

Judy's eyes slowly twitched open to the sound of somebody moaning "Ommmm" repeatedly. With a moment's searching she found the source of the heavy breathing, a shaggy-headed yak sitting cross-legged in the middle of a patch of grass, on the ceiling. Surprised, the bunny doe looked around for a possible explanation.

The walls around the yak were upholstered, with loose straps or handles every few feet. Turning to try and view her immediate surroundings, she was shocked to discover that she was strapped to some manner of cot that lay bolted to the floor, or ceiling, whatever the surface opposite the other mammal was. And she noticed one other thing as well.

"Why am I naked?!" Judy exclaimed, tugging at her bindings in sudden terror.

At her shout the yak shook himself out of his trance, losing a cloud of dust that hung suspended in the air around his head. Slowly, he drifted up from the bed of grass and grabbed onto one of the straps in the walls. As he slowly rotated in the air it became apparent that he was just as unclothed as Judy herself. Stopping himself with an outstretched hoof he faced the bunny and told her, "whoa, calm down there little bunny. Those are just to stop you drifting away into an air vent while you were asleep."

Judy temporarily ceased struggling as she realized what the floating and bed with straps meant. "We're in space?" She asked, almost rhetorically.

"Oh, we're all in space." He replied, starting to unfasten one of the straps around Judy's waist. "No matter what planet or habitat we're on, we're all floating around in a tiny island in the unknowable ocean of space."

The instant her arm was free Judy snapped open the remaining clasps and pushed herself off the bed. In the micro-gravity that was enough force to send her careening into the grass-covered surface on the opposite side of the room. Feeling herself start to bounce back off she quickly grabbed two handfuls of grass and hung on. "I meant," she said as soon as she'd caught her breath. "That we're not on a planet or moon with appreciable gravity."

"Oh, right." The yak pondered as he sprung back to the grassy wall. "Yeah, we're on the Vermin barge *Inconveniently Tied*." He glanced over at the bunny still sprawled on the flora. "Hey, just so you know, Carnivale grass is mildly hallucinogenic. Gives you a good time but I wouldn't eat it if you were planning on going anywhere in the next twelve hours."

Judy spat out a couple blades that had drifted into her mouth. Quickly she searched for the nearest wall's closest strap and leapt for it. She caught it and just barely managed to hang on as she bounced off the upholstery. "Okay then, now that that's been established." She continued. "Why, am I, *naked*!"

The yak twisted around back into his cross-legged position. This time Judy was close enough to notice his feet digging around in the alien “grass” until they found a pair of bars hanging just above the ground that his hooves, which apparently had the same secondary digits that enabled him to grasp objects with his forehooves, could latch onto. “It’s easier to read your aura without clothes in the way. I mean, animals wearing clothes, that’s just not natural.”

“You sound familiar,” Judy thought out loud. “Did we happen to meet at a naturalist club in Old Zootopia back in 116? Twenty-four years before the Fall I mean?”

“Don’t know if I can remember that far back, but you do look a bit like that bunny who came into Mystic Springs Oasis on March 7th, 116 at 1:43 pm. But, that bunny wasn’t Awakened. Did that happen in your next life?”

Judy, both relieved at the familiarity with this mammal and exasperated with his crazy ideas, found herself oddly curious. “Dare I ask what you mean by ‘awakened’?”

Yax looked oddly surprised at her question. “You know, you’ve got the second senses, you’re in touch with the astral plane, psychic...”

“Psychic?” Judy interjected, “that’s ridiculous. There’s no such thing as...” she stopped as memories of unexpected precognition and mental probing resurfaced.

“Sure there is. More than there used to be even.” Yax continued. “I think the telepathic screams of all those mammals who died in the Fall created an astral rift that opened a lot of third eyes. Or ears, or nostrils I guess.”

The bunny, looking for a rational explanation, interjected again. “Look, a few times I saw flashes of events that might happen seconds before they occurred. But, I’m pretty sure that was just my neurachem.”

[Neurachem doesn’t do that Judy.] The voice in the bunny’s head interrupted. [I have all the specs and considering your performance in your last sleeve you were reacting a little too quickly to those attacks for implants alone to explain it.]

[Skye!] Judy mentally shouted back. She’d been starting to wonder if her captors had taken her muse away from her. [Can you tell what happened?]

[All I can tell you is that someone apparently found your cortical stack and farcast us to a Vermin Swarm to be re-sleeved.] The AI replied. [And whoever it was went to the trouble of finding you a sleeve very similar to your birth one. The data I can access suggests a Splicer instead of a Flat but aside from the genefixing the physical parameters match with your first body to an almost obsessive degree.]

