

“Raaangeer! Raaangeer! Where are you Ranger buddy?” Bill called. It was 9pm, and he had just awoken to the absence of the pleasant weight of his pet raccoon on his chest. It was summer, so this was about the time they usually got up. Because Bill worked from home, giving him a very flexible schedule, he thought it would be best to adopt the nocturnal sleep pattern of his pet so they could spend more time together, and honestly, Bill had always been an extreme night owl.

He was used to waking up slowly and cuddling with his coonie. Ranger was well past the stage where he would eagerly wake Bill up to play most days, and in fact was getting pretty old, but he was very full of life, and hadn't really slowed down at all after he was about 3. He had settled well into maturity. Right now, Bill didn't have any clue where the procyonid could have went. He found it unlikely that Ranger would have had to get up so quickly to relieve himself or have any other reason to leave bed so early.

He was out looking in their large backyard which was enclosed on all sides with a fence that was very high and became unclimbable at a certain point in order to give Ranger a safe place to be outside. Eventually, he saw Ranger in a back corner between one of the trees and the fence. Bill observed that he looked deep in thought, which is a rather odd thing to say about a raccoon, but to be honest, it often seemed to describe Ranger.

“Hey, you rascal, what are you doing out here so early?” he said as he hoiked Ranger up and over his shoulder. To his surprise, Ranger started squirming in his arms and trying to get down. This was never something that happened. Ranger was always very receptive to being held, and in fact seemed to love it.

“What’s up with you today...” He started, but then he felt the very odd sensation of falling upwards very quickly and saw black.

“Nurse! Nurse! He’s waking up,” an obviously male, but slightly odd sounding voice said. Bill honestly had no idea what was going on, and kept his eyes tightly shut. He wanted to better gauge the situation before he confirmed that he was awake.

“Well, I’ll leave you two alone to talk then. He definitely needs to be briefed on the situation, and who better to do it than you,” a higher voice said with the same peculiar quality. Bill then heard the sound of her (for he presumed the speaker was a female) leaving the room. Now he was even more nervous about whatever was happening, so still kept his eyes shut.

“I’m so glad you’re okay Bill. You almost died. Well I almost died too, but you came quite a bit closer than I did,” the first voice said again.

“Who are you, and why are you so concerned for my well-being?” Bill questioned.

“Still haven’t opened your eyes yet, huh? It’s okay. I guess you could say I’m an old friend. Things are probably gonna be really weird for you from now on, but I promise I’ll do the best that I can to make it okay” As Bill heard the “stranger” saying this, he felt another smaller hand squeeze his. He suddenly realized that said hand had been holding his all along. This hand seemed to have a very leathery palm and a furry back.

Suddenly, in shock, Bill’s eyes shot open. He was met with the visage of what he could only describe as an anthropomorphic raccoon wearing a simple T-shirt and sweatpants. If he didn’t know better, looking at the individuals face, he’d say that the Rocket-lookalike was Ranger.

“It’s alright Bill.” The furry one said and squeezed Bill’s hand again.

“R-r-ranger?” The human questioned.

“In the fur,” Ranger responded.

“What the hell is going on!?” Exclaimed Bill. This wasn’t an angry question, at least not angry at Ranger, for he knew that this really was Ranger, and he also knew that Ranger would never want any harm to come to him, as he wouldn’t want any to come to Ranger. He was incredulous more than anything.

“Well, it’s a long story, but I guess I have to be the one to tell it, so here I go. I’ll try to keep it brief. You’re more than welcome to ask questions at any time, now or in the future, and I’ll do my best to answer them. “

“Alright then. Continue.”

“So, as I’m sure you’ve figured out by now. There’s more than meets the eye with us Raccoons. We actually have an intelligence pretty equal to that of humans, but we have a much more mature civilization. As you might know, humans have only been in the Americas for about 20,000 years. Our society far predates that. When the humans came, we saw that they were warlike and mean. That’s not to say that we’ve never had war, we were just mostly past that as a society by that point. Food was plentiful, and we didn’t really need technology to produce or utilize it.”

“Because of this, we didn’t really have weapons, and so we knew there was no way that we would win a war against you guys. Ideally, we would coexist as equals in harmony, but your species wasn’t ready for that at the time. As an aside, I’m afraid that you still aren’t, but you’re

making a lot of progress. Anyway, our solution to this was to go underground and pretend to be simply woodland creatures.”

