

“You didn’t have to dress up like that.” Judy commented as Nick entered the small soundproofed cabin she had found on the ship. While his smartclothes were no different from his usual outfit the fox was sleeved as a fox with a white and faded black coat that almost seemed to glow in the UV lamps. The sleeve also had an underlying bone structure that seemed to be sculpted with perfection and the normal musky fox odor was subdued by a faint scent that seemed almost like rabbit testosterone.

Nick grinned and spun around to close the door behind him, and show off the new sleeve. “You said to come in a pure biomorph, what’s wrong with a Sylph? Is it the platinum coat? Or are the pan-species pheromones making you feel,” he bent over to whisper in her ear, “uncomfortable?”

Now that he was in close the scent threatened to overwhelm her. There was definitely rabbit in there, along with traces of wolf, deer, big cat and maybe a dozen other species. “I admit, it’s a little, distracting.” She sneezed, quite intentionally. “Could you turn that off by any chance?”

The fox shrugged and nodded with a small sigh. “Alright, the glands are off, but that won’t get rid of the pheromones already coating my fur.”

Judy glanced over at the maker over in the corner and sent a mesh request to it. Seconds later it popped out a small squeeze bulb and began filling it with a weak solvent. “Put that on, should take care of it.” As Nick was slathering the liquid over his scent glands the bunny tried to clear the scent from her nostrils and attempted to start a new conversation. “Anyways, I’ve been working on my psi a bit lately. Remember how in our last mission I was able to send and receive thoughts with you?”

Nick’s fur bristled, “I was afraid of this when you asked me to get a biomorph. Alright, what did you have in mind?” Glancing at his fur standing up he attempted to smooth it down commenting that he “should have sprung for a model with emotional dampers.”

“Well,” Judy replied, amused by Nick’s reaction. “I was looking through Firewall’s files on the different Psi-Sleights and noticed that one of them allowed an async to copy their own memories to another person.”

The fox in the room with her tensed in fear, but, Judy picked up an undercurrent of wary hope in his expression. “I get what you’re trying to do Carrots, but, why couldn’t you just get a mnemonic augmentation and make XPs of the things you’d like me to remember again?”

“Nick,” she intoned. “That would just be a playback of my memories. Don’t you want to actually remember the good times you lost in the psychosurgery?” She slowly reached out for him.

Nick stared at her outstretched hand for a minute, considering. Finally, he took it and drew it up to his forehead. "I hear that we pulled one heck of a hustle on Bellwether, but I'm a bit fuzzy on the details. How about we start with that?"

Judy waved over towards the couch on one side of the room and told him to lay back on it. As he did so she grasped his head in both hands and touched her forehead to his, breathing carefully to help focus. She brought up the memories of finding Doug's lab, hijacking the whole train car and the chase to the museum where they met Bellwether, trying to run but falling, then developing the plan to trick her into confessing and carrying it out in minute detail. Then, she mentally packaged the whole sequence up and visualized sending it to the fox lying beneath her.

A second passed, and then Nick let out a blood-curdling scream. "What?" She asked, trying to hold him down as he started to kick and attempted to pull himself away. "Nick! What's happening? What's wrong?"

Gasping for breath he muttered, "I... ate... no, how?" His eyes scanning the room wildly in confusion and terror.

"Hold on Nick, I'm going to figure out what's wrong." Judy plunged into the fox's mind once again, just as she had back in the tunnels below New Zootopia months ago.

*Fangs pierced her throat, collapsing her windpipe and forcing her to gasp for breath as her life's blood gushed down her front.*

*The fox, higher consciousness suppressed by the Night Howler serum coursing through his veins, threw the bunny back and forth as she struggled in vain to remain alive. He wouldn't be waiting for his meal to finish its death scream before he began to tear chunks of flesh loose and gulped them down in a mess of blood.*

*She felt him eating her alive as she tried to cry out in pain. As the light faded all too slowly from her eyes she prayed that she wouldn't remember this.*

"No, no no no." Judy said as she viewed the horrific memories in her friend's head. "That's not what happened, we replaced the pellet with a blueberry. You were only faking going savage. This isn't my memory!"

"No," Nick whimpered. "It's mine. I can tell." He went limp in her hands, breathing heavily as he struggled to rationalize it. "Those bastards must have recreated the scene to fit their own twisted taste, forking me into a helpless bunny and a drugged-up fox."

