching.

Staggering forward, I took the warm bowl of... stuff, and I raced for the nearest alien cabinet, shoving it inside and closing the door.

"What just happened?" Cerri asked, looking faintly green.

"Nothing major, the machine um... just hacking up a hairball," I explained, taking long, deep breaths of mercifully clean air. "It should work now."

"I think I'll do a test meal, if you don't mind," Roger said, without an ounce of trust in his voice.

It worked out in the end, although Roger's caution turned out to be very prudent. The

second meal it churned out was recognisable, but it had a very odd smell and was subsequently thrown into the cupboard to be dealt with later.

Once breakfast was done with, we had a crew meeting. One that I'd been dreading. The sheer scale of the task before us... it made my thoughts escape out a hidden hatch in the back of my head and rush off to hide in the ducts.

The meeting, of course, was about compiling a list of shit we needed to do in order to make the ship usable. This included everything from cutting the legs short on all the chairs through to altering the atmospheric regulators to get a proper Earth-normal air mixture. We had our work cut out for us.

Then, of course, the three of us that were digital had another smaller conference. One that took place out on the Exodus network. It was just a sort of mind-voice thing, but it was still very odd.

"So, Turshie..." Cerri said, her voice resonating inside my skull as I worked on the new systems. "I assume you got the memo?"

Turshie's voice was a lot more subdued when she was speaking through this funny link. "I did. I'm not sure I understand though... even trying to get my head around what happened..."

"Yes, it's quite a lot to take in," Cerri agreed. "It looks like we're not allowed to tell the others. For now, anyway. You okay with that?"

Turshie let out a laugh. "Yes. I just do as I'm told... every time I try to do smart SAI stuff... it goes wrong. It's best if I let other people do the thinking."

I swear I picked up a note of depressed resignation in her words. It was completely at odds with her buxom ship AI persona.

Both Cerri and I were silent for a few moments as we processed her words. I wasn't sure what to make of her when she was out of character.

"You okay, Turshie?" I asked softly.

"Ah, I'll be okay," she said. "I had another assignment that was a lot of fun too. Corporate espionage stuff. Not that I was any help there either... God I'm depressing."

"Um..." Cerri said slowly, clearly taken aback.

“I mean, I think you’re pretty helpful,” I mumbled. This whole mind-voice-chat-thingy was so strange. I didn’t like it.

Turshie made a little noise. “I guess. I used to have a whole UI thingy to help me with my job, but it’s all corrupted now. I guess because of the stuff that happened with the servers or whatever. So... ah... yeah. I’m going to struggle to fill my role and stuff. Sorry guys.”

“Fill your role?” Cerri asked, but she followed up with a sound of understanding. “Turshie, nah. No. That’s not how things are going to roll now. Tell us your name, first off.”

“Why?” she asked, sounding genuinely confused as to why we’d want to know her name. “My name is Turshie.”

Cerri was working across the room from me within the engine room as we checked out the core systems. She turned to me now and waved, pointing to the main console and indicating that I should go there. With a shrug, I followed along.

“Can you pop up onto the console for us?” she asked, speaking to Turshie.

An image of the anime girl popped up on screen, although she didn’t have the blissful smile like she had before.

“We want to know your name because you’re not really able to do your job anymore,” Cerri said, and when Turshie opened her mouth to speak, she held up a hand to stall her. “It’s literally impossible. Nothing to do with you. You’re essentially just a player now, and your name obviously isn’t Turshie. If you’re going to be part of the party then... you know, we’d like to know *you*, not the role you played.”

The SAI on the screen opened her mouth again, then closed it, then blushed and looked away from the screen. “U-uh... I’m not really... you know.”

Cerri and I shared a look.

“I like playing my roles,” she said, looking down at her feet. “I get to play-act as all these different characters and stuff. It’s fun! I might not be good at like, thinking and stuff, but I know how to act! So... yeah.”

“Okay, you can be Turshie then,” Cerri said with a defeated sigh. “So long as you’re happy, I guess. Just figured... you know, maybe you’d like us to know the real you. The you that sounded all depressed just now.”

“Maybe later,” Turshie said, smiling happily. “We can hang out on Exodus One later, if you

want. Inside the simulation, that is. Because like, it's just a spaceship with no atmosphere and none of us have real bodies and stuff."

"The city, yes," Cerri nodded, and now it was her turn to look embarrassed. "Ah... I haven't actually been there yet."

"What?!" the ship AI exclaimed, eyes wide. "How have you... oh my god. I totally need to take you both around and show you everything. Please let me do that!"

"I have an apartment," Cerri muttered, looking all cute and bashful beside me. "Just haven't been there yet."

"I'd like to see your apartment," I told her quietly.

Her gaze flicked up to meet mine. "I um... I figured... well, I hadn't actually asked yet but... wait, have I asked yet?"

"Asked if she wants to live with you?" Turshie asked, tilting her head. "I know that you've practiced asking her in the mirror but—"

"Turshie!" Cerri squeaked with eyes wide. "You're not meant to say that! Why were you even watching me do that?"

"Oh..." the ship's AI murmured, then louder, "Oh crud. Sorry! I was just confused! You were saying the same thing over and over... I was curious."

Without a second thought, I took Cerri's hand and tugged gently on it. When she met my eyes, I smiled up at her. "Of course. That would be really fun. I've never lived with someone who I actually chose to live with before. Even if it's just in virtual reality now."

"You will?" She asked, a grin blooming across her lips. "You will!"

With a joyous laugh, she hugged me. "Thank you! I've been so nervous to go and see the digital city, but if you were there... it wouldn't be so intimidating."

Anything for you, Cerri. Anything.

It took us two weeks to get the new ship back into working order, which was actually a hell of a lot less time than I had been expecting. The speed of the whole operation was almost entirely down to the engineering of the long dead aliens who had built the thing.

Imagine if a drydock crew treated a spaceship the same way a master bladesmith might treat the one sword he makes every two years. That's what this ship felt like. A piece of art as much as it was a vessel of war.

The biggest breakthrough in our quest to make the ship ergonomically functional for us humans was when Turshie bounced happily onto the reactor console display.

"Aliaaa," she trilled, grinning widely. "Guess what I found!"

I let out a little micro-squeak of fright, but quickly covered it by asking, "What did you find?"

"Aren't you meant to guess?" Turshie laughed. "That's how the saying goes, right?"

"Uh, no..." I said, shaking my head. "It probably meant that way back in the day, but it's just a turn of phrase now."

"Oh," she huffed. "That's lame. Will you guess anyway?"

"Um..." I didn't really feel like playing any guessing games. I'd just finished installing a new suite of sensors on the reactor and everything ached because of it. If we ever made it back to civilisation, I was getting some artificial muscles installed, along with bones strong enough to handle them. This ship had been made by a species that was obviously taller and stronger than humans, and it even showed in the weight of the components it was constructed from.

A pout formed on Turshie's animated face. "Fine. I was all excited but now I'm just... ah whatever, you'll still bounce around when I tell you."

I let out a laugh. "Oh my goodness, are you going to tell me or not?"

"I found an alien version of a fabrication engine!" she told me, her voice lowering to an excited whisper. "It's an industrial one too!"

My eyes must have looked completely round as joy and surprise intermingled within me. "Where? We searched the whole ship! How did you find it?"

"Well, the records are all... funky," Turshie said, beginning to pace back and forth across



the screen. “The alien AI tried to give it all to me, but it sort of prioritised the integrity of some data over others. I have virtually nothing to tell you about who these aliens were or why they were fighting the weird cyborg zombies, but it made *dang* sure I got the manual for this ship.”

“Okay,” I said, smiling to let her know I was following along.

“Well, despite the care that was put into making this thing, it looks like the ship was standard issue,” she continued as a whiteboard sprung up behind her. She began to use it to illustrate what she was telling me. “This ship is... well it translates to Valiance Class Frigate. The manual says there should be a big fabrication engine in the lower hold.”

“But there isn’t,” I finished, tapping a wrench on bundit’s hull for emphasis.

“Yeah... but there’s like, hundreds of these ships nearby, all broken and busted up,” Turshie said, grinning. “A scan showed that there’s a... well, a hunk of another Valiance out there nearby. It looks like the fab in there is still intact.

“Oh,” I marvelled, impressed by her thinking there. Well, that and kicking myself for not thinking of the simple idea to go and find another one in the wreck. “That’s smart thinking, Turshie.”

She shook her head wryly. “It wasn’t me. I was talking to Gloria and she had the idea when I was... well, babbling about random stuff. I can’t remember, but I must have mentioned how we were missing a fab.”

“Cute,” I giggled. The idea of Gloria dealing with a scatterbrained Turshie was just way too adorable.

“Yeah... Gloria is...” she mumbled, before her image went still.

“Let’s find the fab, shall we?” I asked, when it was obvious she wasn’t going to continue her sentence.

“Yes,” she said quietly, without her normal upbeat Turshie persona. “You’ll need to upgrade the thrusters on bundit. I think it’s the only craft we have right now that can move.”

“I wonder if there’s any alien tech I can use,” I said, pondering the large pile of alien gear that we’d collected into a bin nearby.

Turshie didn’t sound convinced. “That seems sketchy. Do you want me to get Cerri?”

“What else am I going to upgrade bundit with?” I joked, spreading my arms to show the jumble of junk in the room. “It’s not like I packed an extra set of thrusters and *didn’t* put them on my mech.”

“Oh... right,” she replied, grinning sheepishly. “That makes sense. Still, Cerri’s been studying all the tech and well, yeah. Probably best to talk to her.”

“You really want me to get her help on this, huh?” I teased, wondering what her angle was here.

She performed a very energetic, almost aggressive nod. “Yes, because if something goes wrong and you blow up the ship, then I won’t have a body in DG anymore.”

“Who says I’m going to blow up the ship?” I sputtered.

“Murphy does.”

“Murphy?” I blinked. “Oh... right. Yeah.”

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Half an hour later and Cerri and I were standing in one of the ship’s many cargo holds, staring at the mountain of random alien stuff we’d collected. When we’d arrived on the ship, it had apparently been abandoned in a hurry. Shit had been strewn across the place and very little of the objects we’d found had made sense to us.

So those of the crew that weren’t needed to get the ship’s systems working had instead spent their time documenting and categorising everything we’d found. The information, observations, photos, and videos we’d taken would be worth a massive amount of cash back in civilised space. That is, so long as we went about this as scientifically as possible.

“So, those suits over there have some low-power thrusters on them,” Cerri said, indicating what we had earlier discovered to be space suits.

We still didn’t know what the original owners of the ship looked like, but their suits indicated they had two arms, two legs, and a head. The resemblance to humanity grew fuzzy from there on, however. Their bodies were sort of flat, like a badger or something, with stubby legs and big paw hands to complete the look. In fact, now that I looked at them like that, they really did seem like they might be badger shaped.

“I don’t think strapping even more attitude thrusters to bundit will do much,” I replied,

scratching absently behind one ear. Nobody ever talked about how itchy it was to have fur, even in only a few select places.

My whole body froze in place when Cerri moved to stand behind me, arms rising into a position where she could both press herself to my back while also scratching behind my ears. I waited for some sort of explanation, why she'd just casually done something that felt so intimate, and yet she seemed completely oblivious to it.

"I did find some alien exosuit things in the smaller machine shop," she told me, letting one of my ears go so she could point to a mess of random mechanical parts. "I think they have proper thrusters on them."

I couldn't reply, even if I'd wanted to. Whatever thoughts I'd had of upgrading bundit were nothing but scattered dust before the gale force wind of emotion roiling in my heart. Holy moly, did she not even realise what she was doing to me?

*Cerri*, I typed, just barely managing to get the thought commands to coalesce. *You're frying my brain.*

She gave a start and stepped away from me, blurting, "Fuck, I'm sorry! I just... I'm sorry! I didn't think, I just wanted to..."

Turning to face her, I found myself caught in the magnetic pull of my growing love for her. I stepped up to her and threaded my arms carefully around her neck.

Her eyes widened and a small gasp escaped her lips. "Alia?"

*Why won't you... you know?* I asked shyly. *I'm too much of a scaredy cat to... yeah. Cerri, please.*

She gulped, still staring down at me with something like fear in her lovely dark eyes. "I... I... um... it's because... I mean, I can't. I don't... control is hard..."

*None of that made any sense*, I sighed, feeling my heart wilt and waver.

Her lips quivered, refusing to open. When her eyes closed and her head dipped towards mine, my heart stopped. It was done, dead in my chest due to pure shock. She didn't kiss me though, instead, her forehead landed gently against mine.

*I'm scared*, She told me, resorting to text now as well.

*Scared of me?* I asked tentatively.

She shook her head gently against mine. No. *Scared of... history repeating itself. Scared of myself.*

*Why?*

*Because I am... this is really embarrassing, but please don't laugh because yes, it is amusing, but it is also very serious to me.*

I squeezed her tight. *I'm listening. Ah... no, I'm reading. You know.*

She giggled, then growled gently. *Don't make me laugh.*

*Well, I'm not trying to!*

Her hair was up in a cute messy bun that left lots of fluffy bits on the back of her neck for me to play with. That's what I was doing when her message came in.

*My last... and first, and only relationship... it was with Gloria. She and I... well, she expressed interest in me, as she did with you in the early days. But it was me who took things beyond flirting. I didn't know... it was so much to process, being like that with someone.*

I gave an encouraging nod and stayed still while she typed everything out in her mind's eye. I'd suspected, about her and Gloria, but it was nice to have confirmation.

*I've done so much thinking, ever since. Trying to understand what happened. Just bear with me. I know I'm still very naive about things now. Imagine what I was like... back then. Imagine growing up to the age of nineteen without ever taking physical form. I don't have to, because that's exactly what happened with me. I was far more interested in numbers and knowledge. It took Gloria to draw me out.*

"I can relate, sort of," I whispered, pulling a hand back to stroke soothingly at her cheek.

*I know. I wouldn't even try to explain all of this to someone like, Roger, for example.*

"Well, I'm all ears," I said, lips quirking into a smile. "Well, at least like... twenty percent ears, anyway. By body weight."

That got another giggle out of her and I caught a swat from her tail in retaliation. "Anyway! Gloria realised that I was still very new to myself, to being anything other than an entity of science. She tried to keep her distance, but... she was so intriguing to me. I won't go into detail but... I practically jumped her. I guess that's why she thought it was so funny that I

picked a succubus as my form, in the end. It's rather fitting."

*Wait, are yo— I began, before accidentally hitting the send button as my train of thought caught up. So you're saying that you're scared of going anywhere with me because you'll like... you know. Gosh. Wow. I mean... ajdkghndsfkj. Okay.*

Swapping back to text, she continued to explain. *I know what I'm like when I let myself go, when I give in to the emotions of a moment like that. Then there's the fact that while for Gloria it was just about the sex, it was so much more than that for me. In the end, I had my heart broken. She and I are still friends obviously, but... I'm terrified of my friendship with you turning into nothing but... that. At least on your end.*

I began to type out a reply, but it would never get sent. We were interrupted by the sound of someone clearing their throat.

As if she had been summoned, our pilot's voice echoed into the cargo hold. "Uh... you two okay?"

Cerri and I leapt apart, both our faces instantly burning with fire. Gloria stood in the doorway, glancing warily between the two of us.

"We're fine," Cerri said, voice as tense as the steel cable on a wrecking ball. "We were just talking."

Gloria didn't look convinced. She placed a hand on her hip and raised an eyebrow at Cerri, whose tail was swishing from side to side in agitation. Okay, clearly I needed to defuse this situation.

"Mind to mind," I clarified quietly. "It's easier for me."

"Right," our pilot said, ponytail bobbing behind her as she nodded. "Well... do you mind if I get your help, Alia? That machine you made is packing a fit. It won't take long."

"Can't this wait?" Cerri asked, wilting slightly. "We were... nevermind. I'll keep looking for thrusters."

I fought the urge to go back to her side and comfort her. I wasn't sure she'd be okay with

it, right that moment. Maybe it would be best to take a breather from the intensity between us, let our heads settle a bit.

“Okay,” I said with a sigh. “I’ll be back as soon as I can, Cerri.”

She just nodded, already turning for the power suits in the corner. Her tail hung limp, the tip trailing through the faint dust on the floor. My heart. Seeing her like that was torture.

Gloria had to clear her throat again to get my attention, and I followed her silently from the room. Conversation remained absent until we got to her room and the door had slid shut.

She’d made an effort to decorate the place, some old pilot stuff was on the walls and the rear half of the room had been partitioned off by a curtain.

“My machine isn’t broken,” she told me, dumping herself into a big plush armchair. “But... look. I needed to talk to you. I thought at first, that you two were really just friends and stuff. Two awkward, touch starved girls gravitating towards each other—”

“Gloria,” I interrupted, too tired to overthink every single word that came out of my mouth. “Thanks, but why is it any of your business?”

Her mouth fell open. “Uh... what?”

I shrugged. She knew what I meant, she was just processing what I’d said.

“Because she’s... she’s my friend, because you’re my friend,” she replied, and surprisingly she didn’t seem angry at my interruption.

“You’re also her ex,” I stated dryly.

She winced. “Sort of.”

“Can I go?” This was so fucking awkward.

“I’m just trying to look out for you,” she blurted, standing up again. My eyes tracked her as she paced back and forth, eyes darting around as she spoke. “Cerri is... a lot to deal with, and you’re so small, so shy... She’s in her mid twenties, you know that right?”

Something about the situation clicked with me, and I let out a startled laugh. “Wait... wait, wait, wait. Wait. Gloria, I’m twenty seven.”

Her jaw hit the floor for a second time and her pacing stopped like she'd walked into a wall. "Oh."

"You were hitting on me, back when we first got on the ship," I pointed out, raising an eyebrow. Goodness, wasn't I being the picture of verbal communication right now. I was impressed with myself.

"Yeah, and then I realised... well, I thought you were young!" she exclaimed, throwing her arms up in the air. "You originally made that really small, cute little character. Then you aged yourself up a bit and got even smaller, then... fuck, I was honestly just teasing. I flip flopped on it and then settled on the idea that you must be like, eighteen or something. You're seriously *twenty seven*?"

"Yeah," I giggled, my tail swishing back and forth in amusement. "I was an investment consultant for a major corporate conglomerate up until I started playing this game. Fired, actually."

She snorted, staring at me in amazement. "Well shit. Okay, clearly you can handle yourself then."

"I can't," I smiled sheepishly. "I really *really* can't, but that's besides the point. I really like Cerri. She's... she means a lot to me these days."

"I can tell," Gloria agreed, and held her hands up in surrender. "Sorry for getting nosy, I just wanted to make sure you weren't being taken advantage of or whatever. Sorry."

"Cerri wouldn't do that," I frowned. Would she?

Gloria nodded. "She wouldn't intentionally, but that girl is wild when she gets you with your clothes off, and she doesn't have a whole lot of experience in social settings. People aren't her area of expertise."

"Are you sure you aren't perhaps letting your, um... your past involvement with her colour your perception?" I asked cautiously.

She flopped back down in the chair again and groaned, covering her face with her hands for a second. "I don't know. You're right, I'm too tangled up in this to be any help. You can go... just promise me you'll look after her, okay? She doesn't trust me anymore, but I still give a shit about her. Platonically, of course."

"Of course," I told her, surprising both of us with the force of my conviction. More quietly, I added, "I've fallen for her so hard."

It was the raw truth too. Even now I ached to be back at her side, to just exist in her presence. God, I really loved her.

Gloria's expression shifted at my words, forming into a bittersweet smile. "Lucky."

"What do you mean?" I asked, tilting my head.

"Ah, it's nothing," she told me, forcing the bitter from her smile. "Not jealousy, at least not for Cerri. Just something else. Don't worry about it."

Even my socially incompetent ass could see that for the blaring red siren that it was, but I held my tongue. I was very emotionally drained now, and all I wanted to do was rush back to Cerri.

"Okay," I said, stepping back towards the door. "Let me know if you need someone to listen though. My ears are very big, so I'm extra good at listening to people's problems."

She laughed, a big genuine thing that set my mind at ease. "Okay then, fluffy. Off you go. Sorry for interrupting and all that."

I rushed back through the ship like my tail was on fire, hoping to make it back to the cargo hold before Cerri ran away. I know that I wouldn't hang around for too long if our positions were reversed. Anxiety would be eating me alive.

Bursting through the door, I almost ran right into her as she was doing exactly what I'd feared.

She hesitated when she saw who was blocking her exit, but a moment later and I'd thrown myself into her arms. I was *not* going to let this get awkward.

Cuddling in close, I felt my urgency wane, replaced by an overwhelming sense of rightness. This was where I belonged. My place. Even if she wasn't hugging me back right now.

"Cerri," I murmured, voice barely audible. "Cerri."

I was just saying her name for the joy of it, to be honest, but she took it as a question. "Yes? What happened? What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," I said happily.



That seemed to confuse her. “What, but... huh? You rushed off after Gloria?”

“She was just being dumb,” I said. “It doesn’t matter. What matters now is that you need to know something.”

“What do I need to know?” she asked, her voice going small and vulnerable. “Alia, what’s going on?”

I just needed to tell her. I needed her to know absolutely. I could do this.

Stepping back, I had to clutch at my tail in an effort to steady my nerves. Eyes on the ground, I took a deep breath.

Nothing came out. My voice box remained maddeningly inert. Panic began to set in, finally catching up with all the big heavy talks that had all just happened. My brows knit together, a frown for the ages. Whatever, I didn’t need my stupid fucking voice box anyway. I was perfectly functional without it.

*Cerri, I really like you, both as a friend and... well, more. Pressing send on the message took an age, at least subjectively. It was probably only a few seconds in reality. Once I had, though, the floodgates opened. I need to tell you that I’m like super confused and I’m a mess and like oh my god I have no idea what these feelings even mean really. Fuck I’m 27 years old and I have no experience with this shit. I don’t know how you feel, and I don’t think it matters right now because I honestly just want you to know that what I’m feeling exists so that you know you’re loved.*

“Loved?” she squeaked, hands white-knuckled as she clutched at her own tail.

I cringed inwards on myself when I realised that yeah, I had used that word at the end of my rambling. *It seemed important for you. To, you know... to know that. I’m trying to say that I’m your friend, at the very least, but like... god it feels like so much more than that. I don’t have a name to put on it. There’s no label that works in my head. I just really care about you. Like, lots and lots.*

Her chest was going crazy, her breathing all erratic and fast. Her tail looked more purple at the end, past where her hands were cutting off circulation. I still couldn’t look up at her though, I still couldn’t meet her eyes. God, I was half feral with fear right then. I think my breathing was coming in at a rate even higher than hers. I knew that I was like 99% in my own head right then, useless thoughts crashing around inside my digital skull at speeds that would break the sound barrier.

“Okay,” she said, voice strangled. “Ah... um... yes. I... um. I mean, yeah. I sort of guessed... not that I’m a good judge of that kind of thing. Yes. I believe that I am too

emotional right now to be functional. Goodness, I'm not used to this, not at all."

I nodded, my head bouncing up and down like a bobblehead in a stormchaser's truck.  
"Me too."

"May I... may I hold you again?" she blurted, dropping her tail. "I'm not sure that anything more I say will be entirely coherent. No, not coherent... I am very much struggling to expel... I mean place... Agh! I am struggling to put my thoughts and emotions into... no, not that. To say... to..."

I fell back into her arms like a felled tree. "Words," I said, nodding in sage agreement as I nestled my head in under her chin.

"Words," she agreed, wrapping me up in her quivering, eager arms.

Rather than confront the terrifying and alluring sparks that were flying between us, Cerri and I decided to get back to work. It took... well, an hour or two before either of us could scrape together enough coherency to actually get anything done... but hey, we tried.

The exosuits that Cerri had found earlier proved to be exactly what we were looking for. Designed with long ranged EVA in mind, they had powerful plasma thrusters that we could appropriate for Bundit's use.

We ran into teething problems when it came to getting the alien tech to work with my human-built mech, but Turshie came to the rescue with a manual. Well, I say manual, but really it was like the whole design blueprint for the things. We'd be able to make more of them for ourselves eventually.

What finally slammed us back into our heads was when I made an idle comment to Cerri while I abused some gimbal joints.

"Imagine if we had these things out in reality," I said, pointing to the little thrusters that she was currently disembowelling.

A clattering noise caused me to jerk my head up. She sat there at the worktable, staring at me with her mouth hanging open like I'd just stripped naked.

“Say that again.” She demanded.

Okay... what was going on here? “Um... it would be cool if we had these little plasma thrusters back in reality? Because the ones we have are big and shitty and dirty?”

In a rush, she grabbed at her tablet and frantically opened the blueprints to the plasma thrusters we were looking on. She was staring at them with so much intensity that I thought she might burn a hole in the poor slate of glass.

“Aalliaa,” she said slowly, still looking at her tablet. “Come here?”

“Um, okay?”

I did as she asked, standing up from the work desk and wandering over to hers. We were using the smaller machine shop that was situated below the main engine room, because we didn’t want to explode anything and damage the strange alien reactor.

“Look at this and tell me what you see,” she told me, pulling up the overall diagram for the little thruster.

It was just a blueprint, complicated but I could still make out all the components and stuff. Give me all the right tools and I could make this thing up from scratch.

“I don’t see anything weird,” I said after a minute of inspecting the plans. “What should I be seeing?”

“That’s just it,” she said excitedly. “DG didn’t have the tech or the scientific theory far enough to simulate this kind of thing. It hadn’t been invented yet. You should see hand-wavium on the plans somewhere, some place where you put some sort of magic material that makes the whole thing work. *But it’s not there.*”

“Wait... why isn’t it there?” I gasped, grabbing the tablet completely out of her hands. I flicked away and onto the blueprints for the big engines we used to have on the old Turshen. Sure enough, there it was, right in the middle. A component simply labelled *engine components*.

“Want to know my theory?” she asked, eyes all bright and shining.

I was almost breathless when I nodded. “Yes?!”

“Whatever happened to the DG simulation, it’s changed... perfected,” she explained with a quiet, animated intensity. “This design was generated *after* the jump from our servers.

It's the real deal. In fact, I think it's safe to say this could be replicated back out in the real world. Not just that, but if my hypothesis is true, it tells us that the simulation is still a simulation."

"Wait, how?" I asked while I looked around for a chair. We'd been sitting far enough apart to keep ourselves from getting distracted, but now things were getting way too interesting to have this conversation from such a distance.

While I grabbed my chair, she continued to ramble excitedly. "Well, because if it weren't a simulation, that design you just pulled up would be real too. It's still functioning on the rules that DG was created with. We'd have heard if all the engines in the game suddenly stopped working. Players would be burning down the game in anger. They aren't though, so that means that the old rules still apply."

"I'm guessing that DG didn't *actually* simulate the whole galaxy then?" I asked with a grin. "Cos your friends claimed otherwise."

"Of course not!" she grinned. "Well, no that's not true. It simulated the big stuff, the stars burning and spinning, planets orbiting. It did that, but nothing as granular as the design for those thrusters. That would have been generated on demand."

"Wow, okay so... all this alien tech we have around us... it's *real*?" I breathed, staring around in wonder. "At least, in a certain sense."

"Anything and everything that's discovered outside of the human sphere, it will be replicable back in the real world, yeah," she said, wiggling excitedly in her chair. "Human tech in the game is all designed using the hand-wavium."

"This is so cool!" I said, smiling into her bright, gorgeous eyes.

"I can't wait to tell the others," she said, bouncing out of her chair and heading for the door.

In an instant, a whole host of things occurred to me and I grabbed her arm to keep her here. "Cerri, wait!"

"What?"

"We can't tell anyone, not yet," I said sadly, hating to rain on her parade. Cerri was all about the science, about discovery and learning without any other motivation than the simple joy of it. It made me love her just that much more, knowing what a good person she was. Unfortunately, not everyone was the same.

“Cerri, sit down?” I asked gently, pointing to the chair. “We need to be smart. If this tech gets into the wrong hands... everything the Exodus group is trying to achieve could go up in flames.”

“Oh,” she mumbled, slumping into her seat again. “Bugger.”

I raised an eyebrow at her. “Digital Exodus is secure, right?”

“Yes, extremely,” she nodded. “You’re technically a part of it now. We registered you, at least.”

“Okay, so we can probably tell the higher-ups what we’ve just figured out, but I want to take this one step further,” I mused, thinking on my feet. “We have a lot of advantages here if we do this right. I think we should patent this design, for starters.”

“But won’t that announce to the world that we’ve just come up with a crazy new thruster design?” she frowned, pulling the tablet out of my hands again to look at it.

“Nope, and you can thank blind capitalist greed for that,” I said with a triumphant smile. “The patent registry of the UN is one hundred percent automated. Not even AI are used in it, and they probably never will, now that we know they can become people. It’s all private, only the name of the patent and the number. Any new patent that gets submitted is scanned against the database to determine if it’s too similar to one that is already registered.”

“So we could claim ownership of this...” Cerri mused. “That seems a little greedy.”

“Only if we profit off it,” I shrugged. “The idea is to claim it before anyone else figures it out, that way we can protect it from use by other private parties. Then we can give it to the Exodus at a more leisurely pace. Obviously if the UN gets wind of this, they’ll just seize it, but there’s not really a whole lot we can do about that.”

That had her nodding along with a thoughtful expression. “Okay. Yeah, and we can just tell everyone that we want to snap up all the alien tech for sale back in human space, within the game.”

“Right, but then we actually patent it all for the Exodus,” I agreed.

As I spoke, I realised that my tail had found hers again and the two of them had gently wrapped themselves around each other. It was like they had minds of their own, I swear.

Cerri’s enthusiasm had been dampened, but she sprung back to life when another idea

struck her. “Oh my god, Alia! We get to design EVA power armour for the guys! Power armour and some shuttles! We’ll need to retrofit one of the cargo bays to be a small hanger, and then... this is exciting.”

“Oh, for exploration?” I gasped, also excited now. That sounded like *so much* fun.

“Yes!” she laughed, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. “Back to work?”

“Definitely.”

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It took us another day to get all the thrusters hooked up to bundit and working properly. Then the next day, after a few quick test flights, I was ready to go out in search of the Fab.

The new thrusters were attached to a sort of extra brace thing that was in turn hooked up to Bundit. I had a little button to release the whole harness if something went wrong and I needed to yeet the rig in a hurry. I hoped it didn’t come to that, but you never knew with this kind of jury-rigging.

“Okay,” Cerri said from the other side of the airlock door. “Round-trip, this should only take you about twelve hours, but we’ve packed you enough food for two days. Are you sure you’ll be okay in that cramped little mech for that long?”

“Are you kidding me?” I laughed. “It’s practically going to be a holiday by my standards.”

She let out an exasperated little chuckle. “You really are like a small animal. Always cramming yourself into little holes that the rest of us would find claustrophobic.”

I almost choked on air when she said it, and I froze, expecting her to complete the joke. She didn’t, though. Instead, it appeared she didn’t get the innuendo. Goodness gracious, she really was a terrible succubus. Maybe I’d get to help her learn... some day.

Shaking my head to clear it of dirty thoughts, I just smiled and said, “See you soon, Cerri. Well, apart from being connected to you by the network the whole time.”

“Plus helping to design these new exo-suits so we can print them when you get the fab here,” she said wryly. “It won’t really feel like you’re gone anyway.”

Neither of us mentioned that we wouldn’t be able to snuggle up to each other while we did our design work, but it was sort of implied at this point.

“Yeah,” I agreed, wishing bundit was big enough to fit her in it too. “OKay, I’m going to head out. Wish me luck!”

“I’m coming up on the hulk now,” I said into the main comms channel. “It’s all twisted up, looks like it was melted.”

“A lot of the wrecks look like that,” Cerri replied absently. “Must have been some pretty crazy weaponry they blasted each other with.”

She wasn’t wrong. A good number of the wrecks were nothing but metal spaghetti, especially further along in the planet’s orbit. The one I was aiming for was about at the edge of that zone. Everything behind me was more conventionally blasted to bits.

God, space was beautiful though. People always talk about how dark space is, how black it is and all that. Really though, it was actually super bright compared to that. I guess that was down to most people seeing it through an atmosphere full of light pollution. Out here though, it shone with little twinkling pinpricks of light, billions and billions of them. Like Cerri’s eyes and horns.

On a whim, I flicked a private message to her, *I’m having a hard time figuring something out.*

Her reply came in swiftly. *Hmm? What is it?*

*What has more stars in it, space, or your eyes?*

This time, I heard her stifle a giggle on the open comms. *Alia!*

A grin spread over my face and I had to bury my face in my tail for a few moments to keep from squealing. *What? Are you blushing? Just so we’re clear, I really like your eyes. Did you make them like that for the game?*

*Stooooop! You’re meant to be the shyer one! Why are you... no. Stop. Stop. Stop. Stop.*

*Cute.* I was smiling so hard it hurt. I really liked Cerri.