“At first, and in fact for thousands of years, this didn’t go too bad. The indians left us alone (mostly, at least), as long as we hid our true potential, and we were able to continue developing our technology in secret. We were also able to keep our natural life-spans of about 100 years. This all changed when the white man came. Fur hunting, which we had had to deal with before (you guys do seem to think you have the right to kill any animal as long as it suits you after all), suddenly become an industry, and worse of all, the Europeans brought the beginnings of science. People were now studying the life histories of different animals, and they knew that carnivorans weren’t “supposed” to live to be 100. By this time, we had technology analogous to that of your species in the 1950s or 40s, but more like one would expect from a ‘mad scientist’ in media of the time”

“Our scientists scrambled to find a way to continue a passable existence. We knew we had a while before Europeans would be widespread enough to really threaten our way of life, but we wanted to find a solution quickly. One team was working on a virus that would shorten our maximum lifespan to the about 15 to 20 years that we knew the Europeans would be expecting. We knew this was a drastic, latch ditch effort, though, and it was actually officially scrapped. However, we are by no means perfect, and we either have, or have had a lot of the same problems your species does. One of these problems is the naturalistic fallacy. There were some lunatics at the time who already thought our way of things was unnatural, and romanticized nature, and thought we should join it. Unfortunately, this got to the level of terrorism, and one of them managed to infiltrate the lab and start the spread of the virus.”

“This combined with natural diseases from the old world such as Rabies and Distemper devastated us. The worst part is we had no way to reverse the virus. It literally modified our genes and got passed on that way. To make a long story short, we poured all of our resources into getting off of the Earth, and finding our own world, as well as reversing the virus. At the moment, we are on a starship hurtling towards what we think to be the nearest uninhabited star system.”

“Why can you walk and talk like a human, though?” Bill asked. He had sat quietly through all the exposition, and he had always been a good listener, and liked things like educational YouTube videos and college lectures.

“Well, the technology we have has enabled us to do extensive genetic modifications on living individuals, and we also have good nanotech technology that we’ve been able to integrate into our bodies at a very basic level. As for why we’ve chosen these specific enhancements, we actually think bipedal locomotion is a very useful thing, and a genuine advantage your species has over ours in our natural form. It’s very nice to be able to walk and use one’s hands at the same time. As for human speech, we did that because we want it to be easy for our species to be allies when you guys finally take to the stars. Despite all the pain we’ve faced as a result of your species, we think we ought to stick together being from the same planet and all. We still retain the ability to speak our homegrown raccoon languages.”

“If you can still speak your own languages, why were you talking to that nurse in English? Bill questioned.

“Well, English is my native language, as it is for many other pet raccoons. I didn’t really grow up among others of my species, and from the little I remember of her, even my mother

spoke English, but filtered through a raccoon vocal tract. She must have also been a life-long pet,” Ranger explained.

“Interesting,” Bill replied. “Now, I’m not really very sure how to feel about the fact that I’ve had you as a pet, basically owned you, for all these years.”

“Bill, don’t you ever feel bad about that. You gave me a much better life than I ever could have had “free” in the wild with all the problems we were facing as a species. I know many of my brethren, and pretty much all who were actually in that position feel the same way.”

“Thank you for that Ranger. I’m glad you’re happy with the life I’ve given you. So, what exactly happened in the transit for Earth, and how long was I out?”

“As for what happened, the hyperspace tractor beam wasn’t really equipped for a being of your mass along with me, so we were sent through regular space very quickly, but slowly enough where the acceleration wouldn’t kill us. I knew proper procedure for this, so I emptied my lungs and held my breath. You were panicking, so your lungs kinda... exploded due to the pressure differential in space. You were already passed out by that point, so you probably didn’t feel any pain, but you were not in good shape. Luckily, we have medical technology on this ship far in excess of any human hospital, and we were actually able to grow you all new lungs just like your old ones. Of course, we could have just done a genetic reset on your body, and had it regrow everything besides your brain from your DNA, but we need nanobots to have that sort of control, especially if we wanted to preserve your tattoos, and we didn’t want to mess around with that stuff without your consent.”

