

Welcome (Back) to the Real World

# **Welcome (Back) to the Real World**

By Robotech\_Master, with JonBuck

*November 20, 158 A.L.*

*Realtime: 60 Days Since Departure*

*Crechetime: +16 years*

“So,” Renfield said. “This is it, then.” The wolverine scratched nervously at the bark of the stump he was sitting on in the clearing across from Ruth’s home where they liked to come and hang out after school when there wasn’t anything else doing. It had an extra touch of poignancy today. “The Last Day.”

“Or the first day!” Stacia pointed out. “Of the rest of our lives.” The EI girl shrugged, crossing her legs as she sat on another stump.

“I can’t believe they’re just...closing this place down.” Soren the owl was perched on a low-hanging limb of one of the trees that remained.

On another branch right across from him, Ruth the snow leopard stretched luxuriantly and shaved scraps of bark from the limb with her claws. “We all knew it was coming,” she said. “Known it for years, if you want to be technical.”

“If you want to be *technical*, you’ve known about it for *weeks*, realtime,” said the poodle digging between two roots of the tree.

“Well, yeah, Geena, but realtime doesn’t have a whole lot of meaning in here.” Ruth rolled her eyes. “For us—well, not *you*, I guess—we’ve lived our entire lives in here. It’s one thing to know this was coming, but something else to actually *get* here.”

“It’ll still exist in our memories,” Soren said. “Literally, as it happens. They’re downloading our homes plus the shared common areas to each of us as our First Boot environments. We can visit the place any time we want—or even link networks and visit each other at ‘home.’”

“Won’t be the same, though,” Renfield grumbled. “Won’t be all of us together, *here*, on this ‘frame.’”

“Yeah, but life goes on!” Geena said, standing erect and shifting back to her poodle-skirt-wearing teenaged human form. “And I’m looking forward to getting back out into the Real on a permanent basis.”

“You would,” Renfield grumbled. “You’re *from* there. No one just...took it apart under you. This was all just a *vacation* for you.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Geena said. “A *vacation* is something you take

willingly. This was more like a prison sentence. A very *comfy* prison sentence, with a lot of really awesome people in it—don't get me wrong, I love you guys—but I kinda only came here 'cuz the only other choice was getting sent right back home if I didn't grow up a little. I'm looking forward to getting out of virtual jail."

"Yeah, I guess you would," Ruth said. "For us, it's more like getting cast out of Eden."

Stacia raised an eyebrow. "That's pretty deep. I hadn't realized you were religious."

Ruth shrugged. "I'm not. Or at least, I don't think I am. But it was something to read to try to understand humans who are a little better."

"Did it help?" Renfield asked.

"I don't know, I haven't really talked to any yet." Ruth shook her head. "It's so weird to think about how different everything is gonna be. I mean, I know we stay on 'realistic' settings to try to prepare us, but those don't hold true everywhere." She scratched at the branch again. "I can't tell you how many times I've torn all the bark off this nasty old thing only to have it all come right back by the next day."

"They'll get mad if you do that to trees in the Ark," Geena said. "Those *don't* reset at the end of the day."

"See? That's what I mean." Ruth sighed. "No matter how hard we try, nothing's *ever* going to prepare us for life in the Real. They really should have had us grow up more out there."

"They would have if they could," Stacia said. "But there just wasn't time for that on this trip. My parents said that many of us weren't exactly... *planned*, or if we were our parents hadn't thought it through very well." She smiled faintly. "When they didn't know I was listening, of course."

"So it was either raise us all virtual in fast-time, or have toddlers in a war zone." Ruth sighed. "Terrific."

"I'm sure it won't take you too long to get up to speed." Geena smiled. "We've learned more stuff about the real world over the last few years than I even knew when I got here, and I'd grown up in it!"

"There's a difference between learning and doing, though," Soren said. "And it could be *months* before we actually get to see a world. I don't think they'll let us out on that Totalia place if there's still a war going on in

it when we get there.”

“In any case, it’s not as if we have a choice.” Ruth sighed again. “Tomorrow after the closing ceremonies is when they take everything apart. And then it’s back to the Real World, whether we like it or not.” She rolled her eyes. “At least Mom and Dad are excited about it. They can’t stop talking about getting their *real* bodies back. Like we RIDEs are just chopped liver or something.” She frowned. “Or like they were *also* under a prison sentence, just like yours. Because they had to raise *me*, their little *accident*.”

“Hold on, I’m sure it’s nothing like that—” Stacia said.

“No, I’ll bet that’s *exactly* what it was.” Ruth growled. “Isn’t that nice? Turns out *I* was the ball and chain keeping them from living out in the Real World, in their real bodies. And now they’re going to get to unlock the shackle.”

“You shouldn’t jump to conclusions,” Geena said. “At least not without talking to them first. Accidents *can* happen, but that doesn’t mean they can’t be *happy* accidents. I’m sure your Mom and Dad wouldn’t have stuck it out this long if they didn’t care for you.”

“Seems like half our classmates’ folks have already taken a powder to the Real World and just visit every so often,” Renfield said. “Accident or not, I gotta grant them props for staying here this long.”

“I’m sure it’s just because those parenting books they’re always reading told them to.” Ruth sniffed. “I don’t even know what relevance Dr. Spock has five centuries on when your kid isn’t even biological.”

“I always favored *Mister Spock*, myself,” Geena said. “But we’re all Trekkies on the *Clementine*.”

Stacia cocked her head. “My parents just pinged me with the dinner alert, so I guess I’ll see you all later.”

“Yeah, the rest of us should probably be getting home too,” Soren said. “See you tomorrow at the Big Sendoff?”

“Yeah, see you then.” Ruth sighed. “C’mon, Geena, let’s head home.”

Dinner that night was a subdued affair. Ruth had noticed over the months leading up to graduation that her parents were spending less and less time, and fewer and fewer dinners, in feline form. Instead, they sat

around a human dinner table. They didn't require Ruth or Geena to join them—they were free to gnaw on haunches in the corners if they preferred. *Big on "being yourself," they are*, Ruth thought sardonically.

But tonight Ruth and Geena did join them, not least because it was hard to have a dinner conversation from around a leg of elk. They waited as Rochelle dished up the spaghetti and meatballs she'd cooked, from ingredients she'd rezzed up, and Ruth tried not to roll her eyes at all the extra effort it all took. *Why don't they just rez up a pre-cooked pot of spaghetti? Or even just rez up already-filled plates at our places?*

She would have thought they'd surely have gotten lazy about doing everything as it was in the real world by now. Ruth herself no longer bothered with inconvenient "full simulation" settings like potty breaks, since Soren had shown her how to hack the "poop protocol." But as far as she could tell, except for special occasions, Rochelle and Chet continued to act just as they would have in the real world.

*Or no, they're going even more full-sim crazy than they would in the real world*, Ruth reflected. *In the real world, they'd use a fabber!*

But maybe it was something to help pass all the extra time on their hands. After all, they'd just spent sixteen years in a VR simulation, for *her* sake. And there was another thing she could feel guilty about.

"Okay, kids, dig in!" Rochelle caroled as she put the pot aside. "Our last family meal in the Creche."

"You don't have to sound so cheerful about it," Ruth muttered.

"Why? What's not to like about finally getting to go out into the real world?" Rochelle asked. "I mean, this is what you've been looking forward to for your entire life, right? How many times did you ask me about what it's like out there?"

"I didn't realize that *this* world was just going to...go away," Ruth said. "That's a little bit of a downer."

"What do you mean 'go away'? You're getting to download it and take it with you wherever you go." Rochelle shook her head. "Do you realize how lucky you are in having that? The home where I grew up is back on Zharus, and Chet's is light-years away back on Earth. All we've got is memories, but you've got the *actual place* right there in your noggin."

"It's not the *actual place*," Ruth grumbled. "The 'actual place' is being

shut down and wiped to make room for something else.” There was going to be a “college session” covering the next couple of weeks in real-time for those who wanted to polish off their education. Ruth and her friends had decided they wanted to wait until they found a college campus back on Zharus that *wouldn't* disappear when they graduated.

“No, really, it *is* the actual place,” Rochelle said. “The checksums are identical. That means, digitally speaking, it’s the exact same file.”

Ruth rolled her eyes. “*Moooooom...*it’s not the same. This is the place where all our *friends* are!”

Chet nodded. “I get that. It’s going to be really hard for you, when you’re all out in the great big wide real world...of a spaceship in interstellar space that nobody can leave. Where all your friends will *also* be...”

“*Daaaaad...*you just don’t *understand!*”

“I realize the situation isn’t...*ideal*,” Rochelle said. “If we’d been back on Zharus for this, we would have spent half-and-half time in the creche and the real world, to get you acclimated to both, so you’d feel more of a connection to the real world when it came time to leave the creche. Unfortunately, that just...wasn’t really possible here, given the time constraints of the trip. So we did the best we could in the time we had.”

*Because I wasn't intended to happen*, Ruby thought. But the lump rising in her throat prevented her from saying that aloud. What if they agreed? What if they told her that they *hadn't* wanted her, and hadn't wanted to spend sixteen virtual years shut away in the computer, but they had carried through anyway out of some sense of obligation? If that *was* the case, did she really want confirmation she'd been responsible for sixteen years of their misery?

“It does sound kinda heartless to say it, but you’ll adjust,” Chet said. “It’ll be a big change, yeah, but you’re strong enough to deal with it. And you’ve got a big sister who’ll be happy to show you the ropes.”

Rochelle nodded. “Lots of kids in the real world have to move around a lot. They get by, and so will you.”

Ruth sighed, poking at her spaghetti with a fork. “I guess I won’t have any choice.”

“C’mon, you’ll like the place once you get to spend more time in it,” Geena said. “Time *not* skulking around in maintenance decks and tangling

with ratty human kidnappers. There's a lot of stuff out there to like, and I'm sure there'll be even more when we get to where we're going."

"If they even let us off the ship."

Geena shrugged. "We'll see what we'll see. Meanwhile, you've got a whole new place to explore. Let's try to enjoy that, at least."

