

"What are you planning, fox?" Judy inquired of her old friend and partner.

"Well," Nick started, moving in the direction of the shop he was looking for. "You've never done a gradual resleeve before, have you?"

Judy raised a puzzled eyebrow at his question. "No, I don't think so. The only times I've resleeved were either from a backup or farcasting. What do you mean by gradual?"

"You've also had problems resleeving without continuity haven't you?"

"You know I do!" She replied angrily. "I'm officially diagnosed with body dysmorphia, in addition to... you know what."

Nick nodded, he'd read Firewall's data on asyncs, and knew full well that in addition to mental disorders they tended to have trouble acclimating to new bodies. He also had no small amount of personal experience with Judy's assorted meltdowns every time Firewall needed them to farcast somewhere for a mission. "I was starting to think," he continued. "That part of the problem might be that there was always time lost whenever you've resleeved. Hours, if not days, between upload and download. Maybe you start to suspect that perhaps you're not the same person who sat down in the Ego bridge."

"Are you going somewhere with this?"

"Right, anyways gradual resleeves don't have that particular problem." Judy's expression lost a minute amount of its annoyance and he continued. "Instead of suddenly waking up in a new body, the ego bridges form a neural link between the old and new bodies and slowly copy the brain over neuron by neuron. You feel yourself slipping from sleeve to sleeve."

Judy started to think about it. "I'm not sure I see the point. It sounds like it wouldn't work for farcasting more than a few light-seconds, and it would be useless for backup restoration."

"Not everybody wants to remain in the same sleeve they were born with, or a pseudo-clone thereof compiled from DNA sold by her relatives." Nick commented, looking pointedly at Judy in her Heirloom morph. "And when they decide on what they want to be, the transition is easier if they know for sure that it's still them. Even if it takes a few more hours."

The bunny groaned, "I suppose that makes some sense. But what does this have to do with me?" By this time they were right outside the shop, its' AR sign reading "Phil's discount resleeving. Buy or rent, try before you buy option available."

Nick tapped the door lightly and it slid open. Along the back wall was a row of biomorphs in stasis tanks, ranging in species from mice to horses, morphs from simple Splicers

to six-limbed custom morphs. However, the sleeve that caught Judy's attention was another rabbit doe, this one had tan fur and a white streak on her head, but its' height and build seemed oddly close to her own. Her vulpine companion noticed her attention and stepped up to the tank in question, tapping the transparent aluminum with a light finger. "We're passing within shuttle distance of a Consortium habitat soon." He stated, as if it explained anything. "It might help if you didn't look quite so much like you."

"Wait," Judy said incredulously. "Are you saying that's going to be me?"

"Yeah," Nick replied, nonchalantly admiring the merchandise. "It was a bit of a challenge to find a decent balance between new looks and familiarity."

"Hey, I did most of the work here." A capybara stepped out from around a corner. As he approached he lifted a leg that ended with a hand and held it out before Judy, tentatively she gripped and shook it. "Name's Phil, nice to meet you. Now, lagomorph Splicers and Bouncers are common as Maresian dust but I thought you deserved something a little better for the inconvenience. That, and I speak from personal experience when I say that four hands take a little getting used to." He withdrew his hand-foot from Judy's grasp and set it back on the floor. "Fortunately, we picked up some bunny Exalts a few months ago at Mustelis. One of them was fairly close to your dimensions and only took a couple hours of bodysculpting to get them within the range you're used to. You won't bang your head on any doorways and if you misjudge a jump it'll be because your new sleeve is stronger and faster than the old one. But, you should also have an easier time calculating the distance too."

"Stronger, faster, and smarter." Judy repeated, trying to imagine that kind of life. Her previous regular sleeve had been a Fury with substantial strength and reflex boosts, as well as a giant by bunny standards. Even her current Splicer already healed faster and needed less sleep than her original "Flat" body. How would the Exalt compare?

"You don't need to take that one, necessarily." Phil cut back in, "you can give it a test run and if it's too different for your tastes you can sleeve back into your old body free of charge."

Judy slowly shook her head, trying to imagine seeing that face in the mirror every morning. "I just don't know."

"Look, Carrots," Nick laid a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "If you're going to keep up this line of work you're going to need to resleeve regularly. I really think this might help you."

"Alright," the bunny finally conceded. "What do I need to do for this gradual upload thing?"

"Well..." Phil started, showing a bit of discomfort in his voice. "Have you ever been in a healing vat while conscious?"

“Yes,” Judy replied. “It wasn’t pleasant.”

“You know how you can do a normal upload with a ‘dry’ Ego bridge but downloading into a biomorph requires a ‘wet’ Ego bridge similar to a healing vat?” The capybara tapped the side of the tank. “For a gradual upload, you’ll need a wet bridge on both ends, sorry.”

Judy stared at the body in the tank for a full minute before sighing “Let’s get this over with.” She followed Nick and Phil to the back of the shop.