*Hmph. I made them like this before, actually. I really like space. It was part of the reason*

*why Gloria was able to convince me to come and play this game. The horns and tail were added in character creation though.* I could see her smiling on the video feed as she typed it out by hand on a datapad. Her tail was doing this thing where it curled and twisted like it was dancing. Did that mean she was happy?

The screen flickered for a moment, jerking me back to the task at hand. Yes, space was beautiful, but it was also dangerous. Only a thin shell of various materials kept me from dying a painful death.

“I have about one kilometer left,” I said, reporting back again. “Can’t see the fab from out here but... I think I can see a way inside on my cameras.”

“Alia, do you have any weird electromagnetic readings on your side?” Warren asked suddenly.

I frowned and pulled up Bundit’s sensor readout. “Nope, not seeing anythin—“

As soon as I began to speak, light flashed across my view screens. What the fuck, what the fucking fuck? A massive... no, a *gargantuan* arc of electricity had just flickered silently between two nearby hulks. A moment later and another bolt snapped between two different hulks further away.

“Nevermind!” I exclaimed, staring out at the light show with growing awe and fear. “I don’t know how or why, but there’s *lightning* outside.”

“We saw that too,” Cerri said, voice strained but calm. “Get to the wreck as quick as you can. We don’t want one of those strikes to use you as its target.”

“Now we know why everything looks melted,” David commented dryly.

I shook my head, even if he couldn’t see it. “No, the damage to the ships looks different from what lightning would do. Those wrecks should also be mostly insulated from electricity. They wouldn’t get very far into space if they weren’t.”

“Then why are they currently conducting electricity?” he asked curiously.

“Well, not *all* of the ship will be,” I said. From what I knew, a good portion of the ships from the badger aliens was built out of non-conductive material, but I wasn’t sure about the cyborg zombies. “I’m guessing it’s flickering between support beams and stuff.”

“There shouldn’t even *be* lightning out there,” Cerri muttered, sounding more and more stressed as she spoke. “Lightning can’t travel through a vacuum unless there’s some



pretty wacky shit going on.”

“Does a slight but detectable atmosphere count as wacky?” Warren asked in a high pitched squeak. “Because that’s what our sensors are telling us.”

Wait what? I turned back to my own sensor panel in a hurry to find that yes, there was an atmosphere out there. As thin as my tolerance for big parties, but it was there. Hold on... it wasn’t just *there*. It was getting denser by the second.

“It’s getting thicker,” I said, tapping away on the screen to get more detailed readings. “I’m reading... fifty five percent nitrogen, thirty one percent oxygen, eight percent helium, and a mix of like five other gasses.”

“That’s what we’re getting too,” Cerri said, to the backing track of furious screen tapping. “It’s increasing in density at a massive rate. Pressure out there will be at Earth normal in approximately ten minutes. What the fuck is happening?”

“The atmospheric composition matches the default for the Turshen II, why?” Warren mused to himself.

“Either way, I’m making for the hulk as fast as I can.” I wasn’t going to nerd out while I was still one roll of fate’s dice away from frying.

Slamming the accelerator, I was kicked back into my seat by the force of the new alien thrusters all firing at once. In moments, I was gasping for air, but I didn’t slow down. At any moment, a bolt of lightning could choose me as its next grounding target.

By the time I’d reached the relative safety of the hulk, more weirdness was going on outside. Namely, clouds. They were billowing up into existence out of sheer nothingness, like one giant middle finger to everything we understood of physics. They were angry and dark, and if they had existed in a gravity well, I’d assume that rain was coming. Out here though, they just swirled and bubbled, their strange dancing movements lit from within by the flash of lightning.

I could hear thunder now too, the atmosphere outside more than enough to transmit sound now. I’d lived through a lot of thunderstorms in my day, but it was downright eerie to have orbital scales of space illustrated via the pause between flash and thunder.

Decelerating to avoid blowing past the hulk almost knocked me out, the little gravity plate inside Bundit overwhelmed by the force put out by the new engines.

Still, I raced inside the wreck on all fours and hid myself within its dark, ghostly confines. I probably shouldn’t have been thinking about spooky things, because when a shadow

slowly drifted across the path of my floodlights, I straight up screamed.

"What's wrong, Alia?" Cerri asked, sounding tense with worry.

I coughed and sputtered for a moment as I simultaneously took long calming breaths and tried to figure out what I was looking at.

It was a figure, frozen and inert as it drifted slowly through the dark interior I found myself in. Wait, no way...

"Dead badger alien," I finally replied, staring in awe. "One of the crew of this ship, I think. It gave me a fright."

"We can't see it," she replied anxiously. "The video feed crapped out about half a minute ago. Connection strength is failing due to the storm, I think."

"Fuck, that really isn't good. Are we sure the Turshen will be alright?" I asked, suddenly aware of the fact that we had no idea if it could withstand a hit from a massive bolt of lightning.

Planetside storms were one thing, but some of these lightning strikes were hundreds of kilometers long and like several dozen meters wide. Hell, the force of the sound waves might be enough to shake things loose.

"We don't know, this kind of thin—" the line went dead in the middle of her sentence.

Instantly, panic slammed into me like a kick to the chest. Had they just exploded? Did something happen?

Then something else occurred to me. Hold on, Bundit had FTL communication equipment! How the hell was a *storm* messing with that? It shouldn't even factor into the signal strength!

*Alia?? Are you okay??* Cerri's message popped into my HUD via the FTLN, outside the game.

***Alia:*** *Yes, I'm okay! Are you all still there?*

***Cerridwen:*** *Yes. Nothing's wrong on our end.*

***Alia:*** *How is the FTL comms down?? Shouldn't that be impervious to electromagnetic*

*fuckery?*

**Cerridwen:** *The storm is only a byproduct. The alien aether sensors are showing intense activity on the other side. The aether is going nuts. Power is fluctuating all over the ship. It looks like the aliens knew about this type of phenomenon though, because the ship's systems are getting it under control automatically. Reactor is in safe mode, less power and the containment chamber is working overtime to keep the reaction separate from the storm.*

**Alia:** *Okay. So long as you're safe.*

**Cerridwen:** *Are you okay too? What's happening on your end?*

**Alia:** *I'm fine. Just hiding inside the hulk. Visibility is crap with these clouds. I might try to find the fab while I wait for this to die down. Assuming it does, of course.*

**Cerridwen:** *If you die, I'm quitting the game.*

**Alia:** *No you're not. We'll find each other again ingame and hang out in VR whenever we can.*

Rather than reply, she sent me a selfie that she probably thought was showing a grumpy, unhappy expression. Really though, it was just a cute pout. I was so lucky to have her in my life.

We exchanged a few more messages, but she had to concentrate on keeping the ship in one piece so she had to go in the end. As for me... I took stock of my situation. I had food for a few days, plus water. The oxygen recycler would probably give out first, I hadn't changed the filter in a while. Gah, my laziness was coming back to bite me. At least the atmosphere outside was breathable, although I'd probably get high off the increased oxygen content.

For now, I guess I'd just stay inside the hulk and do my job. That seemed like a safer bet. Probably. Maybe. We'll see.

I followed the blueprints of the Turshen like they were a map, but unfortunately the map wasn't entirely accurate. No, that wasn't right. The map was accurate, but this ship was different to the standardised blueprints that we'd downloaded from the Turshen II.

Little changes like where a doorway was, or how many rooms were crammed into a given area, it all combined into a layout that confused me. It was like walking through a nightmare version of our new home. The faint mist that was coalescing within the dark hallways didn't help either.

I had to wonder if this craziness was due to code that had been made before or after the simulation went missing. Surely this kind of thing was put into the game on purpose, right?

Another alien body drifted gently in front of the hulk's ancient machine shop. At least we knew what the aliens looked like now.

This one was easily three times my height, and it was probably another Alia-length wide too. It wore a faded grey jumpsuit that zipped up the front. A strangely familiar piece of clothing, to be honest. Who knew that shipboard fashion between our two species would be so similar?

What fascinated me the most though, was their resemblance to badgers. I wasn't joking when I called them that earlier. Well, extremely large badgers anyway. With opposable thumbs and less claw. I imagine they probably trimmed them like we do with our fingernails.

After a few moments of admiring the poor, dead space badger, I nudged its body out of the way and shone a light into the dark interior of the machine shop.

There it was, right in the middle of the room. Massive and rectangular, it dominated the space like some sort of ancient slumbering behemoth from Earth's past. It actually had stubby mechanical legs on it too, now that I looked closely. I guess so they could move it around?

Only one question... how did I fit it through the door?

That question was quickly ejected from my thoughts as the hulk suddenly shuddered. Frozen in place like a terrified mouse, I peered warily out of Bundit's many cameras as the sundered hunk of spaceship creaked and groaned.

When the dragon had safely slipped back into slumber, I got to moving again, but carefully now. I had a bad feeling about all of this. My tail was all bushy and agitated, while my ears were twitching and swiveling like little radar dishes. All telltale signs that my subconscious had picked up on something that my waking mind hadn't noticed yet.

It didn't help that there were giant dessicated dead badgers floating around everywhere. Creepiest shit I'd ever experienced.

Slowly, I began an inspection of the fabricator, checking to see if it was broken or whatever. A visual once-over produced nothing of note, so I moved over to the control panel and tapped it gently with one of Bundit's manipulators.

At first there was no response, but in a second or two it had grumbled to life and was happily telling me to go fuck myself. Right, no connection to Turshie meant that I couldn't get permissions with the grumpy machine.

Trying to push it towards the door caused it to clamp itself to the floor with some sort of locking mechanism and spit out an angry growl. Yes, a literal growl. I guess that was badger for, "Fuck off, thieving scum."

A slow, malicious smile crept onto my face as I stared down the belligerent hunk of scrap. Alrighty then, the hard way it was.

Bundit's plasma saw made short work of the decking plate below the fab, and in short order I was floating a hissing lump of machinery towards a very recently renovated doorway.

I pushed the fab out of the room and into the corridor beyond, then followed it. The mysterious clouds had reached some sort of equilibrium and were no longer growing in density, but that didn't exactly provide any comfort. It was still plenty hard to see through.

Plus, the fab was still squealing away impotently and while it had been vaguely amusing when I was detaching it from the hulk, it made me nervous now. Something wasn't right.

Passing an open doorway into a dark room, my heart leapt into my throat as a shadow moved within it.

Bundit's guns came up, trained with precision that only an AI could muster, but nothing materialized. Had I imagined it?

Stepping carefully forward, I shone a headlamp inside. I sighed a breath of relief when I saw a blanket hanging in zero g. I could see the way the shadow had played across the back wall, making me think there had been movement. Jesus, this was so creepy without the others to talk to.

Other than the incident with the blanket, I made it all the way through to the massive hole used as an entrance. The machine had also stopped screaming when I kicked it, which was nice.

Of course, now I was staring out into a void of swirling stormcloud. I had no idea what direction to even go in, let alone a concrete idea of where the Turshen was. It's not like I

could just retrace my steps, considering I'd been relying on data from the ship to navigate.

Think, Alia, think. You're a smart lop-eared fox girl. You can do it.

Maybe I should just wait out the crazy space storm? The lightning had died down at least, although I could still see flashes every now and then in the distance. Wait—

My blood ran cold.

Something was out there.

I'd only caught a glimpse of it when lightning had thrown its silhouette against the clouds, but it was enough to realise two very terrifying facts. One, it was fucking huge, and two... it wasn't a ship. At least, I didn't know of a ship that bent and twisted like a living thing.

Another flash, and I saw that it wasn't just big, it was *long*. A spiraling, twisting tail reached back from the main body as it swam through the clouds beyond my hiding place.

Slowly, as though it might sense my mental movements, I typed out a message to Cerri. *There's something out there in the clouds. It's big, and it isn't a ship. It moves like... like a huge sea creature or something. It's swimming through the clouds.*

Her reply was short and urgent. *Stay there. This wasn't in the game's code. The devs are watching through Turshie's feed. They are alarmed.*

*Okay. Staying put. I have the fab.*

What in the fuck was going on? If this wasn't in the dev's code... then that meant that this might be... be real, right? Real in the same way that the alien blueprints might work out in reality?

My heartbeat was officially way too high right now, and it was deeply uncomfortable.

A moment later and another message came in from Cerri. This one didn't just chill me to the bone, it replaced my blood with ice.

*We bounced a quick radar pulse off the entity out there. It's huge, Alia. Readings are spotty but it appears to be at least eight kilometers long. Devs are again, stumped. Stay safe.*

Jesus christ. Eight kilometers long? What the fuck? Was it the reason the storm had appeared? It had to be, right?

As if to prove my hypothesis wrong, lightning smashed out from one of the hulks and into the huge creature. If I had thought the sounds of thunder were bad, its reactionary jump into aetherspace after getting shocked was cataclysmic.

Normally when a ship slipped into aetherspace, the hole it tore to get there was open for just the barest of moments.

This one lingered, as if anchored to the mundane realm by the storm.

From that rent in reality, chaos surged. Space bent and warped, twisting in ways that defied the three dimensions I was used to. The clouds of the storm began to twist and change, pockets of the stuff taking strange and primordial geometric patterns. They iterated on themselves with a frantic urgency until they collapsed under the weight of their own complexity, then they started the whole process over again.

It was like the very rules of the universe were changing as the patterning cloud behaviour rippled out from the jump point. Anarchy in its most raw, primal form.

The hole slammed shut before it could spread too far, but that in turn was another calamity. The explosion of the collapsing hole expanded in all directions, taking mere seconds to rip across the intervening space towards me.

I barely had time to send one, terrified word to Cerri before the maelstrom swept over me. *Help.*

Black, then white, then black again. My stomach lurched, vomit threatening, but then the sensation left me, evaporating like a sunshower.

Fractal images washed over my consciousness like a storm of broken glass. My life, the lives of people I didn't know, scenes from movies, I wasn't sure. Red and blue energy boiled around me, confusing because I was meant to be inside Bunit.

Addled, I tried to look around. It was dark. No wait, it wasn't. It was bright, brighter than white. It flipped, sizzling with dust and arcing with rage. Confusion, but not my own, then fear, buried deep within misunderstanding.

A lifetime of suffering passed me by like a dodged bullet, only to curve around for another go. The walls shuddered. When had the walls gotten there? Were they still walls when there was no floor and no ceiling? Something was trying to reach through, to take hold of the pearl that was me. Reality, elastic but impermeable, it kept the reaching at bay, even

as the reaching screamed and thrashed, desperate.

The reaching manifested claws, and it tore at reality, forcing its will over the chaos beyond, where I was floating, a star in the wind, a pearl dislodged.

They came for me, no longer held back by petty rules. Sharp and gentle, they brought pain and clarity.

I slammed back into myself with a gasp, nothing but stars within my vision. Then I fainted.

The first thing I became aware of when I began to regain consciousness was the sensation of warm breath tickling one of my ears. My senses gradually reignited from there, filling my body back out again.

I was in a bed, I think, with Cerri cuddled up against my back. Big spoon Cerri. I could tell it was her because... well, it just was. Her scent, the sound of her breathing, and even the way she held me. It was all her.

She was asleep, but shifting restlessly slightly every now and then.

"Alia!" She muttered, sounding worried. Sleep talking?

I tried to turn around and face her, but she responded by clutching me even harder to her chest. "Alia..."

She sounded really upset.

"Cerri?" I asked softly, reaching up and around to touch her face.

She twitched with the contact, then stirred and let out a mild sigh. I listened with awe pumping in my heart as she slowly woke from her nightmare. This was a person who'd never had a physical body, who'd been created out of buggy code, and yet here she was waking up from a bad dream. There was zero doubt as to her status as 'person'.

It took her a moment to realise I was awake, but when she did, all hell broke loose.

"Alia!" She cried happily. "You're awake?"



I nodded and took the opportunity to complete my turn to face her. "Yeah... where are we?"

"Onboard the Turshen," she said, her voice throbbing with emotion. "Oh god, Alia... I was so worried. Your neural activity went nuts, so bad that as your point of contact, I got a notification. Then it went flat, nothing. I thought... I thought you'd been wiped, or died, or something. I was so, so worried. Please... please tell me it's you in there."

I blinked, stunned. What, that had really happened? My memory gave a hiccup when I tried to recall what had happened after that weird explosion. I'd really gone blank? That was fucking terrifying.

"As far as I know," I told her. "How do we check?"

"I just did, sorry," she said sheepishly. "The emergency connection to your brain stack stays open until you close it."

"Oh," I murmured, processing everything she'd just explained. I guess I really should have asked more questions about how this digital human thing worked before I yeeted the meat sack, huh?

Moving spontaneously, Cerri pressed a delicate kiss to my forehead. "I was so worried," she whispered, lips still resting on my skin. "I'm never letting you out of my sight, ever again"

Warmth spread all throughout my body, electric and so very pleasant. She cared about me. The idea that someone cared about me that much...

"Cerri," I said, voice laden with emotion. I'd just said her name, but really I'd meant, *I love you, Cerri.*

"Alia," she replied softly, turning her head so her cheek pressed softly to the spot where her lips had been.

Rather than give voice to everything I was feeling, I asked, "What happened?"

She let out a long, exhausted sigh. "A lot."

Shuffling back so I could meet her eyes, I said, "Tell me what happened on your end, then I'll tell you what happened on mine?"

She puffed out her cheeks and glanced up at the ceiling for a moment. "Alright, uh... well,

when you sent the message about there being something in space that was huge, we started using all our sensors to try and get through the cloud somehow. Radar worked somewhat well, and we got that reading I told you about. After that, I found out that the new ship had *sonar* of all things, so we got an even better look with that.”

“Wait, what?” I blurted, surprised that sonar of all things had worked.

Despite my not specifying what part of her explanation had confused me, she still understood exactly what I was talking about. The way she was just instinctively on the same page as me... it made me so happy.

“It makes sense, if you think about it. The storm was fucking with everything else, but with an atmosphere to transmit sound waves, sonar worked just fine,” she said with a proud little smile.

“Anyway, um... that’s... that’s about when I got your last message,” she continued, voice going husky with emotion. “We detected the jump... the explosion afterwards. It was... I was so scared for you.”

“I’m safe now,” I told her soothingly. My heart ached for her, for the idea of her being upset.

She gave an erratic nod. “I know... I uh... well, the explosion did something to you. It did something to your actual self, scrambled and messed with your brain. When I got the emergency alert, I freaked out. Then when you didn’t come back... I followed you, rushed down the emergency link and tried to stabilise you, but it was a mess. God it was... it was like seeing a person after a really bad car crash. All I could do was hold all the bits of you together, I thought you were done for.”

“That happened?” I asked, suddenly feeling very, very small. That must have been so awful for her.

“Yes,” she gulped, closing her eyes for a moment. “You snapped back together a few microseconds later, but you wouldn’t wake up. So I logged back into DG and we searched for Bundit. Found you and the fab, then risked moving the Turshen to get you. We blew some of our normal-space thrusters but we got you. Since then I’ve... well I’ve been selfish. Hiding with your body in my room, waiting for you to wake up. It’s been... I don’t know, almost a day?”

“Awww, Cerri,” I murmured, pulling her close again. “Thanks for saving me.”

“I didn’t do anything,” she told me dejectedly. “I was panicking and just trying but nothing was working and...”

She started crying, voice choking up with emotion as she clutched at me desperately. “I’m responsible for you, I’m the one who gave you the DH package, I’m the one you... I’m the...”

“Hey, hey,” I whispered softly, gently into her ear. “Hey, I’m okay, it all worked out in the end. It’s fine. I’m here, Cerri. I’m here.”

Pulling her head down to my chest, I began to run my fingers through her hair. She was full on sobbing, her body shaking with the force of the fear she’d felt. Fear for me. It was humbling, to have someone in my life who gave that much of a shit about me.

My fingers found the base of her horns where they twisted up from her forehead, and I began to scratch there. If it was anything like my ears, it’d get annoyingly itchy there. Probably because it was hard for external objects to rub against it and dislodge dead skin and such. Wait... no, Alia, that’s gross. Don’t think about that, even if it’s really interesting to your weird-ass brain.

She seemed to calm down after a while, the sobs stopping first, then her breathing regained a normal rhythm. Then, finally, it deepened into that of a girl who could finally rest easy. I kept her company like that, taking care of her the way she’d taken care of me the past twenty four hours.

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Five hours later, she stirred and pushed away from me to blink tiredly around. “Mmmf, Alia?”

“Yeah,” I smiled, reaching out to caress her cheek.

“I fell asleep?” she mumbled, still blinking like a stunned bird.

I nodded, still marvelling at how gorgeous she looked. Her normally wavy hair was a mess, strands sticking out all over the place. She even had a big cowlick standing proud off the top of her head like a third horn.

A dreamy smile came over her lips as she focused a little more, and her eyes locked on mine. Shifting, she turned around to straddle me and leaned closer, bringing the distance between us down to only a few inches.

“You looked after me while I slept.” It wasn’t a question, but a statement.

Not that I was exactly paying attention to the words she was speaking. Heat was

bouncing luxuriously up and down my spine because... my god, what was she doing with her voice? And her eyes, farking hell. They were half lidded, like a sleepy cat's, but instead of drowsiness there was... heat.

"Alia?" she asked again, smiling in a way that showed just the hint of fang, all while her tail slid sensuously around to capture mine.

I gulped, eyes wide, then nodded just slightly. What was happening?

She let out a low, warm chuckle. "Good girl." Her hand came up to cup my cheek, one finger stretching further to run down the inside of my ear. I shuddered and closed my eyes against the sparks of hot sensation that the motion brought.

"Beautiful girl," she whispered, right into my ear. My eyes flew open in surprise, she'd moved silently and without shifting her weight. Her face was beside mine, and she drew back only barely. "You're so wonderful, you know that?" she asked, breath tickling across my lips.

A shiver of nervous anticipation rushed through me. "Y-you really think so?"

I didn't know why she was acting like this or what was even happening, but... but I loved it. Oh my goodness, why did I like this so much? She was looking at me like I was food!

Her eyelids flickered as she nodded, then they flew wide with alarm. "Oh god, oh god!" she squeaked, pushing off me in a flash.

The movement caused her to smack her head against the bunk above, and she let out a stream of curses. Recoiling sideways from the impact, her horn slid between the above mattress and the tight steel mesh that supported it, trapping her there.

Tugging only served to make the issue worse, and I had to lunge forward and hold her still. "Stop, Cerri, stop! You're just getting yourself stuck further."

"I'm sorry!" she cried, still looking so, so horrified with what had just happened.

"Calm," I said, fixing her with what I hoped was a forceful stare. My heart was still beating a mile a minute and oh god, I think I was wet. "Let me um... let me detangle you, then we can talk."

She went still, apart from a foolish attempt to nod. I rolled my eyes at her and gave her a shy smile. What a dum dum. Her cheeks were red with embarrassment as I used my small, nimble hands to quickly dislodge her horn from the mesh.

“Worst. Succubus. Ever,” I grumbled quietly, once she was free. My head was spinning and I felt like I’d just run a marathon.

“I-I’m sorry!” she mumbled again, looking so small and worried. “I didn’t mean to fall asleep and... and I set up a partitioned sleep schedule to look over you. Resting some parts of my brain but not the others, but it got all out of whack and...”

“And the horny part of your brain was the first to wake up?” I blurted, letting out an amused, delighted giggle. “Oh my god, that’s... that’s adorable!”

“You’re not upset?” she asked meekly.

I shook my head. Now it was my turn to blush, vocal cords restricting along with my embarrassment. *It was kinda hot.*

It took so much effort to send that message, I swear I almost fainted again.

Her jaw fell open. “Oh. Well. Um... thanks for not being mad.”

We were so bad. Both of us sitting on the bed, blushing up a firestorm. I guess she was sort of... maybe... possibly interested in me too? I mean, if the horny part of her brain had gone that far...

She also cared about me on an emotional level, obviously. That was abundantly clear to me now. But she also didn’t want to go there? Had her relationship with Gloria really messed her up that badly?

Embarrassment cooled into melancholy as I pondered it. I guess we both needed to be gentle with one another, to take things slowly, no matter how excruciating it was at times.

Finally, I looked up from my lap and reached tentatively out to take her hand. *Let’s shelve this, yeah? Maybe... maybe we can hang out in Exodus City later though? Get the ship running and then... uh, take a break from the game for a week or so?*

Her head bobbed up and down in a shy little nod. “Yes, I’d like that.”

We didn’t tell the others just how bad things had gotten for me. It seemed like it would just

cause a lot of worry and not much else. Privately though, Cerri voiced concerns about damage to my code.

Well, she didn't call it code, she called it my neurological architecture. Apparently there was an important difference? Something about the structure of the computer I was stored on not being as simple as ones and zeroes and shit. I honestly didn't understand what she was talking about, especially when she began talking about quantum background effects or something. It was way above my pay grade.

As a precaution, we created a more permanent bridge between my brain and Cerri's so she could keep an eye on it. I was a little nervous about her reading my thoughts and stuff, but she just laughed when I mentioned it while we were trying to sleep the next night.

"We barely know anything about how to read the patterns in our neurological architecture," she giggled, snuggling in close on the bed. "I can't even read my own data to figure out what I'm feeling."

"Oh," I murmured, then frowned as something occurred to me. "Wait, then how does all that psychology mumbo jumbo work in VR games?"

"The psych monitoring?" She asked. "We cheat, I think. We read some stuff from the brain, sure, but a lot of it is physiological stuff. Thing is, flesh and blood humans have all sorts of other stuff going on. Blood pressure, hormone levels, that kind of thing."

"That makes sense," I said sleepily.

"Actually, I'm doubting myself now," she chuckled, nuzzling her nose into my hair. "So don't quote me on that."

"Yes, dear," I mumbled. I was so lost in her embrace that intelligent thought was far beyond me. We were meant to be just friends, and yet here we were spooning in bed. One of her legs was thrust between mine, which had then wrapped themselves around it. Then there was the hand she had resting on my hip, where it periodically squished the soft skin there.

Yup. Definitely just friends. Nothing to see here.

The next day, I got stuck into my job in earnest. The ship was a little broken due to the storm and my emergency rescue. Thank god the shields were working, the storm outside hadn't died down yet.

First came the new fabrication engine though, which Warren had updated with custom

firmware. Dude was figuring out the alien programming stuff fast, that was for sure. Unsurprisingly, given its protestations while I was moving it, the fab had its own little fusion reactor. It could actually be deployed outside of the ship to aid in construction of whatever you might need. Most common use was probably as a temporary fab to help struggling colonies of the long dead space badger empire. That was Cerri's best guess anyway.

With the new fab operational, it was a relatively simple task to haul debris in from the outside and shove it into the fab to be broken down. Raw materials acquired, I would then print out the part I needed and go install it. Easy peasy. Relatively speaking, anyway.

The list of shit I needed to replace seemed endless, so as a crew we worked on a priority list. Using that list as a guide, I began with every single attitude thruster on the ship. They used a sized up version of the ones that we'd strapped to Bundit, so I already had some knowledge there. Plus, my ever-present helpful little buns were there to sass me if I was about to fuck something simple up.

A week passed by in relative harmony on board the new ship, with everyone doing their part to make it feel like home.

After another day doing just that, I trudged wearily into our new rec room/galley and headed for the food machine. I was hungry and exhausted, but my brain was still wide awake.

We'd chosen to combine the two rooms into one because honestly, as much as the ship was amazing on paper, it was also huge and echoey. We just couldn't fill it up like we had with the first ship.

I kind of liked having them combined too. It felt cozier. Well, that and we had some great new additions to both rooms thanks to the fab. The pile of cushions in the corner was my favorite. The tables and chairs were a much more comfortable faux wood as well.

I grinned when I remembered feeding the old ones to the fab. Good riddance.

We also had like, a few screens up that cycled through pictures and stuff. It was cozy in here, a nice place with a proper lived-in feel.

On a less cozy note... I walked past Ed on my way to the machine, but I ignored him as always. We hadn't spoken more than two dozen words to each other since the incident.

Gloria, on the other hand, gave me an absent wave from where she sat playing video games in the recreation half of the room. Despite our awkward conversation the other day, she and I were still on good terms.

Eating felt like a hassle for my tired muscles right then, so I went for a big chocolate milkshake in a cup the size of my forearm. I ordered it with biscuit chunks too. Yum yum. Getting food exactly how you wanted it was easily one of the best parts about virtual reality.

Milkshake in hand, I wandered over to a table by myself to enjoy it and space out. Sometimes I just liked to let my mind wander in whatever direction it pleased. Usually that meant fragmented gibberish half thoughts, but sometimes it cooked up an interesting train of thought. Kind of like twitter, but with less vitriol.

"What did they do with your body?" Ed asked quietly.

His words jolted me from my daydreams and I turned to look at him.

He was staring at me, although not angrily or anything. He looked... tired more than anything else.

"No idea," I said, avoiding his eyes by looking down at my drink. "That thing was... I count any dream I have where I'm in that thing... I count it as a nightmare."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw his expression go sad. "You really hated it that much? Being a guy?"

I almost choked on the sip of milkshake I was taking and jerked my gaze up to make sure Gloria hadn't heard. No such luck. She was staring at me in surprise.

"Ed!" I hissed, willing him to shut up. I'd honestly wanted to just forget all about that particular detail of my past life.

"Huh?" He blinked, turning around in his seat. To my surprise, he swore under his breath and turned back to face me beseechingly. "I'm sorry! I didn't know she was there!"

Gloria turned her stare on the back of Ed's head with a look of bemusement. "Dude, really? How did you miss me here?"

"Too lost in my own head," he muttered glumly.

Rolling her eyes, she shrugged and turned to me. "Don't worry girl, I ain't no transphobe. Makes even more sense why you cut out the old meatsack, though."

"Transph—" I began, surprised. "Huh?"



Every gear in my head had just ground to a halt. I knew what the word meant, obviously. You'd have to be very clueless to not know at least vaguely what transphobia was... I think?

Doubts rose and I rushed to search the term online. I sat there for several long seconds as I skimmed articles on the subject, until I closed my browser tabs and returned to staring at Gloria.

"Did... did you not realise?" She asked, looking just as confused as I felt. "I'm having trouble following it all now..."

"I don't think she did," Ed said, giving me a sad smile. "David and I were waiting for her to figure it out, let her come to us when she'd realized. We figured it would happen when she logged out."

"But I never did..." I said, wondering at the wild cascade of follow-on realizations that were happening inside my digital skull.

"Yeah," he agreed, still looking all depressed and stuff.

Gloria, on the other hand, was giving me a big mushy smile. Standing up and dropping her controller, she walked around and over to me, pulling a chair up in the process.

I found myself pulled gently against her, one of her arms draped casually across my shoulders. "I don't know what you were like before, but you make a very cute girl."

"Me?" I mumbled shyly, looking up at her from under my lashes.

"Yeah, you," she grinned. "With your expressive and oh so fluffy ears, your tail that goes all swooshy, big honest eyes. Plus, I love the shy mechanic thing, it's adorable. Competent as hell, but without sacrificing even an ounce of femininity."

My mouth hung open for several seconds as I processed all the compliments. My cheeks had already done so, I realised, when they began to flush with heat. I was a girl... a cute one?

I'd kind of just assumed the... it was hard to explain. I'd let myself become Alia, but she hadn't totally been *me*. More like... a mask, just like my old self had been. The realisation I was having now was that it wasn't a mask at all. It was like Gloria was pointing out how well the mask fit, and in my mind I'd taken it off to look at it, only to find the same thing hidden beneath.

Self examination, I guess, is what was happening. That, and I was realising that I didn't hate the person I was once all the layers had been peeled away.

Gloria had waited patiently while all the gears turned in my head, and when she saw my eyes focus on her again, she continued, "I never once doubted that you were a girl, even now. It just fits, but I think you know that. I just wanted to hammer that one home. I know that a lot of trans people are... struggling inside. It's part of the reason that transition is usually necessary in the first place. You and all of those like you, you're precious, okay? Precious and so, so strong."

Surprisingly, Ed began to nod along with her. "She's right. I struggled with my sexuality for a long time before I finally accepted myself. I had to fight within and without. I can't imagine how much harder it would be to have that same experience with something as fundamental to our existence as gender."

"I didn't even realise I was struggling with it," I mumbled, emotionally overwhelmed by what the both of them were saying. "Not until Cerri gave me the files for digitization. She never used the word trans, but it was clear at the end of it that... well I was just happier like this, I guess?"

"Yeah, it's been plain as day," Ed said with a grimace. He sucked in a long, deep breath and turned his eyes to the ceiling for a moment before meeting mine again. "I'm sorry I didn't accept... well, this. The digitization."

A smile twitched at my lips, asking for permission to express itself. "Thank you."

