

# Digital Galaxies Part 1

*Quiet Valerie*



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# Chapter 1

“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. "... 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.

## Chapter 2

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.

## Chapter 3

“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!

## Chapter 4

“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.

## Chapter 5

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.

A chime 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.

## Chapter 6

“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.

## Chapter 7

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.



## Chapter 8

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!"

## Chapter 9

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.

## Chapter 10

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.*

**Cerri:** *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 Jelmar 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!”

# Chapter 11

“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 to 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.”

## Chapter 12

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 achingly 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!

## Chapter 13

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...

## Chapter 14

“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. “I... 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.

# Chapter 15

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.

## Chapter 16

“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?

# Chapter 17

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 skimmed 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 ocula 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.

## Chapter 18

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.

## Chapter 19

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 smoosh 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.

## Chapter 20

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.”

# Chapter 21

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 oculo 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.

## Chapter 22

“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."

## Chapter 23

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?

## Chapter 24

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 Bunit 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 Bunit 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.

## Chapter 25

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.”



## Chapter 26

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.

## Chapter 27

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."

## Chapter 28

“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.*”

## Chapter 29

“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.”

\*\*\*\*

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.

## Chapter 30

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 / 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.”

# Chapter 31

"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?”

# Author Note

Yooooo thanks for reading and stuff! Sorry about the jankness of this little file, I'm not too good at this xD. Either way, I'm so thankful to you for supporting my patreon, it means the world to me... literally. I have no idea what I would do with myself if I didn't have all my lovely patrons to write for. You're all wonderful.

As for the story, I have absolutely no doubt that I've written a whole bunch more of this story by the end of the week after releasing this thing so... yeah, hope you enjoy future chapters too! Also like gosh I love this story. Alia's head is so nice and cozy to be in, she feels like... being in bed on a saturday morning with no obligations for the coming day and a lover at your side, gently snoring away and looking adorable while they do it.

Love you all, thanks for reading, Valerie!