My name is Quyrl and I was born with a destiny; to fly the fastest ship ever. Even before I was born, I dreamt of flying among the stars, slingshotting around planets and spinning to land on asteroids. I was in that dream when the fluid started draining from my tank. A thunk and a hiss, then I was exposed to the cool dry air. I sputtered and coughed until I wretched. Light stabbed at my eyes and I clenched them shut. I shook away the pain, then started to see. I was in a large room filled with tanks like the one I had just been removed from.

A dark haired man in a blue suit squawked at me. I stared at him. His face and arms were covered in stripes that matched his hair. He made some more noises. Then, after a disorienting moment, I gained access to the appropriate language files.

"What is your status?" the man asked.

I could understand his words then, but I was not sure how to answer him.

He sighed loudly, looked at his tablet then said, "Q-U-Y-R-L. Give me primary systems status report 0135."

"All primary systems are green," I replied automatically. Then I was so shocked that I tried to look at my mouth to see if it was mine that spoke.

"What is going on?" I asked.

"Cyborganic Liberation Day outlawed the tank you were being grown in a long time ago. You have been in stasis ever since. When the Sapient Council found out, they ordered your release," he told me.

I did not have any files on a Sapient Council, so I started one. Whoever they are, they make decisions about my life.

Another person? walked in. It was twice the man's size with four thick limbs and four thin in between. I did an image search, but the closest match was a tardigrade. I had no idea how they got from being microscopic water bears to the size of a bear, but there one was.

"I am Dr. Rotifer. I know this is all unexpected, but we will get you sorted. We can start with those legs," he said.

My legs? I looked down at the stumps and a status page opened in my mind. It was all green. They were functioning perfectly.

"What about my legs?" I asked.

"You cannot walk around on those," he told me.

"My legs were not made for walking. I am a pilot. They were made for flying," I informed him.

"Don't worry, we will update your software. The new legs will feel just as natural as any other part of your body," he said as if that was my concern.

The design for the pilot socket came to mind and I tried to imagine fitting long legs and feet in there. It was not possible.

"How can I fly with feet in the way?" I asked.

"The same way everyone else does.

"That doesn't make any sense. Why would I want to be worse at what I want to do in order to be better at something I don't care about?" I asked.

"We have a lot of options to choose from," he told me.

I chose a mobility pod.

Later that day, someone decided that I should go to the Praxis Reggio School to complete my education. So, at three days old, I became the youngest student to ever attend PRS. There I met Leonidas, a Homo Domesticus boy and Edie Ann, a young cyborg. Together, they would help me fulfill my destiny and I theirs, but our adventure almost ended before it began thanks to some peanut butter and plasmidium jelly.

\* \* \*

Arriving at Praxis Reggio School was like stepping from one holiday to the next. Cyborganic Liberation Day marked the biggest change in my life, but for almost everyone else it was Thanksgiving.

The hallways of Praxis Reggio School were covered in cut-out cauldron, bears and ghosts. While student drawings and paintings told the story of the Ursus Sapiens and their gifts to humanity. There were pictures of thin, ragged, blank-faced humans being fed soup from a cauldron stirred by the bear-sized, evolved tardigrades. Others showed people with light stripes as they finished their bowl of bear bean soup. And finally, pictures of humans, striped and patterned like normal Akkadian, working with the Ursus Sapiens to plant trees, farm or raise buildings. I did not have files on any of this so I quickly made some and started filling in what I knew. I became so engrossed that I did realize the person behind me was trying to get my attention until I heard tapping right behind me.

The teachers and staff at Praxis Reggio were generally helpful and supportive. The same was not always true of the students. After some loud throat clearing, the first one I met asked me, “Why are you missing legs?”

“Its skin is silver-blue. Maybe it is defective,” said another.

“I am not an it. I am a ze. And I am not missing legs,” I told them.

“If you aren’t missing legs, then why are you in that pod?”

“Ze is a pilot. Zey d-don’t walk. Zey p-pilot. Ze is missing legs the same way a fish is,” said a tall blond boy as he approached. He was obviously the smartest person I had met in my entire life. The stripes across his face and arms were as golden as his hair. “Thank you,” I told him.

“I am Leonidas. You must be Quyrl. The teacher sent me to show you around,” he said.

\* \* \*

Although I was the youngest, I did not stay the newest. Eleven days after I started at Praxis Reggio, a new student arrived who was just as distinctive as me. I was alone at my favorite table in the back watching the other kids as they came in. I did not know all their names. The two freckled ones (siblings?) were not sitting together today, but the boy and girl that were arguing loudly yesterday were. They must have made up. Then I got so focused on watching the bouncy-haired girl squad make their rounds that I nearly ejected from my pod when I received a beep.

"May I join you?" the message card asked. It was signed Edith Ann Gilpin-Rivera-Sinclair of the Cockaigne Bound, cyborg daughter of La Partigiana and Scion of the Families.