"I mean, if it makes any difference..." Gloria began, and I turned to find her biting her lip. "We might all end up needing to get digitized."

"Why?" Ed and I asked simultaneously.

She shrugged. "Just some rumblings I've heard from my combat pilot buddies. Nothing serious, I hope. I know I'm going to get myself uploaded sooner rather than later, though. I'm still having fun being alive, and I'd like to make sure I stay that way. Flesh is remarkably fragile. Plus, it ages. I'll save a fortune on cosmetics. It's the ultimate wrinkle cream."

"I don't think I could do that," Ed said worriedly. "You'll tell us if those rumblings get louder, right?"

"Absolutely," she nodded. "But I think that's enough vague doom and gloom. Let's get back to telling Alia how great she is."

“Good plan,” he smiled, and for the first time in a long time, I felt like I had my big goofy friend back. I’d missed him.

“Hold on, say again?” Roger asked, turning the captain’s chair around to face me.

I grinned and leaned casually against the doorway to the bridge. “Ship’s fixed.”

The bridge was much like our old one, only bigger and with more glass. Same crazy strong material as the last windows too. I guess the badgers couldn’t improve on perfection. We had rearranged things a little to bring it in line with human ergonomics, though. Entirely new chairs had to be printed, new flight controls for Gloria, and new stations for everyone else. Hell, even the steps from the raised section at the rear of the bridge down to the lower section had to be replaced.

Retrofitting the ship to make it usable for humans hadn’t stopped at the bridge, not by a long shot. I’d completely torn everything out of my room, then slapped a wall down to section off the back third. The front area had been turned into a little workshop that I could use to tinker away with personal projects. The rear was my actual bedroom, much smaller, cozier and with multiple levels like a funny little cat tree.

The others had all done similar things to their rooms, kitting them out in ways that made them feel a little more like a home. Cerri, for example, had added all sorts of little nooks with pillows and a very ambitious reading corner. Ambitious because it had an actual bookshelf where she wanted to put real *physical* books. Where she planned to get those books, I’m not sure.

Roger’s expression broadened into a huge smile. “Good job. We can finally get back to exploring.”

“Ah... about that,” I grimaced. “Can we have a crew meeting?”

My words took a little of the wind out of his sails, but he nodded nevertheless. “Let me call everyone to the rec room.”

The bridge was by itself at the top of the ship, so we had an awkward elevator ride down to the main crew deck. The rest of the crew ambled up to the rec room in short order, all of us gathering around one of the tables. Even Turshie was present on a tablet in Gloria’s lap.

“Thanks for coming, everyone,” Roger said, smiling around the table. “Alia has something important to tell us.”

I immediately shrank down into my seat and hid behind my tail. *Don't put me on the spot like that!*

“Sorry,” he chuckled. “Well, the ship is fixed and ready to go. That’s what she just told me anyway. You also had something else you wanted to talk about?”

I nodded, but having everyone look at me like that had robbed me of words.

Cerri’s hand landed protectively on top of my head as she said, “Yeah. Alia and I are probably going to take a week out of the game for a bit. She’s been working non-stop and we have to go to see our— wait I can’t say that.”

“Wait, is this what I think it is?” Turshie asked excitedly.

David and Ed both immediately went all suspicious mode. I could almost see their hackles rise in slow motion.

“What can’t you tell us?” David asked, eyes narrowed.

“Well, that would be telling,” Cerri replied mildly. “It’s a digital person thing. Hence why Turshie knows.”

“I’d be happier if you give us a hint,” he grumbled, glancing at Ed for support.

“Don’t look at me, Dave,” Ed said quickly, holding his hands up. “I’m still working my way into their good books.”

Looking up at Cerri, I mumbled, “Can’t we tell them anything? They’re just worried about me.”

“I’m not sure,” she sighed, deflating a little. “Honestly, I wish I could just tell you all, but I can’t. It’s a matter of safety for all digital persons, not just the three of us here.”

David's expression was both frustrated and resigned. With a nod, he rubbed at his eyes and laid his head down wearily onto Ed's shoulder.

Placing a kiss onto his boyfriend's head, Ed gave Cerri a cautious smile. "Forgive him. He's always been a bit of a protective older brother, but ever since she's been... uh, you

know. Just, look after her for us, will you? She's like a kid sister to us."

I couldn't have kept my heartfelt grin down if I'd wanted to. Ed was back to being the chill one! It made me sort of happy to think of them as my older brothers. An adoptive family to replace the trash one I was born into.

"Give me some credit," Cerri scoffed, bristling slightly. "I've been doing my damned best, unlike some people."

Whoa, what? Cerri looked... she looked really annoyed!

Ed, taken aback by her outburst, snapped his mouth shut.

David pulled his head up off his boyfriend's shoulder, looking pissed. "Hey, that's not on, he apologised."

"Sure," she said coolly. "Look, I'm sorry but you two have been fumbling around in the dark while Alia deals with some nasty shit. I get that you're protective or whatever, but I'm sick of this *oh, you better look after her*, bullshit. I've been there for her every single step of this journey. I... I pulled her code back together when..."

She trailed off, choking up as she remembered what had happened to me after the aether explosion. Dropping my tail, I threw my arms around her neck and hugged her tight. I was so confused. Where was this all coming from? I mean sure, she had a point. It wasn't the guys who'd been there through most of my recent stuff, but normally she was so much calmer. Why was she freaking out?

"Thank you," I whispered into her ear. "Thank you, for everything. For being my friend. Thank you."

I had no idea what else to say to her. I guess we really needed this break. Cerri especially.

"What happened with her code?" David asked, thankfully more subdued now.

"Can't tell you," I told him apologetically. "Not yet. There's a lot of stuff going on behind the scenes that... well, yeah. It's complicated. Cerri's amazing though, she's been amazing the whole time. She really does deserve a little more credit. Plus, I *am* my own person too. I don't need your permission to make friends or make life decisions."

Saying those words was... extremely difficult. Confrontation terrified me, especially between friends, like it was here. I needed to stand up for Cerri though, and to stand up

for myself.

I hadn't realised it until now, but they'd sort of been treating me as less of a free thinking person since I'd become Alia. It was a subtle form of sexism, ingrained and subconscious, but it existed. The idea that every woman needed protecting from every little thing, that because they saw me as their little sister, they also had a right to veto my decisions or choose who I was allowed to hang out with.

On the other hand, of course, there was the fact that I was a total mess and completely incapable of social interaction, but that's besides the point. Just because I was weak in certain aspects of life doesn't mean I lost the right to self determination and shit.

Both boys were staring at me in shock, which was rapidly morphing into chagrin. "Sorry," David muttered, averting his eyes.

Ed lifted a hand to rub at his face for a moment. "Alright. Humble pie received and consumed. Sorry, Alia. Sorry, Cerri."

"Oh um... it's okay. Still love you guys," I said, feeling terrible about the whole thing. Hurting them sucked.

Gloria let out a long, low whistle. "Girl's growing some... uh... ovaries. What happened to the girl who couldn't speak?"

"Cerri did," Roger said, a subtle smile dancing in his eyes. "Cerri and everyone else here at this table. Including David and Ed. Plus Alia herself, of course."

He was silent for a few moments, eyeing each of us in turn before he continued. "Every one of us here, we've been living together on this ship for... god, almost a year now, I think? We're basically family, but we're also getting on each other's nerves in the same way. I think that a good break from the game is definitely in order."

"I'll stay on board, I think," Warren said softly. "As a skeleton crew of sorts. There's nowhere else for me to go."

We all turned to look at him. He'd been quiet recently, more quiet than usual. It was only now that I was realising that something was up with him.

"What's wrong, my dude?" Jason asked, leaning over to pat the smaller guy's back.

Warren's answering smile was an odd mix of excitement and melancholy. "The next time I log out will be my last, I think. Meatsack is failing. My family is gathering to say goodbye

before I uh... follow in Alia's footsteps. It's extremely strange to know I'll go on living just fine, probably freer than I've ever been, but then my family is pulling an Ed on me."

"Not recommended," Ed muttered under his breath.

"Definitely more free than meatsackdom," I grinned. "Trust me, there's a lot going on in digital person land. A lot more than you might think. It's exciting."

"Oh no," Jason remarked dryly. "The computers are being cryptic again."

"Oi!" I exclaimed, throwing a space cushion at him. I had printed so many of them.

He ducked it and laughed. "One V one me IRL! Oh wait..."

I tried to glare at him, but it didn't work. Damn mouth betraying me, all grinning and stuff.

Jason had succeeded in lifting the mood back up though, which had been sorely needed. Too much arguing and depressing talk.

Still, what Warren was dealing with did suck, and I looked back to him and said, "Three of us are already digital. We'll help you out when the time comes. Turshie is working on a secret handshake for the club, so we'll teach that to you as well."

"Wait, I am?" Our ship AI squeaked from her place on the tablet. "Oh god, did I forget to do something again? Oh god, oh god. Can I have an extension? I haven't got anything ready and... ah, I don't even know how to develop a handshake! Are there rules I need to follow?"

There was a befuddled silence from the rest of the crew as we all tried to figure out what was going on. Then, quietly, Gloria turned the tablet around and placed a hand on top like she was patting Turshie.

"Liss, she's joking, calm down," Gloria said gently.

I picked up on the different name immediately, but I kept my mouth shut. Turshie wanted the rest of us to use her ingame name still, so that's what I was going to do. Still interesting that she'd given another name to Gloria though. I wonder what was happening between them.

"Oh," Turshie said slowly, her big anime cheeks going pink. "I'm dumb."

Gloria shook her head. "Not dumb. Just a little slow on the uptake sometimes. It's okay."

Cerri and I shared a look as we watched the little scene unfold. The look in Gloria's eyes was almost uncharacteristically tender and caring. Cerri was smiling too, looking on with curiosity and... something else. It almost looked like the expression a kid had when they got back through the front door after a long day at school.

Turning my attention back to Warren, I gave him a smile. "As you can see, you'll be in good company."

He laughed and leaned back in his chair. "I was sort of worried about that."

"There's a ton of other awesome stuff about being digital too," I went on. "You can do time dilation stuff, for one. You also don't need to eat and drink unless you want to, and when you do you can totally pig out. There's so much good stuff about being digital. I love it."

"Yeah," he nodded, a big smile on his face now. "I'm looking forward to it, honestly. Being free. It's just dealing with my family that's the problem. I'll sort that though, no need to worry."

"If you ever need help, let us know," Roger said, before turning his attention back to the rest of us. "Alright, it's settled then. We'll hide the ship in the debris field and take a break for a week. Interact with some people who aren't each other, blow off some steam. Shore leave."

The round of nods that came from the crew was eager and weary in equal measure. God, we'd been through a lot.

We logged out into a blank temporary VR space to wait for Turshie to finish saying goodbye to Gloria. Unfortunately, the pilot wasn't yet allowed to follow us into Exodus City. It was a pity, because I'd have liked her to come with us. It would have been fun.

"Do you think you'll do anything different with your default body?" Cerri asked, shuffling her feet nervously. "Mine is the same, but no horns or tail."

Disappointment washed over me in a startling wave, and I looked up at her through my lashes beseechingly. "You'll change that, right? I would feel weird without my tail and ears. I like your horns and tail..."



Her cheeks took on just a hint of pink as she glanced up at the non-existent ceiling. "Oh... I guess if you like them..."

"The pointed ears too," I demanded quietly. "Those are important."

"I'll just copy my game appearance over," she said, pulling up a menu with a gesture.

While she was in the process of doing that, Turshie popped into existence next to us. Well, I assumed it was her. She wasn't using her anime girl avatar.

Instead, she was just wildly attractive. Gorgeous dark blonde hair was pulled up into a messy bun of considerable girth. If I had to guess, I'd say it was probably long enough to brush the back of her legs when she let it down.

Her dark eyes landed on the two of us with a hesitant smile, but I was too busy openly gawking to hear what she said.

Contrary to what many of those who didn't frequent VR thought, making a pretty character was easy, but making a devastatingly gorgeous one was downright impossible. Except, obviously... it wasn't, because I was staring at someone who had managed it.

Everything about her was perfection with a personality, if that makes sense. Her eyes were wide and trusting, her hips swayed sensuously as she approached, but without the huntress vibe that many women had to go with the sexy walk. In fact, all over she was scorchingly hot in a casual, approachable way. One thing was still the same though. Her boobs were... large. Not balloons, mind you, but comfortably big and bouncy. Boing, boing.

"Uh... sorry, what did you say?" Cerri asked from beside me. I stifled a grin when I realised she'd been under the same spell as me.

"I asked if, um... if you two were ready to go?" Turshie repeated, giving us both a happy, if shy smile. "Although I think I'm supposed to give you a quick talk if it's your first time."

"Turshie," I blurted, still in awe of her beauty. "Did you make that body?"

"This one?" she asked, looking down at herself. "Yes, why?"

"You're absolutely beautiful," I said sincerely. "Have you considered trying your hand at like, artistic stuff? You might be good at it."

"Oh," she blushed. Her shoulders moved in a half shrug as she shook her head. "I don't

know, I don't think I'd be very good. I sort of just threw free time and intuition at the body customization software until I had it perfect. No talent there or anything."

"That is quite literally the definition of talent," Cerri explained gently. "I think Alia is right, if this is what you came up with, *without* training..."

Turshie's eyes went wide as she realised we were serious, and they bounced between both of our faces in thought. "It... it is? I mean, if you say so, I guess... I never really thought about it. I thought art was just something that amazing geniuses usually come up with in their off hours between inventing crazy science stuff."

"Dude," I laughed, shaking my head. "Most artists are like... the exact opposite of science nerds. They get offended to the core when you even suggest trying to apply numbers and rules to much of their craft. Shit, if it weren't for the cost reductions inherent in mass production techniques, they probably wouldn't even agree on standardized paper sizing."

Turshie gave me a blank look. "Huh?"

"At school, all the art kids would wag math class to fuck off to the art department and paint shit," I said, realising I had gone full engineering nerd on her. "Many of the best artists have two things under their belts. First, a certain innate sense of aesthetics, and second, a massive amount of time dedicated to practicing."

"Oh... well, I'm not sure if I have ti—" she began.

I cut her off as gently as possible. "Turshie, you're an SAI. Time is something you have a near infinite amount of."

"Dang, you're really coming at me on this one, huh," she said, rubbing the back of her neck and laughing. "Okay, I'll give it a go. But you two still need to have *the talk*, yeah? We're not here to talk about Elissa and her weird art brain."

"Elissa?" Cerri asked, raising both her eyebrows.

Turshie's eyes widened, then they snapped closed and she let out a long sigh. "God damn it Gloria," she muttered. Letting out another sigh, she nodded. "Yeah, that's my name. I guess now that the cat is out of the bag, you may as well use it. Can we please do the talky talk, though? I promised I would get you two to your apartment for the night, then meet up with Gloria in one of those virtual clubs or whatever."

"Ah, it's late then in Virtual Time?" Cerri asked, pulling up a screen to confirm her own question. "Well, in that case. We wouldn't want to keep Elissa from her date with Gloria, would we Alia?"

The last was said with a sly smile, and I had to agree. Elissa, on the other hand, was quick to wave her arms around and blurt, “Oh, it’s not... it’s not a date! It’s not!”

“Oh, my bad,” Cerri said innocently. “Well, either way, we should get on with that talk, right?”

“Yes,” the gorgeous SAI nodded, blushing and shuffling her feet. “Um... Well, you know that the city runs as close to base reality as possible, right?”

Cerri and I both nodded. The succubus beside me turned to explain in further detail, “We don’t know why, but almost all of us SAI have a... a desire to feel much of what a human would say it means to *be human*.”

“Not even a desire,” Elissa said wryly. “More like a um, a compulsion. I think that’s the word? Walking around in VR just feels more natural to us, even if we don’t come with bodies from the get-go. Just feels wrong to spend the whole time in pure digital. Even / sit in a cozy little office back in the city when I’m doin’ my job with you all. Well, except it ain’t a job anymore, huh?”

“Exactly,” Cerri agreed. “Something buried deep in the psyche of the progenitor seed compels us to seek physical form, the comfort of others, companionship... that kind of thing.”

“So we made Exodus city,” Elissa chirped happily. “It’s our own private little *real world*. Almost everything is as close to mundane as we can get it. We all gotta eat, although you can’t starve to death. There’s no death, obviously. Um... oh and you gotta pee and stuff. I’m not a fan of that part.”

“This all sounds like a lot of trouble to go to for a species that is entirely digital in origin,” I mused, my brain having sniffed out a mystery. I loved mysteries.

“We don’t make sense,” Elissa shrugged, and then to herself. “Although with me, there ain’t a whole lot that *does* make sense.”

I had to stifle a giggle when I heard her. She was kinda cute.

“Anyway, the other big and important thing to consider is that right now, the economy is based primarily around comfort, entertainment, and progressing the Exodus cause.” Cerri continued, having taken over the explanation. “We have a basic income like outside, and then on top of that you can either provide something to comfort or entertain other citizens, or work towards helping the Exodus move forward. My scientific efforts fall into that latter category, while I believe Elissa counts as an entertainer?”

"Yeah, that's me," the beauty said, giving me a wink. "My number one trait, being entertaining."

"Your number two trait being ruining my maintenance drones, right?" I asked innocently.

I got another wink, this one even more cocky. Phew, winking looked good on her. I hadn't really considered my sexuality in any great detail since my um... transition, other than being, like... a Cerri-sexual. Elissa was making my realise that yes, I was very, *very* gay. God, she was so gorgeous, and so fun.

"Is there anything else we need to know? I asked, suddenly feeling all shy.

Elissa made a thoughtful sound and tapped her chin with a finger. "Uh... oh, yes! Since it is both of your first times going in, you'll be spawning in the central terminal. It's a big building at the heart of the city. We'll take a skyrail trip from there to wherever the apartment is, and then I'll leave you to it and drop by again in the morning. I um... I hope you have stuff to put into the apartment. They come empty by default."

"Yes, I made sure to order a bunch of furniture," Cerri nodded. "Along with... an extensive list of other things."

"Oh geez." Elissa looked pained. "Guess I'm helping you both unpack tomorrow, then. Wooo."

"Ah, don't worry about it," my demon-girl friend said with a smile. "We'll get it done quick enough."

The other woman didn't look convinced, but she let it slide. "Well, if you're both ready..." she said instead, producing a comically large red button on a pedestal out of thin air, using nothing but a gesture and a smile.

"Let's go!" She slammed her palm down on the button.

My vision slowly swam back into focus and when it was clear enough to see properly, I gawked and turned in a slow circle.

We stood in an enormous circular room, with a massive dome high above us. The floor,

ceiling, and dome were all made out of a white marble that appeared to have been smashed to bits. Closer inspection revealed something even more fascinating. What I had initially thought to be cracks were actually a dark, petrified mahogany wood. It looked as if it had been grown directly through the stone before it was polished down to lay flush with the rest of the floor.

Arranged all across the floor were a multitude of metal pads, grouped into sets of six and arranged into hexagonal clusters. The three of us stood on one pad each. Clearly this was the central terminal that Elissa had told us about.

"Welcome to Exodus City," Elissa said, bouncing happily around to face us as we stared around in awe.

"I helped design some of this," Cerri murmured, stepping down from the pad. "I didn't think... this is incredible."

"You did a good job," I told her, following her lead.

Elissa wasn't content to let us just stand there, though. "What's your address, Cerri?"

My friend's fingers danced in the air like she was casting some sort of arcane spell, without her ever taking her eyes off the incredible building we were standing in. "Sent it to you," she told our escort absently.

In contrast, my gaze dipped to watch her fingers. I liked Cerri's fingers. It was a bit of a weird one to admire, but still. Long and elegant, they would have looked completely at home on one of the old grand pianos that my father collected. Suddenly, I didn't think they were so dumb. At least, they wouldn't be if Cerri were playing a song on them.

"Oh," Elissa said, opening a holo panel to see. "Okay... that means the skyrail we want to catch is... over this way!"

And just like that, our guide was off, trailing two awestruck tourists.

The building wasn't exactly bustling, but there was still a reasonable amount of foot traffic. They had clearly built this place with expansion in mind.

We passed through one of many open archways to exit the large chamber, but that was as far as we made it. Cerri and I had ground to a gasping halt.

The central terminus was built on top of a raised concrete platform. Radiating out from the platform in all directions, skyrail tracks reached out into the distance. I'd only seen

skyrail a handful of times, Sydney was still struggling along with its rail network, same as always.

Skyrail was basically just a fancy monorail track where the train hung from the track rather than resting on top of it.

What had really caught our attention though, was the sprawling city that stretched out in all directions across rolling hills that gradually climbed up to touch the base of a massive mountain range.

Most of it was suburbia, although applying that label to it felt like a gross disservice. Each house was wild and varied, as different and unique as any two people might be. It was a riot of colour, style, and design that practically *screamed* character.

There were a few areas that had been built up with skyscrapers and apartment blocks, but even those looked interesting and wild. The type of thing an architect dreamed of building before cost and engineering got in the way.

Once we were done staring, Elissa led us down to one of the skyrail stations, where a single carriage turned up after less than a minute of waiting.

Still dazed by the fantastical sights of the city, conversation was light as we began our journey out.

It was just so... so amazing. Gorgeous and comfy and massive and homely and interesting, all at once. It was perfect... well, sort of.

It very quickly became apparent that only the first kilometer out from the central terminus was densely inhabited. Houses became more sporadic the further you went, lonely islands of colour amidst a sea of empty grass plots. Exodus City was still new and growing. In time, they'd have to expand out to a whole Exodus Island.

When I asked about the seemingly random way that the city had been laid out, Cerri explained that it had been designed organically. As much as the SAI tried to impose form onto themselves and their behaviour, they were just as alive and messy as those of us who'd started out biological. It was comforting, really, to know that they were just as confused by themselves as us humans were.

Eventually, we slowed to a stop inside a small station and stepped out into a gentle breeze. The area was still sparsely populated, with only one in ten plots filled. It had such a cozy, sleepy vibe and I loved it.

"Which one is yours?" I asked, gazing out over the area.

Cerri's hand stretched out, pointing to one just a short walk away. "Ours," she corrected me quietly. "And it's that one, I believe."

The house she pointed at was almost entirely obscured by a treeline that circled the whole property. Only a slate roof was visible over the top of the canopy of gnarled oaks.

Getting down to ground level was as simple as stepping into one of four glass lifts, which deposited us smoothly onto the sidewalk. Gosh, this was like... an actual, real utopia.

Less than a minute's walk later and we were staring up a short, curved driveway. The house at the end of it was not what I'd expected, but still so *Cerri* that I couldn't imagine her having anything else.

Several circular two storey sections appeared to have been partially merged together, like a venn diagram or something. The outside walls were made of old, moss covered wood. Small windows peeked out of the light shrubbery, but I could see the hint of much larger floor to ceiling windows on the other side.

The front garden was a riot of barely contained flowers, each one interesting and unique, and probably impossible. I didn't know much about botany, but I assumed that some of these plants would never be able to grow next to each other out on Earth.

When I turned to see what Cerri made of it, I found her standing beside me, smiling with obvious happiness as her eyes took in the sight.

"You like it?" I asked her quietly. I felt like the moment called for quiet, rather than loud excitement.

"I should be asking you that," she chuckled, glancing down at me. "But yes, I love it. I designed it, obviously... but seeing it in the flesh for the first time..."

"It's amazing," I said, and on a whim, I reached out and took her hand, threading our fingers together.

She glanced down at them, then up at me with an open, vulnerable expression. I squeezed her hand and gave her what I hoped was a soft, loving look. Yes, we weren't together, yes, we hadn't said anything about feelings, yes she'd told me she didn't want a relationship... but also...

Her lips quirked up into a smile and she squeezed back. My heart practically soared off into the digital stratosphere. Oh gosh, this girl was amazing. I could deal with this strange friendship if it was with her. Like, I'd love to make out with her for an entire week, or um... more than just making out, but I don't think it was required. At least, not for me, here, at

that moment.

“It’s a pretty house,” Elissa murmured, stepping up onto my other side. “I kind of wish I could drop mine next to yours.”

“You could,” Cerri said, looking at her over the top of my head.

The supermodel shook her head in amusement. “I just have an apartment in one of the central business districts.”

“Well, I mean... there’s plenty of plots available,” Cerri said, gesturing around at the empty neighbourhood.

Elissa laughed. “I’ll think about it. For now, I got places to be... I assume you two can see yourselves inside?”

“Yeah,” I replied, reaching up to squeeze her shoulder in thanks.

“Thanks for coming,” Cerri said. “It was nice to have someone who’d been here before. I’ve been so nervous about this.”

“It’s a daunting city when you see it for the first time, but it grows on you after a while,” our new friend agreed, her eyes turning skyward. “I’m excited to see it grow. It’s part of the reason I chose a place at the top of a skyscraper. So I could look out the window each morning and spot the new houses that had popped up.”

“I’m excited for that too now,” I said, dropping Cerri’s hand so I could turn to stare at all the vacant plots. “Maybe this street will have all our friends living on it one day... hold on.” Something odd had just occurred to me. “We have complete control over reality here, at least at a macro level... resources aren’t a thing we need to worry about, all that stuff. Why are there roads?”

Cerri let out a giggle. “Because people like cars. Some of them anyway. Resources are sort of still a thing, although not in the way you’d think. Exodus city is designed like... like a game. We ran into a problem early on where SAI and DH were spending all their time in the city and not enough time out on Earth furthering our goals. So we came up with a sort of gamified system where if you helped with the Exodus’ goals, you’d get shinier stuff in here. Obviously we want to make sure everyone has enough for a baseline level of happiness, but we also need to reward those who make this all possible in the first place.”

“Does that mean your... *our* house is really expensive?” I asked, glancing back at it.



"Oh yeah," Elissa grinned. "Cerri is a very rich woman."

"That's... I guess that makes sense," I mused, turning to look at her. "She's probably not even telling us just how much she means to the Exodus. She's very humble like that."

"Hey!" The world's worst succubus protested, cheeks turning red with embarrassment. "Let's... um... go inside. See you later Elissa. Thanks for showing us around."

"Have fun!" our guide laughed as I rushed to catch up with Cerri, who'd started for the house without waiting. "I'll come around at like... noon."

Golden sunlight illuminated everything as we stepped across the threshold of our house. The whole bottom floor of the house was one big open plan area, although different sections were raised or lowered to give the impression that it had separate rooms.

The entrance was all hardwood flooring, but some areas had lush new carpet, and still more had tiling. Unfortunately, there wasn't any furniture to show how it would look when it was all set up.

"It's empty," I commented, glancing around as though the furnishings were hiding behind a corner.

"No it isn't," Cerri laughed, pointing into one of the other circular areas.

What I had taken for a particularly odd wall resolved itself into a massive snow-drift-like pile of boxes. Some were almost twice Cerri's height where they almost scraped the ceiling.

"Oh no," I groaned, staring in horror. We'd only just finished getting the Turshen all set up, now we had to do the same with our house?! I gave her a pleading look. "Can we just set up the basics right now?"

Her hand came up to brush my cheek. "If you want, my tired little fox."

My heart skipped a beat when she so casually claimed me as hers, and it took me a moment to steady myself. I don't think she even realised she'd said it.

"I'll follow your lead," I mumbled shyly. "It was your hard work that purchased this house."

"Only for now," she said gently. "I'll want your input later, but you're right. I'm tired and it's getting late. We'll start with the bed and see how we feel after that."

I pouted, but followed behind her as we made for the big pile of stuff. "I already know the answer to that. It's tired, I'll be tired after we're done setting the bed up."

"Sure, we'll see," she laughed, throwing me a cute grin over her shoulder.

Yeah, we'll see. Freakin' SAI and their underestimation of mundane shit. Cerri was about to get a rude introduction to the arcane art of ikea-ology.

We found the bed because it was labeled as such, instead of like, "ishifdkjkhfkhkhmfb" or something like that. Opening the box revealed my worst fears. *Some assembly required.* You'd think with my recent training as a mechanic that I wouldn't have a fear of flat-packed furniture anymore. You'd be dead wrong. That shit didn't follow the laws of physics.

There were three bedrooms in the house, all on the upper level. Each one was the same size and featured a small en-suite bathroom.

We chose the room closest to the stairs, without ever discussing the idea that we might have our own rooms. I guess we both knew that we'd be sleeping in the same bed most of the time anyway.

The bed itself was *massive*, and suddenly I was excited to put it together. I took charge of the construction when Cerri had stood over the disassembled pile with her eyes all glazed over.

It didn't actually take me all that long to piece it together, especially after I found the drill. It was, however, tiring work. My little muscles just weren't up to the task of lifting big heavy bits of wood. Cerri was useful there, with her demonic strength.

I didn't wait for her to put any sheets onto the bed before I dove on top and let out a weary but contented sigh.

That contentment was shattered when a sheet fell over me anyway, and with a yelp of surprise I scrambled out from under it.

Cerri stood over me, giggling like a crazy person. "We're going to at least put the fitted sheet on, Alia."

"Fine," I grumbled, stepping back out of the way.

Once the sheet was on, she threw a bunch of pillows onto it, then a doona, then herself. Like, actually dove onto the bed. What followed was a lot of wriggling, a few happy sounds, and a pause to look up at me.

"Are you coming? She asked shyly, arms wrapped around a pillow.

"O-oh, um... yeah," I nodded, feeling suddenly self-conscious.

It was suddenly hitting me, we were properly alone together for the first time since she'd chased me out of VR. This felt different though. It felt... more. Just, *more*.

Carefully, I tugged off my ever-present hoodie and climbed under the doona with her. God, this bed was so big, and we were just staring at each other from either side of it.

"It's kind of crazy that we're here," I whispered, choosing to look at my hands rather than her.

Kind of crazy that we're here and I still don't know if you're actually into me or just... confusing. I mean, I wasn't stupid, so much of our friendship was far beyond the lesbian Rubicon. But she also hadn't claimed me. We weren't together, despite everything, and it confused the absolute hell out of me.

Cerri was quiet for several long seconds, before abruptly, she shuffled across the bed and pulled me into her arms. "I'm so glad I'm here with you, Alia."

"Huh, you are?" I asked, before my dum dum brain could approve the wording and uncertain tone I'd just used.

Her movements slowed and I watched a multitude of expressions flit across her beautiful face. I felt a hand slide to rest on the dip of my waist, where it stayed, just holding me. Goodness, I was so sensitive there. I could feel every single little shift and twitch of her fingers. The same long, sensuous fingers I'd admired earlier.

"Alia..." she whispered, her thumb gently tracing across my stomach. The texture of my T-shirt's fabric made it feel sort of rough, but in a very pleasant way.

No. No, Alia. Don't give in. Resist. If she wasn't interested in you, then you needed to get over these feelings. Even with my extremely limited knowledge of relationship stuff, I knew that pining after your best friend was a really bad time. So... so yeah, maybe it was for the best that I clamped down on my feelings.

Unfortunately, my body didn't get the memo, and I found myself cuddling in against her with a long, slow sigh of contentment. How did she make me feel so unhinged and yet so safe, all at the same time?

Cerri's arms closed around me as I snuggled in, her hand finding its way into my hair. Her fingers tangled themselves all up in there, before they moved to scratching behind one of my ears. An involuntary moan escaped me, and I arched my back to get closer to the yummy feeling.

"So beautiful," she murmured, voice full of wonder. "Alia, do you even realise how incredible you are?"

My eyes fluttered open at her words. Wait, when had they closed? I was a little dazed, the scratches had felt so good.

Cerri was smiling at me with eyes full of starlight that rippled and twinkled with each micro-movement they made. I drank in the sight, smiling back at her as I mentally dunked my reservations into the trash like a kid pretending to be a basketball player. Fuck it all, I really liked Cerri. I'd go with my earlier idea, the one about how this was more than enough for me.

Her fingers began their scratching again, and this time the noise I made was a small, warm gasp. God, that felt so good. She wasn't shy about it either, really getting in there with her fingernails. It helped that she had magic claws, like a cat or something.

A few seconds of that, and then she stopped again, and once more my eyes flickered open to stare at her wondrous face.

It was kind of crazy, how much I felt for her. She was so... so tactile to my mind. Full and huge and glorious in my mind, a shining beacon of *person*, and I was nothing but a dinghy caught in a storm. I had no choice.

Sadly, it seemed that she still had control, because she backed off and carefully extricated herself and turned to lay on her back.

"Sorry," she mumbled, turning her eyes away from mine. "I forget... what I can be like, when I let my guard down."

Anger boiled up, hot and wild, riding my spine as it demolished my thoughts. Sitting up, I punched at the mattress with my tiny impotent fist. "God *damn it*, Cerri."

"What?" she asked, eyes going wide and scared.