The bunny gasped in horrified realization. "That's why you don't remember. Nine Lives perverted our most intimate times together and indelibly tied them to their torments in your

mind.” She backed away, staring at the hands that had channeled the memories into her friend, a drop of blood from her nose stained the fur of one palm. “Oh Nick, I should have realized. I’ve hurt you again.”

Nick sat up, shaking his head. “No Fluff, I know you had the best intentions. You genuinely thought you were helping me. And I shouldn’t have just expected some AI messing with my brain to provide a quick fix for my problems anyway.” He got up to head out the door. “Thanks for the memories, we really did hustle her good didn’t we?”

Despite his assurances Judy found herself sobbing quietly for a full fifteen minutes after he’d left. It seemed like every time she tried to help she only made things worse. She was about to fab enough synthesized moonshine to give herself alcohol poisoning when her muse interrupted her reverie.

[Judy, remember when you wanted to try out Ego Hunting?]

Judy sighed. “That was when I was trying to figure out what the closest thing these anarchists had to cops was. Before I understood that all I needed to do to earn my keep was volunteer for maintenance a few times a month.”

[Yes, but it wouldn’t hurt to have some credit available for when you leave the swarm, and that fake ID you’ve been using is sorely lacking in Rep. Don’t you agree, “Jessica Karota?”]

The bunny ex-cop glanced over at the CivicNet profile in her real name, unused since she’d unwittingly run off on her indenture, and compared her new profile. “Jessica Karota” had a C-Rep 50 points lower than “Judith Hopps” and a mere 15 points on the Circle-A network more popular with her current neighbors. “Skye, these mammals here are perfectly fine with a lot of things that most states would consider crimes. I’d probably get thrown out an airlock if I tried apprehending any of the fugitives hiding in this mobile junkyard.”

[I wouldn’t be too sure about that. I may have found someone that the locals wouldn’t mind being rid of. And I suspect you might particularly enjoy taking this one in.]

At that comment Judy perked up in curiosity. “Who? A member of Nine Lives?”

[Worse.]

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A couple hours later Judy was clinging to a wall in one of the Vermin swarm’s freighters that had been converted into a makeshift zero-g habitat. She stamped a gloved foot on the wall and saw blue electrical sparks crackle on the plating, satisfied that the shock pads were functional she set it back down and let the glove’s electromagnets secure her feet to the surface. Carefully letting go of the wall she unslung the particle bolter slung across her back and held it ready.

The Lunar criminal databases listed Volkov Ursinus, or “Horribilis” as he was also known, as a serial killer. He preferred to identify himself as an “Exmammal”, one of the various psychopaths who modded themselves until they’d deemed themselves beyond the petty concerns of mere mammals. In his case he’d adopted the strain of that philosophy that sought to become the perfect predators, while viewing all other mammals as their rightful prey.

The information Skye had secured suggested that Volkov had been drawing together a sort of personality cult, calling out to Vermin curious to experiment with a new lifestyle that truly didn’t give a scat about what other mammals thought. However, he would occasionally go out alone on “hunts”, demonstrating his superiority over other mammals and independence from them.

As Judy hung there she heard a primal bellow off in the distance. Shuddering she bent closer to the surface and carefully aimed her rifle in the direction of the roar. Seconds passed, feeling almost like hours, before a naked and terrified-looking squirrel ran out just ahead of the scything claws of a monster.

The creature that stormed into the room may have been a bear once, but now it looked more like some prehistoric reptilian horror. Its’ blood-red hide was completely bereft of fur, instead bearing patches of armored scales. The jaws sprouted fangs that looked more fitting on a deep-sea predator than on any mammal, even a grizzly bear. Its’ claws were more like blades of bone than gripping nails. Topping the whole thing off was a tail that whipped out from behind the monster, culminating in a vicious-looking stinger. Judy couldn’t help but watch in horror as the thing finally grabbed the hapless rodent in its’ jaws and the little mammal disappeared down its’ throat.

The Exmammal was still swallowing when Judy decided not to bother with a live capture this time. She took careful aim for a patch of bare skin on the monster’s neck and let loose with a particle stream. A faint trace of blue Cherenkov radiation followed the accelerated particles as they slammed into bloody hide.

Horribilis ducked out of the beam’s way and carefully felt the wound with one hand, as he processed the damage he snarled in barely concealed rage. Judy fired two more times before he could zero in on her location, putting superficial pits in his carapace. Shrugging off the damage easily he turned in the direction of the shots and with another roar charged straight for her.