Ruth didn't feel anywhere near as optimistic as Geena was sounding, but she didn't want to disappoint her big sis. "All right. I'll try."

"That's the spirit!" Rochelle said. "Now eat up, there's chocolate cake for dessert. If this is gonna be our last dinner here, we're gonna *celebrate!*"

After dinner, Ruth and Geena headed back out again to meet their friends back at the school. It had been decorated in festival style, with a small carnival set up on the football field behind the school and a big banner reading "PROJECT GRADUATION" hung over the entrance.

"Project Graduation, huh?" Renfield sniffed. "Meh. In the *real* 20th century, 'Project Graduation' was a way to keep kids from going out, partying, and getting drunk on graduation eve. It's doubly pointless here—there's nowhere to go, and we can't even *get* drunk."

"We could simulate it, though," Stacia said brightly. "It shouldn't be so hard for an accomplished hacker like Ruth to crack the code lock on the 'adult beverages' sim database, right?"

"Are you really sure that's a good idea?" Geena asked.

"We ought to do *something* to rebel, given that it's going to be our last chance to do it," Renfield mused. "Maybe rez up some simulated rocket launchers and shoot up the town, since they've already saved and downloaded the 'permanent' version?"

Geena cocked her head. "On the whole, I think the booze actually sounds like a better idea."

Ruth rolled her eyes. "Trust me, guys, you wouldn't like booze. I cracked the database last year, after Mom told the 'Long Island iced tea' story again and made me curious. I dunno if it's an organic thing or what, but alcohol just tastes funny. Anyway, you don't need to simulate drinking the booze to simulate *being* drunk. That's a whole different subroutine."

"Did you try it?" Stacia asked.

Ruth shrugged. "Yeah. Not sure what all the fuss is about. At mild

levels, it's interesting for a few minutes, maybe, but gets old after a while. And at the higher levels, it's uncomfortably like those times Mom made me have flu symptoms because 'getting sick is part of growing up.'" She wrinkled her nose.

Renfield shook his head. "And humans do that stuff to themselves *willingly*? Organics are just weird. Uh, no offense, Geena."

"None taken!" Geena said. "Anyway, I'm only *half* organic."

"And don't even get me started on what that crap does to their bodies." Ruth shook her head. "Uncle Julius said that Crazy Joe's been through something like four regrown livers."

"I wonder if organics think we're as nuts as we think they are?" Soren wondered.

Stacia smiled. "The grass is always weirder on the other side of the tracks."

"Well, it's going to be our last day here, so I guess we might as well enjoy ourselves." Ruth shrugged. "C'mon, let's try that Ferris wheel, and see what the town looks like from that high up."

"*Some* of us already know," Soren pointed out. Ruth stuck out her tongue at him.

The carnival was fun for a while. Ruth and her friends mingled with other friends and acquaintances they'd made during their years at school, and went on the rides a number of times. But sooner or later, it began to pall. Finally, Ruth and her friends wandered back out of the carnival, into the largely empty streets of the silent town.

"So now what?" Renfield asked. "We can still burn down the town..."

"Seems a little childish, really," Ruth said. "Though I guess it could be fun."

"Have you all thought about where you're going to go after this? Out in the real world?" Geena asked. "We could talk about that..."

Renfield snorted. "Aren't exactly a lot of places *to* go, are there? One ship, slightly used."

"But we will be arriving somewhere very soon," Stacia noted. "That will give us a few more choices."

"I haven't decided what I'm going to do yet," Ruth said. "Hang with



my parents a while, I guess. Or move to one of the places they're setting up in the empty part of the ship for the new grown-up RIDEs. I guess that's the good part about the ship being sent off mostly empty; there's room to expand."

"I'll hang out with Ruth 'til we get there," Geena said. "Then I'm gonna try to get back to the *Camelot*. I hope they'll take me on board again, now that I'm all older and stuff..."

"I'm considering applying for a crew position," Stacia said. "There are slots available for EIs in some of the subsections of the ship. I'm thinking of going for something in damage control."

"You'd be good at that," Soren said. "You always were one of the more serious-minded of us."

"Yeah, that would probably be right up your alley," Renfield said. "Good luck with that. Me...dunno. I was thinking maybe the Diplomatic Corps."

Soren hooted a laugh. "Because when we think of Renfield, we think 'diplomatic.'"

"Hey! I can *be* diplomatic, if I need to," Renfield insisted. "I've just... never *needed* to. It could be, you know, an entirely new facet to myself."

"I was thinking that the Scouts look interesting," Soren said. "I heard that Joel guy has been running a program to evaluate RIDE and Integrate applicants for the Scouts, and it's open to newbies like us as well. Maybe it's right for me, maybe it's not; figure I'll at least try it out."

Ruth rolled her eyes. "Sheesh, all you guys are making me feel like I don't have any ambition. I really don't know what I want to do yet. Probably won't know for weeks. I don't even know what the real world is *like*, I just know what I've read and people have told me. I'm going to keep my options open for a while."

"You could come to the *Clementine* with me!" Geena said. "I'm sure they'd have room."

Ruth shrugged. "Like I said, options open."

There wasn't really a whole lot to do in town after that. All the stores were closed down, presumably so the oldsters could have their own returning-to-the-real-world parties—with simulated adult beverages, no

doubt. All they were really left with were the silent, empty streets—streets that would never be full of people and open businesses again, at least in this instance.

“We did have some pretty good times here, didn’t we?” Soren mused.

“Pretty good times?” Ruth snorted. “We had *all* our times here. And now it’s all going away.”

“We’ve had this conversation before,” Stacia said. “There’s no point in dwelling on it. If this is the last time we’ll be here, we should enjoy it.”

“Not like there’s anything left to enjoy.” Renfield kicked at a virtual pebble. “We might as well just go home and compress our databases for the download.”

“For what it’s worth, I’ve enjoyed the last few years here, too,” Geena said. “It seems like a pretty nice little place. And I’ve seen places in the real world to compare it to.”

“Didn’t you grow up in a bandits’ hideout?” Soren asked. “The proverbial ‘hive of scum and villainy’? Seems like kind of a low bar to jump over.”

Geena smiled. “Well, I wasn’t talking about Bartertown. But since you mention it, this place *does* actually kind of remind me of it. The nicer side of it, anyway. It was a smallish village sorta place, and a lot of the people in it knew each other.” She shrugged. “And not *everyone* was a bandit. Bandits like home-cooked meals and well-made clothes and stuff just like anybody else, and they soon figured out that they’d have an easier time getting them if they treated the people who make them nicely. So Aunt Aeri and I never really saw too much of the worst side of things. Though we did see enough.”

Renfield snorted. “Well, it’s not every day you hear your home compared to a bandit ‘burg.”

“*Favorably* compared.” Geena grinned. “Like I said, this place kinda reminds me of the *nicer* parts of my home a little. The not-so-nice parts don’t really bear talking about.”

“Too bad we’re not going to have it much...oh, BLEEP it.” Ruth sighed. “I’m tired of complaining about it. I guess it’s right, what Mom and Dad say...moving away from your old home to a new one tends to happen in real life, so getting used to it is just another part of living in the real world. I

don't have to like it...but I suppose I can accept it.”

“There's really nothing doing around here anyway.” Renfield shrugged. “Why don't we head on back to our clearing and hang out together there one last time?”

Stacia smiled. “Sounds like a plan.”

The graduation ceremony the next day was rather anticlimactic. There was the usual progression of robe-and-cap-wearing students to receive their diplomas, and speeches by various stuffed-shirt notables on how the real world was going to be different from anything they'd ever experienced before, yatta yatta, blah blah blah.

The only really interesting part to Ruth was seeing all the teachers finally shed the virtual human disguises they'd worn in every classroom session, revealing themselves as RIDEs, EIDEs, or Integrates of various types. Miss Othmar turned out to be a kinkajou.

At last the friends said their final farewells to one another before meeting in the real world, then Geena and Ruth returned to the cave one last time.

They entered the cave, which had been stripped down to its bare stone walls—not out of any real need to, but just because Mom thought it “felt” more like they were moving out to see it this way. Ruth had gotten far past the point of eye-rolling over parental behavior, and tried to cultivate an attitude of detached bemusement (or bemused detachment) instead. She wasn't entirely sure it was working.

“I still can't get over the way I can remember *everything* now,” Chet was saying as they padded in. “It's been sixteen years since I've been on the flight deck of the *Maxima*, but if I just think about it, I can picture the way every switch was set like it was just five minutes ago.”

“That's RI memory for you,” Rochelle said. She chuckled. “Enjoy it while you can. By this time tomorrow, you'll have a hard time remembering what you had for breakfast yesterday.”

“I still don't know why you want to go back to that,” Ruth said. “From everything you've said, it sounds like humans are half-crippled compared to us.”

“Oh, it has its compensations,” Chet said. “I'm not sure there's any

way you could really *understand* without trying it out for yourself.”

“They’re kinda right, actually,” Geena said. “It’s...*different*.”

“You all keep *saying* that. You really expect me to, what, have a clone body made up and put myself in it, just to try it out?”

“Well, you could if you *wanted*,” Rochelle said. “When we get back to Zharus, anyway—the expedition doesn’t have the medical resources to clone bods for everyone who wants them. But if you’d like to try being human, I think I could afford to bankroll it.”

“Ugh...thanks, but no thanks.” Ruth wrinkled her nose. “I like being just who and what I am.”

“Well, so did we,” Chet said. “But if *we* hadn’t tried being something different, you wouldn’t be here now.”

*Oh, right, so you want me to switch bodies and get accidentally pregnant, too?* Ruth thought, but had better impulse control than to say out loud. She settled for, “I’ll think it over,” instead.

“Well, this is it.” Rochelle shifted her body to humanoid, and Chet followed suit. “Take one last look around, kids...then I’ll see you on the other side.”

### *FreeRIDERS Garage, Great Western Franchise*

Rhianna wiped her hands on the ever-present grease rag and straightened up, casting a satisfied gaze over the results of her latest labor—a lifter and hardlight tuneup for one of the ship’s stevedores, a Percheron mare RIDE named Gracie. It had gone pretty well, without any of the little surprises that sometimes turned up on “simple” jobs, and all that was left to do now was reassemble the frame and seal the shell.