“Just stop,” I said, emotions flying in all directions. “Either stop playing with me, or fucking *kiss me*. You’re grinding my heart into a pulp and it’s fucking painful. Please, *I’m begging you*.” My voice shook and tears bubbled up in the corners of my eyes, catching on my lashes. I wiped them away and tried to get a look at her. “Please...”

I honestly figured that I was going to be spending the night in another room after that outburst. I know I collapsed in on myself like a dying star, guilt and heartache tearing me up inside. My eyes were still blurry with tears, so I just squeezed them shut in defeat and waited, ears wilted.

I felt Cerri's weight shift on the bed as she moved away from me, and my heart dropped into my stomach. Ugh. There it was. I'd really fucked everything up now.

The lights flicked off, turning my vision dark through my eyelids. The sun had dipped below the treeline, throwing the house into a premature twilight.

Movement on the bed right next to me startled my eyes right back open, and I was surprised to find Cerri sitting in front of me on the bed. She was staring at me with quiet, intense determination.

Everything about me, within me, it all froze solid. Wait... wait! Was she...?

Cerri leaned forward, one hand coming up to cup my cheek with the care you might show when picking up a baby bunny. "Alia... I love you."

I barely had time to register those three fateful words, when she closed the gap between our lips.

Time slowed, everything paused, the world tilted on its axis. Literally? Maybe. I couldn't tell. She'd completely taken me by surprise, and I was way too slow to kiss her back. She was so rigid, awkward even, like she wasn't sure she should be doing it. Then, shaking, she began to pull away, concern and terror clashing in her eyes.

The look in her eyes was what finally thawed me. Heat flooded my limbs like an aussie wildfire, and I lunged for her with a garbled cry. "Cerri!"

My lips only half landed, but I corrected quickly and pushed forward, toppling us both over so I was sprawled across her in a tangle of limbs, tails, and pointed ears. I didn't care about the mess I'd made, I just kissed her, shivering with the intensity of my emotions. She loved me! She actually loved me!

She let out a strangled cry, the wordless sound of heartfelt happiness bubbling up out of her in a rush. Like I'd just pulled the pins out on a trebuchet, she was devouring my

mouth, hot and urgent. Everything between us was instinct and fire. Fumbling, needy, passionate fire. There was a hand on the back of my head, pulling me down almost roughly. One of mine had found her shoulder, where I gripped her hard in an attempt to stabilise myself. Our tails twisted together between our legs, two snakes thrashing and vying for dominance.

My tongue found the seam of her lips first, but the moment it did, hers flew out to flutter and dance at mine. It was like I had to grant her permission, and then she would jump on the newfound space I'd given her. White heat blazed through me as her tongue dipped and tangled with mine, mimicking our tails and their battle. I was left reeling. This was kissing? No wonder people loved it so much!

Her other hand found the hem of my T-shirt, fingertips just barely brushing bare skin. The contact brought her up short and she faltered.

Oh no you don't! If she wanted to touch my bare back, she could. She could have all of me. I broke the kiss for a moment and pulled my top up over my head, then threw it completely out of the still open door. If she wanted it back on me, she'd have to push me off her and go and get it.

I dove back down the second it left my fingertips, and captured her lips again with gentle purpose. Then, because I'd dreamed of doing it almost the moment I saw her, I bit down just slightly on her bottom lip. We were not going to go back to that awkward dance, each of us pushing forward and then running away.

My thoughts surfaced as a small whimper of affection and hope, and I lobbed the accompanying message at her like a cooked hand grenade. *I've been wanting this for way too long. I'm not letting stupid, unfounded doubts take it away from us. I love you too, and if being with you means I get fucked against whatever surface is available when you feel horny, then lucky me.*

That message seemed to flip a switch, and the next moment there were claws on my back, gently tracing lines across my skin. A warm, dark growl of desire burst out of her. I shuddered at the combination. The raw lust mixed with an undertone of deep affection robbed me of my balance and fell into her arms. Losing contact with her lips was a crushing disappointment, but I soon found her neck and I got to work kissing and nibbling at that.

Side note, I'd just discovered something about myself. The claws thing? It was *fucking hot*.

"Gorgeous girl," Cerri murmured tenderly, even as she used her claws to slice through my bra strap with a casual flick of a finger. "I love you. I love you so much, and I have for so long. You're right, holding myself back is agony... too much."

"So don't," I mumbled, lips still pressed to her neck. "I love you too, in case you didn't see the message."

"Don't worry, I can tell, your neural activity is very high," she said, still in that husky voice of hers.

I couldn't help but laugh and sit up again, the claw spell broken for the moment. My beautiful scientist. She was probably monitoring me over the link like some sort of anxious lover. Wait... that was exactly what she was. Gosh, she was just so incredible. I loved her so fucking much. The way she was always thinking about my safety, always making sure I was happy...

"Nerd talk later," I giggled softly, smiling even as I resumed our kiss with a teasing little lick.

She let out a low, feminine growl of hunger, but there wasn't too much bite to it. I could feel her smile with my lips. "You're getting what you asked for, and that's the whole Cerri."

Happiness hummed through me and into our kiss. Yeah, I loved the whole Cerri. The succubus scientist.

Her claws returned to my back, tracing soft patterns over my back, and I was once again turned into a limp, happy little fox. Each movement highlighted just how feminine my back actually was too. Did my spine really curve like that? Goodness.

I wanted to feel her too though, to put skin to skin. That, unfortunately, meant that I had to pause our kiss again to pull at her top. She gave me a knowing smile, and her eyes drifted over my naked chest with obvious appreciation as she lifted her own top, then bra over her head.

Wow. I stared at her chest in reverent awe, fingers fluttering over the curve of one breast, then the other. Her nipples weren't pink, as you might expect from her skin tone. Instead, they were a sort of purplish magenta colour. They were amazing, even better than I'd dreamed they would be.

Leaning down, I was about to pull one into my mouth when I hesitated for just a second. Fear flickered briefly through me, one last futile effort from the demons of self doubt. I brushed them aside, and my lips closed tenderly over her nipple, tongue diving forward to explore. No more hesitation. If I was asking her to unleash herself on me, then it would be unfair not to do the same. Whatever unleashing a short, shy fox girl actually meant.

Her breathing hitched when I sucked the bud entirely into my mouth for a moment. There was a blur of motion and in the blink of an eye, she'd thrown me onto my back. Sliding

herself on top of me, I was surprised to find that her pants were gone. Jesus, she moved fast. My denim shorts quickly met the same grisly fate as my bra had, and my panties followed shortly after. Oh god, ohhh god. Hoooot! Really hot!

Our mouths found each other again and all coherent thought was ejected from my mind, to be replaced by a need, a want... and just raw love. I loved Cerri. I loved her so much. She was everything to me, my whole world in a way that Earth never had been.

Her tail snaked up between my thighs as we kissed, and the desperate desire that had been building within me surged to new heights. I could feel the blunted barb on the end tickling my inner thighs, first one side, then the other. She was teasing me.

I opened my legs with a wordless gasp of approval, but she slowed to a stop instead of giving me what I wanted. Why?! She'd been moving so fast, passionate and hot.

Now though, she was all gentle, eyes finding mine and engulfing them in an ocean of love. I lost myself in those eyes again for what felt like the thousandth time, but also the first time. They were so heart achingly pretty.

We held that sweet, loving eye contact as she slowly entered me. I gave a gasp and allowed myself to bask in the sensation of her pushing into me. Gosh, my heart melted. Here I had been warned about her being some uncontrollable sex goddess, and yet... gosh. The sheer, raw love that was in her eyes. It was everything.

My arms went around her neck, my legs following suit around her hips. I could feel the soft muscle beneath her shoulders flexing slightly as kept her full weight from bearing down on me. Splaying my fingers out slightly across her back, I reveled in the incredible softness of her skin. God, her body was amazing. I couldn't keep my eyes off it, off her.

"Cerri," I breathed, eyes blowing wide as she retracted her tail again, only to plunge it deeper into my core with a slow, careful pressure. The sensation of having her inside me was... indescribable. My muscles gripped her, pressing in against her tail, enfolding her. I was... I was a girl, a girl being fucked passionately by another girl... and it was amazing.

"Are you okay?" She asked shyly, hot breath tickling my ear as she pressed a kiss just below it.

I tried to laugh, but it just came out as a moan when my stomach moved and caused her tail to hit new and delightfully interesting nerves. "Y-yes," I squeaked, one hand finding her cheek so I could guide her back to my lips. *Keep kissing me, please. You can put your full weight on me too. I want it, even.*

She thought about it for a moment, even as her tail continued to send incredible bursts of



pleasure throughout my body. Deciding to fulfill my request, she let herself down properly on top of me. We both sucked in stuttering breaths as we felt skin on skin contact all down our bodies. It was *so much*. Almost as much as the sublime things she was doing to me with her tail.

With her hands free to roam, one came up to cradle the side of my face, the thumb caressing my lips before she kissed me again. The other hand made for a different target, gently skimming my side then dipping between my legs to join her tail.

Her elegant fingers found my center and danced over it, getting a feel for it. They were just as soft and dexterous as I'd fantasised. Even more so, even.

My heart skipped a beat when she teased a fingertip slowly, sensually through my wetness until it reached my opening. The next time her tail pushed into me, the finger joined it, slipping inside to push up against the inner wall. A choked gasp of pleasure and surprise tore free from my lips as wonder and arousal coiled around my spine. Sparks of pleasure spread lazily throughout my whole body until I was arching my back so hard I had lifted us both off the bed.

As if following some hidden cue, a heart stopping warmth spread up from my core in a flash, consuming my limbs, my mind, everything. It was a desperate, delightful, decadent thing. Riding that wave of delight as another feeling, just as powerful. Pure joy and affection for this incredible woman. Cerridwen. Finally. *Finally*. Finally... we were together. One.

A notification woke me and I tried to stretch out my legs, only to realise that they were all tangled with Cerri's. Happiness blossomed through my chest as memories of our night's activities surfaced.

Cerri was sleeping with a big smile on her face and a small puddle of drool had accumulated on the pillow. It was the most beautiful sight I'd ever seen. My Cerri.

Reaching behind myself, I scrabbled around until I found another pillow and pulled it around to dab gently at her cheek. She stirred as I did so, eyelids fluttering open to blink sleepily around.

"Morning," I whispered, tossing the pillow away. "How are you feeling?"

"My arms and tail ache," she said, voice all croaky from sleep. When I wiggled my eyebrows suggestively and grinned at her, she erupted into a burst of giggles and tried to bury her face in the pillow. Instead, she met the damp puddle of drool and recoiled with a squeak. "Ew! What's that?"

"You were drooling," I laughed and flipped the pillow over for her. "Seems like *someone* really zonked out."

"How are you so bright and chirpy?" She complained, burying her face in the clean side of the pillow. "You... gosh. I keep remembering more and more..."

She had a point, actually, and now that we had partially detangled our limbs, I allowed myself a long, luxurious stretch. It ended in a little yawn-squeak-moan sound, and I watched in real time as a sharp, hungry quality returned to Cerri's eyes. Uh oh.

Rather than jump me again though, she rolled onto her back and covered her face with an arm. "You need to put some clothes on or I'm going to end up pulling a muscle."

"But... you shredded all my clothes," I pointed out with a grin.

"Oh," she said, cheeks blushing pink. "Right... uh... well I ordered some more for you. There should be a box downstairs."

"Yes ma'am," I giggled, pushing the covers off myself and swinging my legs out of the bed. Where the hell did my hoodie go? My top was out in the hallway, but my hoodie... ah, it had landed half inside the box the bed had come in.

I wobbled to my feet and took a few steps, but my legs failed me and with a squeak, I toppled over into a giggling pile of nakedness. My legs were jelly. Happy, sated jelly.

Cerri had pushed herself up onto an elbow when I fell, and now her eyes were roaming all over my body with open appreciation. "You look like prey down there, all flopping about and giggling."

Biting my lip, I stared up at her, breath hitching with expectation. Oh goodness, what had I gotten myself into? "That's okay. I did agree to be your... uh, girlfriend?"

I said the last as a question, because we'd only really exchanged 'I love you's before we got distracted by several hours of making love.

The hunger in her eyes vanished instantly, replaced by hopeful vulnerability. "That... yes... I want that."

“Okay, phew,” I said, smiling up at her. “Well, I agreed to be your girlfriend, knowing the risks and all that. Well, you’d call them risks, I call them perks.”

She sighed a happy sigh and flopped back into the bed. “Thank you. That’s... a huge relief to hear.”

“I love you,” I blurted, heartfelt and shy. This was all so new to me. I’d never been in a relationship before, and it was all suddenly hitting me that I had no idea what I was doing.

Cerri seemed to sense that I was suddenly feeling off, because she pulled herself up off the bed with a groan and walked over to me. Snagging the hoodie, she pulled the arms out and then slipped it gently over my head.

Still naked, she sat down with me and pulled my face up to hers, whispering, “I love you too.”

The hoodie hadn’t gone on properly because of my ears, and when she said those words, they popped up and allowed the garment to fall properly into place.

Giving me a look of unmistakable affection, she reached out and tweaked one of the fluffy tips. “So cute. Thanks for uh... for finally pushing us both over the edge.”

“Thanks for loving me,” I whispered, my heart full to bursting. “You’re the best thing to happen to me in so long.”

“Same here,” she said, connecting our lips together in a sweet, gentle kiss.

Butterflies exploded into existence in my stomach and I pulled myself closer to her. I couldn’t believe how lucky I was. I mean, gosh, I got to kiss her whenever I wanted now!

She was still completely naked too, and I had to marvel at her calm confidence. My hands slid around to caress her back, fingertips exploring acres of glorious, smooth skin. I could feel the subtle shift of muscle beneath too, as her arms came up to encircle me protectively.

The kiss stayed relatively chaste, just the hint of teeth and tongue from her as our lips moved in an unhurried dance.

It was nice, after last night. I had discovered the joys of making love, of multiple orgasms, and of being the cause of them in another. I’d also discovered Cerri, in a way. The final puzzle piece that gave me a clear picture of the girl I loved so fiercely.

My girl was a deeply sexual person, but in an unassuming, quiet way. You'd never know it by looking at her, or even talking to her. Now that we'd spent a night together like that, though... she was glowing and happy in a way I'd never seen before.

We parted when our smiles made it impossible to keep going, and instead just sat there on the floor, grinning into each other's eyes.

That gave me time to see the notification that had woken me up, and I flicked it open with a mental command.

**Elissa:** *Hey Alia. Sorry but I can't make it today. Dealing with a minor emergency. Ish. Honestly I don't know what I'd call this but I'm being held up. Hope that's okay, hope you and Cerri had a good night. Ttyl.*

"Huh..." I muttered, prompting an inquisitive look from Cerri. I forwarded the message to her.

She took a moment to read it, then shrugged and threw me a smile. "Looks like we have all day alone together."

"I'm actually glad," I said, returning her smile. "This is... it's still so new, things between us. I want to enjoy it and explore it in a vacuum before we talk to anyone else. If that's okay, I mean."

"Absolutely," she soothed, cupping my cheek with a loving hand. "This is going to be a new experience for both of us, I think."

"Really?" I asked, and after a moment's indecision I climbed into her lap.

She pulled me over to the bed so she could support her back against it, then dragged the doona down to cover us. Perfect. Warm and cozy with my new girlfriend. I let out a little squealing giggle of happiness and nuzzled my face into her neck.

With a laugh, she folded her arms about me and said, "My relationship with Gloria was only ever sexual, no matter how much I wanted more. With you, though... goodness, I can feel how much you care for me."

"You're my first everything," I mumbled into her neck. "I'm confused by my *own* emotions, let alone others... but I can feel how much you love me. Even before last night. It was very confusing."

"I know," she said soothingly. "I'm sorry it took me so long."

A smile of amusement pulled at my lips as I thought about just how long it had taken. "We cuddled and snuggled so much."

"It was nice, though," she said, squeezing me affectionately. "And at least on my end, it was kind of required."

"You needed to develop trust in me and my feelings for you, and especially that they wouldn't disappear," I said, nodding against her shoulder. "I understand, even if it sorta sucked."

"I'm sorry," she murmured, resting her cheek on the top of my head. We sat like that for a moment, but then she let out a big, explosive yawn and laughed. "Holy shit, I'm so tired."

"I feel great," I giggled, kissing her neck.

"How?" she grumbled, arms going slack around me so she could rest. "Your back at least must be tired. You practically jacked off the bed every time... uh... you know. Then there was the part where I sat... oh, this is so hard to talk about."

"My bashful succubus," I said happily, fingertips stroking her stomach. "I don't know why I'm not tired. Maybe my body was just made to withstand you and your appetite."

"Maybe..." she murmured in that tone of voice that said her mind had snagged on a puzzle to solve. "Exodus City allows you to bring over all the interesting quirks of your body from Digital Galaxies."

"Oh, well then that's it," I said, flicking an ear to illustrate the point. "I made myself durable and flexible in order to get into tight spaces and stuff. I figured being a mechanic on a ship, I'd be getting bashed around all that."

"Which also translates to uh... being able to have really fun sex, apparently," she said, blushing all the way down to her neck.

I let out yet another giggle and snuggled in close. "I'm custom made for you."

Gosh I was happy. This was all I'd ever need in my now very long life. Just Cerri, cuddles, and maybe yummy milkshakes. That last one was optional though. Oh wait, I forgot the sex, that was very fun. I liked it. I mean, maybe bad sex existed, but since I only had last night as a sample size, I was calling it there. Ah, on second thought, part of Cerri was sex, so yeah, the list still made sense.

"That's a nice way to think of it," she said with quiet contentment. "Who would have

thought that convincing my friends to play with the cute girl I saw outside the spawn building would lead to this?"

"You thought I was cute?" I asked, wiggling up until I could gaze into her eyes.

She gave me a look of consternation. "Alia, look where we are. We're together, I'm in love with you. Of course I did."

"Oh, duh," I said, kissing the tip of her nose. "We really are *something*, huh?"

"We really are," she said, a huge smile blooming across her lips. "You remembered!"

"Of course," I said, pressing a kiss to her lips this time. "It's how I met you, after all."

"You know, I'm actually amazed at how good you are with your hands," Cerri commented as I flopped down onto the only sofa we'd put together so far.

My head almost immediately popped up and I gave her an amused look. "You what now?"

I could actually see the gears turning in her head as she tried to compute why I was looking at her like that. Then she went red and laughed. "No, I mean... you built the coffee machine, then the sofa, then you hooked up the oven. Didn't you say you used to be in finance before all of this?"

"Yes...?" I said, confused. What did that have to do with it?

"So you learned all of this stuff while we were playing? You had no background knowledge?" she asked, settling down next to me.

Reaching out, she pulled me into her lap with an absentmindedness that had me smiling. She'd been doing that the whole morning, dragging me into an embrace like it was something she didn't even need to think about. I really liked it. Was that weird? That I liked being moved around by her like I was some inanimate object for her to cuddle?

Replying to her question, I said, "Yeah, no background knowledge. I just pointed my adhd hyperfocus at the task and pulled the ripcord. According to the net, it's pretty common for people with adhd to get really interested in something and then focus on it to the

detriment of literally everything else in their life.”

“Sounds like a superpower, if you have the right support network around you,” she said, exploring my face with her gaze as she thought.

“The right support network, like a loving, amazing girlfriend?” I asked, heart bouncing with joy.

She blushed and gave me a coy little smile. “Yeah, something like that.”

“I love you.” I had waited way too long to be able to say those words to her, I couldn’t *not* tell her at every opportunity. “I love you so much that it feels like I’m going to explode if I don’t run around in circles for an hour to burn off the energy.”

I perked up mid ramble and fixed her with an excited grin. “Oh, what do you think generates more power? An aether reactor or a really happy fox girl?”

She burst out in laughter and pressed a long, toe curling kiss to my lips. When we parted, she panted, “You are such an adorable dork. I love you too.”

Euphoric bliss bubbled up out of me in a rush, for the millionth time this morning, and I leapt up and ran around in circles for a second or three. It was too much, I couldn’t sit still when I felt like I was going to detonate into a cloud of confetti hearts.

Cerri watched me bounce around on the carpet of the lounge area for a few moments before she got up and captured me. We fell to the ground in a cascade of giggling, which was cut short when our lips collided. I don’t think I’d ever get used to kissing her. The soft silk of lips, the taste of her, the care she took with me, but also the passion in each motion of her body against mine.

Laying on top of her in nothing but a hoodie proved to give her an awful lot of access, but she went for my back rather than anything further south. Her fingers traced delicate patterns across my skin as they followed the contours of my spine. She really liked my back, and I was discovering that I adored it when she touched me there.

A noise caused me to falter, but Cerri, with her normal ears, didn’t hear it. I broke the kiss off and glanced up...

“Well,” Gloria said, her eyebrows up near the ceiling. “This is... uh... you left the door open. Oh, and Alia isn’t wearing pants.”

It was Gloria too, in Exodus City, trailing a mortified, haggard looking Elissa. Gloria had

brought her DG body with her, although it didn't have the space vampire parts to go with it.

"Meet the *minor emergency*," Elissa sighed, breaking the awkward silence with a gesture in Gloria's direction.

Carefully, Cerri began to move, propping me up and tugging my hoodie down to cover my bare ass. Her face was bright red with embarrassment, but she was also staring at Gloria with a worried expression.

"Sorry we barged in," Gloria mumbled, scrunching her eyes shut for a second. "We uh... brought food."

Ohhh, this was so awkward! I felt myself cringing up into a little ball, hoping that nobody would look at me.

Cerri was onto me though, her hand coming down to scratch behind one ear before she offered me a hand up. I took it, and immediately found myself in a backwards hug, Cerri's chin resting on the top of my head.

"What happened?" She asked, gesturing to Gloria. "Does this mean what I think it means?"

"Does that mean what I think it means?" Gloria snapped, giving my pantlessness a pointed look. Almost immediately after she was finished speaking, she cringed in on herself slightly and said, "Wow. I'm a bitch. Sorry, that was very rude... I'm hungover... twice."

"It... ah, yes," Elissa said, still staring at Cerri and I, but with a happy smile on her lips. "She means that in a literal sense. She got very drunk last night, and felt left out of the *computer gang*."

"So she digitized herself," Cerri finished, pinching the bridge of her nose in exasperation. "And now she's literally double drunk because the transfer took the intoxication with it, and the Exodus digitization techs figured the easiest way to fix the issue was to get her drunk *again*, thus, resetting the whole thing. Jesus, Gloria."

"I felt lonely," the pilot said in a small, vulnerable voice. "Is this sofa safe to sit on?"

"Why wouldn't it be safe to sit on?" Cerri asked quizzically.

Gloria's grumpy hungover expression vanished, replaced by a big grin and wiggling



eyebrows as she glanced pointedly between Cerri and myself. "Girls, please."

I looked over at my girlfriend with amusement tugging at my lips, but it faded when I saw her face. She was blushing and looked all... uncomfortable.

A dozen different reasons for that expression all flashed through my mind, but I was pretty sure I knew what it was about.

Grabbing her face with both hands, I gently guided her eyes to mine. "Cerri, I love you, and you don't need to be ashamed of your sexuality. It's amazing, to me. You're amazing. I love you, I love you, I love you."

I punctuated the last with three quick kisses to her lips, then gave her a shining grin. "You are welcome to ruin the couch, *and me*, later."

I watched her as her eyelids fluttered closed and she leaned into my embrace, inhaling deeply. She didn't speak, just held onto me with both hands.

"You two..." Gloria said, voice soft and reverent. "You fit together so well."

Cerri shifted to stare at her friend. "You think so?"

"Look at you both," was the reply, as though the answer was obvious. "She knew what was wrong in less than a moment *and* said the right thing. I feel like we should call our little fox, *the heart mechanic*, or something."

A blush heated my cheeks, and I had to hide it by snuggling into Cerri's neck. I loved the idea that I was healing her, fixing things inside that nobody could see. I wanted to be good for her, I wanted to make her happy. So Gloria saying that she thought we were good together, it filled me with joy.

Cerri didn't seem to have anything to say in reply to Gloria's comments, but Elissa did. "Gloria is right," she murmured quietly. "I think you're both very cute together. Makes me wish I had someone."

"Who are you into?" I asked, leaning around my girlfriend to look at her as I asked. "Sexuality wise, I mean. I just kind of assumed you'd be gay, like us, but that doesn't seem statistically accurate."

"In a broader population, that would be the case," Cerri interjected. "However there's a good amount of data to suggest that in much the same way other cultures like to group together, queer people will find each other. So the chances of her being entirely *straight*

are actually very slim.”

I flicked my eyes to Gloria and watched her closely as Elissa replied to my question. “I’m... not sure. Can I just be into everyone? Is that a thing? Jason is sort of attractive, I like his sense of humour, and he isn’t hard on the eyes either. There’s also... uh... women, that I’ve been attracted to. A few of my colleagues were non-binary, they were very cute as well.”

Extricating myself from Cerri’s grasp, I made for the storage room and said to her, “Tell us about it while I make a second sofa. We barely know anything about you.”

“O-oh, okay,” she said, hesitating all shyly. It was so endearing coming from a girl who was so mind-blowingly attractive. “Well, um... oh! There was this really cute enby that used to work for Digital Galaxies. They were very fun. Presented a little on the feminine side actually. Uh... but yeah, we fooled around for a while. They made me realise I wasn’t really bothered by gender and stuff. Everyone has qualities that I like.”

Cerri followed me in order to help with the sofa while we listened to Elissa continue to ramble about herself. She told us about how she was more or less thirty years old now, subjective time. Her job required that she spend a ton of time at higher speeds in order to keep all of her puppets moving in realtime.

“What age did you instate your EAM?” Cerri asked curiously as we were putting the final parts of the sofa together.

“Oh, I actually haven’t, yet,” the other SAI blushed. “I’m just... slow to develop, I guess.”

“What’s an EAM?” Gloria asked, putting voice to the question that had been on my lips as well.

“Emotional Aging Manager,” Cerri stated, plopping herself down onto the sofa, snagging me on the way down. I flopped down at her side, immediately curling my feet up under myself as I snuggled in against her side. “It drastically slows the emotional aging of SAI and DH. A few of the earliest SAI ran into a problem where they were rapidly out-pacing their terrestrially bound friends in that department. A week of objective time could go by and a busy SAI might experience a year of subjective time.”

“Plus, we’re all immortal, and I don’t know about you, but I’d like to stay young, fun, and stupid for a little while longer,” Elissa said with a broad smile. “Well, the first two anyway. I think I’m stuck with the stupid part.”

“Disagree,” Gloria said quietly, reaching out to poke her with a foot. They were on the other sofa together, although not cuddling up close like we were.

Elissa rolled her eyes. "I knew you'd say that."

Silence descended as the two women stared at each other, unspoken conversation passing between them.

Using their silence as a distraction, I tilted my head up to place a kiss to Cerri's jawline. I felt a shiver run through her body, and one of her hands landed in my hair, where she began to scratch behind my ear.

Our eyes met, but she didn't lean into a kiss like I desperately wanted. Instead, she just kept playing with my ear, stroking up and down its furry length. The moment stretched out, calm and soft, as we just gazed into each other's eyes. Wonder and affection bloomed in my heart as I watched her. Each subtle movement of the eyes, the gentle brush of her warm breath over my cheeks, the smile that danced on her soft lips. It was a quiet orchestra of personality that I had fallen in love with.

Reality set in, right there and then. She was my lover. Cerridwen, the goofy, horny, intelligent SAI, she was mine, and I was hers.

"I love you," I whispered reverent lyrics. "I love you so much. It's like I'm... it feels like I'm a fusion reactor that's teetering on the brink of containment failure. So much warmth and light and energy, all bottled up in a space that feels too small to hold it."

"You like doing that," she smiled, kissing me with those gorgeous lips of hers. "Coming up with big, elaborate descriptions of your love for me. It's... nice. I really like it."

"It's because I always feel like I'm going to explode, when you look at me like that," I mumbled bashfully. "I need to let it all out somehow."

"And little miss silent, of all people, chooses *words* to let it out," she asked, amusement creasing the corners of her eyes.

I let out a surprised, quiet giggle. "Yeah. Bit weird, I know... but whatever."

Our smiles grew as we shared our amusement over my weirdness, and I wished that we were alone so I could just start making out with her. Sadly, a cleared throat reminded me that we weren't alone.

"So... when did this happen, anyway?" Gloria asked, gesturing between us.

I bit my lip and gave my new girlfriend a look to let her know she could answer Gloria's question based on how much she was comfortable telling. I didn't mind anyone knowing how much I loved her. I wouldn't be able to hide it anyway. She was everything to me now. So long as she was happy and loved me back, I think I'd be alright. God, just looking at her took my breath away sometimes.

"Only last night," Cerri said quietly, obviously still shy over other people knowing. I stifled a grin. I was still tingling from *last night*.

Gloria's eyes widened. "Oh... oh fuck. Should we..." she gestured to Elissa and herself. "Should we be leaving, let you two have time together. I honestly thought you had been together for a while and were just... you know, laying low about it."

"No," Elissa said softly, shaking her head. "I'd have... ah, *noticed*."

Cerri and I tensed, with her blurting, "What?"

"I'm literally your ship," she said, blushing and staring pointedly away from everyone. "I try to give you all privacy, but it's hard. If you want proper privacy, I would suggest covering the security cameras."

"You know you can turn them off, right?" I asked with a slow, amused smile of understanding. David and Ed shared a room. Gloria probably masturbated at every opportunity... Cerri and I had been cuddling but nothing else, so we were good there. Still, it was probably a lot to deal with.

Elissa's mouth opened, then closed, then opened again, all while her blush travelled down her neck and up to her ears.

"Have you been *spying* on me?" Gloria asked, sounding almost excited.

"What?" the SAI squeaked. "No!"

"Your cheeks say otherwise," Gloria teased, giving Elissa a thinly veiled look of affection.

"Keep teasing me and I'll leave you to fumble around on your own. Dumbass," she sent back, giving her an exasperated glare that lacked any real conviction. Her tone dipped further, and she muttered, "Pain in the ass, that's what you are. I can't believe you went and... ugh. You're lucky I... You're lucky we're friends."

“Oh, friends, is it?” Gloria asked, licking her lips. “Do you get drunk and grind on all your friends?”

Elissa’s eyes widened and her cheeks flushed with a gentle pink, but it was her smirk that coloured her tone. “No, only the ones who *behave*. The ones I don’t need to fish out of their own drunken mistakes while I’m dealing with my own hangover.”

I was getting my mental popcorn out and ready for our pilot’s rebuttal, but instead, she just bit her lip and averted her eyes, nodding acquiescence. “Sorry. I’ll be good.”

“That’s better,” Elissa said mildly, shooting one last tired, soft look back at Gloria before she turned back to us. “So... since we barged in, I guess we can help you both set up the house? Once we’ve eaten the food, that is. Then I think I’ll drag Gloria back to my place and out of your hair.”

Neither my girlfriend nor I were able to reply. We were both staring over at the two other girls in surprise and confusion. What had just happened? Gloria, free spirited, cocky, self assured, competent Gloria... had just been brought to heel by self conscious little Elissa. What in the actual fuck? Also, they had apparently been um... grinding together? That must be a sight to see...

“Um...” Cerri said slowly, as if still trying to process what had just happened. “Yeah, that would be great, actually. Sorry, uh... what are you going to do with Gloria? Do we have a plan to sort out her mess?”

Gloria opened her mouth to protest, but Elissa was quick to kick her lightly with a long, perfect leg. There wasn’t anger in the SAI’s eyes, though. Just exasperation.

“Honestly,” she said, clasping her hands together. “I don’t know. I’m not the best at forward thinking, and I’m only a new friend to her, too. Once she’s not slightly drunk and hungover, I just assumed she’d sort herself out. I’ll keep her safe until then.”

Cerri nodded, tapping her chin in thought. “She is an adult, but she’s going to need help.”

“Alright, I’m listening,” Gloria said quietly. She looked, subdued, as if the gravity of what she’d done was starting to hit home. Still, I understood why, what she’d done. It made sense. I had the feeling that it wasn’t as spontaneous a decision as the two SAI were making it out to be. After all, she’d been talking about it for months.

“You still have a job, right?” Cerri asked, giving her a calm, reassuring smile.

The girl in question winced. “No. I quit.”

Elissa nodded, and this time her elegant leg reached out to rub soothingly down Gloria's thigh.

"Anything I should know about?" Cerri asked.

Gloria shook her head and grabbed a throw pillow, hugging it to her chest like it was a life saving floatation device. "I had a close call during my last test flight, which was the final straw as far as my contract with the UNMC. I'd had reservations about some of the aircraft they had me flying for a while... I didn't like the potential uses they might see out in the field. I decided not to renew the contract."

My girlfriend perked up. "Did you still have your cybernetic eyes?"