“Alright, but how did I even live for more than a minute or two with no lungs?” Bill asked”

“Well, we do have a machine that can keep your blood oxygenated, and because I know you’ll ask again, and I haven’t really said yet, you were out for about a week. The reason you were out so long, is because that’s how long it takes us to grow organs. It’s a bit slow compared to our other technology because we don’t really use it much, preferring the DNA tricks and nanobots. We kept you in a medically induced coma for that time so you wouldn’t freak out.”

“You keep on saying ‘we.’ It made sense when you were talking about your whole species, but you’re not really doing that anymore. I’m not sure why you’re saying things that way unless...”

“Yes, I am part of your medical team. I’m a biologist-slash-electronics engineer (those fields are rather interconnected for us.) I’m sure you’re wondering how I can already be a professional in terms of knowledge of any subject when up until a week ago I just lived as your ‘normal’ pet raccoon. Well, I was actually able to get a mind interface to talk to computers at the HQ and log on to the communication system, so I’ve been secretly working a lot of the time we’ve been ‘relaxing’ together.”

“Oh, a mind interface. Interesting. Is that how whoever-your-leaders-are were able to tell all of you guys about what was happening?” Asked Bill curiously.

“Well, not exactly. Only a few of us have these interfaces. What can be done for every ‘coon though is simple mostly one-way communication, like a mental radio. The only feedback the ‘listener’ can send out is by concentrating very hard to block out the signal.”

“Interesting. So I’m a human stow-away on a raccoon ship,” mused Bill.

“You aren’t the only human on this ship, Bill. We gave all Friends of ‘Coons the option to come with us. We explained the situation to them fully, and if they declined we wiped their memory of the event,” Ranger stated.

“But you never asked me,” Bill objected, and then he thought about it. “Oh, I guess I’m not a...”

“No, Bill, you definitely are. What you’ve done for me and my kin can not be overstated.”

“Then why...?” Realisation struck Bill’s face.

“Yes, Bill, you declined.”

“I mean, I guess that makes sense. I have a pretty good life back on Earth, with a few really good friends who are definitely more tied down than me, so couldn’t come, even if it were an option” Bill reasoned.

“It isn’t an option for precisely that reason. We have to limit it to only the people who raccoons know and consider to be family, or else it just becomes a total mess,” Ranger interjected.

“I just honestly don’t know how I could have said no to you. Even though we don’t really know each other very well as ‘people’ (which I hope to fix), I have always considered you my best friend and honestly thought I’d go to the ends of the Earth for you.”

“Well, I think you probably would have agreed if I had been the one to ask, however I was too chickenshit to do so, and had a buddy do it for me. He told me you were confused at first, but once you understood, you almost accepted until you declined in the end. I’d also love to get to know you better as a person, though I feel I already know you much better than you know me. I’ve always been able to understand you, and you actually tend to talk to me quite a lot.”

“Well, What are we gonna do now? I’m okay with going to space with you guys, and I really don’t think I’d leave you now Ranger, but I’m gonna miss the rest of my friends and family. I wish there was a way to have them, and you - this you - the real you, at the same time.”

“Me too Bill. I’m already starting to miss some of the friends you always had over. To be honest, had it been an option, I would have stayed behind with you, as long as I could live to my real maximum lifespan, even if it would have meant staying unable to really communicate with you.” With that, Ranger squeezed Bill’s hand, which throughout the entire conversation had not separated from Bill’s own.

“Well, I’m glad we’re able to talk now. I do wish we could go back to Earth.”

“There might actually be a way. Maybe now that we’re home free, Richie won’t mind us two going back to Earth. We did leave messages for the humans telling them exactly what had happened. We should ask him in the ‘morning’ it’s actually really late right now,” Ranger said with a yawn.

“I presume I haven’t been discharged from the medical wing yet,” Ranger nodded his head. “Well, where are you gonna sleep then?”

“I have quarters,” Ranger said.

“I’m sure you do, but I have a funny feeling you’ve slept every day in that chair not leaving my side.”

“Sure, let’s go with that,” Ranger quickly said and got a nervous smile on his face.

Bill laughed. “Even better. I had a feeling that’s how it was. No need to blush under all that fur. You’ve slept every day of the 12 years I’ve had you in the same bed as me. It’d be silly to ask you to do differently just because I know now that you’re just as much as a person as I am.

Get up here you big lug.” Bill wasn’t dumb. He knew what Ranger’s bashful reaction likely meant, he just needed time to sort out his own feelings before he really thought about it. All the same, there was no way he was gonna make his buddy feel like he couldn’t be close to him.