“Hi hi!” a cheerful voice caroled. Uncia wandered in, Nils right behind her—though the bodies they currently wore were Rochelle’s and Chet’s. They’d been helping out around the garage to pick up some spare cash to spend on little human luxuries—not to mention make it easier for Rhianna and Kaylee keep an eye on them.

At first, Rhianna had expected it to be odd, or possibly even a little creepy, seeing Rochelle’s body wandering around with a different person in it. But given the completely different body language, and the way Uncia had

shortened Rochelle's hair for her own use of the body, it actually ended up feeling more like...well, discovering Rochelle had a somewhat less mature human twin sister. One who *scampered* everywhere. (Rhianna still didn't understand how someone wearing an adult human body even *could* scamper, but somehow Uncia managed to pull it off.)

Uncia wasn't quite as good as Rochelle at untangling some of the knotty software problems that turned up in RIDEs now and again, but having spent so much time in contact with Rochelle—not to mention, being a RIDE herself—did give her a few insights that came in handy. And any of the really difficult problems could be put aside for Rochelle herself to take a look at, during one of the slow-time days her creche had every so often. (And being able to drop into fast-time herself meant *Rochelle* could often solve those problems in a hurry when given the chance, and have plenty of slow-time left to visit out in the Real.)

Rhianna brought her attention back to the present. “Hey, you two. This is the big day, isn't it? When Shelley's family comes back out, and you-all switch back?”

“It'll be the big day in about fifteen real-world minutes!” Uncia said. “But I guess if you mean the big *real-world* day, then yeah, that'd be this!”

“You two about ready to trade back, then?” Kaylee said.

Nils nodded. “It's been an...interesting experience, these last couple months, learning how the other half live. But there's no body like home.”

“‘Ready' is such a strong word.” Uncia pouted. “But yeah, I've had more than my turn, I guess, and I gotta give it back now. We'll go ahead and get the cradles wheeled out and set up.”

Rhianna nodded. “Should be done here in about ten or so. Call me if you need me.”

Uncia nodded, then she and Nils went to wheel out the maintenance cradles in which they kept their DE shells. The shells actually weren't seeing a lot of use these days, what with Rochelle and Chet spending all their time in the creche and Uncia and Nils spending all their time in human bodies, so they'd stuck them in a couple of spare cradles to keep them out of the way, and to make it easier to do a little tinkering. Ruth and Geena also stayed in the closet—Ruth's shell shut down awaiting her download to the real world, and Geena dozing in Integrate hibernation

while her mind was in the creche with the rest of them.

A few minutes later, Rhianna had Gracie completely reassembled, sealed up, and powered back on. After a quick system check and a profuse round of thanks, the stevedore mare was on her way to her next work shift, and Rhianna turned her attention back to Uncia and Nils just as they finished making the final connections and opening the cradles.

“Just got an email from Shelley!” Uncia reported. “They’ll be out in just a minute.”

“Coming!” Rhianna came over to stand beside the other two as the status lights on the cradles flickered from amber to green, and the RIDEs therein opened their eyes.

“Morning, sleepyhead!” Uncia caroled. “Welcome back to the real world!”

“Glad to be here.” Rochelle lifted out of the cradle and landed on all four paws, and languidly arched her back and stretched. “Ahhh. So how have things been out here? Still crawling slowly toward Totalia, are we?”

“For some value of ‘slowly,’” Rhianna said. “Though I expect the time will go by more quickly now that you’re not burning the fast-time candle.”

“Oh, here you all are.” Ruth padded out of the closet, followed by a yawning, stretching, poodle-eared teen. “Funny, it doesn’t feel all that different from visiting. I’d have thought it would, knowing that we’re stuck here now...”

“Just look at it as a new place to explore!” Geena said. “I’ll show you around some of the best spots I found in the weeks before I joined you. There’s some pretty neat stuff here, you’ll see.”

“I guess this is the part where we switch back, huh?” Uncia said. “Y’know, you *could* just chill out, see the sights, enjoy being back in the real world for a while...?”

Rochelle slowly shook her head. “Nooooooo, don’t think so.”

“Yeah, I didn’t think that was gonna fly either.” Uncia grinned. “All right, so shall we Fuse up and see if I can stick your hair back on your head?”

“The short cut looks good on you, but I do want it back, yeah.” Rochelle grinned. “Of course, even if this doesn’t work, it’s just a couple days to grow it all back, so...”

“So hopefully you won’t have to. C’mon.” Uncia held her arms out, and Rochelle stepped forward and Fused her feline body around her.

“Guess that’s us too, huh, pard?” Nils said, stepping forward.

“Yeah,” Chet said. “The old bod ain’t much, but I am looking forward to spending time in it again.”

Nils chuckled. “Funny, that’s just what I was going to say. Shall we?”

“Yeah.” They moved together and Fused as well.

Ruth sat on her haunches and scratched behind an ear, watching thoughtfully. “Hey, that looks like fun,” Geena said. A moment later, a poodle sat next to her, scratching behind her own ear, in the same posture.

Kaylee rolled her eyes. “Darnit, now you two have me feelin’ an itch in my *own* ear. This is worse than yawning.” She shook her head. “Nnngh. I *won’t* scratch, dammit. This’s just psychosomatic.”

Geena giggled. “Oh, give in. You know you wanna.”

“Okay, I think we’re done!” Uncia announced. “Showing rematch and reconnection on 97% of hair strands...and after this long, that’s about as good as it’s gonna get. Oh yeah, and we’ve traded bods again, too.”

“So let’s see what it looks like,” Rochelle said.

The snow leopard RIDE peeled away, revealing the same body, now with a mass of grey and white spotted hair that reached almost all the way to the floor. And from the change in that body’s language, it was clear that Rochelle was now the occupant. “Ahhh, that’s better. So let’s see...” She tugged experimentally at a lock of hair. “Seems to be a sturdy connection.”

“I was *gonna* put a nano-connector in at the join on each one, so somewhere down the road I could send a signal and all your hair would just drop off at once, FWUMP!” Uncia said. “I thought that would be really funny. But Nils talked me out of it. Spoilsport.” She stuck her tongue out at the other snow leopard RIDE, who’d just finished de-fusing from Chet.

Rochelle shook her head. “Same old Uncia. You haven’t changed one little bit, have you?” She leaned to the left to bring her hair around her shoulder, then draped it over her left arm like a blanket and ran her other hand through it. “Ooooooh...I’ve missed *you*.”

Ruth rolled her eyes. “Moooooom, it’s *exactly the same hair* you wore whenever you were human in the ‘frame.’”

“Well, I know the *style* is, but this just feels more *real*. After sixteen

years in the ‘frame, I *can* feel a difference.”

“Are you sure it’s not just in your head?” Uncia asked. “I mean, being in a human body was nice and all, but except for one or two things, I’m not sure I’d be able to tell the difference in a blind existence-test.”

Rochelle looked at her. “A blind...*existence-test*?”

“Yeah, you know, having them blindfold you or something and not tell you if you’re in the real world or VR after they take it off.”

“Is that something that’s *likely* to happen?”

“Well, you never know. Anyway, it’s never been *proven* we’re not actually living inside a simulation running on someone’s computer somewhere anyway.”

Rochelle rolled her eyes. “For all I know, I might just be words on someone’s computer screen somewhere, but this still feels more real to me.” She stretched. “So many little sensations you forget about...all the little aches and pains you don’t notice, but forget about after they’re gone. There’s just no good way to simulate something like that.”

“So now you’re...*happy* about aches and pains?” Ruth cocked her head. “Was I raised by crazy people, and I’m only just finding out now?”

“It’s not the aches and pains, really, it’s what they *mean*. They mean I’m back in a human body again.” Rochelle let her hair fall back into place behind her. “Able to experience life in the real world directly, and...”

Rochelle looked down at herself and frowned. “Wait a minute...I’ll be right back.” She turned and walked across the room, heading for the door to the restroom.

Geena raised an eyebrow. “What’s *that* all about?”

A moment later, a loud yelp could be heard from the restroom, followed by an angry Rochelle stalking back out. “You...you put on nearly *four kilos*, in just the two months I’ve been in the ‘frame. *Four kilos!*”

Uncia sighed. “Sorreeeeee! Can I help it if food just tastes so *good*? It’s not like it’s a big deal, anyway—I’ll just sculpt it off you next time we Fuse. I took more weight than that off when I crossed you over.”

Rochelle glowered at her. “That *still* shouldn’t let you off the hook. If you ever get a body of your own, you’re going to have to take care of it, you know.”

“Hey, now! I took care of your body! I didn’t *starve* it, did I?”



“That’s *not* the problem.”

Chet glanced down at himself, then over at Nils. “Looks like I’m still about the same weight...”

“Yeah, food’s nice and all, but I’m not one for gluttony.” Nils chuckled. “Besides, keeping an eye on *that* one burned a lot of calories.”

Uncia rolled her eyes. “Hey, now, not you too!”

“Glad to have you back, Shelley,” Rhianna said. “Even if there’s now a little more of you to love. Anyway, I’m given to understand it’s not unusual to gain a few extra kilos after a pregnancy.” She grinned.

“Yeah, but not *sixteen virtual years* after one.” Rochelle sighed. “But I guess Miss Greedyguts there is right; she *can* fix it when we Fuse. Feels a little like cheating somehow, though...”

Uncia snorted. “Oh, and living sixteen years in two months *isn’t* ‘cheating’?”

*Oh, right, my entire life was just dismissed as “cheating.” Thanks, Aunt Uncia.* “Why is it such a big deal, anyway?” Ruth asked. “I mean, if you had a proper DE shell, you wouldn’t have to worry about gaining weight and stuff. Seems like that’s just a choice you make from going organic, isn’t it?”

“I didn’t ‘go’ organic, it’s how I started out,” Rochelle said. “And how I’m glad to be again. Even if *someone’s* not quite been treating my body right while I was gone.”

