The ringel sighed, “Naturally, we’re not gonna let my boss find out about this whole ‘discouraging a customer from buying ten thousand clones thing,’ right?” She glanced around the shop behind her, but Rah couldn’t tell if anyone else was nearby. “At the very best, I’d lose my job. I don’t want to ponder the worst possible outcome.”

“No, no, of course not,” said Rah with a placating gesture. “That was just me being stupid. I would have realized *eventually* that it made no sense. We never would have ordered that many, ma’am.”

“Oxxinos,” she said with a warm smile. She flipped a paw, explaining, “Not like we even *could* make ten thousand at a time. I don’t know if anyone on this planet has that big a facility. We’d have to subcontract it out to dozens of other companies…”

“I’m Rah,” said the anup. “And I appreciate your candor and helping me work through this task for my owner.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Rah. Let’s start over without any preconceived notions, okay?” When the anup nodded, Oxxinos asked, “How many of you would it take to operate one of these ships?”

“Good question,” he admitted. “I’m not certain. I do have a ship that’s operated by five hundred and twelve umbrans, but I doubt we’d need as many.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, some of the crew are cubs who’re still in school,” explained Rah. “They’re not really working.”

“Why wouldn’t you have any cubs?” asked the ringel.

Rah scratched his head, confused. “You just *said* that the crew would be all guys, and obviously a bunch of guys can’t make cubs.”

Oxxinos groaned. “Of course, there would be cubs. Look, how old are you?”

Rah scowled, confused. “I’m thirty-four.”

“Okay, and if I cloned you,” she asked, “how old do you think that clone would be?”

The anup opened his muzzle to respond then closed it, confident that she was tricking him but uncertain how. He asked, “Wouldn’t it be thirty-four too?”

“No!” laughed Oxxinos. “It would be zero. It would be less than zero, actually. It would be just a fertilized egg like if you had just gotten a gal pregnant. In … however many months later would be appropriate to be born, that cell would become a newborn cub, and *then* it would be zero years old. It won’t be thirty-four for decades.”

Rah stared at the screen, his jaw hanging open. “What am I supposed to do with hundreds of cubs? How are they supposed to operate a spaceship?”

The ringel laughed and wiped at her eyes. “The contract, as I’m imagining it, won’t be for us making five hundred and twelve clones.” She grinned. “It’ll be about us producing clones at a steady rate so that your ship *maintains a crew* of five hundred and twelve. As the oldest clones die, we’ll be supplying them with cubs to raise as if they were their own. We get nice long-term, reliable income, and you get a ship with a stable population. Everyone wins.”

Rah sighed with relief. “So, these clones aren’t … me, are they?”

Oxxinos laughed. “You mean like exact copies where they know everything you know and think they’re all you? Nah. Genetically, they’re the same, but they’ll all be their own people with their own names and identities. It’ll be like you have hundreds of brothers running the ship.”

“That actually makes me feel a lot better,” said Rah. “I was imagining them all being me—and I don’t know how to fly a spaceship. I was worried I’d disappoint Projoiticy.”

“No, don’t worry about that,” said the ringel. “We’ll raise the first batch of cubs, and we’ve got educational programs available. I’m sure there’s courses on running a gateship. Then, older cubs can help raise the younger ones. When there’s enough adults, they can start running your ship.”

Oxxinos’s ears dipped with uncertainty. “Might not be exactly what you imagined when you called. Do you want to run it by your owner?”

“No,” said Rah firmly. “That sounds like it will accomplish the goal he had in mind, and he trusts me to handle the details of how to get there. Let’s do it.”

# # #

Rah met with Oxxinos to tour her facility and leave the heavily-pierced creature some blood samples, but then stayed out of the way and let Crazy Yrnrie’s Rock-Bottom Taxidermy and Cloning focus on creating and raising the clones. He checked on the ringel’s reports every week to make sure they remained on schedule, but didn’t see a reason to look in on them in person.