Ranger looked like he was gonna say something, but then just nodded his head in defeat and crawled up on the bed with Bill. Curled up was no longer the most natural position for him to sleep in, so he simply laid down beside Bill instead of curling up into a ball on his chest like he did when he was quadrupedal.

He was obviously trying to keep his distance and avoid the bodily contact he so clearly wanted. Once again, his own feelings that he had yet to figure out notwithstanding, Bill was not going to let his best friend be uncomfortable. He rolled over on his side and spooned Ranger to him. He knew this was what Ranger wanted, and this was confirmed when the ‘coon got himself comfortable and relaxed into his touch. Honestly, Bill thought it felt pretty nice too, but the fact that this person who was very clearly in love with him, or at least had a very serious crush on him, had previously been his pet who he thought was just a ‘dumb’ animal was something he had yet to really come to terms with.

The two drifted off to a comfortable sleep, unsure what the future would bring, but happy in each others’ company.

Bill awoke first, and did what felt natural. He cuddled up to Ranger and started basically petting him, running his hands down the ‘coons flank. As he did this, Ranger began to stir and melted into the touch.

Ranger soon opened his eyes.

“Morning big guy” Bill said to the smaller man.

“Morning to you too, Ranger purred contently. He then thought for a moment and froze up. “Hey now,” he said. “Bill, stop playing with my feelings. I know you don’t feel the same way about me as I do you, and all this physical affection is really sending mixed messages.”

“I don’t know what I feel,” Bill admitted honestly. “But I do know that it feels right and natural to be physically affectionate with you, and I love seeing how it makes you light up. I know how you feel about me, and would never intended to take advantage of that. I really feel like there’s a good chance I’ll end up feeling the same about you in time. I just need to get to really know you as the person you are, and come to grips with the fact that less than a month ago, you were my pet who I had no idea was even capable of such “human” emotions. Not that I ever thought that non-human animals couldn’t experience love, it’s just romantic love that I thought to be purely human (or maybe shared by Dolphins, but I digress.)”

Ranger did a couple deep breaths. Obviously overcome by conflicting feelings. “I appreciate your honesty Bill. I’m glad that this really could work out, but please try not to get my hopes up too much. It’s embarrassing how long I’ve felt this way about you. *Anyway*, let’s go and see Richie.”

“I’ll try not to get you too excited,” Bill said with a laugh. “Now, where’s this Richie fellow? I presume at the bridge of the ship, wherever that us.”

“Yep. Though technically, you still need to be discharged from the sick bay. Luckily, I have the authority to do that. I just need you to drop your gown so I can do a quick medical examination,” Ranger said and snapped a nitrile glove onto one of his forepaws.

“Uhhh...”

Ranger burst out laughing. It sounded a lot like raccoon chatter. “I really had you there. Jeeze. No, that’s not how this works. I have a scanner right here and...” He runs it quickly over Bill’s body ***beep*** “You’re good. You should probably get dressed though. Your clothes have been washed and are folded up beside the bed. You can change in the bathroom.”

Bill did as was suggested and quickly got dressed in the bathroom. It was no time flat until they were able to head to the bridge to see Richie. They got to the bridge pretty quickly, along the way seeing many raccoons, humans, and another species that looked pretty raccoon-like, with a longer, thinner face, bigger eyes, and an altogether more lean and tall appearance as well as super long and fluffy tails. They also seemed to have a more carefree outlook, and Bill was pretty sure most of them had clothing that was thicker around the crotch area than “normal.” If Bill didn’t know better, he’d think that those were...

“Who are those guys?” Bill asked motioning to some of the tall fellows.

“Well, everything I’ve said about raccoons applies to us of the genus *Procyon*. That’s mostly us North American Raccoons, alongside the South American crab-eating raccoons. Those people are ringtails. They are of the genus *Bassariscus*. From what we could tell, they seemed to be a lot like eternal toddlers. A lot better than the humans give them credit for, but not quite like us. With the enhancements, that’s still the impression we get. Don’t get me wrong when I say that, though. Most of them are adults, and they reproduce just like any other animal. We’re pretty sure their natural lifespan is about 40 years. It was cut down by the virus just like ours, and we’ve actually extended it to match ours. They’re actually super fun to have around.”

“And are they wearing...” Bill trailed off.