*And there she goes, rubbing it in again.* Finally, Ruth couldn’t take it any longer. “So what am I, chopped liver? How could you just...raise me to be a RIDE, when all the while you were looking forward to switching back?”

“We never made any secret about it when you were growing up,” Chet pointed out. “In fact, I seem to recall that when you were little, you felt like it made you special.”

“Yeah, but...that was *different*.”

“How?” Chet prodded.

“I...I dunno, it just *was*.”

“We’ll talk more about this...but we’ll have to do it later,” Rochelle said. “Right now, there’s just the little matter of needing to integrate sixteen years of virtual memories into our flesh-and-blood brains. And from what I’ve been reading, the best way to deal with that amount of memories

involves doing it over the course of a little downtime.”

“I guess this makes you the senior partner in the Garage now,” Rhianna said. “I think I would’ve needed about that long just to learn how this ship works. The Eridanites made some interesting offers in exchange for our FTL comm tech, but with everything else I haven’t had the time to seriously consider them.”

“Oh, no you don’t,” Rochelle said. “I’m not taking credit for time spent in a different timeframe. While I won’t say I *didn’t* get some extra study time in, raising a kid is a full-time job in itself. Though I’ll be happy to look over those offers in fast-time, it’ll have to wait a week, since what comes *after* reintegrating the memories is the forced reacclimation period with all implants locked off.” She grimaced. “The one part of coming back I wasn’t really looking forward to. Guess I’ll be digging those I-specs back out of storage.”

“Oh no, we’re going to be stuck back in our own heads again.” Chet chuckled. “Gee, wonder what we’ll *ever* do to occupy that much real time.”

“I recognize innuendo when I hear it, but I don’t think we’ll be able to spend *every* waking second like that.” Rochelle chuckled. “Not without the aid of some screwed-up nanites, anyway. Meanwhile, I *am* looking forward to renewing my acquaintance with some old friends. Feels like it’s been *years* since I saw them last.”

“Imagine that,” Kaylee said dryly. “So, your time as a RI give you any new perspectives on the business?”

“I dunno about *new*, but it certainly reinforced my opinion that it’s a crime the way society treated you all up until a couple years ago—and I’m proud to have been a part of the movement to change that.”

“I really enjoyed my time as a human...though I kinda feel like I got the short end, ‘cuz I just had a few weeks while *you* got to be a computer person for *years*,” Uncia said.

“I’m kind of glad I didn’t give *you* years,” Rochelle said. “Who knows what shape this body would have been by the time I got back?”

Uncia stuck out her tongue. “I told ya, it’s not *my* fault food tastes so good! It’s even better when you’re *in* the body instead a’ just piggy-backing. I’m really kinda gonna miss that.”

Ruth groaned. “Even *you* think it’s better being a human? What is

this? Is this some sort of big joke on me, that you raised me to be a RIDE while you *all* actually like being human better? You intentionally raised me to be a second-class citizen or something?”

Rochelle pursed her lips. “Now, Ruth...it’s not like that. It’s just...it’s something *different* after a long time of something else. It’s not that being human is *always* better. It’s just a fun change. You might like it if you tried it, too.”

“Oh, right, and have to go around pooping and peeing all day?” Ruth rolled her eyes. “*That* got old doing it *virtually*. Why would I ever want to have to do it in real life?”

“We could *get* you a cloned body, you know. Once we get back to Zharus, anyway,” Chet mused. “Shouldn’t be too hard to base a clone on both of our genetic materials, force-grow it to the right age, and download you into it. If you wanted to try it out.”

Rochelle nodded. “It’s not as if I couldn’t afford it.”

“Eww. Nooooo thanks.”

Rochelle glanced to Uncia. “Offer’s good for you, too. If you want a clone of me, I could spring for it.”

Uncia cocked her head. “Huh. I dunno. I’ll have to think about that. It’s fun being a human for a while, but a meat body’s kinda high maintenance, really. Not so sure I’d want to have to take care of it all the time.”

“Maybe something like Nana Socah’s Jane would be more your speed?” Rhianna suggested. “Something that could pass for human, and maybe eat some, but you could just power down when you weren’t in it?”

“Huh. There’s an idea.” Uncia swished her tail thoughtfully. “We can talk about it later, maybe.”

“Yeah.” Rochelle yawned. “For now, though...I think maybe it’s time to assimilate some memories and catch some Zs. See you kids in a while, ‘kay?”

“Uh...yeah, sure, whatever...” Ruth mumbled.

Chet sighed. “Low-grade amnesia, here we come...” He followed Rochelle out toward the elevator to the shuttle where their bed-tents were.

Ruth rolled her eyes again. “Oh, great. First they drag us out to the real world, then they abandon us.”

“Aw, that’s okay,” Geena said. “I found a few pretty neat spots out here during the few weeks I spent waiting for you to get old enough for me to come join you. I could show you some of them, if you want..”

“I guess it’s better than just sitting around doing nothing,” Ruth said. “Lead the way.”

“You kids stay out of trouble,” Rhianna said.

“Like there’s any trouble we could even get into, here...” Ruth muttered.

“Try not to find any,” Kaylee said. “And comm us if you need us.”

Ruth bit back a sharp retort and followed Geena out into the corridor toward the interior of the ship.

A few minutes later, the pair wandered into the diplomatic sector bar that had become a sort of de facto off-duty lounge for the ship. There were a fairly large number of humans and RIDEs to be seen, and a sprinkling of Integrates. The room was pretty full, though there was still plenty of seating available.

And there were a few familiar faces at the table in one corner.

“Howdy, strangers!” Stacia called cheerfully. “We thought you might show up here sooner or later. Come on and join us!”

“Hi, Stacia!” Ruth glanced over the table’s occupants. Stacia looked largely identical to how she had in the mainframe—sitting on the human chairs at one side of the table. Ruth hadn’t seen her friends’ RIDE forms before, but they were close enough to recognize. An avian-RIDE perch and padded floor mat had been placed on the other side of the table for them. “Renfield, Soren...how’s real life treating you?”

Soren hunched his wings in a shrug. “Given that we’ve only been in it for an hour or so, it’s a little hard to say.”

“It’s different, anyway.” Renfield looked around. “Weird to see so many people I’ve never met before.”

“But we’ll get used to it.” Stacia sipped a cola; the other two didn’t have anything on the table in front of them. “Join us? Pull up a mat or a chair, whichever you prefer.”

“Guess we might as well,” Ruth said. She sat on her haunches on a convenient mat, while Geena pulled up a chair for herself. A waitress came

by to ask if they wanted anything, and Geena ordered a Coke.

“I am rather going to miss eating stuff,” Soren said. “Of course, I could always sim it, but it’s not the same.”

“Actually, given that our entire life up to now *was* a sim, I’d think it would be *exactly* the same,” Ruth said.

“Yeah, but that’s not the *point*.”

Ruth rolled her eyes. “Oh, is this another one of those ‘the real world is super-fantastic, even though it’s just the same as what we simmed’ things?”

“Well, it’s not *really* the same,” Geena said. “That’s sort of the point. They try to sim the real world as close as they can, but they’re always gonna miss in the little details. And for the people who grew up with those little details, they’re sort of important.”

“What about for the people who grew up *without* the details, and liked it that way?” Ruth grumbled.

“Oh, suck it up,” Renfield said. “It’s not like the rest of us aren’t in the same boat here. Honestly, not even sure what was going through our parents’ heads, having kids on the way to a war zone. But we are where we are, and it’s not doing any of us any good to gripe about it now.”

“Live a little,” Stacia said. “That’s what I’m trying to do, anyway.”

“So what’re you all going to do? Live with your parents out here in the Real?” Geena asked.

“Not really, no,” Stacia said. “Unlike Ruth, most of us actually don’t have anything like a stable family situation out here in the Real. Our parents generally have other duties, or human partners.”

“Yeah, you don’t know how good you’ve got it,” Renfield said. “Of course, we keep in touch via the ‘net, but...it’s not going to be like it was on the inside.”

“So we’re considering rooming together, at least until we can all find situations of our own,” Soren said.

“You got room for one more?” Ruth said. “My parents might be out here in the real world, but I’m not really sure I can deal with them right about now. And I think it’s just about time I left the nest anyway.”

“Make that two more,” Geena said. “I don’t have any particular place to stay, myself. So one place is just about as good as another for me,

leastways ‘til we get to Totalia and I can hook up with *Clementine*.”

“Don’t you think you should maybe talk that over with your parents first, Ruth?” Stacia suggested.

“They’re not available to talk to right now, and I don’t really feel like it anyway.” Ruth rolled her eyes. “Anyway, legally I don’t need to. As I understand it, as full-fledged high school graduates, we RIDEs and EIDEs are now legally emancipated and free to do what we want.”

“If you’re sure that’s what you want to do...I don’t have a problem with it,” Soren said.

Renfield nodded. “Me neither.”

“All right, then. We’ll be glad to have you two.” Stacia smiled. “With that settled...we were all just about to head up and check out the Ark. Want to join us?”

“Oooh, good choice!” Geena said. “I visited there a few times before I joined all of you on the inside. It was pretty neat.”

Stacia finished her drink. “All right, then let’s go take a look.”

Stepping out into the Ark gave Ruth the oddest feeling of *deja vu*. The rest of the ship was all sterile ceramic, glass, and metal. But as the hatch in front of them opened and they stepped through, suddenly they were standing in an open field. Instead of the neutral smell of the rest of the ship, here there were smells of grass, and flowers, and trees, and other natural things. Around the field were park benches, and a few plots for flowers and other plants to grow. A number of other humans, RIDEs, EIDEs, and Integrates were also present.

“Whoa...” Ruth said. “It’s like we were back in VR again.”

“As long as you don’t look up, anyway.” Soren nodded toward the ceiling, which was a transparent dome currently covered in metal shutters to block out the featureless white of jump space.. “You wouldn’t see something like that in VR.”

“They’re making good use of the space.” Stacia pointed to other platforms under the dome that hosted various different environments, including pastures with grazing animals, forests, swamps, and even a glass aquarium tank.

“What a crazy place.” Renfield snorted. “They fake up a natural

setting in a computer, and then they build a real natural setting out here. What's the point?"