"Yes," I replied, but my message just ended with Quyrl @ Praxis Reggio School. "Is that whole thing your name?" I asked.

"What? Sorry, my mom thinks she's funny. Just call me Edie Ann. This is my first day," she said, then she sent a new contact card that said Edie Ann @ Asscher-1.

I saw her look around and nibble her lip.

“Looks different with everyone here, I know,” I told her, “ I just started a decaday ago. [Teacher] will introduce you after the bell rings and everyone settles down, but waiting on that can be awkward. Lucky for you, I have attended Praxis nearly all my life. I can show you around.”

“I thought you said you started ten days ago?” she asked.

“I did. I was activated twelve days ago,” they explained, “I was supposed to be a pilot, but after Cyborganic Liberation Day they outlawed the tank was I being grown in. Then the government kind of forgot about us. The ones at my depot anyways. We were in stasis for a long time, but then they found us again and had to let us all out. So, here I am.”

Edie Ann’s eyes got big for a moment then she placed her hand on his arm and said, “I’m sorry that happened to you. That wasn’t right. The ship I live on was designed for a cyborganic crew, but it never had one. My parents and their friends switched everything around so we could fly it ourselves. I was even born there,” she told me.

“I’ve only ever flown this,” I told her gesturing to my pod, “But someday, I’m going to fly the fastest ship there is.”

“Leonidas, this is Edie Ann. She lives on a ship. This is her first day,” I said when he joined us. “Edie Ann, this is Leonidas. His family has lived on Station One from the beginning. They even helped build it.”

“Nice to meet you. That is very cool. Maybe you can show me around sometime,” she said.

“O-of course,” he stammered, but he recovered and added, “That would be fun. I know where all the best spots are.”

Before Leonidas could tell Edie Ann about the station, a chime alerted the room that it was time for the day to begin. Edie Ann and Leonidas took seats at the table and I whirred back into place.

“Class, we have a new learner joining our community today,” [Teacher] said after the morning announcements, “Edie Ann, can you stand up and introduce yourself?”

“My name is Edie Ann,” she told the class, “I hate doing laundry. I hate washing clothes and I especially hate folding them and putting them away.” She paused as a murmur of agreement spread across the room. Hearing that made Edie Ann smile. “More than anything, I want to be an explorer. I want to see and find things no one has ever seen before,” she said as heads bobbed and made pleasing faces. Now, she was ready for her grand finale. “I like trying new things, which is perfect, because everything here is new to me. So, I hope you can all show me what you like so I can try even more new things.”

Several kids started saying what they liked to do all at once, but [Teacher] reigned them in saying, “Alright, everyone, you will all get a chance to talk to Edie Ann, but not all at once. We have things to do now. I’m sure there will be time to get to know her better.”

\* \* \*

When Edie Ann unhooked the clasp on the box holding her sandwich with a hiss and a pop, the smell of peanut butter burst out. “What is that?” Leonidas asked.

Edie Ann removed the lid and told him, “This is just a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. My mom made it. We grow all the ingredients on our ship.”

Leonidas stared suspiciously at the square, white, layered thing that had been sliced into four triangles. “What are peanuts?” he asked.

Without thinking, “Peanuts are the edible seeds of Arachis hypogaea, a plant native to Earth,” came out of my mouth. What just happened?

“How do you know that?” Leonidas asked.

“I just do. It came to me when I smelled it. I must have a file on it. Wait. Yes, I do have files that mention peanuts and peanut butter. Wait. Peanut butter and jelly, PB&J is a sandwich consisting of peanut butter and fruit preserves spread on white bread with the crusts cut off,” I told him.

“You can each have a piece,” Edie Ann offered.

“Really? Thanks,” Leonidas replied. He took the piece and sat it on his plate. Then he put his hands on his lap, closed his eyes and lowered his head.

“Is he praying?” Edie Ann asked softly.

“Leonidas? No, he’s just talking to himself so his biome will be prepared to try the new food,” I explained.

Edie Ann moved her head around in a circle. I couldn’t tell if that meant she understood or not. She asked me, “Don’t you want to try it, Quyrl?”

“I, uh, don’t know if I can,” I told her, “It might be a problem for me to digest. I’ve never eaten before.”

Edie Ann’s eyes lit up and she said, “Give me one moment.” Then she raced away.

[Teacher] came with Edie Ann to the table. [Teacher] stared at the meal then told us, “I think we should consult with Mr. Xho.”

A few of the other kids were gathered around to see what was going on. When a girl with copper skin and silver hair walked by [Teacher] waved and signed, “Saro, could you ask Mr. Xho to come here?”

Saro nodded and started quickly down the hall flanked by her friends.