Twenty years later, however, Oxxinos’s reports grew increasingly impatient to begin the next phase of Rah’s project. “But you’ve only got two hundred clones so far!” he groaned.

“Two hundred and twenty-four,” she corrected him.

“But *most* of them are too young to take on any adult responsibilities!”

“I *understand* that,” she said, sounding frustrated. “I’m not saying they should take over the ship just yet. I’m suggesting that they should *transition* to the ship. You’ve got all these anup who we’ve trained to raise crops, but there’s no crops here to raise. They’ve learned how to build machines, but we’ve got no machine shops. Everything we’re training them to do has been completely theoretical, and they’ve had no way to apply any of it. They’re bored!”

“Well, I’m sorry that education can be boring—”

“It’s worse than that,” she yelled. “They’re starting to get disruptive, keeping us from doing our tasks. I can’t put them to work on our stuff because you’ve been clear about teaching them skills they won’t need, but they need *something* to do. You’ve got this great big ship with room for ten thousand, and they’ve only got five hundred and twelve—”

“Seven hundred,” he corrected her, “roughly. They had five hundred and twelve back twenty years—”

“It doesn’t matter!” screamed Oxxinos over the comm link. “They have plenty of room and can start to train your clones as replacements. They *need* to be on the ship and learn how to run it from people, not just from books. There’s no substitute.”

Rah’s ears were blank and stoic for a long while before he finally nodded. “Yes, I suppose you’re right. We should transition smoothly from one crew to another, not change abruptly. Good idea.”

The ringel’s ears showed obvious relief.

“Okay, let me arrange all of this,” said Rah. “You identify those most ready to go, get them on a bus, and I’ll have a pilot bring them to their new ship.”

“Thank you,” she said with sincerity. “Do you want some of our people to come with and help them get settled in?”

“No, I think I should probably handle this personally,” said Rah. “None of your employees have any authority aboard the ship, and I might need to order the old crew around to make this transition work.”

# # #

Rah waited at the spaceport, nervously excited to see how well his clones took to the new job. He had really thought they’d be at this point some twenty years ago, but no matter, they were here now. Though the waiting had been a big chunk of Rah’s lifespan, to his boss, the delay was merely a detour.

He paced while he waited for the bus from Crazy Yrnrie’s to arrive, and he worried that it wouldn’t go well. Apart from his DNA and a general plan, Rah’s contributions had been minimal. Usually, he stayed far more in-the-loop when his crew worked jobs, but what good would that do in this case? He didn’t know the first thing about how to make and raise clones. He had to trust Oxxinos that the project was as she claimed—still on track.

After what seemed like an eternity, the bus—well, a krakun-sized truck really—arrived and a door swung wide. Instead of waiting for the clones to march out, Rah tromped up the ramp, eager to address his copies before they disembarked.

He turned and shouted, “Hello, clones…” but his optimism and enthusiasm gave out, and his words faded to nothing. His heart dropped deep into his bowels.

Even though he knew, understood that the truck would not be filled with exact duplicates of himself, a small portion of his brain still expected it. If not his fifty-four-year-old self, then as his thirty-four-year-old self from back when this project began.

But the rows and rows of exact copies isn't what he saw—not even remotely.

No, what he saw was a rowdy group of guys from only a few months old through their late teens. Older teens rocked infant cubs in their arms as if they held their own cubs while young cubs screamed, frolicked, played, and young teens rolled on the ground fighting…

No, they weren't fighting … not with the open-mouth kissing … tongues in each other's mouths and on … so many other body parts as well.

He saw necklaces, rings, bracelets, jewelry inserted into piercings all over their bodies. Instead of black fur, he saw an explosion of color—fur bleached white and then dyed every color of the rainbow.

In twenty years of speaking with the ringel, he'd learned that they had a very different culture from his own, but it never even dawned on him that anup raised in such an environment would grow up knowing this as "normal".

Rah closed his eyes, and he began to shake.

"Projoitiсy is going to kill me."