“Yep. I wasn’t joking when I said they were like toddlers.”

“Interesting.”

When they got to the bridge, they saw that it was full of activity. There were many raccoons, some humans, and even some ringtails off playing well away from any controls that they might mess up.

In the center there was a captain's chair, but instead of a single raccoon in the chair, like Bill expected, there was an elderly, but healthy-looking human with two raccoons sitting on his lap, one apparently male, and one apparently female. The old man had one arm protectively around each raccoon.

“Uh, so who’s Richie? The human or...”

“Richie is the raccoon on the left. The male one. This is just some more of his family. They’re all pretty equal actually, but they let Richie bear the title of leader,” Ranger explained. “Go up and introduce yourself to them. I’ll be right beside you.”

“Alright,” Bill agreed. He went up to get nearer to them. “Hi, My name is Bill. I’m Ranger’s former “owner.” Bill laughed at the idea that he ever thought he could own Ranger. He didn’t at all regret being Ranger’s friend and protector, but to think that he owned him seemed rather silly now.

“Hi, I’m Rachel,” the female Raccoon said.

“My name is Ted,” the human said.

“And as I’m sure my buddy Ranger has told you. I’m Richie.”

“Hi. As I’m pretty sure you know. I’m here somewhat by accident. I’m fine with going with you guys, but I’d really prefer to return to Earth.”

“And I want to go with him,” Ranger said.

“Now Ranger said that there’s a way that that might be able to work out, saying that the rest of you are already home free.”

“Well, yes, but I fear that Ranger, ever humble, has missed a very important detail. He’s one of our best scientists, and is probably the closest that anyone is to cracking biological and technological immortality, and giving us all the ability to live forever. It’d be quite the thing to give up, saying as we currently don’t have any faster than light communication technology,” Richie explained.

“That’s quite a thing to neglect to mention,” Bill chided Ranger.

“My work is important, but there are others that can carry it on. I have some great colleagues, some that are showing a lot of potential. What’s important is that Bill has friends and family on Earth, and I rather like a lot of them too.”

“What about your friends here, Ranger. You’ll never get to talk to us again. Your interface won’t work back on Earth. You’ll be totally isolated from all Raccoons” Rachel said sharply.

“Not all. You know as well as I do that the on-ship count is a couple percent below census numbers, and there’s still tons of ringies back there,” Ranger countered.

“Alright. Here’s how this is gonna go. I’ll give everyone, including myself, a week to think things through, and if possible try to come up with a better solution, because I know you’d prefer to at least be able to communicate with us from Earth. Also, that gives you two some time to get to know each other, and work through your business,” Richie ruled. The others in the chair both started basically petting Richie, and he gave a smile and a shrug.

Ranger and Bill went on after agreeing to the terms. They were heading to Ranger's bunk. "So, what did he mean working through our business?" Bill asked. "Do you think he knows?"

"You have to remember that Richie is a friend of mine, so I did tell him that I was into you. However, I also think it's plainly obvious, and let's just say we're far from the only ones here. I'm sure you saw how Richie, Ted, and Rachel were with one another. Though, to be fair, they worked through all that quite a while ago. There are a lot that are in our position, though."

"That's something that we're not gonna get on Earth if we do become a couple. Our relationship being common and accepted," Bill mused.

"Well, there is some hope that we won't be the only ones. As far as I can figure, there are still some raccoons on Earth, and it would be trivial to get them augmented and able to communicate with humans." Ranger obviously hoped this would be the case. No matter what he might try to say, it was clear that he would miss the company of others of his species.

"Y'know. I think I need a shower. I'm feeling kinda grimy after sleeping for a week."

"I could actually use one too. Let's go to the showers. Daily bathing isn't really a thing for us, but I could probably stand to get cleaner."

"The showers? Like communal showers?" Bill asked, slightly worried.

"Yeah. We're rather nonplussed about nudity, for reasons that I would think are obvious. We never really had clothing before humans came, and are honestly only wearing it now to keep the less adventurous humans comfortable, and some of us like the self-expression possibilities it gives us. There are some rooms with their own showers, but those are only really the ones with humans, and some with bathtubs, but those are mostly rooms with ringies. There are some

private stalls in the shower room, but they're for two or more people, if you catch my drift. Of course, I'm sure I could find some human or 'coon with a human roommate that would let you use their shower," Ranger explained.