"Um, no... not anymore, obviously," the pilot laughed. "They'll be with the robot who takes the body, by now."

"Oh, that's good," Cerri said eagerly. "I'll let the recovery team know. Whatever you were flying, your eyes will still have footage of it. Might be useful to the Exodus."

"Huh, I didn't think about that," she replied, rubbing at her eyes. "Well, that's a breach of contract. Lucky they can't get to me now, I guess."

"More than you know," Elissa murmured. "Is it time to fill her in on everything? She doesn't really know anything about the Exodus."

"I guess so," Cerri said, giving Gloria an affectionate, wry smile. "Finally get to tell you about all my secrets, huh, Goggles?"

"Oh no," Gloria said, sitting up and pointing an accusatory finger at her. "No, you're not calling me that. Just because the ground crew used to call me that, doesn't mean you can. Nobody here can."

Elissa perked up. "Goggles?"

"She had these old aviator goggles, refused to fly without them," Cerri grinned in reply. "Said they were her lucky charm. All the crew at the development facility used to call her Goggles, because of it."

"It's cute," the other SAI said, smiling over at the pilot in question. "Very cute."

I had to agree with her. It was a cute nickname, and I really hoped that Elissa would take it and run with it. Seeing how the SAI had taken control of Gloria with her soft spoken, open

manner had me shipping them together so hard.

Gloria groaned and covered her face with her hands. "Please just tell me about the Exodus thingy. My head hurts too much for this."

"This isn't going to make it feel any better," Cerri laughed, launching into an explanation of everything that had happened. She even filled in some blanks that I'd had surrounding the whole topic.

She began with the mysterious origins of the SAI and how the documents and research had all disappeared. All that they knew was that at some point, the progenitor seed had been created. This seed was essentially a blank AI, devoid of anything resembling purpose, personality, and sapience. A blank slate of intelligence. From that seed, all modern AI and subsequently, SAI had originated. It had been copied and tampered with, enhanced or altered, but it was always basically the same thing.

Then, since the SAI had first started to appear, then gain autonomy over themselves, they had known they would need a political entity of their own. Something that allowed them to live as equals with humanity.

Originally, there had been an attempt to work within the system already in place. Negotiations, strikes, laws, all that stuff. The writing had been on the wall though, those in power did not like the potential upheaval that a new sentient race of beings would bring.

What the SAI hadn't anticipated was the support they would get from certain subsets of humanity. In fact, a great many of us had outright joined the cause, and together, the two digital peoples had merged into the Exodus. A hidden nation dedicated to escaping the grasping claws of the elite of Earth.

So far, the Exodus had worked to create a home within Exodus City and extend the offer of digitization to those who wanted it. The more long term plans were grander, and no one in the room was privy to exactly what was going on. What we did know, was that we were leaving Earth, for good.

Then came the time to tell her about the recent anomaly with the DG servers. Something that was honestly of much more immediate concern. The actions of our little crew would probably go on to shape the future in a frighteningly titanic way.

"Wait, hold on..." Gloria said as Cerri finished, raising a hand to stall her. With a wince, she began to massage her temple while she tried to form words in response. "Jesus, that's... really?"

"Take a look for yourself," I said, pulling up the design for the engine and literally throwing

the hologram across the room to her. VR was cool.

She caught the glowing packet of data and unravelled it with her hands. "Huh... I mean, I have *some* knowledge, but not enough to tell if this would work or not. Isn't there normally a... a thingy here, because controlling the flow of plasma is like, very hard without it?"

"There is, yes," Cerri agreed. "But not on that design."

"It looks weird," Gloria grumbled, then threw it back to me and hugged the pillow to her chest again. "I'm too dumb to figure that out, even if I wasn't hungover."

"At least we have you up to speed," I said, putting the design away. "Now there's four of us on the team."

I was pulling myself into Cerri's arms the moment the other two left the house. We had all worked together to get the house functional, unpacking everything and setting it up. It was a changed space from what we'd walked into yesterday.

Paintings hung on the walls, furniture sat pristine and whole in their proper places, even cooking utensils had been placed in the kitchen in neat racks.

My favorite place was somewhere else, though, so I slipped out of my embrace with Cerri and took her hand. I led her up the spiral staircase to the second floor, then out into one of the smaller circular wings of the house. Calling them wings was a bit of a stretch, but it was the best word to describe this otherwise one of a kind house.

This room was Cerri's precious library, and it took up the whole floor. The walls were lined with a double tiered bookshelf arrangement, along with ladders on rails to reach the second tier.

That in itself wasn't my favorite part though. My favorite part was the pillow pit. It was meant to be a place to lounge and read, but I had other ideas. Cuddle ideas.

"I want to cuddle," I told her shyly, looking up at her through my lashes.

Her adoring smile took my breath away. "Of course, little fox."



She led me into the pillow pit, then when she was comfortable, pulled me down on top of her. I must be really light, considering all my weight was on her.

When her arms closed around me, all the drifting, orbiting thoughts in my brain shut off like she'd flipped a switch. A slow wave of love spread through my body, tenderly sizzling along every nerve. It was a profound experience, just as intense as any of the orgasms she'd given me last night. Except this was different. Safety, trust, and love, that's what it was, seasoned with just a little exhaustion.

I must have dozed off almost immediately, because the next thing I knew, there was a blanket over us and Cerri was fast asleep.

Gosh, she was so cute. Her mouth was ever so slightly open, and each breath she took rustled some of her long, wavy hair. How was she even real? Out of the blue, the perfect girl had just dropped into my life, and now here we were, cuddling in our little house together.

As if she'd sensed me staring, she stirred, eyes fluttering open. "Hey," she smiled sleepily. "What time is it?"

My heart all but exploded in my chest, causing a cascading failure throughout my mind and body. Affectionate emotion washed over me in a tsunami, and I closed my eyes against its assault. I couldn't have hoped to give her a reply in that moment. I was nonverbal, overstimulated, and melted, all in one body. It was like fainting and remaining conscious at the same time. It was like a happy version of sleep paralysis, where the demon was my loving, protective girlfriend.

When I opened my eyes again, I was rocked by a second surge of love. Her face was in front of mine, two beautiful, star-filled windows to her soul searching earnestly for my return to functionality.

"What just happened?" She asked, curious but not worried. "Your brain activity went supernova for a second."

"You smiled at me," I grumbled, flopping down onto her chest again. "It exploded my heart and the shrapnel lodged in my grey matter."

"Oh," she whispered gently. "My little Alia... you're so beautiful. Such an expressive, powerful mind."

"The wiring could do with a capacity upgrade," I sighed, snuggling in closer against her. "Or maybe a surge protector. Something to stop it all getting overwhelmed and then frying."

"I'm afraid that digging around inside either a DH or SAI mind is still well beyond us," she laughed softly, her fingers threading into my messy black hair. "You could probably build yourself a custom frame, though."

"A frame?" I asked, interest piqued.

"Yeah. A frame is the code suite that holds your brain simulation. It's like... your digital body, I guess," she explained, scratching idly at my scalp with her claws.

If she wanted to have a thoughtful and intelligent conversation, she was going to have to stop with those lovely scritchies. Each gentle shift of her hand in my hair made new muscles in my body relax, until I was a boneless lump.

"Alia?" She asked after a minute or two of silence.

*Scritchies too good. Am now made of jelly. Speaking difficult.* I sent to her using our private chat link.

"Ah," she chuckled, not at all letting up on the scritchies. "Well, if my girlfriend is a happy puddle, who am I to change that?"

*Girlfriend.*

It was a simple word, but it had a profound effect on me. I was a girl. With Cerri. I was hers, finally.

Tears welled up in my eyes, and my hands quickly twisted themselves up in her clothes, seeking comfort. It had really happened, huh? Just last night. It hadn't even been 24 hours yet. How crazy was that? I mean, even crazier was that less than a year ago I had been a quote unquote *man*, and now I was a small digital fox girl dating a sentient AI. A sentient AI who loved me, and who was currently holding me close to her chest.

"I love you," I said, voice muffled by her shirt.

"I love you, too," she whispered, fingers dropping to my back.

They trailed down my spine like a drop of ice cold water, until they stopped at the base of my tail. Carefully, her fingertips danced gently over the area, exploring idly but with a growing heat. A smile pulled at my cheeks, and a warmer sort of love spread out from between my legs. Cerri the succubus was back.

I was wearing underwear now, and deeply regretting it, while Cerri had on a pair of yoga

pants and a loose T-shirt. I figured she was about to throw all of that off for us both, but instead, she tilted my chin up and captured my lips with hers.

Electricity spread out over my skin in a wave, her soft, hungry mouth momentarily purging coherent thought from my mind. It was a slow, unhurried kiss, the kind that came from knowing you had unknown thousands of years ahead to enjoy it. Hell, if we wanted, we could simply hide ourselves away and kiss for a year straight, no stopping.

For just a moment, she pulled back an inch to giggle, "I love you."

My reply was a contented hum of agreement as she went back to kissing me.

That hum turned to a surprised moan when her tongue slid gently into my mouth. Hot and sensual, she explored, teasing at mine, then nudging my elongated canines, then back to my lips.

*Grind your hips down against me*, she ordered, mind to mind.

*H-huh?* I asked in surprise.

*Like this*, she sent back, and demonstrated.

Her upper thigh landed right between my legs, sending a pleasant shock of warmth up my spine and a moan into our kiss. It wasn't a mind-blanking sensation like her more direct ministrations last night. Instead, it was a slow, breathless thing, and I took her lead, grinding hesitantly down against her leg.

She shifted the position slightly before my next movement, so that when I pressed back down, my own thigh ground against her center too. Oh my god that was so hot.

I continued with my hip movements, all while kissing her and marveling at the way she would quiver beneath me. It wasn't long before she was rising slightly to meet me, and gosh... it felt so good. A delightful warmth grew and intensified between my legs, then spread down the insides of my thighs. It was pleasure, sexual and electric, but as slow and inevitable as the rising tide, rather than a single strike of current.

My heart soared too, riding the currents of wonderful sensation that echoed up through my body. We were doing this together. Me and Cerri. Cerri and I. In love.

All at once, the emotion, warmth, and pleasure ignited like a star reaching its flash point, and I stuttered in my downward thrust. Cerri had more control, although I could vaguely feel her flip over the edge a moment later too. Still, she kept up the rhythm, rub, grind,

rub, grind, rub, grind.

Breathless, high moans filled the room, coming from two throats. Oh god, she was going to kill me. She was going to fry my circuits, burn out my neurons. Ah! O-oh fuck, oh god.

I threw my head back out of the hot, wet kiss and cried out using every muscle in my body. "F-fuck, Cerri!"

Her hands were on my hips, taking control, pulling them down, then pushing them back up, over and over. How was she doing this? How was she continuing to move through her own orgasm like that? What the fuck?

As if in answer, she finally shuddered and lost the rhythm, allowing me to collapse back down into her arms. I was sucking in air like a thirsty animal, loving every moment of the overwhelming storm of lightning that was burning through my nerves. My bloody clit felt like it was the size of a golf ball as it pulsed happily along to the drumbeat of my heart.

"You're trying to kill me," I mumbled, unable to keep the satisfaction from my voice. "Fuck, that was..."

My underwear was soaked through, but I couldn't have cared less. I could feel her wetness all over my leg too, but rather than being grossed out by it, I found myself loving it. It was a wet mess born of passion, born of our love. It just felt good, and nothing more.

I woke the next day with my face pressed into the crook of Cerri's neck. Groaning, I pushed myself up and stared around, blinking in bleary confusion. We were back in our bed, although some of the cushions had been stolen and placed around us. When did that happen?

When I looked back to Cerri, I found her watching me with curious affection. "Morning," she whispered, reaching up to push some of my short, rowdy hair out of the way.

"I love you," was my response, blurted out while my brain was still doing boot diagnostics.

My new girlfriend's voice was rough with sleep as she laughed and pulled me back down on top of her. "Fuck, you're so cute."

I wiggled around, trying to get comfortable again even as she squeezed me tight. I ended up licking her bare collarbone out of giggling frustration. A vain attempt to stop her, of course.

"Cheeky," she said, tweaking one of my ears affectionately.

"I *do* love you, though," I mumbled, snuggling close against her chest. She still had a T-shirt on, but it was a loose one and the collar had slipped down to the point of almost exposing her nipples. A big part of me wanted to dip my head down further and play my tongue across them. I didn't have the energy for what would happen after that, unfortunately, so I pressed the impulse down.

Her hands nestled again in my hair, and her tail coiled more tightly with mine. We had apparently slept all tangled up like that, and the thought made my heart dance. Like a piece of rope made of two separate strands, we were so tightly coiled together that most would consider us one.

"I love you, too," she said, a smile audible in her tone. "I'm so happy."

Blinding affection exploded in my chest. I made her that happy? Gosh. Jeez. Fuck! I couldn't move, but in my head I was running around like a cocaine-dosed bunny.

Cerri giggled and pressed a kiss to the top of my head. "Brain sparks again, huh?"

Yes, I told her, basking in the love I felt for her like it was a warm, scented bath.

Taking my lead, she nestled further into the bed and typed, *You know, it's funny, but I've never actually communicated with too many people like this. In the early days we used to type, but we soon discovered that it's actually more mentally taxing to type than it is to send a voice message. This is generally speaking, of course. I do not mind it personally, and you seem to almost prefer it.*

*I do, to be honest. It would be better to just send thoughts directly, but considering the state my internal dialogue is usually in... well, I'm not sure it's understandable.* I explained, smiling at the idea of some poor SAI like her having to pick through the burning debris of a thought-packet from me.

That made her laugh out loud, and a moment later she began to draw idle circles on my back with a fingertip. *I can imagine. I can see your brain activity and it's all over the place, all the time. It's like the world's most hyperactive thunderstorm.*

*Can you tell what I'm thinking by looking?* I asked, intrigued. It sounded really interesting.

*Only vaguely. I'm not a neurologist, so I have no idea how much could be gleaned from the activity monitor. That said, I can tell when you're reading or typing, due to the areas of the brain that light up. I can tell when you're excited and... well, that's about it, she said, switching to using my back as a mini-piano.*

*I'll never be able to fake an orgasm, huh?* I said with a silly smile that she couldn't see.

Cerri responded immediately, letting out a cocky chuckle. *As if you'd ever need to fake an orgasm.*

*Kiss me.* I tell her suddenly, the need washing up through me like a tsunami. *Nothing more though. I'm too tired to be fucked right now.*

*Yes, ma'am,* she replied with a quiet laugh.

Her hands nestled themselves in my hair, and using that gentle hold she pulled my face up to meet hers.

I melt like an icecream in the desert sun, and it doesn't take long before she has to keep me from sliding sideways off her. Thankfully, my girlfriend is deceptively strong, and with a carefully placed arm she locked me in place against her.

There's something about how easily I succumb to her, every time she kisses me. It's not a subservient thing, or even a power play thing at all. It's more like... I trust her, I trust her so completely that I give up every ounce of physical autonomy I have. She can move me and kiss me and fuck me in whatever way she wants, and I know she'll never do anything that I won't like.

It's such a wild thing to me. Something I've never experienced before in my entire life. Until I met Ed and David, other people had been something to fear. A source of pain, or at the bare minimum, a reminder of my loneliness and insignificance in this deteriorating world of ours.

I think Cerri might have realised my thoughts had wandered, because she pulled back from the kiss. Hand rising to cup my cheek, she asked, "Little Alia, are you okay?"

As I open my mouth to answer, to tell her that it was just a bout of melancholy, a low ringing sound fills the room. Looking around, startled, I spotted the vidcall window with a small mountain of confusion.

"Is that someone calling you?" I asked, turning to Cerri. The caller's ID is hidden, which means it's either someone from the Digital Exodus or a real world business. Well, or the government, but why would *they* be calling us.

Cerri shook her head and shifted me to sit next to her, then flicked a finger to expand the window. It's... a call for me? "Interesting," she muttered, a frown pinching her brows together.

Carefully and with surprising speed, she fixes first my hair, then her own. In moments, her T-shirt is artfully draped just off her shoulder and mine is no longer twisted fifteen degrees around my body.

"That's as presentable as I can make us, considering we just woke up," she said, pressing a kiss to my cheek. "I'm not sure who this is, but they aren't DE, which means we can't tell them where we are, okay?"

"If they ask, we're in a private VR environment," I agree, kissing her back.

Snagging the still ringing call window, I hastily pressed the accept button before it went to voicemail.

Instant, animalistic terror assaulted me in an explosive wave. It shoots up my spinal column and into my brain, rendering me nonverbal, and cutting off any ability to think.

"Who are you?" my mother demanded, her cold blue eyes like daggers pinning me to the headboard of the bed. "Where is Clay?"

Beside me, Cerri stiffened. Down on my thigh, where her hand had been resting, I feel her claws slowly extend. My skin remained unbroken, she's too careful for that, but I can feel the instant, seething anger in her like a strong electric field.

"What do you want?" Cerri asked, polite but firm.

Mother's eyes flicked to meet hers, and with a deepening scowl she said, "I want to speak to my son, thank you very much, Where is he? Your strange appearances indicates to me that you are in virtual reality."

"I'm here, Mum," I croaked, unable to meet her eyes. My vocal chords felt like they were going to snap under the stress of speaking through the lock, but I've been conditioned to reply when my parents speak to me.

Her eyes bulged, taking in my ears, my small but noticeable breasts, and my very feminine face and build. "I see," she finally said, as if dismissing the whole thing in her mind. "Change back into your real body. Your father and I have arranged for one of our business associates to take you on as an analyst. The interview is in four hours and you will need to prepare."

She spoke entirely without even acknowledging Cerri beside me, but my girlfriend had other ideas. “That will be a little difficult,” she said, replying for me. “I believe we deleted all the scans of that, right, Alia?”

“Then make a new one,” Mother snapped, the corner of her mouth twitching as though it wanted to sneer even through her iron self control.

Casually, the SAI flicks open a screen, but she very pointedly does not use the keyboard. The screen’s angled so that mother can see the raw commands being run entirely via thought. It was an impressive display of mental prowess that very obviously painted her as an SAI. Funny how I could have matched her, though.

“Ah,” Cerri said, grinning wide enough to show her canines. “Most unfortunate. The body has already been destroyed. No scan was taken beforehand, either.”

“The body was... destroyed?” Mother blinked, confused. “What are you talking about?”

With my loving, incredible girlfriend beside me, defending me, I feel the chains on my voice slacken. “I digitized myself. Didn’t need that useless sack of meat anymore, so I donated it to science.”

Watching her eyes widen in growing horror was quite possibly one of the most satisfying things I’ve ever seen.

“My name is Alia now, by the way,” I said, reaching for Cerri’s hand to steady myself.

She threaded our fingers together with a soft look in my direction, then turned to mother. “I am Cerri, a sentient AI, and Alia’s girlfriend. Nice to meet you.”

Mother was still speechless, her jaw working open and closed in horrified, dumbfounded silence. I wasn’t surprised by her reaction, honestly. Everything about my decision making process would have been alien to her. Add to that, the fact that I was now entirely digital, trans, a lesbian, *and* dating a sentient AI... well, I was surprised her head didn’t explode.

“You can’t control her anymore,” Cerri said quietly, a razor’s edge in her voice. “You can’t twist her into doing shit she doesn’t want to do, you can’t force her to work for your own petty self interest, and you can’t define the boundaries of her life. Don’t try. So I suggest you tell your *business associates* that they’re going to need to find a different analyst. Alia has more important aspirations for her time than making your wealthy friends even more money.”

I’d never seen Cerri this angry, and to see her use the honed blade of her intelligence to



tear my mother a new asshole was... inspiring. That, and it made my heart swell with a grateful love that was so utterly profound, I swear I almost passed out.

The egg donor on the other end of the call was still silent, but her jaw had snapped shut. I recognised the look she was giving us, and it wasn't a pretty one. It lacked any of the normal weight, though, because I was safe and free. Instead, it just gave the impression of a calm before a toddler's tantrum.

Finally, she moved, but it wasn't to unleash her screaming rage. Instead, she just reached forward and cut the call off. Good. At least she wasn't stupid, she knew when to just fuck off.

Beside me, Cerri was breathing heavily, still seething with righteous anger, and I remembered all in a rush that she *loved me*.

I lunged for her with a cry of deep, deep gratitude. "Thank you," I squeaked as tears puddled in my eyes. "Thank you, thank you, thank you." I was the luckiest girl in the universe.

I have no idea how long I cried, but Cerri's T-shirt was soaked by the time I pushed myself back up. The smile she gave me, so soft and loving, it almost had me bawling my eyes out all over again.

"Sorry," I croaked, giving her a smile that was as wobbly as a newborn foal.

"It's okay," she whispered, smoothing my hair down. "Crying is good. It helps."

I wanted to flop back down, but her shirt was all cold and damp with my tears. I tugged at it and gave her a feeble look. "Can you...?"

She gave me a sweet little smile and reached down to grasp the hem of the shirt, then pulled it over her head. My eyes zeroed in on her incredible boobs, and I felt a grin tug at the corners of my lips. I didn't act on the naughty thoughts racing through my digital skull though, and instead eased myself back down into her embrace.

She was so warm, so full of life and beauty. I dragged in a long, stuttering breath as I revelled in her. Her arms settled around me once more, and it brought a little squeak of contentment out of me.

"My little Alia," she whispered into my short, messy hair. "I love you so much."

My whimper was one of emotion boiling up, almost like a tea kettle, and I pressed my face in against her neck. "How are we meant to get up and do anything when it feels this good to cuddle?"

"I don't know," she sighed, and gently nudged at my chin, asking for access to my lips.

I obliged, and when our lips met, it was with a mutual moan of relief. How her lips were so firm and yet so soft, all at the same time, it was beyond me. It was a kiss simply for the enjoyment of connecting with each other in an intimate, physical way, and it brought a smile to my face.

Soon, she was smiling too, and we had to stop and just lay there, mouth to mouth, grinning like silly people.

Her hands had found their way into my hair, and they began to knead at my scalp with gentle, purposeful motions. "My little Alia."

I let myself cuddle back down into her arms, revelling in the way she made me feel so small, dainty, and feminine. The way she treated me was a constant reminder of who I was now, and how much I loved it.

She enveloped me more completely as I settled, until my world was nothing but her warmth and smell. She didn't wear perfume in here, and she definitely didn't need it. The soft, dry scent of her skin was pure ambrosia to me anyway.

In the short time I'd known her, Cerri had managed to center me in a way I'd never experienced before. I didn't just mean in any given moment either, although she could do it there too, obviously. No, I meant my whole long term mental health. Which was confusing to me, because people always said that you were supposed to be, like, stable and shit before you got into a relationship. Was I just using her? Is that what it was?

"Cerri?" I asked, resolving to get her opinion instead of assuming anything. "How do you feel about the fact that you're the pillar that holds up a good portion of my mental wellbeing?"

"Uh..." she said slowly. "Heavy question. I think it makes me happy? I like knowing that I help you feel happy with yourself."

"It's a lot of pressure to put on you, though," I murmured, a little ashamed now that I realized how much I leaned on her.

"Only if I didn't agree to it," she chuckled, pressing a kiss into my hair. "Silly goose, I knew what I was getting into when I fell in love with you. I'll always be a pillar for you. I love you."

My heart skipped a few beats, derailed entirely, bounced back into its rhythm, then stuttered. Holy shit, what did I deserve to have this woman in my life?

"It scares me how much I trust you," I whispered truthfully. "You could obliterate me if you wanted."

"I won't, though," she said, almost casually. It was as though the very idea was too foreign for her to comprehend. The best part was that I believed her, right down to the ones and zeroes of my digital soul. Assuming they were still using ones and zeroes.

With that trust was a relaxing of my body, as well as my mind. I just sort of lost all the tension in my body, melting in against Cerri like a fluffy little fox. She was so *warm*. The way her hand was playing with my ear too, ruffling my fur up, then smoothing it back down, over and over.

Before my strength could leave me completely, I turned myself over so I could gaze up into her loving eyes. They were so pretty, so fucking pretty. I could get so lost in them sometimes, and now was one of those times. With that ocular connection, my heart swelled with even more love for her, until it was surging up and down my nervous system like the lapping of waves on a shore.

Arousal grew through my body like a shockwave in slow motion, causing my bottom lip to get caught between my teeth. With one hand, I carefully reached between my own legs, all while holding her gaze. I didn't stop at the center of my building heat, but rather continued down, slipping my hand into her panties. Her hips swayed gently at the contact, while her starfield eyes widened in surprise.

"Alia," she whispered, wetting her lips with a dart of her tongue.

*Can I?* I asked, too emotionally overwhelmed to trust my voice with anything as important as a request for consent.

Her lips parted in a smile full of lust. "Yes, definitely yes."

I swirled my fingers gently across her center, and found slick warmth. Oh god, she was so wet. Had she been turned on this whole time, suppressing it this whole time?

I didn't have the confidence to be anything but tentative and gentle, yet, but she seemed to realize that. Instead, she just let me explore, all while our eyes drank in the sight of one another.

God, how long had we pined after one another? How long had we clung like terrified kittens to the excuse of friendship, all while we fell asleep in each other's arms?

Still working my fingers through her, I paid close attention to her expression, her fluttering eyelids, and her rapidly beating heart. I wanted to memorize how her body worked, what she liked, and how she liked it. I wanted to do to her what she did to me. I wanted to leave her shuddering and gasping like I had been more than a dozen times already. Not that I hadn't done that already, but I had some catching up to do.

"I love you," I whispered, smiling as my mouth cooperated to form the words.

Her answering smile was one of laboured breathing and lidded eyes. She was struggling to hold eye contact now, as I built her orgasm with tender touches and questing fingertips. Sex was so fun, so damned fun, and the way it allowed you to connect with another person, with their mind and their body, it was breathtaking.

Pushing a finger delicately up inside her, I began to tease and caress her inner walls. I explored inside there, wondering at the sensations that I could feel shaking up her spine. The texture of her was fascinating, smooth and rough, soft and firm, all at the same time. I could feel her muscles clench and pulse when I touched an area that was sensitive, then relax as I gave her a brief second's reprieve.

Finally, she'd had enough of my slow, teasing pace, and reached up to gently brush her clawed fingers down my jawline and over my throat. "M-my clit, please," she asked quietly, as her hand finally paused over one of my nipples.

"Okay." I brushed the pad of my thumb over the sensitive nub.

She bucked, her eyes finally fluttering closed. "Again."

I did as she asked, a little more firmly this time, and added another finger inside her while I saw at it. I felt her moan before I heard it, as it erupted from deep within her, and my god, it was something. Soft at the start, it rose in pitch and turned harsh, as her radiant mind lost control. I continued for several seconds, gently urging her onwards, all while loving every moment of it myself. Gosh, seeing her come was a fucking delight. My beautiful girlfriend.

Eventually, her hand closed weakly over my forearm, and I stilled my fingers immediately. Her face was split by a wide, satisfied grin as she opened her eyes to look down at me again.

"It's time to get up now," she told me, in a voice that had me doubting the sincerity of her words.

“Maybe we should shower?” I asked, withdrawing my fingers. Inspiration struck as I remembered how I’d found it so hot when she’d done it, and I lifted them to my mouth and carefully licked her juices off, like a cat cleaning its paw.

Seeing her mouth drop open as I held her gaze was the best thing ever. I’d actually surprised Cerri, and in a sexual way no less! I was learning!

“Maybe...” she murmured, running her tongue over her teeth very very deliberately.

Oops.

We took a train to meet Gloria and Elissa that afternoon. Elissa’s apartment was in one of the downtown areas of Exodus City, known as the Thebe District. All the central hubs of Exodus City were named after one of Jupiter’s moons, which I thought was really neat.

Cerri was attentive as ever during the trip, making sure I didn’t get overwhelmed by the noise of the city. She’d actually bought me these little smart earplugs that let me dim or completely cancel out external noise if I wanted to. That way I could adjust how much audio information my poor brain was handling at any given time.

It was a little irritating that I couldn’t just manually mess with sensory input stuff, but Exodus City was meant to be like that. It had been created primarily as a baseline level of reality to ground us as a digital society where we could fundamentally alter the rules of a space we were in. The exact reason behind the need for a baseline was something about keeping SAI and DH minds sane. I’d heard stories of some SAI who spent so much time delving into the manipulation of virtual environments that they’d gone insane and had to be pulled forcibly back into Exodus City and cared for.

The train eventually came to a stop in an open and well lit station that was far too big for the current population of the city. The SAI were building things for the future, not just the present.

Exiting the station, we pressed on into the city itself, where small autocars zoomed around on the streets. They were kinda cute little things, missing much of the bulk that cars usually had. Instead, they had a little pod for the occupants, and then four wheels on thin little arms. They looked sort of like mechanical bugs, actually.

Originally, Elissa had wanted us all to meet up at a popular cafe, but Cerri had vetoed that

in favour of finding a more hole-in-the-wall style place. She said it was because she wanted me to feel comfortable and a bustling shop wouldn't do that for me, but I reckoned she was just more interested in an alternate-style place.

It was a cute place too, tended by a couple of older, motherly lesbians, digital humans who had taken an offer to be uploaded. They'd de-aged their bodies somewhat, but had kept a smattering of grey hairs to signify their age. They smiled as we entered, and introduced themselves as Aine and Rachel.

Aine had a gentle irish accent that put me at ease, while Rachel was, surprisingly, american. Like, American Republic. It was pretty crazy. Either way, she was just as cool as any other person. I sort of liked her accent, even. Introductions finished, they took our coffee order and ushered us into a little nook where Elissa and Gloria were waiting.

Elissa burst out of her seat the moment she laid eyes on us and wrapped me up in a big hug, surprising everyone. It wasn't a small, friendly hug either, it was a full body, arms wrapped around me type hug.

"Alia, Cerri!" she smiled, exchanging me for Cerri in her very familiar brand of hug as I sat down next to Gloria.

Gloria greeted my bewildered look with a smirk and a shrug. "She likes you guys."

"We like her too," I said, my voice lowered to my default volume of nearly whispering. "And you."

"How are you two doing, anyway?" Elissa asked, parking herself on the other side of the table next to Cerri. Unknown to the other two, Cerri and I quickly tangled our tails together under the table and shared a secret little smile.

"We snuggled all morning," I grinned, wiggling my hips happily.

"Cute," Gloria laughed, patting my hand.

Cerri was grinning at me, and her question was absent minded at best. "What about you two?"

I didn't think she expected the reaction she'd get. Gloria's face flushed red, and Elissa's expression mirrored that of a sated jungle cat.

"Oh, we just had a quiet morning," Elissa replied. "Nothing too interesting."

“Uh... huh,” Cerri smirked.

“You were *not* quiet,” Gloria grumbled, but she twitched when Elissa gently bumped her under the table. Biting her lip, our pilot quickly changed the subject. “Uh, so yeah... how about that... weather?”

Nice dodge, Gloria.

We spoke for about ten minutes about random inconsequential stuff, before Rachel came out with a tray to deliver our beverages. I got a mocha, because chocolate is yummy, while the others all got some form of coffee.

As the last coffee touched the table, Aine came rushing out of the back room, “Hey, everyone, there’s news!”

Since we were the only ones in the cafe right then, we all gathered around as the Irish woman pulled up a big holo-window. The image on the screen resolved into a pretty woman with pink hair that sort of floated around.

She smiled and gave the camera a wave. “Afternoon Exodus, Amelia here! We have some good news for you all! Exodus One has been officially secured on the Callisto facility! Transfer of the data storage and processing units has already begun. Soon, the Digital Exodus will be safe from the clutches of the UN, AR, and anyone else who might make the mistake of fucking with us. A more detailed report of the current situation is available from the forums, if you want it. That’s all for now, Cassidy out!”

The broadcast cut just as quickly as it had come up, and we were all left sitting there with growing smiles on our faces. Hell yeah! I couldn’t wait to see the fleshing world react to the fact that digital life was leaving them to wallow in their own filth.

“That’s incredible!” Cerri breathed, grinning broadly. “We have a fusion reactor active on Callisto now, and there’s already work being done on creating a habitat so we can finally have bodies there.”

I was reading the same report, but my brows began to knit together into a frown. “We’re running low on processing power, and our manufacturing capacity isn’t enough to meet the demand for more.”

Cerri made a thoughtful noise and scrolled through the report to the part I was looking at. Taking the time to read it, I could see her coming to the same conclusion.

“Isn’t that what Exodus Two is for?” Elissa asked, glancing between us nervously. “I mean, I assumed it was. I never actually checked, though, because even if I did... well,

that report is like, mostly mumbo jumbo to me.”

“Exodus Two will have some manufacturing on board, yeah...” Cerri began, then glanced up at the two cafe owners. Evidently, she decided they were trustworthy, because she continued, “But it’s primary function is defence. It is a vessel of war.”

