

The Satisfied Mind

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"How is everything," the fox waiter asked the two of them, briefly interrupting the privacy of their dinner. "Can I get you anything else?"

The human male and the female raccoon both nodded enthusiastically. "Everything's fine" the human replied, "we're all set for now, right Jess?"

His companion, a lovely raccoon lady answered with "yes, thank you." The waiter nodded and departed with a smile. The human watched him go, his eyes travelling across the scene of the restaurant. His gaze wandering, if for only a moment or two, he caught the view of the other diners. Furies of many races and humans mingled happily together in the restaurant, just as they did everywhere else in this world. Taking in the scene before him, he smiled slightly, if only briefly.

As he looked around him, everything seemed so nice, everything felt so right. How could it be on what should be such a wonderful night as tonight, that he had to tell her such bad news? Did he really think he could go through with it? Looking back at his furry lover, catching her eyes, he caught her smiling at him.

"Your mind wandering again, Dale?" she asked warmly.

"A little I guess," he replied, working at a smile of his own. No matter what, it could wait, he wouldn't tell her here. He wanted their last night together to be a good one, one he'd remember for quite some time. Although thinking about it, he wasn't sure if he'd really want to remember it once it was all over and done with.

"Well, I think I'm used to it," she said with a slight chuckle. "You can be a little distant at times, but you've been so close and warm with me, I can put up with a little mind wandering." No matter what he'd been thinking, he couldn't help but widen his smile to match hers as she reached out to take his hand.

Putting his hand in hers, touching the black of her glove-like markings that trailed up into the gray of her arms, he felt the familiar and pleasant sensation of the softness of her fur. Looking at her, seeing those beautiful blue eyes gazing back at him, he was painfully reminded of her beauty once again. Why did he have to leave her? It just wasn't fair.

Not knowing the quiet turmoil of his thoughts, she simply flicked her ear and winked an eye at him. "Come on Dale, enough of your silent ponderings, now that we've finished eating, lets get out on the dance floor."

Only a few months ago he would've refused the offer, being too nervous and uncoordinated to dance with her. She'd taught him the steps to a few dances since then, and they really hadn't been all that hard. He nodded, then walked with her hand in hand across the restaurant to join a

few other couples out on the floor. He liked dancing now, especially with her.

They were quite a charming couple, her in the lovely blue dress that complemented her fur so nicely and he looking smart in his casual dress attire. They reached the dance floor and walked out upon it. Their hands joining, they came together and found the rhythm quickly. Beginning the slow motions of the dance, they started moving to the gentle strains of the music playing around them.

As they danced, and he moved his body through the steps in perfect motion with her, she whispered in his ear. "See, I told you you'd become really good at this."

"Yes, but I had a good teacher," he replied, a slight chuckle to his voice as he rubbed his cheek against hers. He realized that wasn't all she'd taught him either. He'd learned so much else from her as well. In the months they'd been together, she'd helped him with his confidence. He'd been lonely before meeting her and she'd given him so much. Finding her had been the best thing for him, so why now was it suddenly so wrong?

His thoughts turning somber once again, he held her close as they danced, feeling the warmth of her presence. Feeling the touch of her fur against his skin for what he knew would be the last time, he struggled to keep his thoughts focused. He'd known it would be tough, but he hadn't realized just how hard it was going to be. At least she couldn't see his face he thought, for his eyes were beginning to water slightly.

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He managed to keep his composure for the rest of the evening, trying to keep his mind off of what he'd eventually have to do. He'd tried to simply enjoy her company, which was always wonderful, but it was so hard knowing he would soon have to part with her. A part of him even wished he'd never come to see her tonight, but sadly he knew what he had to do.

Later, as they walked up to the porch of her house, she stopped. Turning to look at him, she asked "Dale, you seemed preoccupied tonight, is something wrong?"

"Yes Jess, I've been thinking about us..."

"Oh?" Her voice became uneasy when she heard his sigh.

"Jessica, I don't know how to say this... but I can't see you any more..."

She just stopped, her mouth partially open, and looked at him for several seconds before she could respond. "No Dale... Why?" Her ears drooped slightly in her confusion.

He paused as well, waiting, looking back at her, before he could finally answer, his voice dull and heavy. "It's tough to explain, but I do owe you that, and I need to get through this... You know about my research up at the University, don't you?"

"Well yes, you said it was using computers for some kind of simulation work, but I don't see what that's got to do with it. I know you can get busy with your work and that we can't always spend as much time together as we like, but I don't see why that's any more of a problem now..."

"No Jess, that's not a problem, well at least not in the way you're thinking of it. I guess you are right, that I have been spending too much time with my work, and have become too intimately involved in it..."

"But how? You haven't been any more busy lately than you were before. We've had enough time together... What are you talking about Dale?"