"Even humans can't live without nature." Geena picked a strawberry from one of the garden plots. "And they're going to give back to Totalia some of the parts of nature it lost. I think that's pretty cool."

"You're welcome to come and visit as often as you like." That was the EI who ran the place, Noah, whose hardlight projection was modeled after the stereotypical long-bearded depiction of the Biblical patriarch. "A number of RIDEs enjoy the novelty of visiting a realistic version of their native habitats. We only ask that you take care to avoid harming any of the plants and animals—and don't eat *too* much of the fruits and vegetables; there needs to be enough to go around."

"Thank you, sir," Ruth said. "We'll be careful." She walked over to one of the benches lining the path and sat down. A ceramic/concrete composite made to resemble marble, it was more than adequate to support her weight.

A moment later, Geena joined her, nibbling on the strawberry. "Mmm. This is good. You forget how good real food can be, after nothing but virtual."

Ruth rolled her eyes. "Oh, God, not *you*, too."

"Sorry." Geena finished the strawberry, and grinned. "But it *is* good. I'm only sad you can't try it yourself."

"Meh. I'll gladly give up eating if it means I don't have to pee and poop either."

Geena nodded. "I guess that's one way to look at it. You know, some RIDEs with fabbers are able to hook up to use them as a sort of digestive system, so they just put the chewed-up food through a recycle mode to make it into fabber matter."

"Yeah, but *you're* my fabber. So it would have that whole weird *Human Centipede* vibe going on."

"Yeah, when you put it that way, ew."

Ruth and Geena sat for a while, watching the others spread out to examine different parts of the arc. Soren changed to his bird form and took to the air, and the others soon used their own lifters, or hit the call button to summon sets of lifter-powered stepping stones to take them from one platform to the next.

“You don’t have to stay here,” Ruth said. “Go on, explore the place.”

“What about you?”

Ruth shrugged. “Dunno. It’s all a little too...*real* for me, I guess. Just serves to remind me that, out here, I’m a machine, and I don’t really get the full benefit of nature. Kind of an uncanny valley thing, I guess.”

Geena cocked her head. “Weren’t you just saying how glad you were that you don’t have to pee and poop?”

“I never *said* it had to make sense. It’s just...I dunno.” Ruth waved a hand. “So many weird life changes lately. I want everything to just stop for a while until I have some time to catch up.”

“It kinda doesn’t. Ever,” Geena said. “That’s what real life is like. It’s *always* changing. Something like what we had in there, where everything was all samey day in and day out—that’s the fakey part. You gotta learn to roll with the changes.”

“So people keep telling me.” Ruth sighed. “I guess I just need time to get used to this.”

“Were you serious, what you said about not living with your folks for a while?”

Ruth shrugged. “Mostly. I do kinda not wanna see them for a while. At least until they’ve got all the ‘oooooh, we’re *real* again!’ bullshit out of the way. Right now, that’s *really* getting on my nerves.”

“And if they insist?”

“I dunno. Play it by ear, I guess. Right now, I just need some time and space to figure out who this new ‘me’ wants to be.”

“Okay. Well, you should go ahead and email them about it soon, then.” Geena smiled. “Don’t leave them hanging. And if there’s gonna be an argument, get it out of the way early.”

“Yeah...I guess I ought to do that.” Ruth rose and stretched. “I guess I might as well give this place a good look-over. You think they’ve got an arctic tundra environment?”

Geena grinned, also standing. “If they don’t, I’m sure it’s a terrible oversight. C’mon, let’s see for ourselves.”

She drifted slowly back to awareness, not knowing where she was or even *who* she was. The name “Rochelle” seemed to hold some kind of



meaning for her, so she decided it probably applied. But then, the name “Roger” held nearly as much meaning. She had vague memories of having been called by both. But wasn’t “Roger” a man’s name?

*Oh.* As she came closer to full wakefulness, some of the missing pieces started to settle back into place. She *was* Rochelle, *had been* Roger, and had just spent a number of years inside a computer. Only...why was it so hard to remember anything now? Had Uncia gotten her drunk again?

That thought brought back even more memories, some of them unwelcome ones. *Oh*, she thought again. *Right.* She reached out mentally for the place where her implants should have been, only to find they steadfastly refused to activate. *Oh*, she thought a third time. *Duh. Acclimatization.*

Proud of herself for having remembered such a long word before having her coffee, she opened her eyes. Everything was blurry, and for a moment she wondered if there was something wrong. Then she remembered that, no, that was just how human eyes *worked*. They didn’t have instant automatic focus, like the eyes (or whatever) of a Reticulated Intelligence living inside a computer.

Something else she didn’t have was the perfect recall she had gotten used to having. All of her memories now felt irritatingly vague and blurry—not the as-sharp-as-if-it-was-happening-now recall of a digital replay. Rochelle groaned inwardly as she realized that living in her strictly-human organic mind now felt disorientingly *alien*.

But that would pass. It surely *would* pass, wouldn’t it? After all, she’d grown up this way, and hadn’t found anything odd in it until a couple of months (or sixteen years) ago. She could get back to feeling that way again, right?

Well, she couldn’t get back to it just by lying here and moping. Groaning aloud this time, Rochelle sat slowly up in bed, adjusting to the slightly unsteady feeling of organic human inner-ear balance. Gyroscopic senses had always been so much more *exact*. It really did feel kind of like being drunk, by comparison to what it had been like as a computer entity. “I’ll get used to it,” she muttered, holding her head. “You can get used to anything, so I hear...”

“Mmph,” a lump in the covers next to her said.

Rochelle sighed. “Wakey wakey, Chet. Welcome back to life in the Real World.”

“Five more minutes, Mom...” Chet mumbled.

Rochelle rolled her eyes, and clambered out of bed. Surely things would make more sense when she had some coffee inside of her.

Coffee...*real* coffee. For the first time in sixteen virtual years. Well, now, just the *thought* of that was enough to inspire her to greater wakefulness. She slid off the queen-sized bed pad, and rummaged in the closet for a robe. Even her movements were a bit more awkward than she remembered—because she had to work with muscles and muscle memories, not a computer that perfectly simulated any requested motion. But at least her muscles still *had* the memories, so there was that. It wasn’t as if she was learning her life all over again.

*Ugh, I wish Jeanette was here, instead of back on Zharus. I’d love to ask her about some of this stuff. Why didn’t I ask her more about it when I had the chance?*

Rochelle stumbled to the door, pushed it open, and stepped out into the *Maxima*’s cargo bay. As she did, she became aware of a familiar aroma. Although she’d smelled the same smell inside the computer, she couldn’t help thinking there was just something different, something more *real* about this smell—and the smell was enough to wake her halfway up all by itself. A moment later, she saw the automatic percolator on a table against the wall happily perking away.

Uncia was lying on a charger pad not too far away. She looked up as Rochelle emerged. “Morning, sleepyhead!”

“Hey. You put the coffee on?”

“Uh-huh! Figured it might help with the thing of wakefulness.”

“Mmm...real caffeine. I’ve—”

“Yes, yes, *been waiting sixteen years for this*. That’s gonna get old, you know.”

“Sorry! But...well, I kind of have.”

“Just pour it carefully. It’d suck to spill scalding coffee all over yourself. If you’re not sure you’re up to it yet, I could page Rhianna in to help...”

“Thanks, but if I can’t pour my own coffee, I’m a lot worse off than I

thought.” She carefully gripped the handle, lifted the pot, and poured.

“Ahh, there we go.”

“Hey.” Nils padded into the room, long tail swishing. “Chet up yet?”

Rochelle nodded toward the bedroom. “I think he’s hiding under the covers. If he’s not up in a few minutes, you may have to drag him out of bed.”

Nils nodded. “I can handle that.”

Rochelle sipped her coffee carefully, and was rewarded by the minor pain of a scalded tongue. *Ow*. But even that was something to be savored. In the virtual environment, even at the highest realism settings on which they’d raised Ruth, for some reason hot drinks were always the perfect temperature. No matter how she’d tried to tweak the settings, the computer had refused to burn her tongue. She suspected it might be due to an oversight in the way the simulation was coded—people were expected to take injuries to the rest of their body, but someone had forgotten about the inside of the mouth.

*If nothing else, this proves I’m back in the real world.* She blew on the coffee and tried another sip, a little better this time. “Mmm. *So good.* Thanks for putting this on, Un-hon.”

“Hey, no biggie. I know how you are about your coffee.” Uncia groomed a patch of fur on her right flank and nibbled on the tip of her tail, while Rochelle drank some more. “So...feeling a little more awake now?”

“A little, yes...” Rochelle considered pouring another cup, but decided it was best to start slowly. She put the cup back on the table for now. “I’d say that now that I had my coffee, I’m feeling a little more human...but the fact is, I’m feeling a *lot* more human right now, and the coffee didn’t have anything to do with it.”

“I kinda feel like I should apologize, a little,” Uncia said.

“About the four kilos?”

Uncia rolled her eyes. “Nooooo, I *won’t* apologize about something I was able to fix with just one quick Fuse. But I do feel like maybe I should have...I dunno, done or said *something* different before you went off into Nature Range that time. Maybe if I’d given you the right bit of advice, warned you to be a little more careful or something...”

“...then I probably wouldn’t have listened anyway.” Rochelle smiled.

“As it is, the whole thing didn’t cost me anything but time. And didn’t even cost me any *real* time on top of that. Instead of a few extra weeks of boredom, I got to spend sixteen years raising a *new person* to adulthood. That’s not a waste of time, however you look at it. Speaking of which, where is the little rug-cat anyway?”

Uncia’s ears drooped a little. “Uh...she’s out right now. She cc’d me on an email she sent you. You should probably go ahead and read it.”

Rochelle raised an eyebrow, and at the same time marveled at the subtle interplay of muscles it took to move a specific portion of skin by a few millimeters. “Email, huh? Uh...okay. Hmm. Implants are offline for the time being. Where did I leave my interface specs? Oh...there they are.”