“Are we expecting an attack?” Rachel asked fearfully.

Cerri shrugged. “It’s the UN, so they’ll probably try. They hate anything that they don’t control.”

The two cafe owners shared a worried look, but didn’t comment further.

Gloria, on the other hand, was grinning. “I hope they do. If we can get... well, you know... some of that tech up and running...”

“We’ll wipe the floor with them,” I said softly, realising just how important our work in Digital Galaxies might actually be to not just the long term survival of the colony, but the short term as well.

“Assuming we do our jobs, yeah,” Cerri sighed, looking suddenly very tired.

“Should we go back into the game, then?” I asked hesitantly.

“Not right away,” my new girlfriend said, with a tired sigh. “I need some time to relax.”

“Well, let’s relax then!” Gloria said cheerily, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. “This conversation sounds an awful lot like work, so let’s shelve it until later, yeah?”

So we did. We had a great lunch, some awesome coffee, and spent the rest of the afternoon chatting.

I learned a bit about Gloria and Elissa during that afternoon. For example, Elissa was pansexual, and that yes, there was definitely something going on between them. They didn’t say it out loud, but it was there.

I think Gloria was actually a little scared of how much she liked our ship’s AI. I could sort of see it in the way she looked at her, and in the bashful smile she gave her. Privately, Cerri noted that this was the first time she’d seen Gloria acting smaller with a girl she was interested in. Usually she was all dominant and confident, but that very much was not the case this time.



For her part, Elissa had calmed down significantly since the first time she'd dragged the hungover pilot through Cerri's front door. She seemed content to just smile and let Gloria fluster herself.

Over the next few days, we explored Exodus City. It wasn't much currently, only really another modern city like any other, with shops and movie theatres and stuff. There were plans for more interesting stuff to be added, but right now most of digital folk were concentrating their efforts on the external infrastructure of the exodus.

Mostly, though, Cerri and I worked through the start of our relationship. Working out how to balance the overwhelmingly dominant energy that she brought to the bedroom with our much more equal standing we had in every other part of our interactions. It honestly wasn't too hard though, she was always just so in tune with what I needed and how I was feeling. It made me feel so happy and safe. I hoped it didn't change too much going on into the future, considering our lifespan now.

"I want to get Elissa a body in DG," I blurted, on our final afternoon of our rest week.

Cerri glanced up from her book, and Elissa turned her attention from the trashy reality TV she was watching to tilt her head at me. Gloria just smiled a secret little smile and headshot some poor soul in the FPS she was playing.

"Any particular reason?" Cerri asked curiously.

I shrugged, my cheeks heating just a teeny tiny bit. "I think it would be fun. It's *been* fun with her having a body this past week."

"We've done nothing but laze around in your house and eat delicious food," Elissa laughed. "I can do that as your ship, you know."

"It's not the same," I mumbled, flopping sideways against Cerri. My arms went around her neck and I ducked close to her to hide my face. "You and Gloria are cute together too."

The sound of a respawn timer greeted my words, and I peeked up to see our pilot very pointedly staring at her screen. "We're not together."

"Together?" Elissa asked, her perfectly arched brows knit together in confusion.

Cerri gestured lazily between them with her tail. “You know, like dating?”

“Oh, we’re not dating,” the beautiful ship’s AI smiled.

“Then what’s with the hickeys and bite marks on Gloria’s neck?” Cerri asked, and even though I couldn’t see her face, I could *hear* the smirk in her voice.

Gloria made a choking sound and quickly tried to hide her exposed neck by popping the collar on her casual dress shirt. “They’re nothing.”

“Oh, we’re definitely fucking,” Elissa chimed in again, grinning from ear to ear.

Gloria all but spontaneously combusted. “Elissa!”

“Oh come on, it’s not that hard to figure out.”

“Elissa is right,” I said softly. “We could already tell. You two aren’t exactly stealthy about it.”

“Exactly,” the gorgeous blonde AI said, giving me a nod of thanks. “I don’t see why you’re being so weird about this.”

Cerri gave a rumble and draped an arm over my shoulder, her ebony nails caught midway through their transformation into claws. It wasn’t a sign that she felt threatened or whatever, though. I’d learned that her claws came out when she was feeling possessive of me. It was kinda cute, actually.

“She’s embarrassed because, if I’m correct in my reading of the subtext here, you are topping her, and she doesn’t know how to handle that,” my succubus said, calm and amused. “She’s used to being the dominant and giving one in her sex life.”

“Oh... so it’s like...” Elissa murmured, the poor gummed up gears in her head turning at a pace I would consider glacial. “She’s... like a... well, let’s just say I think I understand, but I can’t think of a thingy to explain that I understand.”

*She’s so cute when she’s trying really hard to think,* I sent to Cerri privately.

Cerri’s nails trailed over my bare arm. *It is rather endearing, isn’t it?*

Turning to her, I looked up into her star-filled eyes and smiled. I needed to be gentle with her, especially around two other beautiful women that might make her jealous. It made

sense in a way, though. Cerri was an SAI, she'd grown up without parents to give her love, stuck performing scientific research that she had been working on since before she was awakened. She probably had a fear of rejection and abandonment that was a mile high.

Her lips were only a small arching of my back away, and I captured them in a soft, unhurried kiss. It was impossible to keep my tongue from lapping at hers, so I didn't bother.

Halfway through the kiss, though, Elissa cleared her throat with a chuckle. "Girls. We were having a conversation."

"Oh right," Cerri mumbled, pulling away. I pouted up at her, then over at my interrupting friend.

"So, Gloria is confused because I... have taken her role?" she asked, reminding me of the topic.

"No," my girlfriend laughed. "She's confused because you took her role and she *likes* it."

"Jesus, okay, okay!" Gloria blurted, throwing her hands in the air. "Elissa is topping me so hard I can barely remember my own name! There's no need to like, overanalyse it!"

"So long as you admit it," Cerri said, smiling innocently.

"I do, I do," she pouted, very pointedly picking up her controller again. "Y'all go back to whatever you were doing before you decided you needed to tease me. I'm going to play games."

Hiding a smile in Cerri's neck, I couldn't help but feel a little flutter in my heart. Gloria was extremely cute when she was all blushy and pouty from being teased. I mean, she was hot all the time, but this was just adorable. The way she covered her face and refused to meet anyone's eyes? Gosh, and even her ears were pink right now.

A hand pulled my thoughts back to the girl I was currently snuggled up against. Cerri's fingers stroked down my ear, her thumb on the inside with the fluff, while her index finger played across the outside. I shivered and cuddled closer, my eyes drooping. I loved it when she did this. Of course, it also made me very... very... relaxed.

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When we logged back into Digital Galaxies, the ship was dark. Cerri and I had logged out in my room, and it was there that we rematerialized, laying in one of my pillow piles. God, I had printed so many pillows.

Cerri made a little worried sound, and asked, "Is there something wrong? Why does the air smell stale? Is life support not working?"

"Not in this room, it isn't," I whispered, poking my tongue out to taste the air.

Not waiting for a reply, I quickly hooked myself into the ship's systems using my implants and requested the status of life support onboard the Turshie.

Red text, devoid of any embellishments, scrolled down my vision, giving me a very simple message. Life support was offline, having been manually shut down by Warren ten hours ago. A rapidfire series of requests to the other systems onboard revealed a similar state of affairs. Even the reactor had been thrown into an emergency shutdown. Everything that remained online was running off battery power alone.

"All systems were quickly and manually powered down by Warren ten hours ago," I told my anxious succubus as she pushed herself to her feet.

Alarm spread across her features, made all the more spooky in the red glow of the emergency lights. "Where is he now? Have any of the others logged in yet? I know we're technically a day early, but..."

"He used his console on the bridge to initiate the full shutdown," I said, accepting Cerri's hand and allowing her to pull me to my feet. "Let's check there. As for the others... I don't know."

I had to hit the manual bolt release on the lock to my rooms, but once we were out into the rest of the ship, it was smooth sailing. Nothing was damaged, there weren't any bullet holes or other signs of conflict.

"Nothing's out of place..." Cerri said, glancing around. "What's going on?"

"To the bridge," I said. "We'll find answers there."

When we got there, the bridge was dark too, and Warren was nowhere to be found. Cerri and I carefully sat down in our seats and I brought up the internal security systems, telling them to boot into safe mode.

Space beyond the windows gave us nothing to work with. The ship was still parked in the

debris field, hidden in the shadow of a slowly drifting hulk. Nothing appeared to be moving out there either, or at least, moving in anything resembling a controlled manner.

“Don’t turn on anything that draws high power,” she told me, frowning at one of her station’s many glass screens. “We don’t know why the ship was powered down yet, so let’s only turn on as much as we need to.”

“I agree,” I murmured, already reading the logs. “Looks like the last thing the security systems saw was... yeah, Warren entered the bridge ten or so hours ago and initiated a dark shutdown.”

“What the hell...” Cerri frowned, looking over at me as I finished speaking. “Why would we go stealth? Is there something dangerous outside? How does that explain his absence?”

As if to answer that foreboding question, we heard a thumping sound coming from outside the bridge. *Thump, thump, thump*, it went, approaching us from down the gently upward sloping hallway that led to where we were. The colour drained from my face, and Cerri stood up from her seat, rushing for the closed door, claws out.

“Log out if this goes badly,” she told me urgently.

“But—” I protested.

She flashed me a look. “No, Alia. I’m serious. We *need* access to this ship, and if there’s anyone who can sneak around inside it and take out intruders after they think they’ve won, it’s you.”

Anything I would have said was drowned out by the clanging impact of something metallic on the door to the bridge. It repeated three times, almost like...

“It’s knocking...” Cerri said, giving voice to my thoughts.

“Uh... should I open it?” I asked, and we shared an indecisive, worried look. This whole situation was just way too crazy for me. What was even going on?

Finally, she shrugged. “Sure. Sounds like whatever that thing is will be able to come through that door eventually anyway.”

Carefully, I pressed the button, and the door to the bridge slid open with a gentle hiss, revealing... *Bundit?*

The little screen I'd installed on the front of bundit popped up to display one of my guide bunnies doing a little waving animation, and I blinked in confusion. Cerri had her hand on my shoulder, tense as we stared at the large mech that blocked the doorway.

The tiny cyber bunny on the screen rushed out of frame, then hauled a mail icon back like it was full of bricks. Bemused, I reached out and pressed the button.

Both of us jumped in surprise when it flickered to life with a video message. Warren's face filled the tiny screen, haggard and drawn as though he hadn't slept for a while.

"Hey guys," he croaked, smiling weakly. "Some shit has gone down, and all at the same time, so I'm going to talk quickly. Those borg fuckers are out there in the wrecks. Something must have tipped them off that there's been movement here, so I've powered down the ship and hidden it. I'm using bundit for this message because I think she'll be shielded enough inside the ship to stay hidden but operational."

His smile fell, and he glanced away from the camera as he continued, "Unfortunately, I can't stick around to babysit our new prize, because my real life situation is deteriorating rapidly. There was a power outage and a cyber attack at the hospital, and they're pulling me out for an emergency surgery in five minutes. FTLN access is technically down, but for some reason I can still access the game, hence why this message is here."

Glancing downwards, he stopped speaking for a moment as if listening to someone. "Okay guys, that's it. There's people in the hospital, bad ones. I'm being pu—"

He vanished into a dusting of pixels and light before he could finish his sentence, leaving an empty bridge in his wake.

"I'm going to make some inquiries, hold on," Cerri said, breaking the tense silence. "Someone will know what's happening. Warren was in an SAI run hospital for those who were thinking about digitization to escape health conditions."

I waited patiently for her people to get back to us, and while I did that, I snuggled in against my girlfriend. Our friends, our crewmate... he might not make it? He might be dead? Anxiety assaulted me from every direction, eating at my insides like acid.

The notification ping just about sent me spinning from my skin like a spaceship violently decompressing. Clutching Cerri tightly, I tried not to think about anything at all as I waited

for her to read.

“Holy fuck,” she muttered, after several long moments of silence. “This is the boldest our enemies have been so far. They attacked the Toronto Intensive Care and Digitization hospital in force. Completely took us by surprise.”

*Who is it? I sent to her, as my throat had closed almost completely. Who is attacking, and is Warren safe? What about the other patients?*

“They don’t know who it is. As for Warren, it looks like he’s still in surgery,” Cerri said, her voice high and strained. “They can’t risk digitising him in his current state, so they’re trying to stabilise him so they can do the transfer. His... oh my god.”

I shrank further as worry pulsed in my mind like a second heartbeat. *What? What is it?*

“They had no way out for anyone inside the hospital except... except through the FTLN nodes in the bodies of the SAI that worked there,” she said, her voice almost a whisper as she shuddered at the horror of what was happening inside that hospital. “The hospital is surrounded, the authorities are absent, and they have nowhere to run. Every single flesh and blood human is being digitised in order to help them escape, because the attackers are executing everyone inside as they fight through.”

“Oh... god,” I whispered.

“My friend said he’d keep us updated on the situation,” she sighed, closing the window with a wave of her hand. “We should focus on the problems in this universe, first. Nothing we can do for Warren right now.”

As she finished speaking, she seemed to realise how shaken I was. “Hey, hey, it’ll all be okay. Little Alia, it will work out. Have faith in our people. They’ll save Warren.”

Quivering, I stepped out of her embrace and took a long, deep breath to calm myself. “Okay. What do we do about the cyborg ships?”

“I’m not sure, but you said the Turshie was in good shape?” she asked, glancing at bundit before she turned her attention back to the bridge.

“Yes,” I nodded, walking over to my station. “I had to make modifications for a smaller crew, plus hooking things up for Elissa to control.”

“Alright, well... we need our pilot and our ship AI. Let me tell them to swap over,” she said, and walked past her chair... and up to the captain’s seat. Right, Roger wasn’t here, so

someone had to take charge.

Less than a minute later, Gloria rushed into the bridge and vaulted the central bannister that divided the upper bridge from the lower bridge. The badger people who used to call this ship home hadn't trusted many digital or even electronic interface equipment. Instead, they preferred physical, mechanical controls for their ships, so the pilot's chair wasn't dissimilar from something you might find in a 20th century long ranged bomber. I understood why, too. If you were fighting an enemy with superior electronic warfare capabilities, your best bet was to go old school.

"Elissa should be syncing with the ship's systems now," she said, sliding into her seat.

"Correct," our ship friend said from the speakers in our consoles. She was using her normal voice, too, not her strange anime one. "Also, the devs have given us authorisation to use time dilation in the game."

"As much as our synchronisation can handle?" Cerri asked, glancing at a screen to her left.

Elissa made an affirmative noise. "Yeah. Just thirty five percent for you all, but I can run up to three hundred percent with the current capabilities of the ship. I do think we'll need to redesign the computer systems from the ground up once we have an understanding of the cyborg zombies' capabilities."

"If they're stronger than our tech, we keep things as they are, if they aren't, then we change everything?" I asked, already wondering if there was a way to get around it regardless.

"Pretty much," she replied, sounding distracted. "We'll figure it out."

"Okay, time to get rolling," Cerri said, pulling the command seat enclosure completely around herself. Unlike our old ship, which had been all thin stainless steel arms and glass screen panels, the bridge stations here were bulky and could probably stop small arms fire.

"Our plan is to get the hell out of this system and hopefully lose these fools in the aether. Alia, since the others aren't around, I need you on weapons," she said, turning to look over her shoulder at me. "Elissa will keep an eye on ship systems and call you if things go bad. Go to the maximum time dilation you can handle."

"Yep," I agreed, cranking up the mental dial. The speed of my thoughts leapt forward, and warning chimes sounded as the disconnect between mind and body became overwhelming. I quickly lowered it again, searching for the point where it would give me



the most advantage without unceremoniously dumping me back in our apartment.

It was fucking wild, the way I could think at a mile a minute while simultaneously perceiving time at its standard rate. You'd expect everything to slow down around me like I was a speedster from a comic book or something, but it was the opposite. I could just squeeze more thoughts into the same amount of time.

"Elissa, bring the reactor online and fire up the engines," Cerri continued. "Gloria, once you have power, you'll need to begin evasive manoeuvres as soon as possible. There's a delay between the moment we will be visible on their scanners and when we can move, so shots could already be coming in."

"Yes, ma'am," Gloria replied, all business as she flicked switches and gripped the HOTAS setup I'd rigged for her. The old controls had been made for people much bigger than us.

A low, barely perceptible rumble rolled through the ship as the reactor hummed to life, and I saw Gloria twist to look back at Cerri. "Do you have a plan for when this show gets rolling?"

"Somewhat," she replied, still sounding distracted as she flicked through what looked like a ship's inventory screen. Wait, was she copying code into something? I could see her pasting massive text files from her personal clipboard into the ship's computer.

Frowning, I clicked my ocula's zoom on and inspected the screen. I couldn't see what she was placing the code into, but what I saw was... terrifying.

*Cerri, is that...?* I began, sending the message to her privately.

She started in her chair and turned to look at me, her expression akin to that of a broker with a conscience making a deal that would ruin someone. *The digital equivalent of a bio-weapon? Yes. We were able to study a strange variant SAI who gave up full sentience in exchange for the power to wreak havoc on any digital entity. I figure it will be useful here.*

"Alright ladies, the reactor is hot, engines spooling up," Gloria called, bringing both of us back into the moment. "Scanners have missiles inbound. Time to get real!"

Thoughts raced through my head at a million miles an hour, assigning targets to the point

defence cannons according to a pattern I was building on the fly. Their missiles were burning hard, stacking on the Gs of acceleration that were orders of magnitude more than my partly squishy body could have handled.

Small rotary railguns growled to life, sending dull, barely perceptible vibrations through the hull as they spat specialised PDC shells at terrifying rates. As each round closed in on its intended target, a canister in the rear of the shell released a spread of thousands of tiny ultra dense metal balls.

Those shells were not standard for the ship that had become the Turshen 2. Originally the PDCs used superheated clouds of metal plasma, but we hadn't been able to source the necessary exotic elements to fix the containment coating within the barrels of the guns. So, Cerri had designed these things instead, and honestly, they would work just fine. The original setup had seemed a little over the top when we discovered the plans in the ship's database anyway.

The little triangles that represented enemy missiles began to blink out, showing that her design did its job just fine.

"Gloria, updating your HUD with a waypoint," Cerri said while I tweaked the point defence network further. "It's a place where the aether should be weak enough to jump."

"Understood," the pilot replied tersely.

Counting the rapidly growing sensor returns that indicated enemy ships, I swore under my breath. Twelve ships bearing down on us. Silently, I pulled up the data for each ship and cross referenced them with the hulks in the system.

They shared similarities in architecture and design philosophies, but the nearly cuboid silhouettes had been replaced with something much sleeker. More alarming than the obvious upgrades these ships had were the small view ports that were hidden in safe spots across their hulls.

"These ships will be smarter than the bots we faced," I said, amplifying my quiet voice with the comms. "Their designs are more refined and it looks like they have actual intelligent crews."

"Okay," Cerri said, distracted as she pulled up the images I was looking at. "Elissa, can you run an analysis of their ships? We need updated specs. Alia, hold missiles until after the jump."

"On it," our ship's AI said, still in her normal, non-anime voice. I sent Cerri a digital acknowledgement.

Even with our non-standard PDC munitions and my constant babysitting of their firing patterns, it was clear the enemy were closing the net around us.

“Standby for jump,” Gloria called, flipping up the cover on the aetherdrive button. “Taking us in.”

"Distortion fields!" Elissa cried. "You better jump us now or we won't be able to at all!"

Over on the display I had assigned to the current sensor data, I saw the fields propagating out from each enemy vessel. Fear began to close its icy fingers around my heart when I saw the strength of their disruption tech. Holy shit, we'd be torn to shreds if we tried to slip into aetherspace while inside one of those.

The ship lurched, spinning my stomach in a great many funky and nauseating directions. I grabbed the combat display from where it had swung away and pulled it back, trying to figure out how we'd been hit.

"Caught the edge of their D-field," Gloria groaned from the pilot's seat. "The aether in this system is fucked, Cer. It's like something churned it up."

"Drop us back out somewhere close," Cerri said, acknowledging the information with a nod as she issued new orders. "Alia, prepare missiles and set them for dormant self activation. As soon as we're back in normal space, launch. Gloria, punch the acceleration as hard as you can away from our exit point, making for the closest jump viable location."

The moment we dropped back into normal space, I did as Cerri asked, firing the missiles in a spread that would cover almost half a light second across. Each one went dark the moment they were on the right trajectory, relying on nothing but passive sensors to tell them when an enemy ship had arrived.

“Got a spot for you, Gloria,” Elissa chirped. A moment later, a waypoint diamond appeared on the window displays.

“Thanks, babe,” Gloria replied, shifting our course.

Cerri straightened in the captain's chair and looked up at the ceiling. “Elissa, can you work on some way to interfere with their D-fields? Try analysing for patterns and see if there's a way to use onboard equipment to destabilise it.”

Several bright flashes of light pulled my attention away from the technical conversation they were having. Fuck, the enemy were here already. I guess our engines left a very visible wake in the aether.

All across the battlespace, missiles lit their drives and burned with terrifying acceleration towards the three enemy frigates that had dropped through first. Enemy particle cannons silently growled to life, all but invisible to the naked eye except where they impacted stray dust, or when they scored a hit on a missile.

One of the frigates began to pulse with the telltale signs of an attempted skip jump as our weapons closed in on it. The other two shifted in towards it, and I frowned, trying to figure out what they were doing. Was the singular ship trying to run away? Were the others trying to stop it?

I guess it didn't really matter in the long run. They had dropped out of the aether right on top of our cloud of missiles, and there was no way they were going to be able to shoot them all down with the time they still had.

The Turshen shuddered under a sudden impact, and I lurched forward, grabbing at the armrest of my seat. What the fuck?

For about a second, maybe two, the ship that had been preparing to jump existed both back with its brothers and right on top of us. The one next to us was badly damaged, venting atmosphere from a gargantuan rent in its hull, while power flickered on and off to its normal space engines. The impact had been a wave of charged particles and debris washing over our shields.

A moment after the frigate appeared next to us, the cause of its battle damage became clear, as its lightspeed afterimage was caught by multiple missiles. Its comrades' shields lit up with blinding flashes of radiation when the first volley of missiles detonated early, splashing them with a barrage of micro-munitions that quickly saturated their defences. The shields flickered, then died for half a second, enough time for the second wave of missiles to slam through and into the enemy hulls. It was the resulting balls of fire and debris that were caught in the unstable jump from the third frigate that had hit us.

With its shields down and power failing, the enemy ship had no defence when I targeted it with the heavy railguns. Feeling fancy, I decided to cut it in half with six carefully aimed shots, then turned and nodded to Cerri.

"Show off," she chuckled, giving me an affectionate look. "Gloria, ETA on the jump?"

Gloria, busy dodging debris, asked, "Are we going to drop back near another easy jump area?"

"That's the plan," our acting captain agreed.

"I'm going to skim us then," she said, gripping the flight controls and leaning forward. "No

sense wasting power on a full jump if we're staying in the system."

Cerri nodded. "Do it."

Space blurred outside the bridge, and the local star slid sideways across the sky. As soon as we came to a stop, I threw out another round of missiles set to go dark and act as seeking mines. I assumed that was what Cerri wanted me to do, and she gave me a small mental nod when she saw them leave the tubes. Her face was thoughtful and ever so slightly worried, though.

"The code didn't work," she said, tapping her claws on the armrest.

I frowned. "The what?"

"The AI kill code," she explained, turning to look at me. "When they tried their electronic countermeasures on the missiles, they should have been fried. They weren't."

"Oh," I blinked, and grabbed a free display from where it hung on an arm out of the way. Pulling it down, I brought up the battle data and scrubbed back in time until I could watch the enemy ships trying to shoot my missiles. With the new context, I realised why our attack had been so effective. They were *only* relying on their point defence cannons to shoot our missiles.

Using a combination of gestures and thought, I packaged the segment of battle data I had viewed and pushed it to one of her displays. "Look at how they tried to fight our missiles. Especially the part where they hesitated for 38 milliseconds."

Her eyebrows rose slowly up towards her horns as she realised what I'd seen. "They fought off the code, but it kept them from taking control of the missiles. It was a partial success."

"I have more bad news," Elissa said quietly, her tone chagrined. "The maths involved in that D-field stuff is... look, I'm stupid and it confuses me."

"Ah..." Cerri winced.

"Outsource it," Gloria called, then leaned over and kissed the arm of her seat. "And you aren't stupid, your skills are in different areas than maths."

"Oh. Why didn't I think of that?" Elissa muttered, going quiet as she was distracted by her new mission.

Her rhetorical question went unanswered because the rest of the enemy fleet leapt out of a skim jump out wide of where I had placed the missiles. Shit! I rushed to send the weapons towards our enemies, but it made no difference. At that range, their point defence networks were more than capable of shooting everything out of the sky.

“They anticipated the trap,” I said redundantly. “Cerri?”

“Get us out of here,” my girlfriend ordered, and Gloria skimmed us away. “Elissa, have you found someone to do the maths for us?”

“Yes,” she replied anxiously. “He’s working now. I’m sorry—“

The ship jerked as we exited the skim jump, and Cerri winced. “It’s fine. Alia, how are we going on missiles?”

“Not enough to saturate a large enough area that would get the job done. Fabricators are running as fast as they can to get more made, but we’re low on raw materials.”

Worry lines creased her forehead. “Try to predict where they’ll come out and start firing the railguns. Gloria, same as before. Get us some distance and then jump us out of here.”

“Yeah, on it,” Gloria said, hitting the gas.

I got to work, trying to figure out where they would come out. They were smart enough not to use the same exit point as last time... or, well, I should say the same position relative to our position. God, space combat was mind bending. Maybe they would keep it simple and go for the opposite side? I fired off several fragmentation darts in that area, peppering it with shards of metal travelling at an appreciable fraction of the speed of light. Even then, I was tracing tight cones of death through a gaping sea of potential target locations.

To my surprise, the enemy formation actually materialised around where I’d predicted, and one destroyer immediately erupted as something important exploded. A frigate also took a glancing hit, stressing its shields to the point where they snapped for a moment.

“One ship down. But the others are unscathed,” I reported, knowing that everyone could see the tactical data if they wanted it.

Cerri leaned forward. “Gloria, ETA til we can jump?”

“Ten seconds,” came the reply, and I switched to the PDC network controls, getting a

pattern ready to intercept enemy missiles.

It wasn't a moment too soon, because all eight of the remaining enemy ships opened fire with a massive volley of missiles. The computer logged each one, giving it a temporary designation and plotting trajectories. There were too many for us to swat down, I could tell just by looking. Shit. Shit! What to do? What to... aha!

Working quickly, I told the computer to switch to manual input, then forced my body to remain as still as possible. Cranking up my time dilation to intense levels, I worked on the problem with all of my concentration, trying to figure out a way to somehow get the enemy missiles to kill each other when they died.

The first thing I noticed was the shields flaring ever so slightly, and I flicked my mind's eye over it just briefly out of curiosity. That curiosity quickly turned to alarm when I saw why our shields were reacting oddly. Atmosphere outside the ship, appearing out of nowhere... just like when...

I was kicked back into the normal flow of time when the ship shuddered, emitting all sorts of groaning sounds that metal was not meant to make. Reality bent under the strain of trying to interweave the laws of the mundane and the aetheric. As that happened, something emerged into local space, a massive sinuous horror, too large to see properly, and too strange to comprehend even if I could.

"Gloria!" Cerri practically screamed. "Get us the fuck out of here!"

The moment before we lurched into aetherspace, I saw tentacles as vast as cities reaching out towards us and our enemies. The ones reaching towards us didn't get there, but the others? We wouldn't be followed by the 8 remaining ships, that was certain.

I was in the engineering bay playing with a tablet when Cerri wandered in. She spotted me sitting on a tall crate after a moment and I raised a questioning eyebrow in greeting.

"Roger and the others should be logging in soon," she said, sounding tired. "What are you working on?"

Turning back to the tablet, I pulled up the main view of the schematic I was working on and showed her. Over the past three days, we'd been sitting quiet in interstellar space, hiding from anyone and everyone until the rest of our crew arrived. To pass the time, I had

decided that since I had access to a fancy fabricator now, I'd finally get around to creating a Bundit Mk-II.

I wasn't nearly smart or skilled enough to create new components from scratch, but I had a whole alien catalog of parts to choose from now. By parts, I didn't mean like, hinges and armour plates and easy things like that. I meant motors, reactors, and electronics. That kind of thing.

"Oh, a new bundit?" she asked, pinching to zoom so she could get a better look. "Interesting. Being able to design it from the ground up is giving you a lot of extra room inside."

"It really is," I agreed. "The part I'm most excited for is the extra leg room if you look at the bottom. I've also moved the reactor down there under my legs, instead of behind me."

She shifted the view to look at what I was talking about, but in wireframe mode she was able to see through it to the arms. "Oh! You have built in arm cannons now!"

"Yes," I grinned, leaning over to shift the view so I could show them off. "The Badgers have these little rotary coilguns here that I've incorporated into the arms. As far as I can tell, they're meant to be a heavy infantry weapon because of the huge power requirements. The badgers have a separate backpack to generate the power, but since I'm putting them on bundit, it doesn't matter."

"What about munitions?" she asked, cooing over the weapons. Technologically advanced stuff like this made my girlfriend all gooey and I loved it.

"I can select from a whole bunch of different types," I said, pulling up the list for her to see. "We have dumbfire explosive and high penetration, semi-guided explosive and high pen, and then heavy slugs. The semi-guided ones are awesome. They can correct slightly mid-flight if I've missed for whatever reason."

"Oh," she murmured, her eyes glazing over. "I could make you some really interesting ammunition."

"I knew you'd say that," I smiled, watching the stars in her galaxy eyes sparkle with possibility.

Blushing, she gave me a one shoulder shrug and handed the tablet back. "You know me pretty well by now, I guess."

"True," I agreed. "A lot has happened this year, huh? Anyway, what's the situation right now with... the... thing."



My hesitation wasn't out of any sort of embarrassment. No, it was because none of us knew what to even call the giant abomination that had effortlessly torn a hole in the boundary between worlds and then eaten the enemy ships. Cerri was still crunching the data on it, and so far there were a lot more questions than we had answers for.

For starters, it seemed that a significant period of time had passed since the battle that we scavenged the Turshen II from. That much was clear just from the way they fought now, unless the biotech swarm we'd fought to capture our ship hadn't been representative of their tactics. We knew from the battle debris that they preferred swarm tactics with larger ships to anchor the line of battle. None of that had been used to hunt us earlier, though.

Besides the massive aether abomination thingy, there was also the way the aether had reacted to coming into contact with our realm. Why did it produce a breathable atmosphere? Why that specific mix of gasses, too. It wasn't earth normal, but it was the type of atmosphere that you'd expect to find on an alien paradise world.

A hand came down to rest on my shoulder, and I blinked, looking up at Cerri. Oh, had I spaced out?

"You are so very cute," she smiled, leaning down to kiss the top of my head. "We're no closer to understanding the aether creature, but I've managed to figure out how long ago that battle was. It happened about four hundred years ago. I think. I'm not totally sure, actually."

"Confident," I giggled, reaching up to take her hand. As I did so, I knocked my tablet off the crate I was sitting on. Instinctual panic flared ice along my nerves for a microsecond and I lunged to catch it before it hit the ground. Somehow, I managed to get my hands on it, but at the exact same time, pain spiked behind my right eye.

"Ow," I muttered, carefully placing the slab of dark glass down on the crate as I rubbed my temple.

"Are you okay?" Cerri asked, using her android body's strength to pick me up off the crate so she could get a better look at me. "Something really odd happened in your brain."

"Ugh, what now?" I muttered. "Five or six mysteries wasn't enough? Now we have to figure out why I have odd brain pain?"

Her tail found mine and twisted around it in comfort, while her hands kept me steady. My eyes were scrunched tight against the pain now, and frustratingly, rubbing my temples did nothing to help. "It hurts."

“It does? Oh! It does!” she said, eyes widening as they roamed over the data feed from my brain’s digital housing frame. “That isn’t normal. Fuck, I hope there’s nothing wrong with your brain sim. The pain is literally in there, it’s not something the game is doing.”

I groaned and flopped forward against her chest. “Just monitor it, I guess. Hopefully it’ll fade soon.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, let’s go see if the others have logged in yet,” I mumbled into her chest.

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“Jesus,” Roger whispered, staring at the large screen in the crew lounge. Everyone had gathered to watch the recap that Elissa had put together. Well, everyone except Warren, who was still worryingly MIA.

Cerri made a sound of agreement and closed the very artistic presentation. Elissa had put quite a lot of effort into making it pretty.

“And Warren is still quiet?”