"You know what I'm working on is a realistic simulation environment for a virtual-reality system, the ability to create custom worlds within the computers we have... You've never been outside of the city have you Jess?"

"Of course I have Dale... You know I'm from the country and I moved here after finishing college."

"Right, but that was four-and-a-half years ago, by your time, and you've been in the same place at the same job ever since. You remember other places, but you haven't been there since, have you?"

"Dale, what are you getting at?" she asked him, her hand gripping his arm a little tighter. Her voice sounded nervous. "I haven't had the time to go other places. I've been busy like you with work, and you yourself said this city has a lot of attractions to keep us entertained."

"How long have we been going out Jessica?"

"Come on, you know that, we've been together for close to nine months now."

"What about before that, did you have any boyfriends before me?"

"Of course I did. You know that, though of course I don't talk about them too often... What is this about Dale, why bring my old boyfriends up now? I don't like this."

"I know, and I'm sorry, but it's the only way I can think of explaining this to you. Now think hard Jess, those old boyfriends, can you remember much about them?"

"Sure, there was Bill in college and then Jerry who I met here in the city three years ago... Is that it, are you jealous of them, after all this time?"

"No, that's not it, it would be hard to be jealous of them. I'm just trying to make it so you'll understand. Can you remember anything about them, anything substantial?" He saw the look of confusion cross her face as her eyes opened wider with surprise. "You can't remember can you?"

"No Dale, what's wrong? Why can't I remember them? I should be able to..."

"The system isn't perfect Jessica, and we're still developing it. There isn't enough memory to store everything, so a lot of things are glossed over, especially deep background details..." He paused before continuing, knowing he had to finish, but feeling his resolve starting to crumble. "The simulations from our computers don't just create new worlds for us, they can create characters and personalities to populate them as well..."

Her mouth opened wider, but it took several seconds before she could speak, even then it came out haltingly. "No... No that's not what you're trying to tell me is it...? You can't mean that. It can't be..."

"I'm afraid it is... there was no really good way to tell you... I'm sorry Jess..."

"No, that can't be..." Her voice was getting louder and she was starting to shake as she stared at him with disbelief. "No, I can't just be a bunch of computer code... I'm real Dale, I know I am." As she trembled she held him in her gaze, the haunting look in her eyes reaching out to him, pleading for his assurance, something which he couldn't give her.

The small claw tips of her fingernails poked the skin of his arm as she gripped him with her hand. Staring at her, he did the only thing he could do and reached out for her, pulling her towards him. She struggled briefly against him, and kept repeating "no" as if it was a sacred mantra, while he held her firmly, waiting for her shivering to subside.

His soft whispers and strong, reassuring contact slowly calmed her down as he held her uncertainly in his arms. Finally, after she'd stopped shaking, she looked up at him with watery eyes to see his face full of concern, showing wet eyes of his own.

"But it all seems so real to me..." she whispered plaintively to him.

"I know it does. That's the way the system's supposed to work. You're normally not supposed to realize the limitations of the system. I had to let you see it tonight, so you'd believe me... and so you might understand." He hesitated only briefly before kissing her gently on the tip of her nose.

Her reaction was an angry one, her eyes going wild almost instantly. "Understand? How do you expect me to understand this? You tell me I'm not even real, that I'm just another toy in this video game you've created, something you could use for your own pleasure... and now that you're done with me it's all supposed to be okay?!"

He held of her struggles once again, trying to calm her down. "No, of course not... It's not like that at all... Listen to me Jess. You remember how surprised and nervous I was when I first found out you were interested in me...? If I'd created you just to be my plaything then it wouldn't have taken you so much work to make me realize you liked me, I would've been coming after you."

"Most of the people in the city are just background characters. We still don't have the system up to a point where we can create a lot of true personalities. You were one of the few characters that had any real power in their algorithms and you surprised me when you evolved so far above the others..."

She winced as he said that, and he saw the hurt in her eyes. Holding her tighter, feeling his own eyes stinging hotter, he continued. "I'm sorry Jess. I hate to talk of you this way, because you've become so much more than just the original software you were generated from. Whether you believe it or not, I do care about you as a person... You've become very real to me."

"When I first created the simulation, I thought it'd be fun to create a city full of furies, the

aesthetics of the different races mingling together with humanity really appealed to me. I knew it was just playing with the daydreams of a science-fiction fan, but it seemed like a good idea at the time. Plus, what better way was there to show the uses for virtual reality than by creating a world so similar, yet so different from our own?"

Pausing, he continued. "I didn't create you or any of the other characters to be used like that. It was all part of the research and I wanted to see where things would go. I never thought it would come to something like this. You amazed me when you came so far and I realized you were more than a simulation... Can you imagine how surprised I was when I learned you were actually interested in me as well?"

"You mean you weren't just acting then?" she asked, her voice still quiet.