Judy stood, stripped down to her fur, in a hollow cylinder of sapphire just barely wide enough for her to reach out with one arm, and fully immersed in nanite-infused gel. Her lungs were burning with one last breath that she couldn’t quite bring herself to let out. She knew the nanogel would keep her tissues fully oxygenated once she let it in, but the instinct to avoid drowning was hard to suppress. Eventually, the buildup in her lungs became more painful than she could tolerate and she gasped in a mouth full of gel, her final breath escaping in a stream of bubbles.

[Ready to begin?] Nick’s digital voice came over her mesh inserts as the bubbles rose. She could see him refracted through the crystal, his features distorted by the medium.

Judy started to speak, but the nanogel in her lungs arrested her vocalization. She nodded instead and sent a quick reply over the mesh. [As ready as I’ll ever be.]

The arm of an Ego bridge swung down towards her head and she allowed it to grasp her. She heard the soft hum of the scanners as they powered up, and waited. Judy hung there floating in the fluid waiting for something, some sort of change or transition. But nothing was happening.

Nick was leaning back against the vat opposite her own, his eyes rolled back as he accessed something on his entoptics. [Nick,] she sent him. [Is anything supposed to be happening yet?]

The fox perked up from his virtual reverie and asked Phil a question she couldn’t quite make out. Then he turned back to the bunny and made a suggestion. [Try flexing the fingers of your right hand.] His eyes darted repeatedly between her tank and the one across.

Judy sighed inaudibly and curled her right hand into a fist. Feeling the fingers clench against one another she released them with a feeling of relief. [Seems normal, anything next?]

Nick was staring firmly at the other vat now, she noticed. He hadn't been watching her when she moved. [You sure about that Fluff? Did you even look?]

Puzzled, the bunny turned her head as far as the Ego bridge would allow to glance down at her hand and clenched it again. She felt her fingers curling, but didn't see them move, at all. All she saw was an open hand hanging limply at the end of her arm. Shocked and a bit horrified she lifted her right arm up and brought the unresponsive digits before her face, they waved uselessly in the gel. She brought her other hand up and flexed the fingers to verify that they still worked, when they moved she began to grasp its unfeeling twin. It was as if her right hand were nothing but a piece of warm meat taped to the stump of her arm.

[Judy, calm down!] The vat resounded with a loud *bong* and she looked up to see Nick tapping on the crystal wall. He gestured towards the vat he'd been leaning against. [Look!]

The tank across from her held the Exalt sleeve they'd suggested for her. Through the refraction Judy could just barely make out the Exalt's clenched fist. Tentatively she unclenched the phantom hand and the Exalt's fingers slowly unfurled.

Realization dawning, Judy slowly began to move her left hand up her right arm, testing the nerves. Her upper arm felt normal still, but the lower was growing a little numb to her touch yet she could still sense it there. After waiting a little longer she attempted to rotate her right wrist, and the Exalt responded.

The numbness-not numbness continued to spread up her arm until the Splicer body's limb hung limply at her side while the Exalt counterpart swung slowly up and down, every now and then touching the meat it was affixed to. As the transition crossed her shoulder it began to slip down her side to her leg, while simultaneously spreading to her neck. Just as her toes were losing feeling she suddenly found herself staring at Nick leaning against the opposite tank with her left eye, and the back of his shirt with her right. As she waited her muzzle gradually transitioned and she saw the fox's back with both eyes just as her remaining leg crossed over. Finally, she was left with one arm attached to an unfeeling Splicer body and one Exalt body with an unfeeling arm. Judy's Exalt sleeve gently massaged her left arm with her right as feeling gradually flooded in.

When her left Exalt hand could curl into a fist Judy took one last look at the Splicer she'd been, its' vacant eyes staring blankly into space as the body hung there in the gel. A drain opened in the floor of Judy's vat and the tips of her ears felt air as the Ego bridge detached. She glanced up and noticed that the vat's lid had opened. With a start, the newly re-embodied bunny leapt up and hung over the lip of the cylinder, coughing out nanogel.

"Oh God, oh God." She said as soon as she'd managed to draw in a fresh breath of air. "I can't believe it I just changed bodies piece by piece I was losing parts of my Splicer body as I was gaining Exalt parts. It was one body with physically separated parts. Gradually replacing

them almost like how your cells are slowly replaced nothing like the sudden awakening of farcasting. Wait when I farcast last I left the brain of that Splicer the same and in stasis until I returned and overwrote it did I really travel or did I just make a copy of myself on Mustelis who sent me back her memories? If she was just a copy did she commit suicide when she allowed the rental sleeve to be mind-wiped at the end of the mission? Was the bunny on Mares whose stack I was copied from a different mammal entirely? Was the Judy Hopps who died on Ark also a completely different mammal? Am I just a one-year-old with the memories and personality of a 50-year-old? Does that make me a kit or an adult?"

Phil turned to Nick with a bewildered look. "Is she always like this after every resleeve?"

"No." The fox reassured the capybara. "One time she was hallucinating for a whole day after resleeving. This is a fairly mild reaction."