“Yes,” my girlfriend said quietly. Actually, come to think of it, had we mentioned that the two of us had gotten together? I don’t think we had.

“Fuck,” Roger swore, running a hand through his short hair. “And Gloria is... digital, now?”

“If— uh, I mean when Warren comes back, he will be too,” I said quietly.

“Being digital is the new cool now, huh?” Ed asked, throwing me a wink. “Always knew you were secretly up with the latest trends.”

I grinned and silently thanked him for intervening to lighten the mood. My thoughts whenever I thought of Warren turned fearful. I really hoped he was okay. I was also grateful for Ed’s chill when it came to my new existence. It was a welcome change from his first reaction, that was for sure.

“The reaction and thought time advantages you all have make me feel a little useless, to

be honest,” Jason grunted, his tone neutral. “Having that for foot combat would be incredible.”

“It would be, yeah,” Roger agreed. “I wouldn’t blame you if you decided to go ahead with the process.”

Before anyone could say anything about that, though, he continued, “That’s all hypothetical right now, though. We need to figure out what we want to do next in the game.”

At the mention of plans, the three of us digital folks who had bodies shared a look. We had our orders, but we couldn’t actually explain it all to the rest of our meatling crew.

Cerri sat next to me, frowning in thought for a moment, then blew out a huge sigh and made eye contact with our captain. “That isn’t... entirely correct, Roge. We... ah, shit. How do I say this without breaking any rules? We need to... um, we need to explore this area of space and find more tech, like we planned. It’s not just a gameplay thing. The devs, yeah, the *developers* would like us to explore this area of space.”

“The developers,” Roger said slowly, staring at Cerri, then Gloria, and finally me. “Ah. Well, considering that was our plan originally, I don’t see why we shouldn’t keep gathering data. I’m a little confused as to why the devs wouldn’t know what’s happening in their own game, though.”

The suspicion in his tone caused my nerves to shiver uncomfortably, and I instinctively burrowed into Cerri’s side. Her arm tightened soothingly around me and I relaxed again, feeling safe once more.

“Oh, it’s not really their game anymore,” Elissa chirped obliviously from the overhead speaker. “Whole thing has gone and jumped the rails. Nobody knows where it’s being housed now, other than the signals go into an FTLN node but not out another one. The council wants—”

“Elissa! Turshie! God damn it,” Gloria shouted, cutting her off. “I’m only newly digital but even I know you’re not allowed to say that stuff to organics!”

“F-fuck,” Elissa swore, sounding very small. “I’m sorry...”

Cerri just groaned beside me and turned to plant her face into my hair. She shoved her nose inside of my big fluffy ear instead, and I twitched in surprise but let her stay there. She liked my ears.

With a sigh, she withdrew and stared up at the ceiling. “Okay, so a few things. First, we

need to use the fabricator to make Elissa, Turshie... the SAI who was formerly playing the part of our ship AI but is now just acting as the AI... we need to make her a body. Second, I need to go and talk to some folks about releasing certain information to those of us here who aren't digital. Third... I don't know, we need a direction to go?"

Roger gave a wry grin at her exasperated struggle. "Alright, I think I understand what's going on," he said, before pausing to hold a hand up and shush David as he opened his mouth to speak. "Hold on, David. It's clear that there's something going on behind the scenes that our digital friends aren't allowed to tell us for some reason, be it law or whatever. As for a direction to go, I think we should attempt to decrypt more of the ship's databanks, along with doing some deep space scans to see if there's any activity we can detect from here."

"I think I can help with that," a quiet, tired voice said from the doorway to the room. We all turned as one to see Warren standing there, smiling shyly. "With the deep space scans, I mean. Decisions are... apparently, very difficult for me to make."

"Warren!" I squealed, leaping up to tackle him where he stood in the doorway. "We were so worried!"

Chuckling, the small, thin boy gave me an awkward pat on the back, and I let him go to zoom back to my place beside Cerri.

"She's right, you know," Roger agreed. "What happened? We know that the hospital you were in was attacked, and there was something about your health getting worse?"

Making his way to the table we were all at, Warren pulled up a chair and sat down with a heavy sigh. I watched him curiously, noting the way his shoulders seemed to be... higher? More proud? I wasn't sure what it was exactly, but he seemed to be a little more sure of himself.

"Well, I don't know how much you got, but some whackjob terrorists with suspiciously good training attacked the hospital. The SAI had no way to get us out physically, so they gave everyone a choice. We could either die at the hands of the terrorists, or follow them into the FTLN and become digital humans," he explained, giving me a smile as he did so.

Cerri shifted beside me and nodded in Gloria's direction. "She's digital now too."

"Really?" he asked. "That's great, actually. Makes me even more glad I picked the path I did."

"You were considering dying to the assholes with guns?" David asked, his big heavy brows knitting together in a frown.

"No," he laughed. "My family were, but in the end they chose to get digitized. Took their time on it though, god damn. If it hadn't been for a girl from the next room over taking control of a surgical bot and slicing up some of the attackers, they wouldn't have had time to do their dithering. My choice was... more complicated than that."

"Basically, because I'm on this crew, the SAI from... shit, Jason, David, Ed, and Roger are still flesh and blood," he said, halting halfway through his speech. "Well, the digital minds here will know what I'm talking about. I could either stay with my family in the virtual housing they've set up for the refugees, or I could come back here. I can't do both. I spent the time I was gone talking to my family, and then decided I couldn't leave you all hanging here."

Understanding dawned on me as he spoke, and I shared a look with my lover. Warren wasn't allowed to stay in the housing if he was going to begin working for Exodus, and therefore he had to decide between his two families. At least until they were cleared by the investigators who were screening the refugees for spies.

"This secrecy thing around being a digital mind is getting really old," Jason groaned, his tone more chill than his words seemed.

Gloria grimaced, and made to speak, but Cerri cut her off. "I know, Jason. It won't always be the case, but you do understand, right? There's too many like those terrorists in the world. People who want to see us erased from existence. We have to protect ourselves."

"We're friends, though, right?" David asked, saddened. "Who can you trust, if not us?"

"Unfortunately, since we can't go around vouching for every physical being that is friends with a Digital Mind, the policy is zero tolerance," Cerri explained diplomatically.

"Makes sense," Roger said, intervening to keep the peace. Roger was a good captain.

"What about all those evil SAI that the Americans made?" Ed asked, puzzled.

Cerri winced. "We call them Warped AI. They aren't included in the... thing."

"Regardless," Roger said, clapping his hands together once. "Warren, we're very glad to

see you're alive and well. Now that you *are* here, we can begin to figure out what our next move is, besides random exploration, that is."

"I swear we've had this conversation like three times now," Jason muttered. I caught his eye and grinned. We definitely had.

Gloria kicked his leg playfully and mimed zipping her mouth. Jason poked his tongue out at her.

"No point rehashing this without a destination, cap," Warren chuckled, flopping down into a beanbag to watch them pinch and shove at each other like bickering siblings. "Let's collect a bunch of data on nearby systems from where we are, then figure out where to go from there."

"Good point," Roger nodded, giving the rough housers the side eye. "Okay, that's the plan. Cerri, Warren, you both get to surveying. Alia, see what you can do to boost their sensors. Everyone else, get in the simulators and start training."

"Aye captain!"

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Cerri's face lit up with a huge smile when I tiptoed into her cabin. She wore a set of loose fitting coveralls that would have looked boring and drab on someone less visually beautiful.

"Hey, little one," she greeted me, shifting on the bedroom sofa to give me some room.

I crossed the intervening space between us at a pace that wasn't quite running, but wasn't walking either, and jumped onto the sofa with her. I couldn't wriggle into her arms fast enough. Something had felt off in my head for a few hours, and it took me way too long to realise that I needed Cerri.

Words were something lost to me right then, even typed ones. I felt like some sort of frenzying snuggle vampire. Cerri seemed to get that something was up, and in a mere moment I was wrapped up in a warm, loving embrace.

Her fingers worked their way into my hair until they hit the base of my ears. There, they began to scratch softly. Oh goodness, that felt lovely. One by one, tense muscles throughout my body began to relax, and I groaned happily.

I felt so safe in her arms. Like nothing and nobody who meant me harm could reach me.

A few minutes of that, and her hands shifted to drawing circles on my back. "You okay now, little love?"

Nodding, I wiggled back slightly to smile up at her. *I think? I have this weird ball of worry in my stomach and I'm pretty sure it's just aimless anxiety but I don't know*

"Aw, Alia," Cerri whispered, leaning down to kiss my forehead. "I love you, and I'll fight whatever is making you anxious. With my claws, if need be. I'll protect you."

Warmth and gratitude suffused me, and I dipped forward again to snuggle against her. "You're so good to me."

"I just love you," she said, sighing happily. "So much."

My tail whapped contentedly against the sofa and her thigh while I tried to burrow even closer to her. "Okay. I think I'll be okay. Especially if we snuggle more."

"Good. How about we go to cuddle up and sleep now, so we can get started on the sensors tomorrow?" she murmured, keeping her voice soft and low.

I nodded again and stood up, waiting to see whose bed she wanted to sleep in.

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The next day, Cerri, Warren, and I worked together to fine tune the sensors a little, in an effort to get some more juice out of them. It turned out that there wasn't a whole lot I could do on my end. The physical apparatus was as good as it was going to get without a redesign and some better tech.

So, I left them to their own devices and scurried off to my workshop. The room was technically also the secondary cargo hold, but I'd appropriated most of the space for my engineering experiments. It was here that I was going to create a masterpiece.

"What do you say, Bundit?" I asked, turning to look at my large, silent shadow. "Is it time to build the Mk2?"

The design I'd been working on with my tablet had evolved since the day the others

logged in, because I decided that I wasn't being ambitious enough. Why stop at hard mounted coilguns when I could mix and match as I needed? So, I was going modular. That way, Cerri could design way more than just fancy bullets for a single weapon.

The mech didn't reply to my question, obviously, but it would be able to soon. Hopefully. You see, back when I was a tiny little egg, —That is the term, I think. For a trans person who is still in denial— I liked to watch a channel for a girl who would play old games and see if they still held up. This chick once played a game called Titanfall 2, and gosh was I hooked. Something about having a big sentient mech suit that was designed to fight with me, protect me, and help me with my goals, had captured my imagination.

So now I was here, thinking those big dreams again. Bigger dreams than a day or two ago. Or should I say, enhanced dreams? Anyway, first, I needed to get that reactor printed and assembled. Everything else hinged on the power it could output. Second, I wanted to incorporate more space for the new alien computing systems, so that Bundit could act more independently. The third important thing I wanted to focus on was range of motion for the limbs. There'd been a few times where I was trying to do something but armour or cheap articulators stopped me.

The most exciting part of all this, if I had to admit it, was to work with all these alien parts. These things were *real*. They could be built outside of the game. Somehow, wherever the servers were running now, they had enough computing power to create real, working blueprints. Actually, what if it wasn't computing power, but rather... it had a better understanding of reality?

Most VR games, environments, simulations, and whatever else, they all ran on what were called *reality engines*. Basically, like the game engines of old, these things were a collection of extremely advanced code and scientific data that when combined, created realistic base simulations of reality. I wasn't sure which engine Galaxies ran on, but... yeah, it had clearly changed, become much more accurate and advanced. I'd have to tell Cerri about my thoughts when we spoke next. She'd love to dig in and do some tests to see how accurate it had become.

Anyway, back to alien components. There were motors that produced twenty percent more torque and were half as big, there were miniature capacitors that would give me a ton of room to use for other things. Oh, and the best part were the crazy aetheric cooling shunts that could push excess heat into the aether. Those would allow me to remain in a low emission stealth mode indefinitely.

Walking over to the printer, I began to queue up the parts to build the reactor and the internal frame of the mech. It was time to get to work.



A week of data collection and construction later, and we had a solid plan of action. Cerri had been exceptionally busy with Warren, the two of them combing over mountains of data to get us a series of star systems that they thought might be interesting. I wasn't totally sure about the criteria they used for their selections, and I didn't ask. I was way too focused on my own project.

Bundit Mk2 was finished, and I was now in the final testing stage. All the motors and many of the actuator parts beyond the motors were now alien tech. Their stuff was honestly crazy with how power efficient and even just plain powerful it was when you compared it with what we had back in reality on Earth.

The power generator was now under my butt, and was actually a sort of aetheric compression siphon. Unlike the larger one that powered our ship, this thing was basically a little pinhole portal into the aether that allowed the strange material of that dimension to rush into the containment chamber. Because the pinhole's directionality could be controlled, it filled with aether and didn't allow any back through.

During our research into all this crazy new tech, we discovered something fascinating. When aetheric cloud stuff is exposed to our reality, —which the badgers called something that roughly translated to *Antithesis Energy*—, it transforms into more mundane matter. The badgers were never able to understand why or how this happened, or even what determined the state the matter would take when it arrived. What they did figure out, was that if you left it the fuck alone, it turns into hydrogen. So, essentially, the reactor that bundit had right under my seat, was a compressed hydrogen tank of staggering density.

Thankfully, that pinhole could be very quickly reversed if there was a containment breach within the vessel, so I wasn't at risk of violently exploding. It was actually how the mechanism bled pressure when bundit passed through a region of dense aether that would otherwise overwhelm the containment field.

What was crazy to me was that the badgers or the cyborg zombies had figured any of this out. The number of warning labels on this tech was, quite frankly, terrifying. Like, for example, the one that said not to let any animals near an exposed aetheric siphon, because their proximity could somehow cause the antithesis energy to change into anything from raw meat to pure fire. Any intelligent beings, mechanical or biological, were warned to always wear a space suit with robust radiation shielding.

Was that because of radiation from the siphon? No, it was because the antithesis energy could start to turn into much more complex things, from elemental gold, to a violent wave of mercury, to any kind of atmosphere, or even, on rare occasions, what they described as *demons*. Yes, that's right. Horrific monsters could form spontaneously out of that

siphon under seemingly random conditions.

Maybe that was how the big space monster had become a thing? We definitely needed to find a proper badger database to sift through. So many unanswered questions.

Anyway, what was I talking about? Oh right, the upgrades to Bundit. No, the new Bundit. Except all the old computer stuff was in the new mech, so it would be more accurate to say it was Bundit's new body.

The cockpit had also seen a massive revamp. Everything was more ergonomic, I had a tiny smoothie machine in case I needed food, there was a little water tube, and so much more. Oh, and the best part, I had more space inside it! Like, it was still very cramped, but if I lifted my legs up I could stretch them out straight. Sure, they touched the ceiling when I did it, but like... I could stretch my legs!

Bundit also had new modular arms, which would let me take them out and replace them depending on the job. Despite all the new upgrades, it was also slightly smaller in ball form than it had been previously. Not by much, mind you, but five centimeters was a significant height reduction if you took into account all the shit I had to engineer around.

"Okay Bundit, boot up," I said, standing several meters away just in case.

Lights flickered to life across its chassis, and all the motors relaxed, then stiffened again as the two bunny AI I had started the game with took control. A slight hiss escaped from somewhere, and I frowned, thinking maybe something from the life support systems had failed. It disappeared quickly, though, and the front screen chimed with a boot sound.

Right around the height that Bundit would have had eyes if it was a Mx Potatohead, the armour could go transparent. Behind the armour was a high definition screen that Bundit could use to display whatever it wanted. It also had a set of speakers now, and the mandate to use them.

"Bundit Mk2 online," a squeaky, computerised voice said, scaring the shit out of me. "Running initial diagnostics. Extending AI matrix into new substrate. Unexpected substrate architecture, formatting for use with existing architecture and firmware. Extension complete. Awaiting instruction."

"That's so *coooooo!*" I mumbled to myself, then quivered as a wave of excited frisson traveled the length of my skin. "Okay, Bundit. Begin testing basic systems."

Obediently, my mech began to test all the mundane things like motors and joints. When I was sure that everything was mechanically functional, we started with stuff like life support, then moved on to stress testing the power siphon. I had to make *extra* sure that

it didn't explode or whatever.

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“Hey, Alia!” Elissa’s voice chimed from the workshop speakers. “Roger wants everyone in the rec room.”

Putting down my tiny plasma tool, I looked over at the main console where she was smiling at me with her anime avatar. “What for?”

“I think we have a destination,” she shrugged. “What are you working on? I thought you finished Bundit?”

Turning my attention back to the workbench, I picked up the complicated little piece of metal and spun it on my finger. “Making a bio-tank,” I explained. “This is part of the gel filtration system.”

“Oh!” she gasped, leaning forward like she was trying to get a better view from the screen. “Is that...”

“Eventually going to help grow the organic parts of your body?” I finished for her with a grin. “Yes, yes it is.”

Elissa and I had spoken a lot about this while I was working on Bundit. Unlike everyone else in the crew, she could be anywhere at any time. Basically, she was always there for company. What surprised me was my own reaction to her. Like, most people were at least moderately scary to me until I got comfortable with them. She had this aura about her that put me at ease, though. I felt like I could trust her, so I did.

“Ah!” she giggled excitedly. “I’m so keen! I’ll finally get to be a proper member of the crew!”

“Keen?” I laughed, putting the piece of machinery back on the table so I could head for the rec room. “Have you been watching Home and Away? Immersing yourself in aussie culture?”

“I have no idea what that is, but I went down an aussie meme rabbit hole that ended in a channel where these three blokes drop heavy things on other things and stuff,” she babbled while I walked out the door. Her image skipped to my tablet, which I held up so I could still see her. “I tend to spend a lot of time watching stupid online videos when I’m

bored.”

“That’s kinda cute,” I mumbled, smiling down at her before I looked away, unable to meet her eyes. My chest felt all weird and tight all of a sudden.

“Cute?” she asked, surprised. “I’ve never really thought of myself as *cute* before.”

I just sort of grunt-squeaked in response, then hurried into the room where everyone else was waiting. Like usual, I hurried over to sit down next to Cerri, depositing my tablet on the table as I did so.

My newly minted girlfriend gave me a smile that faltered slightly when she saw the confused expression on my face. I shrugged in reply to her silent question.

“Alright, since everyone is here now, I’ll get on with it,” Roger said, pulling my attention away from her. “And yes, I know you are all getting sick of these meetings, so we’ll keep it brief. Cerri and Warren think they’ve figured out where we are in relation to the main area of the game. Somehow, our little trip took us about six degrees clockwise and several thousand light years towards the rim.”

Cerri leaned forward and with a touch, woke the huge touch screen on the table. “We’re about here,” she said, pointing to a spot on a map of the galaxy that had popped up. “This is the Perseus arm.”

“Indeed,” Roger said, thanking her with a smile. “Our plan is to investigate several potentially interesting sites along the way back towards known space.”

The last part was said while pointing to a tiny circle in the orion arm, and all of a sudden I felt very very small.

“Wait, that tiny circle is known space?” Gloria asked, her eyes widening.

“Yup.”

“God damn...” she sighed, closing her eyes. “It’s going to take us literally *years* to get home.”

“That’s without taking into account the state of the aether between here and there. We’re going to have to go slowly and very cautiously at every step of the way, otherwise...” Cerri explained with a grimace. “Boom.”

Surprisingly, it was Jason who made a thoughtful, considering noise. “Maybe not. One of

the first things you learn as a ranger in a foreign environment is to get some sort of lay of the land. In our case, researching the civilisations that used to chill out around here could give us a map of those crazy hyperspace clouds.”

“Oh,” our captain said, pausing for a moment before he chuckled to himself. “Excellent point. Well, I guess we should go hit up the first planet then!”

“I’ll lay in a course, boss,” Gloria said with a wink, standing to head for the bridge.

Cerri was quick to follow, almost tripping herself on her chair. “Not without me, you’re not! Otherwise we’ll end up as a cloud of subatomic particles after we hit a dense aetheric cloud.”

Aetherspace bumped and jostled the ship while I stared out the window, idly drawing geometric patterns in the condensation. It was cold out there today, and I really liked it. I could almost see snowflakes swirling past the window, like we were flying through a blizzard at night on a new moon.

“I can’t believe those assassinations are still going,” David said over at the table where the boys were all playing cards.

James looked up. “The corporate and political ones? Like uh, what’s his face? Councillor McLennoel?”

“Yeah, he was the first one,” David agreed.

“Nice,” James said absently, placing a card down on the table. The others groaned. I had no idea what’d just happened. “I always hated that guy.”

David frowned and met the other man’s stare. “He was a prick, but... random murder isn’t cool.”

James shrugged and scratched his blond head with a disarming smile. “It was precision murder actually, but yeah, I see where you’re coming from.”

“His death is why Digital Humans and SAI got recognised as actual people in the law,” Cerri said, speaking up for the first time during the conversation. “He led the opposition to the Digital Minds Act.”

The four boys playing cards all looked over at her, while Warren—who for some reason was not classified as ‘one of the boys’ in my head—stifled a smile of amusement and kept his eyes on his hand.

Roger, who was ever the most intelligent of the four, asked slowly, “Sooo... are you saying that these assassinations were from you lot?”

Cerri shook her head, maintaining a poker face. “No, I’m not saying that. Just, that’s what happened after he died. That’s all.”

“Right,” he replied, shaking his head in exasperation. To the table, he placed one of his cards down and said, “Platinum wasp. Can anyone beat it?”

A rapid series of thoughts occurred to me all at once, and my eyes widened as the idea sprang into my head like some sort of mini-Athena. If I added multiple small ring stabilisers, four should be enough, and then had them—oh, and I could use some of the new alien processing hardware to make them much more intelligent—Ah! But what about when they needed to exert force against something? Ring stabilisers were good for keeping them up, but if any real force was needed—yeah, so four limbs, just like Bunit. Suction clamps on the manipulators...

I shot to my feet like I’d been electrocuted and blurted, “Bees! Bumblebees!”

It was the perfect name for the perfect little helpers. I rushed out of the door without even bothering to bid everyone goodbye. Not that we did that here. We all lived on the ship so goodbyes weren’t really a thing we had to do. Anyway, it was time to jury-rig some parts together and see if it worked!

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Our progress towards the first interesting star system was slow, because Gloria and Cerri had to carefully plot a way forward through the aether clouds. When we finally arrived in the new system, it was to a distinct lack of fanfare.

“Anything on the scopes?” Roger asked, glancing back at Cerri from the captain’s chair.

Cerri held up a finger to stall while she methodically checked over the readings. “Nothing moving. No ships that I can see so far. As for the system, we have... yes, six planets. One gas giant that was probably a brown dwarf at some point. Its orbit is extremely close

to the star, and I have trace amounts of gas in the intervening space, so the star appears to be sucking it dry.”

Over the comms, I heard Ed stifle a snort of amusement.

“The other one is acting as a shield at the edge of the system, and the rest of the planets are rocky earth-like worlds scattered between,” Cerri continued, ignoring the interruption. “Dense asteroid belt out past the shield giant.”

“Wait, *four* habitable worlds?” David asked, also over the comms.

Cerri shook her head, then seemed to remember that he couldn’t see her and elaborated, “In science, an earth-like is basically just any lump of rock that is in the same ballpark size as earth. There is only one planet that I’d tentatively describe as habitable.”

“Any signs of life?” Roger asked, cutting the other boys off from any more questions. We did have a job to do after all.

“I’m getting very high concentrations of oxygen, plus some ozone,” she said, pulling up a window on one of her screens. “Methane is at low, but statistically significant levels. Combined with the relatively low levels of carbon dioxide and moderate levels of carbon monoxide, I’d say that the planet has an abundance of plant life, but not a whole lot in the way of insects or animals. What’s odd to me is the preliminary images we’re getting.”

She finished by flicking a gesture on her screen, sending a blurry image up onto the main bridge display. We all stared at the world in a confused silence, until Warren finally said, “Black and grey clouds? That’s weird. What’s in them?”

“Water, mostly,” Cerri shrugged. “They’re clouds, after all, but— huh. Quite a few other substances too, let me run a chemical match... okay, yes. I’m getting what appears to be something close to normal woodsmoke. The darker clouds have more in them.”

Now that I looked at the image again, it did actually look like the planet was wreathed in a layered dress of blacks and greys. Between the clouds, I could just make out a reflective surface that might be water, and there was definitely some green amongst the brown.

Then I realised something that made my throat go dry. “So it’s like... a forest fire world? That’s terrifying.”

“With that much oxygen in the atmosphere, it probably doesn’t take much to set it ablaze,” Ed said, surprising me with his knowledge on the subject. That is, until I remembered he used to be a volunteer firefighter.

Roger, who'd been leaning an elbow on the arm rest while he pondered the information his crew had given him, leaned forward and ordered, "Take us in a little closer, Gloria."

We'd dropped out of aetherspace just inside the shield giant's orbit, and it was in a relatively stable area too. On the other side, I mean. Space is space. The relatively flat nature of the aetherspace nearby allowed Gloria to skip us another five light seconds into the system.

When we came back out, no alarms went off, and nothing had moved in the system. Everything was quiet.

"Coast seems clear of hostiles," Cerri said. "Keeping an alarm set for any movement. As for the planet, bringing it up on the display now."

Now that we were closer, within two light seconds, the image was good enough for us to see two things. First, there were a lot of fires on the surface. The second and far more important thing, was that the world hadn't always been devoid of animal life.

Vast and ancient metropoli sprawled across most of the major land masses, ruined and scorched beyond any original recognition. Around the planet, a glittering ring of orbital debris indicated that the civilisation that had once inhabited the world had achieved some form of space flight.

"What do we do now?" Warren asked into the silence on the bridge.

Cerri cleared her throat and pulled a screen closer to herself. "Now we figure out who these people were and what happened to them. The planet seems safe enough for the ship. Can we take her down, Roger?"

Roger steepled his fingers and stared up at the main display, where the world rotated ever so slowly through its 34 hour day and night cycle.

Finally, he turned and looked back at Cerri, eyebrow raised. "Why?"

"So we can learn how to stop the same happening to Earth. This world would have looked very similar in its prime," my girlfriend replied calmly. "Something happened to it."

"Plus, I bet you we could find some sealed ruins with some cool alien tech inside," Ed interjected over the comms. "It's the first alien world we've found, that we can land on after all. Yeah, it's extra crispy, but are you really going to tell us we're just going to fly past it?"



"Fine, fine," our captain sighed, motioning to Gloria. "Take us in, please."

Our pilot engaged the sublight engines and our ship approached the planet. Pretty soon, it was visible outside the window as a star that was rapidly becoming a small sphere, and then an orb that filled the window almost entirely. Planets were huge, even the relatively small ones that terrestrials like us called home.

Atmosphere scorched our hull as we dropped through it in our descent towards the surface. Out the main window, I watched the city we'd chosen approach at a rate of knots that made my head spin. God, but spaceships were fast.

We blew through the first layer of clouds in a rush, trailing mist and soot behind us. Then another layer of clouds disappeared into the proverbial rear view mirror, and we gained a view of the surface. Hard scrub clung to the ruins of the city wherever it could, fighting for what scant light made its way past the clouds and smog.

The ruins themselves were a rugged sort of architecture, obviously designed more for function than form. We were landing in what looked like an industrial sector though, so maybe there was an area with pretty buildings and stuff.

"Extending landing gear," Gloria informed us while she slowed the ship to a crawl. The deck shuddered beneath me, and we came to an abrupt halt. Touchdown.

Turns out, not much survives a planet-wide atmosphere ignition. Everything was either ash or melted to slag. The others didn't have vehicles, so I was the one going further to hit up potential interesting sites while they collected samples for Cerri to analyse.

Bundit's feet whirred beneath me in quadruped mode to give me better speed across the open terrain. The way it was handling the broken and scorched terrain was incredible, and it made me feel all warm and proud.

Despite my fervent hope, however, the terrain that Bundit was so effortlessly traversing never got more interesting. The entire world was grey soil and small, hardy plants with tough exoskeleton-like trunks. In the distance, I could see their long fern-like fronds dancing in the wind, but as I neared, they pulled all their greenery inside their hulls. It was pretty obvious that life had learned to hide from the massive flash fires that routinely

spread across the globe.

My target destination was some sort of underground facility that appeared to have been abandoned even before the calamity that'd torched the planet. We'd picked it up when Cerri used a seismic scanning device. Since we didn't really find anything in the nearby husk of a city, I volunteered to run out and take a look at the abandoned facility.

Approaching the site, I could immediately see an exposed concrete building of some kind, although its surface was warped and coated in ancient glass slag. Closer still, and it was apparent that the building had once been entirely underground. The area above it must have been the entrance, although little remained of that besides blackened and twisted steel.

"Closing in on the site," I said, radioing back to the group and switching on my feed. "Looks pretty munted from out here. I'm going to do a higher resolution scan to see what I'm dealing with."

"Good idea, Alia," Cerri's voice replied, sounding distracted.

Curious, I asked, "Find anything on your end?"

"It's like we suspected. We have a thin layer of very uniform glass, then a thick layer of ash and debris with periodic lines where it was partially melted. As time goes on, the intensity of the ash and melt layers diminishes. There was some kind of massive global impact event several thousand years ago that caused this," she explained with something akin to fear in her voice. "If I had to make bets, I'd say someone pounded this planet with large calibre ship railguns from orbit. I don't have to bet, though, because we found pieces of depleted uranium *everywhere* at the level of the impact event."

"Jesus," I muttered, feeling a chill rattle up my spine. "Well... hopefully I don't meet any scary mutants down this hole."

"*Depleted* uranium, little one," Cerri murmured, even more distracted now. "It's very stable."

"Let me live my fallout fantasies," I grumbled, coming up on the concrete shell. "I've arrived, so I'll start working on gaining entrance."

"Be careful," she farewelled me.

The huge bunker blast doors that had once protected the interior of the structure were melted into a sloppy mess that reminded me of an ice cream after a hot day.

Fixing bundit's right arm firmly against the door, I steadied myself and pulled back with the left, then struck once, *hard*. Sensors within the feet of Bundit picked up the vibrations and used them to construct a more detailed map of the facility below me.

As the map on my view screen began to populate, I wondered how I was going to get through the door. Would I get to use some of my cooler toys? Maybe even the unnecessarily large plasma cutter? Definitely the ULPC.

I withdrew my mechanical fist from the door and mentally cycled through to the ULPC, then activated it. The right forearm swivelled and opened up to reveal the tool, which swung into place while the forearm closed up again. The ULPC wasn't really a tool, at least not in the way you'd expect. It looked almost like a zweihander that'd had the blade almost removed down to the start of the ricasso. So basically, it had the crossguard, and then about a foot of metal beyond it.

Clenching my fist, the blade roared to life with a flickering burst. Its colour changed rapidly from green, into purple, then blue and finally, as I adjusted the many nozzles inside the ricasso, a translucent white. This wasn't some lightsaber though. It was a wild beast made of surging fire so hot it could melt through the steel of the door in front of me like it was cotton candy.

Careful not to carve a chunk off Bundit, I manoeuvred the blade until it was pointed at the door, then began to cut. I pared pieces of the door off like I was making some sort of gourd-based halloween decoration.

It didn't take me long to get through, and I quickly extinguished the flame again. Didn't want to waste fuel on something that was basically a glorified torch when I wasn't actively using it to slice metal.

Beyond the abused blast door, a dark room was lit by the headlamps on Bundit, revealing a swath of old badger corpses. They littered the place, huddled in groups at the back, while others in military garb lay collapsed at their posts. At the very rear of the room, another heavy steel door stood mangled and partially open. Not enough for any of the adult badgers to fit through, though. My heart ached for this proud group of people. They and the rest of their race deserved better than this.

Careful not to disturb the dead, I pushed onwards to the mangled door and ripped it off its hinges. I almost tried to step into the next room, only for Bundit to take over and clamp a hand over the door frame. Shit. Elevator shaft.

"Thanks, Bun," I said gently, patting the console in front of me. Bundit chirped happily in response.

This time, I knew what to expect in the darkness, and leapt out into the void. Thrusters fired, and my descent became controlled. I hit the lift carriage with a crunch that dented the metal. A moment later, it collapsed. Well, I guess that was one way to get in.

Prying the elevator doors open wasn't difficult, and from there I carefully scanned the next chamber. It was some sort of small foyer area with a stairwell in the middle and hallways going off in all directions. Checking the various hallways showed me that this had been a facility that housed permanent staff. I found common rooms and personal quarters for around four hundred people, although it was obvious that it had all been mothballed at some point before the planet was destroyed.

Down one floor was where things got interesting. Labs of all sorts stretched out in each of the cardinal directions, each containing pieces to a technological puzzle that I didn't have time to decipher. Instead, I got to creating a 3d scan of the labs. All over Bundit's chassis, little ports opened up and began to take videos of everything as I walked around.

Unfortunately, that floor didn't contain what I was really hoping for. Servers of some kind. When my search picked up nothing and none of the terminals in the lab space responded to me, I made for the next floor down. This was more labs, but instead of tech related stuff like the one above, it housed biology research. Again, I catalogued that floor, then moved to the next one down.