"No, I really was surprised Jess. I hadn't imagined something like that happening with the simulation, and not to mention that I was kind of shy to begin with..."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. There's a part of me in you, a part of my thoughts and creativity that I used to create you. You grew from that seed into who you are today. We have so much in common it's no wonder we were interested in each other... I put so much effort into you that of course I like you, how couldn't I?"

"Of course now I wonder if we'd have been better off if this had never happened. Things happened so fast that I really couldn't understand the implications of it, and now it's hurt both of us... It's been wonderful Jess, and being with you has done so much for me, but I've realized I can't go on like this... I'm sorry, but I've got to stop it."

"But why? You yourself said that I'm real enough for you... I still can't really believe all of it, but with your help we can get through this... It's not that you've found someone else is it?" The hurt shown on her face gnawed painfully at his stomach. As he watched those sad eyes looking back at him through a mask of black and gray fur, he saw tears now running freely down her cheeks.

"No, it isn't that, not at all... It's just that no matter how much I try to delude myself, I still know deep-down inside that this place isn't real. I'm amazed at how well the simulation actually works, but I can still find the flaws in the system. This isn't my world Jess, and no matter how much I've become attached to it, I can't stay here forever..."

"But Dale, please don't go, you can't leave me, not like this... Please, I love you..."

He reacted as if he'd been slapped, her words stinging at him. His tears matching hers, he pulled her tighter. "I don't want to Jess, but think of how it is for me. No matter how much I want this to be real, it can never be that way... I can hold you here now and feel your warmth, but we can never leave this city together. In the end I wake up alone in the lab and you're not there... I can't just be satisfied inside my mind. I thought I could be, but I need something more than that."

"I love you too Jess, but it can't work out. We can't grow old together, we can't have kids, I can't bring you home to meet my parents... We can't do any of that. You mean so much to me

and being with you has given me a lot as well, but we can only go so far. If I stay too long I might be trapped and never want to leave... I'm sorry, I can't begin to tell you how much I'll miss you, but I need to find my own life in my world."

Now feeling himself trembling, he held her against him. His lips finding hers he kissed her desperately. She responded in turn, plaintively holding onto him as their mouths came together for the last time. Closing his eyes, he tried in vain to hold onto the moment, but it slowly crept away from them, leaving them lost and alone in each other's arms.

Eventually, he was forced to pull away from her. He moved slowly, but with a sense of finality. Looking through his tears he stared into the depths of her blue eyes, wet with their own salty sadness, as they called out to him. Forcing himself to move, he uttered his final words to her, his voice trailing off into silence. "I'm sorry Jess, I really am..."

He turned and walked from her, leaving her standing there stunned and saddened. Her normally bouncy and expressive striped tail hung limply behind her as she cried on her porch. She watched him go through watery eyes, and as he reached the end of her walkway, he simply vanished from her world, leaving her so alone.

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An instant later he found himself back in the lab once again, laying there on the reclining chair of one of the simulation stations. He no longer wore the fancy attire from his night out on the town with his lovely raccoon girlfriend. Now instead he was dressed in a simple pair of shorts and a T-shirt. Blinking from the disorientation of the abrupt change in environments and feeling some wetness still left in his eyes, he turned to look at the sterile walls of the lab. As he was removing the netting of wires which rested on his head like a cap, and which had connected his consciousness to the computer, he caught sight of an image of Jessica displayed on a nearby monitor.

The image had frozen at the moment just after he'd left her world, pausing the simulation. Looking at the monitor, he saw her captured in her sorrow, her head buried in her hands. He stared at the image of her caught in the stillness of her grief, transfixed by it for several moments. It wasn't until the door opened and a familiar figure walked into the lab that his attention was brought back to the real world once again.

"Hey Dale, the computer said you were back... How'd it go? How are you feeling?" His friend looked at him, a little unsure of the situation.

"Okay I guess. Thanks for being here to meet me after this, Scott."

"No problem bud... I figured you might want someone here, though I can give you some more time to yourself if you'd like."

"No, I think you're right, I don't think I want to be alone right now..."

"I'm proud of you" Scott answered, watching him a little uneasily as Dale got up from the chair, a little unsteady at first. "You were getting too involved with this thing and I'm glad you finally listened to me... It's for the better you know."

"Then how come I feel so miserable?"

"Hey breaking up with someone's never easy, even if they are just a computer date..." He cracked a smile at that, but immediately regretted it.

"Dammit Scott, she's more than that to me and you know it." As he responded, Dale could feel his face heating up.

"Hey guy, take it easy. I didn't mean it like that..." Scott answered, then paused, confused as to just how to continue. "Hey, I don't really get how she could mean that much to you. That whole world just seems like a giant cartoon to me... but she managed to capture your attention somehow..."

"Yeah," Dale let out with a sigh. "She means more to me than you could probably understand. She's very real to me, and now I've had to leave her behind... Can you even think what that does to me?"