Judy stretched out an arm to examine it. Her new fur was the exact same color as the fur she'd had for over 40 years, there was no stiffness of bioweave nor tingle of neurachem. At first, she thought her arm was a bit too short, but, as she thought about it, that wasn't quite right. For the past three months her limbs had been too long, now they were the right length again. Who would go to so much effort to make her comfortable in her new skin? "Yax," she inquired, "who asked you to take a look at my aura or whatever you were doing?"

"Your friend, Robin Hoodlum." At the bunny's confounded expression he started to elaborate. "You know, your friend who was with you when you came to Mystic Springs. He was a red fox in his early thirties, wearing a green floral-print shirt..."

"Nick!" She cut him off. "Do you know where he is now?"

"I think I last saw him going down hall 3, most likely towards the EVA hangers. Huh?" Without warning, he cocked his head sharply to the other side and said into the open air, "no, I don't see any bad spirits on her, just her own spirit extending into the other world. Oh, sure, I'll tell her." Turning back towards Judy Yax said. "Now he's on the Starsight deck in the Roller."

She looked at him skeptically. "Who were you just talking to?"

Yax shrugged. "Don't know, just some guy watching my XP feed. Forgot I had that on."

Abruptly feeling much more self-conscious again, Judy quickly attempted to cover herself with her free hand and feet. "Ookay, I don't suppose you might happen to have some clothes here I could borrow?" Towards Skye she thought [Starlight in the Roller, can you find that?]

[Yes, the mesh here is surprisingly open. Starlight is an observation platform in the main habitation cylinder. It's spun for .5G so you shouldn't have much trouble getting around in there.]

"Hmm, there might be some Vac-suits in the closet over there in your size." Yax swung open a small hatch set into the wall and selected a tube the size of a thick pen. "Yeah, this one looks like it should fit." He said, tossing the tube to Judy.

Catching it with ease, Judy opened the tube and drew out a roll of thin canvas rolled around a tiny gas cylinder on a filmy belt. Unrolling and unfolding the belt revealed that it was a light jumpsuit with a hood. She somehow doubted that it would keep her alive very long in open space, but she supposed it would serve as clothing.

The bunny had just slipped into the baggy jumpsuit and was looking for a way to fasten it closed when she noticed a new icon in her entoptic display. [Sky, is that what I think it is?]

[It does indeed appear that this suit is made of smartfabric. Is there a specific style you have in mind?]

Judy considered for a moment, then decided to trust her muse's judgement. [Whatever you suggest.]

The seam closed on its own, the hood retracted into a collar, and the material writhed as it shrunk to fit its wearer perfectly. When the process was complete Judy found herself wearing a light-and-dark-blue one-piece with padding concentrated over the knees, forearms, and ribcage. She was momentarily disappointed at the lack of a badge, but shrugged it off and sprang for the main hatch.

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After bounding and crawling through what seemed like kilometers of weightless corridors Judy finally found herself in the cylinder. In the final hallway she began to feel herself drawn down towards a specific surface. Centripetal force acting in an approximation of gravity. Cautiously, she climbed down from her handhold on the wall and with some trepidation set first one paw and then the other upon the floor. She still felt light on her feet, but she could stand without drifting away. Careful not to accidentally spring off the floor, she stepped lightly towards the hatch at the end of the corridor.

Looking out into the Roller from the hatch she thought it looked like a compact city. In between the atmosphere recyclers, crew dorms, and hydroponics farms she expected from diagrams of colony ships, there were what appeared to be stores. In both open-air booths and small prefab enclosures she could see vendors offering what seemed like every conceivable product or service ever sold; exotic clothes, weapons, sex, drugs, mammal organs in culture vats (oddly close to the food stalls), and even whole sleeves. Eventually, her gaze settled on what looked like nothing so much as a hole in the gentling rolling deck.

Skye highlighted it in AR, [that's the Starsight deck.] She confirmed, she also noted several silhouettes on the patch of star-spotted open space that may have been mammals walking on nothing. [It's 20-centimeter thick transparent aluminum.]

Circling the aperture where Judy crouched she found a series of raised concentric circles radiating out to the sides of the massive drum. Testing the nearest ring and finding it satisfactorily sturdy, Judy grabbed on and swung out into the vast open space. She used the rings as a ladder to descend outwards to the deck below, feeling spin-emulated gravity tug gradually stronger on her as she came closer to the deck. She also heard the calls of the vendors on her approach.