A pair were sitting on the other end of the table from the coffeepot, undoubtedly set down and forgotten when she’d gotten the nanite implants. She picked them up and slipped them on, and the interface immediately booted up. With a few quick eye-flicks, she opened her email inbox, and saw the message in question.

*From: Ruth  
To: Rochelle, Chet  
Cc: Uncia, Nils  
Subject: Moving out, for now*

*Hi, Mom & Dad. Hope this email finds you well.*

*I’m moving out for now. I need some time to get used to the Real, and it’s not gonna be any easier if I spend half the time getting mad at you over how you’re happy to be back out, and I’m not really all that happy to be here. So I think maybe it’s best we give each other some space ‘til we can all cool down and get used to things.*

*For now, Geena and I are gonna room with Soren, Renfield, and Stacia in the new RIDE quarters section. You can reach us by email or comm, or you can come find us I guess. But I really hope you’ll give us a little time. I want to get used to it here, since this’s where we’re gonna be living and stuff, whether I like it or not. But I need to work through this for myself.*

*Love you both.*

*Ruth*

Rochelle blinked. “Huh. Well, there’s a thing.”

“A thing is, indeed, precisely what it is,” Nils said. “So what’re you planning to do?”

Rochelle considered. “Hmm. Well...I’ll have to talk it over with Sleeping Beauty in there—” She jerked her head back toward the bedroom. “—but my first impulse is to drop an email back saying I understand, best of luck, we’ll be here for you, yatta yatta. I can sorta see how she might need a little alone time to get used to things, and...well, it’s not as if she can go very far. And she’s a big girl now, with responsible friends.” She chuckled. “Geena *has* been a good influence on her. At least she did email me about it instead of just leaving without a word.”

Uncia cocked her head. “You don’t wanna talk it out or something?”

“Well, maybe best not yet. If she’s really feeling mad at us over things, we’d all probably say stuff we’d regret. And I guess she does kind of have a right to be angry.” She shrugged. “We’ve still got a few weeks before we get to Totalia, so we can get back together by then. And don’t think I *won’t* be keeping a parental eye on them in other ways.”

“If you think that’s best...”

“I dunno. Like I said, I’ll have to talk it over with Chet and see what he thinks. Anyway, there’s no need to do anything hasty either way.” Rochelle yawned. “I think this *does* call for more coffee, though...”

An hour later found Rochelle and Chet seated on two sides of a square table in the workshop bay, with Rhianna and Ivy seated on the other two sides. They were working on a breakfast ordered down from the shipboard mess. It wasn’t as good as Bea’s Breakfast Nook had to offer, but it was nonetheless edible.

Rhianna was wearing her usual Easy-Fuse coveralls, while Rochelle had on a plain white dress and Chet was in jeans, T-shirt, and his leather jacket. Ivy was also wearing a pair of coveralls, though these were custom cut for a snug fit, and unzipped halfway down the front.

It was just as well that the sisters were seated adjacent to each other rather than across the table, Rochelle thought, or Rhianna might just wear

out her eyes from rolling them every time she looked up from her breakfast. She *also* suspected that Ivy was no longer trying to “out-girl” Rhianna so much as just get any rise out of her that she could, but saying so would probably be counterproductive.

“So, you’re back out here for good now?” Ivy said, spearing a sausage with her fork. “How’s Ruth doing?”

“Yes, we are, and Ruth has decided she needs some space while she’s getting adjusted,” Rochelle said. “She’s living with friends over in the new RIDE quarters for now.”

“Ouch, really? You’re just going to go with that?”

“Seems wisest to let this run its course,” Chet said. “In a larger sense, she’s not exactly going to leave the ship any time soon, so we’ve got the time.”

“Of course, the *rest* of us weren’t asked to stay away, so we can help keep an eye on her,” Rhianna said. “In our copious free time.”

“So...I gotta know,” Ivy said, eyes sparkling. “What was it *like* being a mother?”

“A lot of hard work,” Rochelle said. “Ultimately satisfying, but *wow* was it hard work. Sixteen years of hard work.”

“But I’ll bet it passed just like that. I mean, it was just a few weeks of real time...”

Rochelle narrowed her eyes. “Uh-huh. And knowing you like I do, I’m getting the feeling that you’re thinking about getting implants, body-swapping, and doing a little of the RI-nasty your own self, because it’s a way to *play at* being a mother without actually having something inconvenient like an *actual baby* to take care of and raise. Put that out of your head *right* now. The setting may only be virtual, but the new life you take responsibility for is *real*. And it takes just as much hard work as real-life parenthood. You can’t just decide you don’t enjoy it anymore and go do something else.”

Ivy blinked at her. “I was only *asking*, geez.”

“And she was only answering,” Rhianna said. “It seems to me like she just about had you pegged.”

Rochelle shrugged. “Anyway, it was a lot of work. And even though I’m really happy with how it all came out in the end, it’s *not* something I’d

have chosen to do intentionally. Not for a good few years yet, anyway.”

“You know, you and Cira should probably go visit her yourself, now we’re all out in the Real,” Chet said. “Find out what *she* thinks about having been raised that way. I suspect you’ll get an earful.”

“Uh...okay...”

“So, what’re your plans now, Shelley?” Rhianna asked.

Rochelle shrugged. “Get used to living in a human body again, for starters. Renew old acquaintances. Pick up working here at the shop. After that...dunno. Guess we’ll play it by ear.” She twitched one of her snow leopard ears in illustration.

“We’ll certainly be glad to have you back. And if there’s any other way we can help out with the Ruth situation, let us know.”

“I think Shelley is right,” Chet said. “She’s been through a big change—we all have—and she needs time to get a handle on it. Without also having to deal with us being a lot happier about *our* change than she is.”

“I guess we should have seen it coming,” Rochelle said. “We were both feeling so excited to be back out here in the Real again that we didn’t take into account how it would seem to her. We’ll give her a little time to get over it, and then see how things go.”

“So how are *you* feeling about it?” Ivy asked. “I mean, you just gave up being RIs, with perfect recall and stuff, and now you’re back in the wonky ol’ meat bods, and...”

Rochelle groaned. “Don’t *remind* me. Sometimes I have to keep reminding myself that I’ll get used to this again, and it has plenty of good points too.”

Chet nodded. “Same. It’s so *aggravating* not being able to remember stuff that you’re sure was on the tip of your tongue just yesterday. But then I have to remind myself I didn’t know anything different until just a little while ago. But the most annoying thing is not having any access to my implants, which I had for years *before* all this.”

“At least I’m not so handicapped there, since before the changeover I was fully used to using these I-specs. So I can get by that way.”

“Yeah, me too I guess. But I’ll be glad when the week is up and I get some access again.”

“Anyway, if we’re done with breakfast, we’ve got some more RIDE

cases to look over today,” Rhianna said, stacking her empty plate onto Ivy’s. “If you’d care to take a look at things, I’d like to hear what you think about them too.”

Rochelle nodded. “Sure. Sounds like a plan to me.”

“Okay, great! Then let’s get these dishes put away and we can get started...”

In the days that followed, Ruth and Geena hung around the apartment they shared with Stacia, Renfield, and Soren. But as the days turned into weeks, the other three were absent more and more, as the positions they’d applied for came through, and they entered training and joined the workforce. Stacia got an entry-level job helping in the ship’s navigation department, Soren started taking scouting classes—and the Diplomatic Corps was even willing to take Renfield on, which surprised none of them more than Renfield.

Geena, of course, had her heart set on rejoining the *Clementine* when they got to Totalia, and that was just fine with Ruth since she didn’t have anything she especially wanted to do, either. She supposed she could join her parents at Rhianna’s shop and work on RIDE hacking and maintenance, but she still didn’t feel like spending time around her parents at the moment. But it wasn’t much fun hanging out at an empty apartment, either.

So, Ruth and Geena took to spending more time exploring the ship together. They hung out in the various common areas, mapped out the utility tunnels that Ruth had first explored while rescuing her friends from Kepler hackers, and even poked into the cargo bays where Aunt Uncia and Uncle Nils had run across some Integrate stowaways. But they tended to gravitate more and more to the Ark, if only because it was the only place where they could experience the sort of nature they’d grown up around in the real world.

Then, one day while they were sunning themselves on the grass near the Ark’s apiary, Ruth looked up and noticed a familiar profile slinking toward it. She blinked. “Hey...is that Uncle Julius?”

The poodle lying in the grass nearby lifted her head, then melted back into her human shape. “It is! Why don’t we go see what he’s up to?”



By the time they caught up to him, the jaguar had stood up into Shell Mode, and was reaching up to unlock one of the beehive enclosures. “Hey, Uncle Julius! What’re you doing here?”

“Huh? Oh, BLEEP.” Julius glanced over his shoulder, then turned to face them. “Hey, kiddos. Actually, I help out ‘round here.” He nodded to the hive. “With the BLEEPing bees.”

Ruth blinked. “The bees?”

Julius sighed. “Yeah. Long BLEEPing story. Few months back, Joe got me a BLEEPing beekeeping license, for no very good BLEEPing reason. Something ‘bout the BLEEPing Nextus bureaucratic Game. Apparently getting a license is like the equivalent of playing a hole’r two a’ BLEEPin’ golf in that, or some bullBLEEP like that.” Julius rolled his eyes expressively. “Anywho, when they brought *this* BLEEPing place on board, the personnel office ran a search for anyone with relevant experience, so they could ask for volunteers to help out. Naturally, my BLEEPing license popped right up. So here the BLEEP I am.”

“But you didn’t *have* to volunteer, did you?” Geena asked.

Julius shrugged. “Meh. It was something to do, wasn’t it? I can only spend so much time on the BLEEPin’ couch with Joe watchin’ old movies I’ve already seen a dozen times. ‘Sides, Joe and Socah kinda like the fresh honeycomb I get to bring home now an’ then, and I like having it with him.”

Ruth cocked her head. “Huh. I didn’t know you could volunteer to help out here.”

“Oh, sure. Hey, you kids wanna help me with the bees? Couple extra BLEEPin’ sets a’ hands might be useful, ‘specially ones that don’t gotta worry ‘bout getting BLEEPin’ stung.”