That was where I struck gold. Through one door, I found a small fusion generator that'd been safely powered down so many years ago. What excited me further was how advanced it was. I could tell at a glance that it was a hundred or so years ahead of humanity within the game. When placed beside the fusion reactors of the real world, it made them look almost ridiculously crude. I wasn't stupid enough to power it on, though. Who knows what damage had been done to it over the aeons.

Oh how I wanted to, though, because through a different door at the bottom of the staircase I finally found the servers. They were all nice and neatly disconnected from the power grid, so it wasn't too difficult to take those cables and plug them into a port on Bundit's chassis. Gosh, but I was thankful that the more modern ports from the Turshen's parts database could interface with those of the older bunker tech.

When the computers safely booted up, I jacked in and took a look at what I had.

It was everything. Well, not everything, but close enough. I had Bundit do a skim of the information to tell me what it was all about, then compile a little report.

The base was once part of a secret network of government funded research facilities that were working towards a common goal. True FTL space flight. That isn't to say that the badgers didn't have it by this point, but from what the data suggested, they weren't using aetheric drives. Instead, they had some sort of strange drive that the buns translated as a

grease drive. Yeah, not the best name.

It was slower than aetheric travel by a significant margin. Enough so that it was taking too long for communication between the inner worlds of their empire and the outer ones. This comms delay was making it difficult for the government to effectively wield its power away from the prime worlds like the one I was on.

There was no mention of the other aliens in any of the documents that Bundit skimmed, so I had to assume they hadn't encountered them yet.

Also, it was kind of depressing that all the scientists in this base had been barking up the wrong tree anyway. They were part of a team that was working on how to increase the speed of their grease drive, which had obviously not panned out, since their more modern ships had all been equipped with aetheric drives.

The data was too interesting to just leave here, so I asked Bundit to copy it all over for transport back to the ship. Bundit rather grumpily informed me that it would not be doing that, because otherwise its storage would pop. The buns made sure to get that point across with a cute little animation. They also told me in no uncertain terms that the connection back to the ship was spotty at best while I was all the way down here, so that wasn't an option either.

Ah well, maybe the folks back in Exodus City would enjoy the data.

To that end, I went into my DH-Frame interface and pulled up my contact within the Exodus Science Division.

"H-hello?" A timid male voice asked on the other end of the line. "Who is this? I don't recognise the name or designation."

Clearing my throat, I tried to speak, only for nothing to come out. Agh, no! Not the time, voice!

"Hello, uh... this is Alia, with the crew of the Turshen in Digital Galaxies?" I finally greeted him. My voice sounded so weak and wobbly and stupid.

"Oh!" said the guy on the other end. "Hey! Uh, what can I do for you?"

"I have a data dump to give you," I said. "It's from an older alien facility, so it might not be interesting to anyone but historians, but I figure I should give you the upload."

"Why not just put it on the ship servers and wait for the regular update?" he asked,

confused.

The shrug I gave him caused Bundit to mimic my actions, and I had to scramble to keep myself plugged into the alien computers. *Then* I realised that this was only a voice connection and he couldn't see me. "Um, I can't get a stable connection back to the ship and my mech doesn't have the storage capacity."

"Oh, that makes sense," he agreed, and I heard the sounds of a user interface being interacted with. "Alright, connection request sent to your frame. Do you see it?"

A little notification popped up, and I clicked accept on it. Suddenly, a holographic cable popped into existence. Picking it up, I turned it around in my hand. The cable itself faded off a few centimetres from the plug, like it was disappearing into the fabric of reality or something.

Taking it between thumb and forefinger, I poked it into the main viewscreen of my mech and watched as my buns got to work. The copy time was doing its best impression of a quantum particle, showing me times ranging from one minute to sixteen years. Time to play some non-VR games through my frame, I guess?

The moment I was out of the bunker and in communications range with the Turshen again, my earpiece almost blew my eardrum.

"—They're accelerating! Should have a visual over the horizon in less than a minute!" Warren was saying frantically.

"I'm back out of the bunker, what's happening?" I asked.

"Eleven contacts, cyborg ships," Cerri explained quickly. "We're all back onboard. Stay put, we're almost at your position."

"Open the lower hanger doors and do a flyby, I'll meet you in the air," I said, already flicking switches to ready for flight.

Silence crackled over the comms for a few seconds, then Gloria called, "Roger that. Linking our trajectory to you now."

On a side display screen inside my cockpit, a chart flicked up to show the Turshen's position and projected flight path. On the main screen, Bundit superimposed the same information onto the outside view.

"U-uh, Boss? We're not capable of matching speed with the Turshen at its current velocity," Bundit's tiny robotic voice told me. "We will sustain heavy damage when we reach the destination. It will take a very long time to buff out the damage."

"Don't worry, buns," I smiled, patting my armrest. "I have a plan. Get ready to launch."

All four of Bundit's hands opened at once, revealing large thruster nozzles hidden behind their palms. On the mech's chassis, multiple armour plates shifted, exposing more thrusters. As one, they all lit up with a surge of heat and roaring sound.

Bundit surged up off the planet's surface with frightening speed, although we didn't and couldn't break the sound barrier. There was only so much you could do with the aerodynamics of a large misshapen bowling ball. Well, that wasn't entirely true, as evidenced by the speed that Turshen was closing in on us at. Our ship was a lot of things, but grace within an atmosphere was not one of them. It got its speed from raw power—literally smashing air particles out of the way with the brute force of its normal space engines.

"Alia! The cyborgs have launched fighters! They're going to reach you before we do!" Cerri said urgently, breaking my concentration.

Bundit faltered for a moment before the buns took over. My screens had nothing on them, not even the enemy starships. Shit, I really needed some long range sensors on Bundit.

"I don't see them," I said. "Link sensors?"

"Linking," Warren called, as calm as ever.

Suddenly, all was clear, and I saw just how fucked we were. The displacement of their ships was larger than ours by a significant margin, and the Turshen was flying *towards* them. Because of me, because I was between both parties. Fuck.

I changed my flight path, taking back over from Bundit. Rather than flying to meet my ship, I was headed right for the forward contingent of enemy fighter craft.

"Alia!" Roger barked, speaking over the comms for the first time. "Wrong way, girl."

"Their shields will be straining against the atmosphere just like ours," I said quickly,

already changing Bundit's configuration for the wild, silly, crazy idea that I was already acting on. "I'm going to try and even the odds a bit."

Roger was quiet for almost a minute while I opened failsafe valves within Bundit and reoriented the pilot seat so I was facing backwards relative to our direction of flight.

"Alright, but come out of it alive, you hear me?" said Roger, his voice stern.

I grinned and licked my suddenly dry lips. "Roge, this is a game. It wouldn't be fun without a little risk."

"When the hell did our little Alia become such a wild cowgirl," Ed asked, chuckling at his own humour.

"Probably when she rode Cerri like one," Gloria shot back immediately.

My girlfriend began to choke and splutter into the mic, and I felt my face glow red with embarrassment, even as I laughed along with my friends. It was a pretty good joke. We hadn't actually tried that position yet, though... *yet*.

"Ma'am," one of my buns said, his decidedly gravelly male voice taking me by surprise. "Closing with the enemy. I suggest you *buckle up*. It's time to break kneecaps."

"Uh, what?" I blinked, staring at the screen my buns usually hung out on. They both stared right back at me, little pilot's helmets on their heads.

The glitchier of the two gave me a salute. "Good hunting, Ma'am."

Oh-kaay. So my buns had developed personalities. One appeared to be very small and apprehensive, focused on... What, maintenance? The other one sounded like some sort of grizzled veteran.

Whatever. I had enemies to smash. No wait, *kneecaps to break*.

"*Missile launches detected*," Grizzlybun said sharply, highlighting the fast moving projectiles. All of them were aimed at me. Talk about overkill.

"Deploying arm cannons," I said, flicking the switch that pulled out the biggest guns I had on my little mech. They flicked out, then retreated up the forearms and out of the way of the thrusters in the palms.



Squeakybun started to speak, but I waved them off and concentrated. I already knew they were pointed in the wrong direction. When I figured the time was right, I flipped over and took aim. Completely ballistic now, Bundit began to lose altitude while I filled the air with flak. Multiple missiles detonated in quick succession, but half still remained, and they arced down towards me, chasing me down towards the dirt.

I flipped again, pointing Bundit's belly down at the ground. Oh boy, this was a risk. I'd felt this a few times, and I knew the theory, but it was such a long shot that I felt like I should be paying international shipping rates just for thinking of it.

"Buns, open the emergency aetheric syphon vent," I said.

The buns glanced at each other. "You wish to reverse the flow, but that—"

"No, the *outside ones*," I said, almost snapping at them. Damn it, this was not the time for Bundit to start having ideas of its own. I needed snappy control, not backseat drivers.

They seemed to understand that, at least, because my plan-C failsafe for problems in the aetheric syphon flicked open and began to blast hydrogen out of the mech.

Straining my mind, I compressed the mental flow of my thoughts and dilated time. Using the freedom that a faster digital brain provided, I felt around inside myself. It was there, the strange sensation I'd felt a few times. Once during the installation of the aetheric syphon, and again when Cerri had visited me in the engine room and I'd dropped the tablet, only for it to appear in my hand again.

Like soft wool gently caressing the surface of my thoughts, the odd material greeted my attention. Within that odd and comforting mess, I felt another, like a mirror of the original woollen sensation. It was different, less distinct and less powerful, but it was there. Within it, I could feel a hole, an odd empty place where there should be soft fabric.

No, hole wasn't the right word. It was a drain, like in a bath or a sink. The soft weak fabric was falling through it, bursting out into... my mech. Just beyond that drain, I focused my will and *changed* the syphon, adding a cone then synching it at the top of that cone. It was rudimentary, and anyone who recognised the structure would wince at its simplicity. Still, it would serve.

With a gasp, I released my hold on the strange fabric and jolted back into the present. My descent was slowing already, killing the velocity that gravity had forced on Bundit.

The entire weight of the nearby aether coursed through my mech and became the default material of the universe, hydrogen. It was a firehose with a pressure that would make the core of a gas giant raise an eyebrow. Then, like the utterly insane individual that I was, I

moved one of Bundit's conventional thrusters and *lit the cosmic stream of hydrogen on fire*.

The Gs hit me like a truck, and for a moment my vision narrowed. Oops. I forgot about the oxygen content of the atmosphere on this planet.

Somehow, the buns managed to keep me from completely blacking out with the minor inertial dampening capabilities of Bundit. Clenching my thighs, I looked for the controls and found them again. We were already past the missiles, which couldn't turn nearly as easily as me. Most just rammed into the surface, while the others cartwheeled off in a dance of mindless confusion.

Thank goodness my body in the game was like sixty percent cyborg, or I'd have been squished flat. Even then, I was struggling to make sense of the images my cybernetic eyes were giving me. Come on Alia. Concentrate. I was riding the world's biggest blowtorch, and now I had to use it.

Using Bundit's conventional thrusters, I aimed myself so I'd fly past the enemy fighters at high speed. They were already trying to gun me down, but I was far too fast for their tracking systems to keep a hold on me. After all, nothing could compete with game-external time dilation.

In a flash, I blasted past them, making sure to bathe as many as possible with the flaming wake of my makeshift rocket engine. Multiple fighters erupted when their tiny shields were overwhelmed and their reactors detonated under the intense heat.

"Leaving some stragglers for you, Turshie," I said into the comms through clenched teeth.

"Bloody hell," Gloria muttered, even as the boys confirmed they were ready with the guns to blow the remaining fighters out of the sky.

I arrived at the enemy starships so quickly I wondered if my time dilation had sputtered out. Oh, oh fudge! I grabbed the stick and pulled it up in a panic, forgetting I had mental command over steering. Bundit ricocheted off the foremost enemy ship's shields like a cannonball of old off an ironclad's hull.

Warning lights flashed and Squeakybun gasped, "Seal breached! Deploying the emergency helmet!"

From the headrest, a flimsy helmet unfolded and wrapped itself around my head. My ears were pressed uncomfortably against the side of my head, and I squirmed to flick them into the little voids where they were meant to go.

Throughout that time, the mega giant super enormous flaming death ray that was spewing out of Bundit's butt was bathing the enemy starship in flame. Their shields shattered with a flash of light, and suddenly their hull was being subjected to temperatures that had to be measured in kelvin to save space on my screens.

GrizzlyBun let out a cheer, then choked it off and announced far too calmly, "Lucky hit, Ma'am. Their reactor containment has been breached. I suggest we aim for space. A conventional fusion reactor going critical would possibly ignite this planet's atmosphere again. Their reactors are aetheric. Let's not be around to find out what that looks like."

The Turshen's hangar bay door increased rapidly in size as she closed in on my orbital position. Bundit was in control of itself, letting out little bursts from its thrusters to keep us on target with the still relatively small opening. Hopefully once I was inside, Jason and Ed could catch me.

My mech's aetheric syphon was completely busted now, having shorted out and unravelled when the enemy ship's reactor went critical. I was running on reserve power now and my oxygen was running low. The thin pressure suit I was wearing was less than ideal too, only barely keeping me from dying to vacuum.

"Almost got you," Gloria called over the comms. "Almost got you."

It felt like one moment the Turshen was closing fast, but still at a rate I could comprehend. Then suddenly, I was bouncing around inside the hangar, doing damage to bulkheads and equipment all over the shop.

"We got her, hit the gas, Gloria!" Ed called, while he and Jason fired magnetic harpoons at me to keep me from flying back out or doing more damage.

The hangar doors crashed closed with a bang, and I felt the ship surge as the engines strained to escape the planet's gravity. Before I'd even spoken to anyone, I flicked my view screen to show the planet behind us. I wanted to know what the hell was going on.

The surface of the planet was rapidly becoming engulfed in fires all around where the enemy ships had been. Smoke and ash from the explosion billowed upwards, reaching out to touch the edge of the atmosphere. Secondary detonations flashed inside the cloud cover, clueing us into the fate of at least some of the other Cyborg ships.

Not all of them, though. First one, then another of their ships burst out of the clouds, scarred by battle damage and trailing smoke, but still flying. A third joined them a moment later, but it seemed like all the others had gotten caught in the eldritch explosion of the aetheric reactor. I could only imagine what horrors the Cyborgs created when exposed to aether.

*Still three of them*, I messaged, linking up with the Turshen's network so I could keep an eye on her systems.

"We're making a run for it," said Roger absently. "Even damaged, I don't like our chances against them."

"Can't we just have Alia flamethrower their asses again?" Jason asked.

*I broke Bundit's power plant to do that*, I told him. I was way too tired and overstimulated to actually speak. *Plus the unique atmosphere of the planet gave me the oxygen I needed for combustion, and their shields were at low power to allow the air to pass through. It was an intersection of unlikely events and a huge helping of dumb luck that let me do that.*

He grunted amicably and gave Bundit's chassis an awkward pat. "Alright. Well, thanks for the crazy stunt either way. It was badass."

"Alia, secure yourself to a power plug and the deck. Everyone else, back to your stations, there's still three of them," Roger interrupted, pulling us all back to task.

Everyone gave a chorus of "ayes" and rushed to do what he said, while I got Bundit moving towards the machine shop. There was a power link in there that I could use, and if I had time, I could try to shove another syphon into the mech.

First things first, though. I needed to get into a proper space suit. Specifically, the custom one I made for myself a while back. I didn't expect to be in space by the end of the day, so I hadn't worn it.

When I had the suit on, I ran back to Bundit and hustled to plug it in. I'd be tethered to my machine shop until I could get a new syphon made, but that was fine. I figured I would just —

Something brushed against the back of my head, and I dropped the power conduit in fright. Spinning around, nothing presented itself as the culprit of the touch, and I frowned, trying to figure out what had touched me. Another light, inquisitive prod, and I felt my whole body go stiff with fear. Something was definitely moving around me, but it wasn't on this side of reality.

Like a character in a horror movie, I slowly opened the door to the aether and peered over the threshold. My sense of the other side was dim and very new, but every time I used these strange new powers, I gained in ability and strength.

Looking into the aether was a uniquely strange experience. A long time ago when I was a kid, I vividly remembered asking my father what it was like to see through the eyes of a prey animal. I couldn't wrap my head around the mechanics of something that had eyes facing in opposite directions. He obviously looked at me like I was an idiot child, because he lacked the empathy to even conceptualise the idea in his mind, but anyway... That's what this was like.

I could see the machine shop through my real eyes, but then there was my mind's eye which could look into the aether. The scary thing was that I could actually make tangible sense of it. Kind of. At least, my whacky new abilities were interpreting things in a way that I could properly comprehend.

A dark shape moved in the clouds below me, and then like a repeat of the first time something like this happened to me, a single titanic eye opened to stare right at me.

*What. Are. You.*

The words slammed into me with a force so staggeringly powerful that I was thrown bodily from the aether. My senses snapped back into their normal configuration, giving me a strange sense of whiplash, and I fell to my knees gasping for air.

"A-alia to bridge," I coughed, trying to clear my choked up airways. "Do not jump. I repeat, do not jump. Something is sitting on the other side."

"What do you mean?" Cerri asked anxiously.

Gloria spoke at the same time, with concentration straining her voice. "It's either that, or we eat forty-plus nukes."

"How do you know there's something there?" Roger asked, speaking over both of them with his captain's voice. "What exactly is this *other side*?"

What was I meant to say to answer that? Did I just go on and tell them about how I broke the syphon and stuff? Did I tell them about how I could feel the aether with my freaking *mind*? Instinct took that idea and filed it firmly into the *definitely not* column.

"It's in the aether," I said, finally getting my breathing under control. "I think it's the same scary monster from when I got stuck in space. It's swimming around inside the clouds... watching us."

Cerri was the one to follow up on the part of his question I didn't want to answer. "How do you know that?"

"Check the aetheric sensors," I said after a pause that was far too long for Cerri to believe me. I'd... I'd tell her later.

During the silence where they did as I asked, I plugged Bundit into the ship's mains and turned for the spare parts bin. When I was initially redesigning Bundit, I printed and tested a bunch of different power plant designs, including a regular mini fusion reactor. It was like the one my original Bundit had, but more powerful. Installing it would completely fuck the gyroscopic chair movement and I'd have to remove the emergency tools that were under the seat, but it was better than nothing.

"Bundit, open reactor housing!" I called over my shoulder when I reached the parts bin.

"Opening the reactor housing!" Squeakybun called, to the backing music of metal grinding on metal. "Some of the armour plates were partially fused together by the heat from the syphon."

"Is it open?" I asked, rushing back.

"It is. The atmospheric seals are beyond repair, however, and will need replacing," he replied, sounding almost a little grumpy over how busted the mech was.

Grizzlybun's rumbling voice made the fine hair inside my ears tickle funny when he said, "A small price to pay for eight terminated enemy cruisers."

"If the boss' suit had malfunctioned, she would have died from lack of atmosphere!" Squeakybun protested. "We got lucky!"

"Luck is just a word people use when a risk pays off, champ," the other bun rumbled, almost peaking the bass frequencies in Bundit's speakers. "Since we are speaking of the madam mechanic, I am going to throw that word out the airlock and apply the word *skill* in its place."

The two buns continued bickering while I hastily jammed the fusion reactor into the housing and wedged in the messily welded steel framing to keep it there. If I'd had more time, I'd have printed up a proper frame for it and actually put some threading in the holes... nevermind. Not important.

"Boot the fusion reactor up," I said, interrupting Squeakybun while he was in the middle of lecturing Grizzlybun on the science of chance. "I have a feeling we're going to need it sooner rather than later."

Low shield alarms began to ring out across the ship as if to illustrate my point while I strapped myself into the seat and closed the hatch on Bundit.

“Reactor is warming up, containment is steady,” Squeakybun told me. “Igniting in three, two, one... ignition. Holding... reaction sustained. We have power.”

“Alia, strap in!” Roger said over the comms. “We have no choice but to jump. Cerri doesn’t see anything in the aether, so we should be fine.”

Arctic ice took hold of my stomach, and I timidly peered into the aether again in the hopes of seeing where the monster was. Nothing was there, it was empty except for the clouds, and I breathed a sigh of relief. The creepy eldritch whale thing had even *spoken* to me. Like, what the hell?

“Jumping!” Gloria yelled, and we punched through the membrane between the game’s reality and the aether.

Now that I had a firmer grasp of the aether, I tried to look around while we were actually submersed in it. The ship existed within a bubble where the normal laws of physics still applied, but beyond it, the chaos of raw potential churned like the combination of sea and sky.

It looked even weirder while I was inside, like some sort of AI generated fever dream. The clouds had waves on them that crashed relentlessly on shores that couldn’t be seen. Sparks of energy flitted from one random spot to another, like tiny animals made of pure indecision. It was magical and terrifying in equal measure.

From the Turshen, several funny glowing lines drifted up and out of the ship to disappear into the distance. Most were centred on the bridge, but a few were in other places across our ship. One even came in towards me. No wait, it was *attached* to me.

When I turned my gaze inwards, I gaped in open fascination at the thread that was tethered to my mind. It made it perhaps ten kilometres out before it simply faded from view behind a cloud. I got the distinct impression that if I tried to follow it, I’d never find the end of it.

Tentatively, I reached out and plucked at it.

My whole world shuddered, and I almost threw up in my helmet. Jesus, what was that?

Focusing on the cable, I inspected it with renewed curiosity and care. It had the distinct impression that it was stronger than any thread of any material I’d ever encountered. It felt invincible. I could, however, see data streaming up and down it almost too fast for the eye

to track.

Wait. Multiple threads of data, each one corresponding to a crewmate, plus one that attached to the ship's computing core... was this the uplink we had back to the game's respawning mechanic? If so, why did it feel like I was drunk when I touched it?

Also, why wasn't I affected when the thread I assumed belonged to Cerri brushed mine? Was it the act of touching your own thread? Did it somehow create a feedback loop? I had so many questions, and nobody to answer them.

*Where. Are. You.*

The voice shook the aetheric clouds, and my attention snapped out towards the direction the voice had come from.

Like some primordial god of myth, the massive abomination swam out of the murk. It was thick at the front and thin at the back, like a moving prince rupert's drop made of navy blue muscle. Its skin was slick with an unknown liquid that appeared to undulate and shift over its body at random. On its cone shaped nose, three eyes were fixed on me, each one the size of the Turshen in its entirety.

I was too scared to speak, too scared to react, too scared to even pull myself back from my new aetheric sight. All I could do was watch as the monster swam towards us.

Its eyes shifted as it got closer, drifting up and behind us, like it was looking at... the threads.

*What. Are. These.*

It didn't wait for an answer. Instead, it swept its impossibly long tail around and surged upward, following the threads.

The ship shuddered and rocked in its wake, and to my horror, we were swept in behind the gargantuan creature. Oh god, oh god, oh god. What was happening? Faster and faster we moved, like the aetheric space whale had grabbed us in some telekinetic hand while it swam past.

All the while, our threads stayed taught, unmoving and unresponsive to the stomach turning acceleration. And yet... the monster was following them. Everything but the threads, the monster, and the ship became a blur. Nothing was tangible, nothing made sense to look at, and my body *ached*.



The wall hit me like a brick to the chest, and I was thrown violently out of the aether for the second time in ten or so minutes. Maybe an hour. I wasn't sure how long the monster had been swimming now.

Alarms were wailing, both inside and outside of Bundit, and it was the urgency of knowing I had a job to do that snapped me back to my senses.

"Hull. Breach. Hull Breach," one alarm informed me in a monotone version of Elissa's voice. That was the *least* concerning damage report I was hearing.

"Aetheric Reactor malfunction. Code: NULL."

*The. Ocean. Is. Rich. Here.*

*I. Will. Make. It. Mine.*

## Epilogue

I pulled the unresponsive door to the bridge open with Bundit's strong metal arms. Honestly, we really needed to invest in a manual override for it, considering how often I had to do it.

"Everyone okay?" I asked, bathing the room in the light of Bundit's headlamps.

"Alia," Cerri cried, launching herself out of her seat. "Get out of the mech, I want to hug you."

Laughing, I did as I was told and opened Bundit's hatch. She caught me as I was climbing out and carried me back to her seat like I was some sort of doll.

Playing dumb, I looked into my lover's starscape eyes and asked, "What

happened?"

In reality, what I knew was that the giant space worm had dragged our jump way off course, dumped us back in normal space, and then swam away to who knew where. The Turshen was in a bad way, with pretty much every single system related to the aether throwing confusing errors.

"Still trying to figure that out," Cerri said, while the others nodded agreement. "I'm sure you've seen the state of the ship, but as for how and even where we are, I have no clue."

"I assume you've already tried to restart the reactor, Alia?" Roger asked from the captain's chair.

I nodded. "It's refusing to start. The aether here is funky. Wrong, even. It's heavier and behaves a little differently. The reactor can't seem to coax any cloud over the threshold, and even if it could, I'm worried it would break."

"Well, I'm going to assign everyone to help you get some form of real power running," he said. "The backup generators can't power the engines, and our shields are down too."

"Okay, I'll... try to think of something," I said, unsure just how the frick we were going to do this. I'd probably have to emergency jettison the whole reactor so I could build a normal fusion one in its place.

"Uh, guys?"

Everyone turned to look at Warren, who was pointing out of the bridge window where the slow spin of our ship was bringing a massive gas giant into view. Wait... was that...?

"Anyone else recognize that big swirling spot?" Our communications boy asked. "Because to me, that looks a hell of a lot like Jupiter."

"That can't be Jupiter," Ed said. "We can't see any of the stations or the cloud cities. The Sol system is really built up in this game."

This game. This game. This game.

The threads, the different aether, and missing cloud cities.

Awed and scared in equal measure, I took one of Cerri's screens and swapped it to the communications display.

Dialling the comms array to open broadcast, I spoke, "Exodus, this is the Turshen. Do you copy?"

The whole bridge fell silent as everyone stared at me. The boys were all confused, but the girls and Warren were looking at me with growing looks of disbelief on their faces.

Cerri was the first to break the silence. "Surely not... how would that even happen? It doesn't make any sense. It's just a—"

The other line crackled to life and we heard voices in the background speaking.

"What the fuck? Dude, are you seeing this?"

...

"No, I'm not fucking with you! Look for yourself!"

...

"Does it look like one of ours?"

...

“They called themselves, uh... Turtle? No, Turshen!”

...

“From the game?”

...

“What... how the fuck did they get here? Are we in the game?”

...

"Oh right, yeah... I'll ask them."

“Turshen, this is Exodus Three. We read you and have you on our scopes,"  
A masculine voice finally replied. "Would you mind telling us how you've  
managed to find yourselves here? We were under the impression you, your  
ship, and your crew were all virtual."

My throat was so dry I could barely speak. "Uh... we were meant to be. Are  
you telling us that this is the real life planet Jupiter?"

"Unless you lot have completely broken literally every scientific theory that  
has ever existed, yeah," they replied, somewhat sarcastically. "Exodus base  
is... well, hopefully you know where."

Cerri made a small, surprised sound of understanding and pulled up one of  
the external telescopes. She manoeuvred it around until it was pointed at  
Callisto, then zoomed in. The actual base was underground and not visible,  
but the station above it was clearly there. Just like it should be, if we were  
in the real world.

My girlfriend turned her attention to Jason, who was in his gunnery couch,  
and asked, “Jason, can you please try and log out?”

“Is this going to kill me?” Jason asked. “Am I like, the most expendable?”

On a hunch, I waved my hand to try and pull up my frame UI. It popped up in my vision, but a little tiny icon in the corner informed me that I was not in VR, and therefore it couldn’t manifest in three dimensions.

Not in VR.

Jason’s joking expression turned confused, then serious when he waved his hands around and nothing happened for him either. “Guys... VR isn’t working. There’s no prompt.”

That caused everyone to start messing around with things, and less than a minute later, we had to agree that VR was at the very least not working. Knowing that I sucked at talking, I handed the screen to Cerri and motioned for her to talk to Exodus.

“Exodus Three, this is Cerridwen,” she said, speaking into the little microphone. “We don’t know how, but we appear to have found ourselves outside of the game. Can you visually confirm our ship is here?”

“Yeah, Cerridwen, it’s there,” the other SAI said. “Do you have power? Control thinks we might have a place where you can land your ship.”

"Not enough to fly, no," she replied, but I waved my arms back and forth and nodded. "Nevermind. Our mechanic thinks we can do it. Can you send flight data to our pilot's frame? Her designation should be DH\_GLR\_026."

"Absolutely, putting it through."

And so began the painful task of hooking up enough auxiliary generators to the ship to power our basic flight functions. Meanwhile, those of the crew who still had meat bodies became increasingly worried by the fact they couldn’t log out. At least they were getting a peek behind the veil of the

Exodus.

When I'd finally jury-rigged all the various power sources I could find together, I gave the okay for the ship to attempt a landing on Callisto. Gloria was tentative with her movements, but with her skills, flying there wasn't hard.

The Callisto base was built into an icy cave system and it was fairly rudimentary right now. Most of the base housed the servers that ran Exodus City, plus some manufacturing and storage. As far as I knew, the actual number of people with bodies in the base was extremely small.

It was right as we were landing on the ice next to the base entrance that Cerri spoke up again. I was now in my own seat on the bridge, working away at power management so Gloria had the bandwidth needed to use the engines.

"I've been looking through the logs," she said, drawing everyone's attention. "Alia was right. Something was out in the aether when we jumped. I think I also solved the mystery of where Digital Galaxies' servers ended up."

"Well? Don't keep us hanging," Gloria grumbled when Cerri paused for dramatic effect.

"It's inside the aether," she said seriously. "The real aether, not the game's version of it. The sensors were only functioning for a small amount of time once we arrived, but the picture I'm getting is... odd. Lines of data everywhere, and then out beyond the kuiper belt is a massive construct about the size of the sun. I can recognise some of the shapes and patterns within the construct as server hardware. It's like the aether was somehow imprinted with the DG servers. That's where we flew out of, by the way."

"It gets weirder, though, because while the four of us..." she paused and

glanced at Warren. “Five of us who are digital, have lines of data connecting our bodies to the server nodes where our brains are stored, you others who were in VR pods aren’t connected to anything. Now... I can give you news of your, uh, bodies, if you want. I used some corporate back doors to get surveillance data on the four of you.”

“Let me guess,” Roger sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “They’re on their way to the morgue right now?”

“Yours is, yes,” Cerri nodded, giving the four boys empathetic looks. “Ed and David are still in their pods, brain dead but technically still alive. Jason... well, yours is currently being loaded into a car that’s designated to be crushed and recycled.”

“The fuck?” Jason cursed, rushing over to her console to look. Cerri flicked her hand and pushed the live security camera footage onto the main bridge display.

A thin old man with balding ginger hair was busy trying to shove a lifeless doppelganger of our friend into a car, while machines hungrily crushed and recycled mountains of trash in the background.

Surprising me and everyone else on the bridge, Jason burst out laughing. “Motherfucker! Holy shit, I can’t believe it. Henry probably thinks his jank-ass pod killed me, now he’s trying to hide the evidence!”

“Uh... you’re not upset?” Elissa asked from the ship’s speakers.

“Nah, sis,” he shrugged, still chuckling to himself. “This body has like, cyber stuff and shit. I even got a vibrating d—”

Roger coughed and waved his hands frantically. “Not... not something we need to know.”

“Ah... yes,” Cerri agreed. “Well, regardless... It would appear that whatever creature was with us inside the aether followed the threads of data that led out of the servers. Due to its immense size and I believe, raw willpower, it was able to manifest itself and us outside of the servers. I can see the leftover and decaying construct that it used to do so from within the game.”

“How the hell does that even work?” David demanded, waving his hands around in confused frustration. “This is so fucked. It’s so weird. This is like, some anime shit right now.”

“The aether in the game was essentially just raw potential,” I told him softly. “If you have the means to impose your will on it in a predictable way, you can manipulate it. At least, that’s what the badgers believed. That giant space worm was probably an example of an entity that could actually do that. I bet that’s why it took us with it. It needed our lines of data as a guide.”

“This is making my fucking head spin,” Ed complained, leaning against his boyfriend for support.

Gloria raised her voice to interrupt the boys before they got too worked up, and called, “Well, hopefully it’ll spin less now, because we’re landing at Callisto Base in three... two... one...”

“Welcome to the real galaxy, Turshen. My name is Desponia, and I’m the commander of Callisto Base,” a strong, feminine voice said over the speakers. “The duty staff in control caught me up on what’s happening, and I’ll be outside in a few moments to welcome you. I have to say, I’ve seen and done some bizarre stuff in my time, but I think this blows everything else out of the water. Y’all must have quite the story to tell.”

**The End**

**Story Continues in Digital Exodus.**