"Now you call that a vac-suit? Check these ones I've got here."

"Need medicines? Tetrachromic vision? Some skillware to learn how to move properly in zero-g?"

“Hey bunny, how’d you like a real predator and prey experience?”

The bewildered and overwhelmed bunny scurried rapidly through the crowds trying to ignore the merchants and their wares in varying levels of taboo. It was like the bazaar that appeared in Sahara Square once a year, on steroids. What made it worse was that it was obvious they were focusing on her, mammals who were clearly permanent residents of the ship were spared the sales pitches and the calls picked up and died down only as she passed by. After what seemed like an eternity of bright and shiny merchandize Judy made it to the metallic crystal floor.

Scanning the loose crowd of mammals walking across the Starlight deck, staring down into the endless void, lying prone with their faces pressed against the giant gemstone floor, or making out with multiple different partners; Judy spotted a red fox lying back in a lawn chair.

He wasn’t quite the same as he’d been on that day over 30 years ago. His shirt had been replaced with a smartfabric suit projecting an animated pattern of falling flowers, his fur was interrupted in places by the seams characteristic of Pod assembly, and the eyes that turned to face her when she called out “Nick?” had the glint of cybereyes. But she would have recognized that expression anywhere.

“Nick!” She exclaimed again, dashing over to his side. “Is it really you? What happened?”

Nick didn’t answer. He attempted to maintain an air of stoicism but the subtle signs of sorrow and regret were clear as day to her. Before she could say anything else he held out the end of a fiber-optic cable. Confused, Judy followed the cord up to its other end, finding it lodged in the back of his neck.

Judy rubbed at the back of her own neck and was shocked to find that a flap of her nape peeled away. Beneath lay a panel of smooth stainless steel with a datajack in the center. Starting to understand she took the cable, and seeing the look of anxiety and anticipation growing upon his face, carefully inserted it.

[We can talk more privately this way.] Nick’s voice resounded in her mesh inserts as soon as she jacked in. [Honestly, I wasn’t sure you would come.]

[Nick, why wouldn’t I come? We’ve been partners for thirty years.]

[Well, for one thing I shot you pretty recently, twice.]

[The sniper was you?]

[No, that was Finnick, I was spotting for him and insisted he take the shot though.]

[I can understand that time, remind me to thank him actually. But what happened the first time? Why stalk me instead of just talking to me?]

[I was under orders not to contact you if it could be helped. Observe and report only until further instructions. As for why I shot you, well, what did Yax tell you?]

[Yax? He seemed to think I was a psychic or something. Are you saying he was right?]

[Yax doesn't know anything, he's coped with his infection by wrapping it in all kinds of NuAge pseudo-mysticism. But he can sense an infection in others and can tell the difference between Wools-MacLion and the really bad strains.]

[Infection? What are you talking about? Wait, does this have something to do with "Exsurgent"?]

[We call it the Exsurgent virus, it was unleashed by the TITANs during the Fall. Sometimes it takes a digital form, sometimes as bio-nanites, occasionally a series of sensory inputs that causes parts of the brain to rewrite itself which we call a "Basilisk hack".]

[And you think I was infected with it?]

[Carrots, I can believe that you figured out who I was just from kinesics, but I never told you the word "Exsurgent" before the last 30 seconds and my firewalls didn't pick up any brain hacking.]

Judy fell trembling to the crystalline floor as she digested the information Nick had just given her. [Nick, are you actually telling me that I was infected with some sort of TITAN bioweapon and now I can read minds?]

[We call that a psi-gamma sleight. Wools-MacLion and Haunting strain infectees develop that talent at the three-month mark. Though sometimes Wools-MacLion, the one we're fairly certain you've got, stops at the psi-chi level. Psi-chi sleights tend to involve amplified savant abilities like photographic memory, instinctive understanding of new devices or languages, or quantum-level predictive mapping.]

[And, if I have this Haunting strain?]

[If you have the Haunting strain of the Exsurgent virus your brain will be fully subverted by a TITAN program in another three months. But, that version of the virus also gives you hallucinations and horrible nightmares. You should be fine if you don't have those, relatively speaking.]

[No! I mean, sometimes I have visions, but they always come to pass a split second later. Like, I knew you were going to draw your gun and shoot me in the heart so I ducked. It might be that prediction psi-chi you mentioned.]

[Yeah, sorry about that. I didn't have any way to tell whether you had Wools-MacLion or one of the nastier strains and I panicked. But I've been cleared for enough of the information we have on the Exsurgent virus now.]