Ruth grinned. “Sure!”

“I’m in, too!” Geena said. “Just show us what to do!”

“Great! Then follow me.” He turned back to the enclosure and unlocked the door, and Ruth and Geena followed him in.

“You know, Uncle Julius, now that we’re all grown up and stuff, you don’t *have* to censor yourself around us anymore,” Ruth said as they walked. “Since I *now know* about words like ‘fuck’ and that ‘BLEEP’ is a way of covering them up.” She glared at Geena. “I had to find that out *on my own*, because a *certain someone* didn’t tell me the first time she heard

*me* use ‘BLEEP’ as a swear word.”

Geena giggled. “I’m sorry! I couldn’t help it! You were just so *cute*. It would have been like telling a kid that Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny weren’t real.”

“Heh heh,” Julius said. “Sorry kids, but no. Not just no, but BLEEP no. You don’t even know what ‘all grown up’ BLEEPing looks like yet. Mebbe when you’re ten years older or something.”

“But we already know what all the words are, and what they mean,” Ruth insisted. “I could even fucking use them in conversation myself if I wanted.”

“Kid, don’t make me wash yer BLEEPing mouth out with soap.”

Ruth pouted. “Like *you’re* one to talk.”

Julius snorted. “You kids think I’d BLEEPing talk like this if I didn’t BLEEPing have to? It’s a BLEEPing core quirk on account a’ me being an original-line Ought One A. Even your Mom probably wouldn’t be able to BLEEPing fix it without BLEEPing up my sweet an’ BLEEPing charming personality in the process. So she made this BLEEPing filter for me, an’ that’s good enough.

“An’ not using BLEEPing words like BLEEP, BLEEP, and BLEEP around kids, even when we BLEEPing *know* they already know the words, is just one of those crazy human taboos that we RIDEs seem to have picked up on. Don’t ask me to explain it, I’m sure I have no BLEEPing clue where it comes from.” Julius sneezed. “Pretty funny you actually thought ‘BLEEP’ was a swear word itself, though. Really, that’s BLEEPing hilarious, that is. Wait’ll I tell Joe.”

“Aw, Uncle *Juuuuuules...*”

“Now c’mon, here we are at the BLEEPing hives. Listen up, and I’ll show you what to do...”

*December 17, 158 A.L.*

*Trip Day 87*

After that, Ruth and Geena got into the habit of accompanying Julius to the hives to help him out. It was a good chance to spend time with him, and a way to feel like they were doing something useful. And Geena, at

least, enjoyed the honeycomb they got to take home for it.

(Ruth was *almost* curious enough to work out a hookup from her throat to Geena's fabber form so she could try it herself—but still, there was that whole *Human Centipede* thing...eww. And Fusing with anyone else to try it was pretty much out of the question, too. She wasn't of the generation that could treat sharing oneself with someone else that casually.)

Eventually, they had learned enough about it from experience and the skill chips Julius shared that they were able to rate Beekeeper (Assistant Class) licenses, and trade off with Julius on working the hive by themselves so he could spend more free time with Joe. (Ruth was pretty sure his blasé attitude about watching movies he'd already seen was just a put-on, and he really *didn't* mind the excuse for him and Joe to hang out more together.)

For their part, Ruth and Geena didn't mind the excuse to hang out in the Ark on a regular basis. With nothing much else to do, they took to spending most of their time there. When they weren't working with the bees or enjoying nature, Noah always had other chores that needed doing—and they didn't mind helping out in return for being allowed to stay there.

The Ark was where they were when the *Great Western* finally emerged from jump into the vicinity of Totalia's star system on day 87. Most of those aboard were at various parties that had been going on since the night before, including a big one on the Grand Concourse. But a number of them had the idea that the great domes overhead in the Ark were a great place to watch the stars come back, live. They'd been unshuttered just for the occasion, and a significant portion of the off-duty crew of the ship was here to watch—including Stacia, Soren, and Renfield. They'd set up lawn chairs within the fenced-in area of the apiary, ensuring there was room for themselves away from the crowds that filled much of the Ark's open areas.

"Just think, this is going to be the first time any of us have actually seen *real* stars, live," Stacia said. "We were born in the middle of a hyperspace jump, after all."

"Well, *most* of us were," Geena pointed out. "I'm looking forward to seeing them *again*."

"Meh, stars, big deal." A few weeks in the diplomatic corps hadn't made Renfield noticeably more diplomatic as far as Ruth could tell.

“If that’s how you feel, Renfield, why are you here?” Soren asked.

The wolverine shrugged. “Something to do, isn’t it? If only to see what all the fuss is about.”

“It is a great chance to get together,” Ruth said. “I’ve missed you guys while you’ve been busy doing other things.”

“We’re glad to be here, too, Ruth.” Stacia glanced up. “Oooh, I think they’re starting to dim the lights.” A moment later, the only illumination in the room was provided by the featureless whiteness outside the ship.

“The shipboard nav feed reports thirty seconds to emergence,” Stacia said. “Twenty seconds...ten...” All around them, people were taking up the chant. “Four...three...two...one...” The whiteness flickered out, and suddenly the room was considerably darker. A hushed “Ooooooh!” went up from the other onlookers as their eyes adjusted to the dimness, and the pinpoint lights of stars came into full view.

Geena grinned. “Welcome back to the real universe!”

*December 28, 158 A.L.*

*Trip Day 98*

Ruth wasn’t really sure what was supposed to happen after that. She imagined her folks probably did, but she still didn’t really feel like going and talking to them. They’d...well, cast her out of Eden. That was worth a few more weeks of silence, at least.

But the sense she got from reading shipboard comm channels and talking to Uncle Jules now and then at the beehives was that they’d been expecting to meet another ship here, the *Rickenbacker*, but it wasn’t around and people were starting to get antsy. Ruth felt that maybe that should be worrying, but she didn’t really feel it in her to get that worked up. After all, whether the escort ship arrived or not, whether they went farther in-system or not, she was just going to end up stuck here out of the way—unless she could manage to transfer to the *Clementine* with Geena, but who knew if that was even possible?

Here in the Ark, things were quiet and tranquil, which reminded her pleasantly of the artificial tranquility of the creche realm where she’d grown up. They kept it gently illuminated in the daytime, and opened the shutters

to the starfield at night. It was soothing. So that was something, anyway, she guessed. Geena, at least, was excited—they'd heard from the Clementine, who'd landed planetside. But apparently they weren't able to get back into space, due to some sort of Kessel Field thing blocking the way. (Apparently they didn't have enough parsecs to make the run, or something. Ruth wasn't really paying much attention at this point.) So it was probably still going to be a while before they could work out how to get down there.

There was a little more excitement when they did a short-duration jump of just a couple of hours to enter the Totalia system itself—and then met up with a local starship, the *Kybalion*, which the Clementine had hooked up with briefly on the way in. Ruth saw it drifting outside the Ark one night—a huge old thing, with kind of a piecemeal look to it the way various bits had been blown off and other bits had been added on. But it certainly seemed to have a lot of big gun barrels.

On the third day following the jump to the Totalia system, Geena was following Ruth around as they retrieved the honeycomb racks from a set of hives that was ready to harvest. “We’re *almost there!* I can hardly believe it! I wonder if I should comm them, or maybe just sorta wait until I can get down there to the planet to meet them. Um...but I guess Maddie and the others will already have commed ahead that I’m here. Oh geez, what if they don’t even wanna *see me*, after I’ve come all this way?”

Ruth sighed and just let it wash over her. She couldn't blame Geena for her enthusiasm. For her, this was going to be a chance to rejoin the people she pretty much thought of as her family. *While my own family... ugh. Don't even care about me. I'd have thought they'd have tried to show up here when I was working, or something.* Of course, until recently she'd actually been *glad* they were giving her space, letting her work things out for herself. But she was gradually starting to want to see them again, but not wanting to make the first move *herself*. It would have felt like admitting she was wrong, or something.

And apparently Geena was still more attentive than she looked, even when she was in the midst of excited babbling. Abruptly she stopped mid-stream, and considered Ruth curiously. “You’re not saying much. In fact, you haven’t said much at all the last few days. Are you okay?”

Ruth waved a hand. “Meh,” she said, as she slid another slider of honeycomb into a collection rack. “Just...I dunno. Coming to realize I’m just going to be stuck here all through this whole trip. It’s not exciting.”

“Oh, c’mon, surely you don’t think they’re not going to let us go planetside *at all*.” Geena shook her head. “They just have to win the war first is all.”

“They *just* have to win the war?” Ruth turned to glare at her. “Geena, do you have any idea how long something like that can *take*? We could be at this for months! Years, even! All this while crammed aboard this ship. Or maybe some other ship. Or maybe even sent back to Zharus without even having a chance to go down there.”

“I can’t believe that. I *won’t*.” Geena shook her head again. “Not after I came all this way.”

“You came all this way,” Ruth said. “I was *born* here. This is the only home I’ve ever known. Or, well, the *only* home I’ve ever known doesn’t even *exist* anymore except as a bunch of zeroes and ones inside my head! What makes you think *you’ll* have any better luck?”

Geena gasped. “You can’t mean that.”

Inside, Ruth knew she didn’t—not really—but she just felt like lashing out at, well, *someone*. “Oh, just go away, Geena. I’m busy here.”

Geena pursed her lips. “All right, *fine*.” She swiveled on a heel and stalked out of the hive enclosure. Ruth sighed, and turned back to her work.

And that was when the world shook. There was a deafening sound, and a jarring impact that threw Ruth across the hut and dropped hives on top of her. “Nngh...what—?” Ruth shoved the hives off of her, paying no heed to the clouds of angry bees that filled the room. There was a sudden howl of escaping air—and above that, a scream. “Oh, BLEEP! *Geena!*”

The hives were scattered and blocking the exit. But something told Ruth that now wasn’t the time to worry about damage. She crossed her arms above her head and fired her lifters at full blast, crashing through the hut’s flimsy roof and looking around. Above her, a crack rent the transparent dome. The shutters were sliding across it, but the air was filled with debris and the occasional frightened animal being sucked toward it—and it only took a moment for Ruth to see that Geena was *also* being sucked toward the exit.