Mr. Xho was cyborganic, like me, but his design had legs. He smelled the air and said, “Intriguing. May I take a sample?” Edie Ann slid it towards him and he cut a one centimeter square from one triangle. First he smelled it, then he put it in his mouth and closed his eyes. He gasped briefly and his eyes fluttered causing their mismatched glow to blink. His body relaxed, almost slumped before he swallowed. “I, what was your name?” he asked Edie Ann.

“This is Edie Ann, our new learner,” [Teacher] supplied.

Mr. Xho bent at the knees until he was almost eye level with Edie Ann and told her, “Thank you for that, Edie Ann. Peanut butter and jelly was in my files, but the experience of eating it, well, rarely have a felt the integration of my senses and a file so strongly.”

“You’re welcome. Does that mean Quyrl can try it?” she asked.

“Only ze knows that,” Mr. Xho told her. He stood up, walked over and knelt by me. “Quyrl, can you access your digestive systems?” he asked.

“A little, but I don’t know how to control them because I don’t know what it all means,” I told him.

“That’s fine. You don’t need the controls. Close your eyes and pull up the digestive screen. Open the menu and go to status,” Mr. Xho told me.

I closed my eyes tight and said, “I got it.”

“Good work. At the top of the screen make sure Red/Green is checked,” Mr. Xho told me.

“It is,” I told him.

“Excellent, now, scroll to the bottom. Is everything green?” Mr. Xho asked.

I searched through the list, then said, “Yes, all green.”

“Perfect. Eventually, you will learn what all those fields represent, but for now, I just want you to do a quick check before and after you eat. As long as everything is green, you have nothing to worry about. If it isn’t all green, ask me or another grown-up before eating. Today, you should start small. That was a lot to go over, do you understand?” Mr. Xho asked.

“I understand,” Quyrl confirmed.

“Right, then,” Mr. Xho said and stood. He cut the piece he had tasted in half, then cut another one cm square from it. “First try this bite, then you can have the rest of this piece,” he told them.

Quyrl looked from the food to the gathering crowd of kids and hesitated.

Leonidas jumped out of his chair with an explosive, “Wow!” He had finished talking to himself and taken a large bite out of his sandwich. “Quyrl, you have to try it. It tastes like a hug.”

I wasn’t sure what a hug tasted like, but I didn’t know what anything tasted like so I gave it a try. After the first bite, I knew exactly what Mr. Xho meant. The files were still the same, but now they were linked with the feel and taste of the real thing. I took the rest of the piece and swallowed it in two bites. “So, that’s what a hug tastes like,” I said, “I could get used to that.” For one beautiful moment, we soaked in bliss. Then Leonidas started pawing at his throat.

“I don’t feel right,” he rasped.

“What’s wrong?” Edie Ann asked.

Her question triggered another file to open. It said, “Warning: peanuts may induce a fatal allergic response in some individuals.”

“We have to get him to the nurse, right away!” I told her.

Leonidas stood, but he was wheezing.

“Which way is the nurse?” Edie Ann asked.

“This way I told her, but I don’t think he can walk that far,” I told her.

Leonidas smiled weakly, but did not try to talk.

Edie Ann scooped him up. He was more than a head taller than her, but she cradled him in her arms with barely a grunt. “Lead the way,” she said.

I took off down the hall and Edie Ann ran beside me keeping stride with my pod’s top speed as she carried Leonidas. She ran the entire way stopping for one beat when she reached the exam table, then gently laid him down.

Nurse Thistle rushed towards us on her bottom four legs. “Allergic reaction!” I shouted.

Edie Ann had her hand on Leonidas’ chest. “His throat is swelling shut!” she added.

Nurse Thistle massaged a handful of plasmidium jelly from their chest and plopped it onto Leonidas’ throat. His stripes darkened to tanned leather as he absorbed the jelly but, the golden honey color returned after a moment.

“What happened?” Nurse Thistle asked.

“He ate part of my sandwich,” Edie Ann told the nurse.

“Is there any left? Did you bring it with you?” Nurse Thistle asked.

“Here,” I said and handed her the remains of Edie Ann’s PB&J.

“With this sample, I should be able to eliminate the allergy. Seriously though, eating strange foods from some far off planet, what were you thinking?” Nurse Thistle asked.

“I did w-what I was supposed to. I told my body first. We thought it would be okay. It wasn’t, but I did try,” he told her.

Nurse Thistle examined the food for a moment, then ate it. “My, that is tasty. I can feel the protein you reacted to,” she said. She pulled he mouth closed tight for a moment then squeezed some more plasmidium jelly from her chest. “This will remove your allergy,” she told Leonidas before applying it to his arms. His stripes deepened in color again as it absorbed into his skin, but after a moment they settled back to a medium honey color.

“The real problem is what to do to keep you from getting hurt in the first place. I have tried upping your aversion to risk. I pushed it so far you started stuttering, but you still managed to get yourself into trouble,” the nurse said.