"No, I think I'm okay. Y'know what they say: When in Rome."

"I think you just wanna see me naked," Ranger challenged and stuck out his tongue.

"Well, Richie did tell us to get to know each other. I will admit that I am curious. Plus, it's something I might be seeing a lot of in the future." Bill laughed.

"What did I tell you about getting my hopes up?" reminded Ranger.

"Well, off to the showers we go in any case."

They walked until they got to the shower room. Bill took in the sights of the many nude and undressing 'coons, humans, and ringtails. There was no mistaking now the undergarment that was prevalent among the ringies, and no question as to why that was the preference either.

Bill suddenly felt very overdressed, and the best way to solve that problem was by stripping. He quickly took all of his clothes off, and when he turned back to Ranger, he saw that the coonie had done likewise. He was honestly captivated by what he saw. Ranger's fur was too long and thick to see any musculature, but there was something strangely appealing about the look. Downstairs, Ranger looked pretty much exactly how Bill would have guessed, or at least how he should have guessed. His equipment was much the same as it had been when he was quadrupedal, just oriented slightly differently.

There was one rather important aspect that Bill was somewhat surprised about, though he really shouldn't have been. "You grew them back," he mused dumbly.

"Yep. it's pretty trivial to do that with our technology."

“I’m really sorry about having to do that, but they threatened...”

“My life is more important than my balls Bill, and like you see that problem is solved.”

That was the end of the talk of that. The incident that sparked that is best forgotten.

Ranger, Bill could tell was quite enamored by his own body. It was hardly the first time the ‘coon had seen Bill naked, though now he understood all the staring throughout the years.

“So, there’s a bathhouse area here too. Raccoons rather like water. Humans are allowed, of course, but many choose not to come. Let’s just say the privacy of the few private stalls in this room is for the sake of the humans, and the antics that go on in those happen quite openly in the baths. There’s even some shower heads in there.”

“Your culture is very open. I admire that. Of course, I don’t think that we’re really ready for something like the baths as ‘us,’ but it certainly sounds like it could be fun in the future.” The idea of the baths really did intrigue him. He was already beginning to forget that he and Ranger weren’t officially an item, and kept on catching himself thinking of them as such. He was really starting to like the idea, but he still felt like he barely knew the *real* Ranger. Of course, he knew that Ranger would be glad to drop any pretence on his word, he just couldn’t stand the thought of jumping in too quick and changing his mind, though. The last thing he wanted to do was break Ranger’s heart.

Ranger smiled at the idea. “I’d like that,” he responded.

“Of course you would, you damn dirty ‘coon. You seem to be a whole species of total horn-dogs. I bet you were having mental phone sex with your freinds with your mind interface all the damn time” Bill said with a laugh, and Ranger laughed too. Bill knew that Ranger could not argue against that, and he noted that he didn’t even try.

That certainly explained a lot. Not least of which why Ranger didn't just jump him when he was still quadrupedal and unable to communicate effectively with him. Bill was glad that that didn't happen. He had no idea how he would have reacted.

The duo cleaned themselves with the provided soap and shampoo, with Ranger obviously using a lot more shampoo and no body soap. Soon they got redressed and headed back to Ranger's, no, *their* room.

They had a lot of talking to do, so that's what they did. They just talked for hours on end, about the aspects of their lives that the other never really got an opportunity to know. Ranger learned that Bill was an Indie Game developer, and had his own company. He had figured that Bill was a programmer of some sort, but he was always shaky on the details.

Bill learned that Ranger was a very well-respected scientist and was instrumental to their augmentation technology. While it was pretty much fully functional before Ranger came around, Ranger was able to make it the almost instant process that made it so the ship was already fully populated by bipedal raccoons and ringtails just a week after its launch.

They also learned that they were both vegetarians, or at least Ranger would have been a vegetarian back on Earth had he had the option. Bill had just fed him like any other raccoon, and Ranger couldn't be upset about that. Bill didn't understand the nutritional needs of raccoons, so had no idea how to design a healthy vegetarian diet for one, and of course he put Ranger's health above what he perceived to be his own dietary choices. It was rather irrelevant on the ship anyway, as they had mastered lab-grown meat.