Pausing, looking at his friend, studying him, Scott finally spoke. "I guess so... It's like a really realistic fantasy isn't it? If it's like that I could probably see myself falling for it too... I'm sorry Dale, but you did do the right thing."

"It doesn't feel like it..."

"It's not always easy, guy... Do you really think you could be happy there, trying to live your life in an electronic fishbowl?"

"I don't know, but I can't imagine living without her... Look, could you just stop the preaching and let's get out of here?"

"Alright... Sure thing," Scott replied, and started heading for the door when Dale stopped him.

"Oh wait, there's one last thing I need to do here..."

Scott watched as Dale moved to sit in front of the computer terminal next to the frozen image of his virtual lover. Dale gazed once again at the picture of her frozen in her grief on the screen, then turned his attention to the terminal and began typing.

"Wait a minute... I thought you said you were done with this, Dale?" Scott's tone showed his worry for his friend, as well as a little irritation.

"I know. I'm done with her... I have to be," Dale replied, his voice faltering slightly. "I won't be going inside any more, I can't do that, but I'm not done with the experiment yet and I can't just dump the whole system... I still need to watch it and see how things progress."

"But how can you keep it going? Now that she knows what's going on, won't it affect the whole simulation...? Besides, maybe it'd be for the best if you took her out of it so you couldn't see her anymore..."

"No, I can't do that." Dale sighed again as he continued to enter commands into the terminal. "She's too important to do that. She's the most advanced part of the simulation... Plus," he

added, his eyes beginning to water up once again, "I don't think I could handle doing that, not right now.... No, I'm just dumping the last fifteen minutes or so, all of the discussion we just had. I couldn't just leave her like that..."

As Scott watched, the frozen image of Jessica crying on her porch disappeared, to be replaced by an earlier scene of Dale and her walking up towards her house. It was just after their wonderful evening out on the town, and the moment before Dale had broken the horrible news to her. Pausing, Dale watched the screen with blurry eyes, staring at the image in front of him, reminded once again at what he'd been forced to give up.

"There, that should do it..." he muttered, and after another brief hesitation, he entered the last keystroke to the sequence.

Watching the screen, the two of them saw the image jump into life as the two figures in the virtual world began their conversation once again.

"Dale, you seemed preoccupied tonight, is something wrong?" Jessica asked, once again looking just the slightest bit concerned.

"Yeah, I know," the image of Dale responded. "It's just that work's been busy and there's a few problems I'm having trouble getting off my mind... I'm sorry I let it take up so much of my thoughts tonight..."

"Oh that's okay, sweetheart. I think I've gotten used to that... mostly. Besides, if you come inside do you promise that you can keep your attention focused on me for awhile?"

Smiling, the image of Dale replied "yeah, I know I can do that..."

The two figures kissed, a light simple kiss, but a promise of more soon to come. Taking her hand, the human and his raccoon lover entered her home. The scene ended there as the door shut behind them, the virtual camera not following the characters any further. As the screen cut to black, Dale turned to look at Scott, smiling slightly. His face showed some pride in his accomplishment, but the aching sadness in his eyes was plainly evident.

"What...? You made a copy of yourself," Scott asked incredulously, "but how... I didn't think it was possible?"

"Well, we can't make a true copy of someone yet, the system isn't that complex" Dale explained with a slight shaking to his voice. "However, going through the logs of the last couple months, I was able to model my responses pretty well. I'm not sure if he thinks like me, and I know he can't think as deeply, but his actions should match mine fairly well, at least most of the time... It's the best I could do, hopefully she won't be able to tell the difference."

"But do you really want a copy of yourself hanging around inside the system like that?" Scott asked, once again confused by Dale's actions and a little worried for him. "I know why you're doing it, but it seems kind of creepy to me."

"Look, what we had was very real to me. It's not just about maintaining the system's integrity, she means a lot to me and I still care about her..." He paused, trying to sort through his feelings before continuing. "I'm not sure how I feel about having a ghost of myself running around in

the machine, but she didn't do anything to deserve this, and at least one of us should be happy... I owe her at least that much." The tinge of jealousy in Dale's voice was quite obvious.

Scott only nodded at that, still trying to understand the situation, but catching more than a glimmer of empathy for his friend's emotions. "I think I understand Dale, but right now you need to get away from this... Things can handle themselves okay here for awhile... Come on, I'll buy you a drink..."

Dale simply nodded. He followed Scott to the doorway, then hesitated as his friend walked through it, leaving him alone once again. He turned and gave one last glance back to the now-dark monitor, gazing upon it, feeling his loss wash over him once again. He paused there, hesitating a few moments before he could finally leave the room. Before he turned his head away, he whispered "good-bye Jess" to the equipment humming softly in the empty lab. Switching off the lights, he then joined his friend waiting for him out in the hallway.