Judy reached out for the armrest of Nick's chair, pulling herself up and leaning him towards her. Meeting him eye-to-eye she made her ultimatum, [okay, you keep saying "we" in a way that makes it sound like you've become some kind of spy. Are you going to explain that, or am I going to need to use my new powers to pry it from your mind?] She raised her other hand over his head threateningly.

The fox looked worried for a moment, then relaxed and rolled his electronic eyes in amusement. [You can try, but psi doesn't work too well on cyberbrains for some reason. And there's a team of snipers waiting for my distress signal, ready to cauterize the area if need be.] A red laser dot appeared on the bunny's chest for a couple seconds, and she lowered her arm. [But, as it so happens, we were hoping to recruit you so I might as well give you the bullet points.]

Nick leaned back again and began to tell his story. [Three days before the Fall, I made an Ego backup with my non-department provider. Sometime during the chaos after the Fall the company's backup caches came into the possession of Nine Lives, you know them right?]

[Yes Nick, we raided their body bank in Tundratown together. Hundreds of vegetative mammals with their Egoes farcast to work camps in the outer system or virtual brothels. Your second biomorph was a teenager whose Ego we never recovered but whose body was in the bank.]

[What, really? No wonder they hated me so much. They made me star in more torture porn flicks than I can remember, most of them fatal, and then leased me out to other organized crime bosses for more "creative" torments. It was so horrific that I had as much of my memory of those three years with them erased as possible.] Judy perked up slightly, recalling the memory she'd glimpsed in his psyche, and the ones she'd been unable to find. [Anyways, one day I was set to fight this, thing, in a gladiatorial arena. I'll send you a picture here.]

An image appeared in the bunny's entoptics. It showed a cage containing a horrendous creature out of the worst nightmares of a dozen schlocky horror writers. It skittered on a set of crab-like stalks and its body was a trunk-like bundle of several purple rods. But the most notable part were the tentacles, long, ropy, waving in the air like a twisted crown with two of them ending in vicious barbs.

[Fortunately, one of the spectators pulled out a seeker pistol and blew the thing to Niflheim before either of us were released from our cages. Then her friends started blowing away everyone else with the rest of their concealed armory. Since I'd been sleeved in just a basic pod wearing a loincloth they correctly figured that I was an innocent victim and were moderately civil during the interrogation that followed. Apparently, my latest renter had been experimenting with some TITAN artifacts and that had drawn the attention of Firewall.]

[Firewall?] Judy interrupted. [Who is that? Are they some kind of government agency?]

[Oh hell no.] Nick replied. [Firewall, as I soon discovered, is a non-governmental cell-structured organization with the singular objective of ensuring that transammalkind survives. If anyone's government agents it was probably those guys who tried to kidnap you down in the tunnels.]

[Cell-structured.] Judy thought. [I think I remember something about that form of organization. It means you're grouped into cells that have minimal contact with one another so that no one can reveal the identities of the whole group. Wasn't it most common with terrorists and criminal conspiracies?]

The fox chuckled audibly. [The Species Consortium has probably labeled us terrorists, or at least the parts of it that know about us. And I will admit, we have done questionable things in pursuit of our mission. But, we are doing good here. It's an uphill struggle, but we've saved thousands, possibly millions of lives.]

[I think you might need to explain that a little better.]

[Carrots, you were backed up during the Fall, you've been to the TQZ, you know what the TITANs built. Sometimes those things escape the quarantine, sometimes somebody stumbles across a derelict habitat infested with Exsurgers and gets infected, there's even some mammals who go looking for TITAN-tech to sell to the highest bidder.]

[What?! Why would anybody want to buy that stuff?]

[Terrorists who want superweapons, cults worshipping the TITANs, Singularity-seeking Exammals unhindered by weaknesses like "morality", even some hypercorps desperate for an edge over their competition. There's also been reports of Project Ozma, our "competitors" in the Consortium, weaponizing Basilisk hacks and a few other Exsurgent variants.]

[So, when these TITAN weapons and monsters are let loose you do what? Deal with them and the ones who loosed them?]

[Most modern governments aren't held to the same level of accountability that Zootopia's was. If a police chief in the Inner System attempted to arrest the mayor they worked for they'd

quickly find themselves and their entire precinct without jobs and blackballed. You do know that the Consortium is privately owned just like the corporations that govern it, don't you?] At Judy's silence he continued. [Anyways, since we can't rely on the "legitimate" authorities to handle mammals who play with the second end of the world, we have to deal with them. If they're Exsurgents we can sometimes recover a pre-infection backup though. And anyways, we don't just go after TITAN scat, there's plenty of other ways to destroy mammalkind and we keep watch on them all. Exmammals preying on the defenseless, mad scientists experimenting with new Seed AIs, nobody knows what the Factors are up to but aliens or no I smell a long con...]