They also talked a lot about the differences in culture and other things between their two species. It was clear that raccoons took what they liked of human culture, as well as other aspects of humanity, and it was hoped humans would do likewise for the aspects of raccoonhood when the two were finally able to meet on equal terms. One interesting quote from ranger in all this was thus:

“Can I really say if being a male as a raccoon is the same as being a male for a human? Of course not, but that’s more of a philosophical question than anything. The fact is I have equipment similar to and evolutionarily homologous to yours, and I identify with, and am attracted to, others who have the same. For sake of simplicity, it makes the most sense to say that we’re both dudes, and that I’m gay, and you seem to be too.”

They learned those and many other revelations about each other. Some of their talking was formatted as lunch or dinner dates, some was when they were cuddling in bed. (They knew that even if somehow this didn’t turn into a romantic relationship, their friendship would always be high in physical closeness. It had always been before, and there was no reason to stop now, nor could they have bore to do so) Some of the talk was just when they were walking from one place to another.

They did end up visiting the baths a few days later, but they just spectated, and guess what, talked. Basically, they did nothing except talk to each other and get to know one another for the whole week. They did also come to a decision about going back to Earth.

“We’re staying,” they said jointly to Richie and his family. “We’ve decided that it’s not fair to cut Ranger off from all known other raccoons, and your species really needs the work that

Ranger can do. We're really fine in either place, and without communication, Earth is just a no-go," Bill continued.

"Here we were about to tell you to go anyway," Rachel started.

"Yeah, at least for the sake of any 'coons and ringies still left on the Earth. You could go and augment them and create a community there," Richie continued.

"We think that the community will be small enough where the humans wouldn't see it as a threat, and it would help the relations between our species in the future. Ted finished.

"Also, I really think we're on track to have immortality in most of our lifetimes even without being able to benefit from Ranger's continued work. We're even thinking that Ranger could keep working on the technology as well and introduce it to those on Earth, procyonid, human, or otherwise," Richie added.

"That sounds awesome. I'd just really miss you guys if we were never able to talk to each other over again. You're some of my best friends. I can get used to not seeing you in person, in fact I never really got used to seeing you in person in the first place, but I really wish we could communicate if Bill and I go to Earth,"

"It's now or never on going to Earth, though. We're almost to the end of the distance our cruisers can cover. Honestly, we've cut it pretty close. If you don't go within the next five hours, you won't have an opportunity to go at all. I can tell that you guys have some stuff to think about, so we'll leave you to it. You have 4 hours to come to a decision," Richie stated with a note of finality.

"T-minus 1 minute"

“Honestly, I’m glad we’re going back to Earth. We can spread the raccoon technology to those who don’t have it, and hopefully make the world a better place for everyone,” Ranger stated. From his place on Bill’s lap.

“Yeah, it’s just a shame that we won’t be able to communicate with the others here on the ship, but I think it’ll be worth it,” Bill agreed. “This is an interesting cockpit design. Being made to accommodate a raccoon in a human’s lap.” Bill put his arms around Ranger.

“Well, this ship is very configurable, and don’t forget that you’re the one who chose this layout,” Ranger reminded him, relaxing in his arms.

“Only to satiate your desire to spend every waking moment in contact with me,” shot back Bill.

“T-minus 30 seconds.”

“Sure, *my* desire, and only my desire. What a laugh. Also, I think you’re forgetting how we sleep,” Ranger scoffed.

“Hey guys,” Richie’s voice came on the radio. “Don’t forget to check the um... glove-box once you’re in open space. There’s a surprise in there I think you’ll like.”

“T-minus 10...9”

“Huh, I wonder what it is.”

“Don’t know. I guess we’ll check it out once we take off,” Ranger responded.

“...3...2...1 You are now cleared for take-off.”

Ranger pushed the big red button, and they were off. In an instant, the big ship was nowhere to be seen.

“So, I just remembered that I never asked how long this would actually take,” Bill said. Saying that it had been about 2 weeks since they had left Earth he was worried that it’d take the same amount of time to get back.

“Should only take a couple days.” Bill was confused at that, and Ranger seemed to take notice. “Yeah, the big ship is intentionally not super fast. It zipped well clear of the solar system pretty quickly, but after that, it went a bit more scenic. It’s designed to meet all of our needs and be a good home, so there’s no need to waste resources speeding off into the unknown. I’m pretty sure the ETA to the planned star is about 20 years.” Ranger explained.

“Interesting. We can get up and walk around, right?” Bill asked.