Ruth didn't hesitate—she fired her lifters again, streaking through the air toward her friend. “Geena! Your lifters! Fight the suction!”

“I'm trying!” Geena called back, her voice faint in the thinning air. “But it's too strong!”

Ruth caught up to her and threw her arms around her friend. “C'mon, let's get outta here—” She fired her own lifters at full blast to accompany Geena's, but it was no good—even at full strength, they were losing ground fast, and the shutter wasn't going to be able to seal it in time.

“Oh crap. Geena—go to fabber form, now!”

Geena's eyes widened. “Wha—?”

“Fabbers don't need to breathe! Do it!”

“Oh!” Geena drew her legs up and tucked her head in, and a moment later Ruth had her arms around a blocky rectangular fabbing unit. There wasn't time to slide her into the pannier slot; Ruth just clamped her arms on tight and tried to make herself as small as possible around her friend, as they passed through the breach and out into space.

As they tumbled, Ruth activated her comm circuits and sent with all her strength, *:Mom! Dad! Heeeeelp!!!:*

The *Great Western* vibrated like a tuning fork, shuddering and shimmying. “I need everyone to Damage Control stations!” Astrogon's avatars shouted over the shipboard alarm. “Fuse up and move!”

“Ugh...do we even *have* damage control stations?” Rochelle shook her head. “I was kinda somewhere else for most of the trip.” She crawled out from under the table where she'd been thrown by the sudden impact. Fortunately, she'd been wearing Uncia's *minima* shell at the time, whose lifters and hardlight had kicked in to cushion her impact. “Ugh...anyone get the number of that skimmer truck?”

Rhianna/Kaylee helped Rochelle/Uncia up. “Did we hit one of those invisible rocks they warned us about?”

“No, something much worse,” Socah Gates said.

Rhianna put her handpaw to her ear. “Well, shit. They're calling us down to help in Engineering.”

“I'll be right—”

Then her comm crackled. *:Mom! Dad! Heeeeelp!!!:*

“—actually, no I won’t. I just got a distress call—from Ruth! Uncia, can you track her?”

“On it!” Uncia said. “She’s...this can’t be right.”

“What?”

“She’s...outside the ship. Plotting her trajectory—it looks like she must have gotten sucked out a hole they blew in the Ark’s dome. She’s heading outward at a pretty good clip. Geena’s with her.”

“Right. Tell Astrogon we’re going to go get them. Where are Chet and Nils? We need them warming up the Maxima’s engines five minutes ago.”

“Chet’s already in the cockpit. He’s been hanging out there a lot now there are stars to see again. Already pinged him.” Uncia paused. “Don’t you mean *ask* Astrogon—?”

“No. No, I mean *tell*,” Rochelle said firmly. “We’re *going* to get our daughter.”

Rochelle slid into the co-pilot’s seat a couple of minutes later, and glanced over at Nils. “How’re we for launch?”

“Engines prepped. We can go at your word.” He glanced up at the head-up display, with inset video panels showing a cloud of gas and debris expanding from one of the tumbling *Great Western*’s flanks, with a carat mark tracking a small dot slowly drifting away. “How’re we fixed with traffic control?”

“Don’t know. Don’t care. Get us out there.”

“I’ve filled Astrogon in on the situation,” Uncia reported. “He understands we’re not willing to wait, and since we’ve got our own ship, we’ve got clearance, as long as we stay in the area and assist in any other search-and-rescue after we get her.”

“As long as they don’t need ship-side medical attention, I’m good with that,” Rochelle said.

Nils spoke up. “Shelley, Ruth is a RIDE and Geena’s an Integrate. As long as we get to them fast, they’ll probably both be fine.”

“Then let’s not sit here jawing about it,” Rochelle said. “We’ve got clearance, let’s *go!*”

“Disengaging docking clamps...using attitude control thrusters to point us in the right direction...and *go!*”



As the ship lifted away and reoriented itself, Rochelle muttered. “Ugh...I *knew* I should have tried to reach out before now. I just...didn’t want to smother her.”

“It’s *okay*, Shelley,” Chet said. “I feel the same way. But...we’re still going to have lots of chances for that. They’re gonna be just fine.”

Ruth held tightly to Geena as they tumbled over and over through space. At last, she looked up, and pulsed her lifters to kill the spin. They were drifting through space, alongside debris that included bits of shrubbery and fences, and a couple of dead animals. *Oh, BLEEP. Poor things.* She was glad that this had been a shift when few people would have been visiting the Ark—as far as she knew, she’d been the only one in the section at the time, so nobody else would have been sucked out—she hoped. She didn’t look around too hard, just in case.

Now that they were free of the atmosphere, she could at least latch Geena securely into place. She opened the pannier at her side, and lowered the fabber and pushed it back until it latched in. The pannier retracted, and connections were green. *:Geena? You okay?:*

*:I...I think so. Uh...did we really just get spaced? What happened?:*

Ruth peered back toward the ship. *:It looks like something hit us. Something big. I think the whole rear drive ring is wrecked. Great big friendly Totalia howdy, I guess.:*

*:Oh...: Geena was silent for a while. :I guess...maybe you were right about the war.:*

Ruth sighed...or at least, sent a sigh emoticon, since there wasn’t any air to sigh with out here. *:I didn’t want to be. I still hope I’m not.:*

*:But if they don’t want us here that badly...:*

*:Some of them don’t want us here. Some of them asked for us to be here. We’ll get it worked out.:*

Geena didn’t reply for a while, then sent, *:What do we do now?:*

*:Well, I’ve got my distress beacon on. I’ve fired my lifters to try to slow us and move us back toward the ship, but it’ll probably take a while—we were blown out pretty quick.:* Then Ruth’s sensors picked something up, and she turned her head to look. *:But...I think we’re good. Look, Mom and Dad are coming to get us!:*

The rescue was accomplished easily enough. Chet had ample experience at matching velocity with tumbling objects in space, especially when those objects had their own lifters and could help to match him back. Ruth halfway expected the Maxima to transform into the giant Fuser form Mom said it had and just reach out and grab her, but they settled for going the more prosaic route of pulling up alongside her so she could close the rest of the way and open the airlock hatch herself.

When the inner door cycled, her Mom and Dad were there to greet her, with the RIDEs Aunt Uncia and Uncle Nils on their haunches in Fuser form behind them. Ruth fell into her mother's arms. Irrationally, she missed having a simulated flesh-and-blood body the most right then, just so she could *cry*. It simply didn't feel the same in Fuser form.

"Hey, are you okay?" Rochelle said. "Ruth, honey, I've never been happier that you don't need to breathe."

"I'm...I'm fine, Mom. Geena too. We're a little shaken up, but..we weren't hurt. We...heh...*evacuated*."

"The whole section of the Ark we were in 'evacuated,' it looked like," Geena chimed in. "I hope nobody was hurt..."

"Nobody in the Ark," Uncia reported. "But looks like there were deaths in other compartments."

"Oh no..." Ruth said. "They actually...*killed* people?"

"A few, it looks like," Chet said grimly. "You kids were lucky."

Ruth sighed. "Mom, I'm...sorry I didn't get back in touch. I just...I guess I was mad at you for being so happy to get back to the real world. It felt like I was...just an *accident* who was tying you down to VR for sixteen years."

Rochelle's eyes widened. "Oh, baby, nothing could be further from the truth. I won't lie to you...you *were* conceived by accident. But after it happened...hey, we were RIDEs. We *could* simply have archived you until we got back to Zharus, and spent a fast three months on this trip. Nothing said we *had* to raise you here and now."

"We *chose* this," Chet said. "We chose *you*. I won't say it was always easy, but...it's been worth it."

"R...really?" Ruth said.

“Really,” Rochelle said. “You know, we’re not the sort of people who’ve had much time to stop and smell the roses, between the Fritz affair, now this Totalia thing...and who knows what new crisis will be waiting for us when we get back to Zharus? Everything seems to happen one thing right after the other—it’s like we’re characters in one of those trashy Internet fiction series from the Steader archive.” She smiled. “But thanks to you, we’ve had sixteen years of peace, tranquility, and domestic bliss—and that’s something we *treasure*.”

“It was like a sixteen-year vacation,” Chet said. “A good one, with people we love and care about.”

“Honestly, you’re *not* the only one who’s sad it’s over,” Rochelle said. “We are too. We’re gonna *miss* all that peace and tranquility, in the hectic kinds of lives we lead out here. But we were *also* happy to come back out, because there’s there’s *so much* good stuff out here, too. As you’ll find out once you’ve lived a little more.”

“That’s what *I* keep telling her,” Geena said.

“Of course, on a starship heading into the middle of a war zone *might* not be the best place to find out about the good stuff,” Nils put in. “But as we used to say in the Army, if we couldn’t take a joke, we shouldn’t have joined.” He cocked his head. “At least, the *humans* used to say it. We RIDEs didn’t exactly get a lot of choice in the ‘joining’ part, so we pretty much *had* to learn to take a joke.”

Ruth carefully disengaged herself and stepped back from her mother. “Can we...go home now? I think I’d like to come home...to whatever passes for home on that ship.”

“Soon’s we get the all-clear,” Chet said. “They may need us to help rescue someone else, if anyone else is still alive out here. But after that... sure.”

“Really, you’re kind of in what passes for home now,” Rochelle said. “We mostly live in this shuttle, it being reasonably spacious. Of course, usually it’s docked to the side of a much bigger ship...”

Ruth glanced back at her pannier fabber mount. “That work for you, too, Geena?”

“Oh, sure! I’m happy to go where you go,” Geena said. “At least ‘til I can get back to Clemmie. And you can come along then too, if your folks are

okay with it.”

“We’ll see how that looks when we get there,” Rochelle said. “For now...I’m just glad to have you kids back. I hope you’ll stay at least a little while.”

“So, welcome to the real world!” Uncia said. “Or welcome back.”

“Thanks,” Ruth said. She smiled. “You know...I think maybe I *am* glad to be here, after all. I guess no matter where it is, there’s just no place like home.”

**THE END**