[Wait, did you just say aliens?]

[Haven't kept up on the news lately? The Factors first showed up a couple years after the Fall, like giant slime molds that can pilot starships. Now they come by some habitat every so often to trade curiosities from what they claim are other worlds of some sort of interstellar confederation. We also found what people are calling "Pandara Gates", no idea who built them but they open wormholes to other gates in a ton of other systems. For some reason though, we haven't met any other sapient aliens, just a lot of non-sapient critters and some ruins of civilizations that died out ten thousand years ago.]

Visions of an endless void and grasping tendrils flowing up her arms dashed across Judy's vision as she attempted to process this information. [Skye, is this true?]

[Yes Judy. Exosolar life is now a fact of life. I thought you were under enough culture shock already so I'm sorry to say I neglected to inform you of them.]

[Hello, who's this?]

[Skye, my muse. Remember?]

[His memory's not what it used to be.]

[Oh hi Jack, I was wondering when you'd show up. Why don't you and Skye catch up while me and Nick finish our conversation?]

The fox's hand slowly swept back towards the cable in his neck, but Judy moved to stop him, gently. [I don't need to read your mind to know you're scared to ask me something, but you also need to. Please.]

Nick put his hand down, out of her grasp, and laid back again. After almost a full minute of silence he spoke again. [Carrots, Judy. How close were we? Really?]

Judy slumped to the floor next to his chair, turning away from him to gaze with one eye into the starry void she began to formulate an answer. [We were more than friends, sometimes

lovers, always close as brother and sister. I don't know if there's a better way to describe us. With departmental regulations and the risk of PR scandals we were hesitant to take things too far, but there were a few times we both had too much to drink and woke up with one or both of us feeling sore. After a decade together I was starting to think we might make it official, but then you died.] She paused, turning back to him. [Do you remember that? The first time you died?]

[Vaguely. The parts I remember most clearly are climbing up onto a car in Sahara Square, a sharp pain in the side of my head, and then the startup sequence for that robo-fox I wore for a while after.]

[You didn't take it well. This was still in the early days of brain uploading and the psychologists weren't sure how to treat resleeve-induced alienation and dysmorphia. It took years of therapy before you were comfortable enough in your metal skin to try being intimate with someone again.] Judy paused, her own misgivings rising to the surface. [And I, I admit I had some trouble believing you were the same fox I'd loved and not just some robotic copy. We thought that things might improve for the both of us when you got that biomorph from the Nine Lives warehouse, what with you having fur again. But, instead you started to feel guilty about wearing somebody else's face, even after his parents gave their permission for you to use the sleeve until his Ego was rescued. The Fall happened before we had the chance to get together again and you...]

[Stop.] Nick held his hand up, one finger on the cord. [I don't need to know how the TITANs killed me. All I know is that my stack was irrecoverable and I'm grateful for that.] Something made him start to think though. [Strange, sounds like I had trouble resleeving before. Now I have barely any problem integrating to a new sleeve. Heck, my codename is based on a mythical shapeshifter.]

[Nick.] Judy cautiously laid a hand on the fox's shoulder, careful not to make skin contact. [You've been through things I can only begin to imagine. While I hadn't even resleeved for farcasting until three months ago, from my perspective. We may have changed, not only our bodies but our minds too, and the world may have gone mad, but I don't want to be separated from you again.]

Nick stared into her deep purple eyes with his electronic green ones. Then, slowly, he reached over and drew her in for a tight hug. [Does that mean you agree to join? It's okay if you don't, me and your backup could just get an igloo on Tarand after I kill you.]

The bunny's eyes and ears perked up in shock, then she remembered the snipers and started considering what immortality might mean for operational security. [That won't be necessary. I'll join your benevolent conspiracy here. Wouldn't want to waste this nice new sleeve anyways.]

[Like it? It's a limited edition Judith Laverne Hopps Heirloom morph based on a best guess reconstruction of your genome. One of the "Julius" variants that didn't sell too well so I picked it up for a steal.]

[Julius?]

[Nothing twelve hours in a vat was unable to fix. Though, if you wanted to try something different it's not that difficult to change back.]

Judy couldn't help herself from laughing out loud. This strange new world still had some surprises in store for her it seemed.