“Of course, and this chair converts into a bed for when we want to sleep. These controls can hide away. We won’t really need them for anything, anyway. The coordinates of your house are programmed right into the autopilot. This ship should easily fit in the clearing in the yard.” Ranger unbuckled them, and got up. Bill followed.

“My house? Don’t be silly Ranger. It’s just as much your house, and has honestly been that way since long before I knew your true abilities.” He picked Ranger up with one arm supporting him from the bottom, under his tail and one on his back. “It’s *our* house for as long as you’ll have me,” Bill said, looking right into the ‘coons eyes.

“Do you mean...” Ranger started, hope in his eyes.

“Sure do. I’m not sure how you could be surprised. We’ve almost kissed like five times, and I think you were only the one to initiate about two of them.”

With that, Ranger closed the distance between their mouths, and it wasn't 'almost' anymore. It might seem that their differences in anatomy might make it hard for them to kiss, but they had seen it done, and they made it work.

"I love you Ranger," Bill said when they were done.

"I love you too Bill. but you already knew that."

"It's nice to hear it though," Bill said. "Now, let's check out what's in the so-called glove-box," He added as he gently let Ranger down.

Bill opened the glove-box. Inside was a box about the size of a lap-top with a lot of ports on it, presumably inputs and outputs, along with what seemed to be a microphone and some speakers. Off to one side there was a button. There was a note stuck to the device, with an arrow pointing at the button, and saying "Push here."

"I'll let you do the honors," Bill said.

Ranger pushed the button, and suddenly they heard Richie's voice. "Took you guys long enough. I guess you decided to make out before checking out the glove-box."

"No comment" Ranger said. "But how are you able to talk to us? We should be light-hours away from each other."

"Well, we've cracked FTL communication. We doubled down our efforts on it when we heard you two wanted to leave, but we didn't tell you because it still wasn't ready when you came to me with your decision. Luckily, we made our break-through at the last moment, and here it is. You can't get rid of us that easy. You should be able to connect your mind interface with the device simply by trying to push data to it, and you should be able to continue your work

just as easily as you did before we left. Saying that you don't have to be covert anymore, you should even be able to set up a terminal."

"Very nice. I'm glad you guys figured it out. With all your talk of work, I know you're also just glad to be able to talk to me as a friend," Ranger responded.

"Guilty as charged, buddy. I'll leave you guys to it, but if you ever wanna chat, I'm down. That goes to you too Bill. You seem to be a great guy, and no one who makes Ranger as happy as you make him could possibly be bad."

"What can I say. I already would have done anything for that little rascal, but being able to make him happy in this way really is an honor."

"Guuys," Ranger interjected. Bill swore he could see the 'coon's ears flushed red.

"Alright. I'll stop embarrassing Ranger now. Talk to you later," Richie said, and there was a click as the call disconnected.

"Y'know. You're kinda cute when you're all flustered," Bill said, and Ranger huffed.

Bill picked Ranger up into a full-body hug. "Y'know I'm just playing, right," he said as he stroked Ranger's back.

"Yeah of course," Ranger responded. "I really am stoked that I'll get to still be able to talk to the 'coons on the ship."

"Yeah, me too. That place is super cool, but I just can't leave behind my friends and family on Earth."

"Well, if what we think is right. There are still raccoons on the Earth, so we should be able to establish a similar society there," Ranger said excitedly."

“Yeah that’d be awesome,” Bill yawned. “Y’know. I didn’t really sleep well last night. I’m kinda beat.”

“Yeah me too,” Ranger said with another yawn. “Let’s lay down.”

Ranger pushed the button to convert the cockpit chair into a bed, and he and Bill laid down and cuddled.

Bill knew that their level of closeness was much more than the vast majority of human couples, and many would probably see it as excessive, and even unhealthy, but it just felt natural to them. They had spent pretty much every moment in either close proximity, or physical contact when Ranger was quadrupedal, and Bill was ignorant about his wonderful mind, but knowing that the ‘coon was just as much of a person as he was made him want to be even closer with him, and it seemed as if Ranger agreed. The point was that it worked for them, so what did it matter what anyone else might think.

Anyway, they cuddled, and talked about the future before eventually falling asleep in each other's arms. They were excited about what the future could bring on many fronts, but were wary about what the other humans might think. One thing they did know, though was when they got home, they were gonna make their bed really *theirs*.