With a start, Judy leapt from the wall and attempted to bounce her way out of the corridor, firing over her shoulder every so often. But it was all she could manage to keep moving away from the monster as she bounced around in the microgravity. She was starting to regret not training more in freefall, or bringing a plasma rifle with her, when her precognition caught a modded bear claw sweeping down towards her.

The bunny bounty hunter pushed off out of the way of the sweeping claws, only to run straight into the Exmammal's barbed tail. It pierced her armored suit and jabbed her in the back, penetrating the back of her ribcage. Judy coughed as the impact forced air from her lungs, tasting something coppery in her mouth. [Nanotoxin detected,] Skye noted, [nanophages neutralizing as we speak. Identified as Neuropath.]

[Good thing I got that nanoware then. I was starting to think I'd have been better off with some Skillware. How about the hole in my lung?]

[Your medichines are working to seal the injury. The bleeding has already stopped. But I would advise running now.]

Judy attempted to do as her muse advised, but whether it was caused by the pain in her back or a lingering touch of the neurotoxic nanites, she mis-stepped and careened ineffectually into the air. Though she twisted and writhed she was helpless as the monster almost casually clamped his jaws around her waist. Her feet were at the edge of Horribilis's throat, but she had no room in his mouth to rear back and kick and her gloves covered her claws. She slammed the butt of her rifle into the creature's head but he shrugged it off without effort and swatted it out of her hand to spin off into the distance.

She barely even felt the teeth that ringed her midsection, probably tipped with diamond or something similarly sharp to maximize penetration. He swung her back and forth but didn't take any further action, was he waiting for something? Her medichines were stopping any bleeding that wasn't plugged by the teeth in her so he couldn't be waiting for her to lose consciousness from blood loss. It suddenly came to Judy when she caught a glimpse of his tail twitching behind him. [Skye, how long does Neuropath take to kick in and what does it do?]

[Approximately ten seconds, give or take. And it causes debilitating pain for eight hours.]

Immediately Judy let out a blood-curdling scream, the rabbit's characteristic "death cry" that she had faked in the museum over 30 years ago and her stand-in from Nick's memories performed for real. She let her arms fall twitching to her sides as she shrieked at the top of her restricted lungs. Horribilis, satisfied that his nanotoxin had finally taken its effect, let his jaws open enough to release her from his fangs and began to use his tongue to move her deeper into his gullet.

As soon as she could get free the nanotech-infused bunny kicked with both legs against the back of the Exmammal's throat, activating the shockpads and sending electricity coursing through his nervous system as she went flying out of his mouth. Thin streams of blood flowed briefly from Judy's wounds as she swung around in mid-air and braced to spring off the far wall again. Moments before striking the wall she pulled a short vibroblade from the holster on her thigh and flicked the switch to activate it. Another quick thrust and she was on top of the

convulsing monster's head, grasping tenuously onto an ear with one hand and plunging the buzzing knife into his skull with the other. Carapace armor and bone cracked all too slowly as she drilled straight down to the hilt, then began to drag it to the side sending a stream of blood and brain matter flying into the open air. Finally, Volkov Ursinus ceased twitching and hung there in the microgravity, just seeping bodily fluids that gradually drifted towards the air vents.

Judy hung there, gasping for breath as she realized what she had done there. She'd already killed things that were once normal mammals before in her brief time as a Firewall sentinel, but this was different somehow. He wasn't transformed and controlled by some TITAN virus, he had done all this of his own free will. Horribilis was a serial killer who ate other mammals, actually ate them, the universe would be better off without him.

The thought of him eating people reminded her with a start. He'd swallowed someone whole barely minutes ago. With renewed determination Judy scrambled down the carcass's scaly sides to the abdomen and pressed a long ear against his hide. She could just barely make out a frantically beating heart and labored breath. Carefully picking a spot not too close to the source of the sound she plunged her vibroblade in and made a long slit in the armored skin. Digging through fat and viscera she finally came to a squirming sack of flesh and slit it open, allowing the squirrel from earlier to tear her way out.

The newly freed prey gave a strangled gasp as she scrambled out, her fur bleached and patchy from the digestive acids. She stared at her rescuer with a surprised expression that seemed more like shock that she was still alive than the incredulity at being saved by a little bunny that Judy usually got.

"Are you okay?" Judy asked the arboreal rodent, who shook her head, no. Of course she wouldn't. "Can you speak, or sign?" The squirrel lifted her head and pointed at a scar running across her throat.

[She has no mesh presence either. I would guess her inserts were burned out as well as her vocal cords removed.]

"That's horrible!" Judy exclaiming, realizing that it would be just in the Exmammal's character to do such a thing. "Can you make it to the ship's clinic? Know where it is?"

The squirrel nodded tenuously, then her eyes widened and she unexpectedly spun about and dove back into the slit in Horribilis's side.

The bunny went scrambling after her. "What are you doing?" She tried to pull the rodent out by her bushy tail, but she'd grabbed onto something large and stuck fast in the pseudo-bear's digestive tract. Then, Judy caught a glimpse of just what the rodent was trying to dislodge, a half-digested mammal skull, with the glint of a cortical stack lodged at its base. Suddenly realizing the squirrel's intent, she reached and yanked the stack out with one of her

own hands and slipped it into a pouch on her belt. She turned then to the squirrel and asked, “you think there’s more in there?”

The acid-scarred rodent nodded sadly. Judy sighed and powered up her knife again.

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They’d dug through the Exmammal’s stomach and intestines together, retrieving half a dozen diamond memory drives from the viscera. When she’d been satisfied they’d uncovered all the ones there were to be found in his body Judy sent the squirrel off to the clinic with the pouch full of stacks while she sawed Volkov’s own stack out of his neck. Her bounty in hand, the bunny left the converted cargo ship and returned to the *Inconveniently Tied*.

Judy was using an EVA rider to move between ships of the Vermin swarm, little more than a few seats bolted to a small rocket and some magnetic grapples. But it had enough AI to steer the contraption across the empty void to the larger barge. The EVA sailed into an alcove in the outer hull of the ship and settled into a rack next to a couple of other short-range space vehicles. As soon as her ride was clamped in the bunny unstrapped herself and carefully walked her way over to the airlock, using her magnetic footpads to stick to the hull plating. It took her several minutes to walk barely twenty meters with the magnets.

Finally reaching the airlock door she reached for the control panel and pressed the button to start the depressurization sequence. The inner door closed and sealed, the indicator on the panel showed the air being siphoned out of the lock, and nothing happened. Confused, she tapped the button again, still nothing happened.

[Skye, what’s going on?]

[I’m trying to connect to the local mesh.] Skye replied, [but it seems like I’m being impeded somehow, I’m not getting much of a, oh!]

[What? What’s going on?]

[Judy,] the muse’s digital voice seemed to carry a tone of regret, sorrow. [It seems that Volkov’s followers have been posting negative reviews to your Circle-A account en masse, you have also received several hundred anonymous down-votes recently. As such, your @-rep has dropped drastically and the ship minds aren’t keen on letting you on board now.]

Judy stared at the closed airlock incredulously. [Are you serious? I’m being left out here to suffocate because some idiots hate me online?]

[That’s the reputation economy for you.]

The bunny’s foot tapped against the deck plating with considerable annoyance as she thought. [Is there anything we can do? Go to another ship perhaps?]

[No ships in range that don't also rely on @-rep to vet boarders. Though, the crew is letting us send one message. You have any suggestions?]

Judy's mind immediately leapt to Nick, but she started to remember what had happened earlier that day. Would he still be willing to help her? Did she have anyone else in this fleet who she could trust? With a sigh of dismay she sent the message off to him.

Within ten minutes a red fox bounced up towards the airlock and looked out towards her. He started to say something but Judy couldn't hear it, or even receive a ping on the mesh. Groaning inaudibly, she started to sign in Zootopian Sign Language, <No mesh access. Is that you Nick?>

The fox's eyes widened slightly in surprise but he signed back <It's me Fluff, want me to come on out?>

The bunny made a nodding movement with her hand. Nick turned to the wall, shouted something at it, and the inner airlock door cycled open.

Once he'd slipped into his own vacsuit and opened the outer door to step up to Judy he laid his palm on her shoulder. Judy received a ping on her mesh inserts then, asking if she wanted to initiate a Peer-to-Peer session with him, and she gleefully accepted. Less than a second later Nick's voice resounded in her head, "When did you learn ZSL Carrots?"

"I started taking lessons after the second or third time you tried using hand signs with me." She responded, glad to finally be able to speak with someone. "Remember the first time, at the hospital on the dam?"

"Heh," Nick thought. "Yeah, I thought I was being obvious, and you didn't understand a single gesture. So what's going on this time?" He said, with a drastic change of subject.

Judy told him everything, from finding out about the Exmammal she'd thought she could serve justice to, to getting locked out thanks to mesh trolls. All throughout her explanation, Nick stood there and listened, occasionally looking off to the right as he tried to remember or accessed the greater mesh. Once she was done, he showed her an image in AR, "that squirrel you mentioned, did she look like this by any chance?"

The image he shared was a dead ringer for the squirrel she'd fished out of the augmented bear's guts, minus the acid burns. "Yes, that's her! How is she?"

"In a vat for a few more hours. Thing is, her profile claims she was volunteering to be Horribilis's next prey. And so do all the other mammals he's known to have killed in the Swarm."

“What?!” Judy shouted again. “That’s ridiculous, who would...” She stopped herself, even before uploading she’d seen all sorts of weird things mammals found kinky, and had doubled that knowledge since setting foot on a Vermin barge. “She.. she didn’t look like she was consenting.”

“Are you sure about that Fluff?” Nick retorted. “Vermin, and Autonomists in general, aren’t very big on fuddy-duddy statist morals. If all parties consent, you can do just about anything and anyone. That’s why your @-rep is history.”

“But,” she thought back for examples, “Horribilis had a bunch of un-sleeved cortical stacks in his guts. She went back in to retrieve them.

Nick cocked an eyebrow at her. “Stacks? What did you do with them?”

“I gave them to,” Judy checked the caption on the picture, “Debra. She was taking them to the clinic I thought.”

“Hmm, let me check some things.” Nick stood there for several minutes, twitching through various screens visible only to himself. “Okay, looks like they’ve all been identified, but the owners have been resleeved from backup and aren’t interested in merging with them so they haven’t been uploaded. But, it’s generally agreed that popped stacks don’t need consent to be uploaded, so if I give out a favor here, some references there, and...”

There was silence for at least ten minutes, then Nick suddenly grinned in triumph. Seconds later the ship mesh came up on Judy’s entoptics. “What did you just do?”

“Well, my mesh-illiterate friend,” the vulpine explained smugly, “those stacks you found have been instanced as infomorphs. They’re now trashing the rep of those Exmammal wannabes who destroyed yours, and having some harsh words with some backups of theirs who left their own negative feedback. Can’t reverse all the damage but it should net you enough fresh rep to make up for it.”

Judy perked up, looked around, and threw her arms around Nick’s waist with enough force to temporarily throw them off their magnetic boots. “Thank you, thank you thank you! I was afraid you would still be angry about... you know.”

Nick straightened himself up and let out a sigh that she could feel through his thin vacsuit. “Yeah, I thought about that while you were gone. Me and Jack had a little therapy session actually. Whoever decided to give muses psychology modules was a genius.”

“And?” Judy inquired.

The fox sighed, shook his head, and finally replied. "I needed those memories, I can't just run away from my past anymore. Forgetting doesn't heal the bad things that happened, it only cover up the holes." He turned to look directly into her deep purple eyes, "thanks Judy, for everything." With that, he turned towards the door.

Judy sprang over to the control panel and pressed the button before he could reach it. This time, it opened without hesitation and she breathed a sigh of relief.

"You know," Nick commented, stepping over the threshold of the lock. "Next time you get locked out, you could try using n-rep."

"Dare I ask what that is?"

"Well, you see, after the Fall there weren't too many members of the old crime families still around, so the remaining Yotes, Nekos, Bigs, etc. got together and decided to band together into an organization called the Night Cartel." Nick waited for Judy to step into the airlock before continuing. "Anyway, one of the things they started was a rep network for criminals and their associates, the Night."

Judy looked at him, confused, as the doors closed and air started to fill the sealed room. "I'm pretty sure Jessica Karota has no criminal associates."

"Maybe not," Nick replied smartly. "But, a certain cocky bunny who once saved a mobster's daughter from final death by fibreglass donut has a pretty decent score on the network." He pulled up another AR window, this one displaying a heavily-encrypted encrypted social network profile with a rep score more than twice as high as her original @-rep, and several photos of her birth sleeve. Noting her stunned twitching, he added. "Oh come on Carrots, who would be less likely to tell the authorities who you really are?"

Judy considered it for a minute, then decided she would need more time to think about it and closed the window but bookmarked it for later.