

*NOTICE FROM UNITED LIO IMPERIAL CENTRAL COMMAND:
THE FOLLOWING IS CLASSIFIED INFORMATION UNDER ORDER OF
MAXIMUM HIGH GENERAL [redacted]. Release of this information is forbidden
under penalty of immediate execution.*

*Projections from the War Department show defeat by the Krakun Empire
within 700 to 1000 years. Primary deficiencies in the United Lio Empire and allies
point to weaknesses in technological development at its current pace. The ULE
will fall behind. Surrender is not an option.*

*Parliament has therefore approved of measure 18-18-STX. In a limited
capacity, ethical standards in scientific testing, enumerated in the measure, are
temporarily suspended. Fifteen thousand grants for study have been approved
for immediate implementation in the new STX facility in [redacted]. Initial results
are promising. The War Department will be ready to reassess the war within 20
years.*

APPROVED BY AUTHORITY OF [redacted].

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Subject 059 sat up in her bed, yawned, and stretched before climbing off. The clock read 0:15 in thin numerals—fifteen minutes past median sunrise. Throwing open the shutters, light flooded in from the open plaza just outside her bedroom window, filling the space with ambient light from the painted blue sky box. Mysa poured into the street, walled with faux-plaster housing, raising their stalls for the Morning Market, while others danced around the fountain playing the reed-flute and tambourine. Fresh air—or rather, recycled, but just cold enough to be bracing—billowed into the overly warm room.

059 had never been a morning person on the outside, and inside her chest she still wasn't. The noise overwhelmed her senses—but she smiled at the

sight of mysa so happy to have this opportunity. Besides, the only free time she really had was in the morning, and so it would not do to waste it.

She checked herself in the small bathroom mirror, brushing her teeth and giving her long incisors a good once-over with the edge of her tongue. Then she quickly brushed her hair, which always got mussed up a little in the night. Making sure a mysa's mane was presentable was always a good idea when dealing with the lio. Mysa weren't as obsessed with the head-fur as the lio were, but a good rule of fashion was to have clean, straight, full, wavy, slightly bouncy hair, and properly applied make-up to smooth out any rough patches. Her neck and cheeks looked softer and more slender.

The green blanker switch installed in her ear, though, would always look crude and out-of-place. It was heavy, sagging the ear. At least every mysa here had one, though few mysa made such heavy use of it as she did. At least the part that connected through her skull to her brain was invisible.

059 made her way down the fake-wood stairs to the common area on the bottom floor, where both her suitemates waited.

"Morning, Fifty-nine!" said 112, an older mysa that reminded 059 of her mother. She clearly wasn't, what with the much darker color to her fur than anyone in 059's family. It was in her eyes, mostly, the way they seemed to wrinkle a bit in the sweetest way.

"Morning, One-twelve," 059 said, yawning as she sat down on the bench.

"Nutritional porridge again!" 112 said as she sauntered to the pantry.

"Ugh," said 486, who'd been hovering around the fridge. She was a lot closer to 059 in age—or so 059 thought. It was hard to tell anything with 486 as she'd rarely volunteered information about herself, but she had pretty red fur and was a wizard with makeup, so it hardly mattered. "Did they get my request to stock some real food? I could kill for some actual cider oats." She removed a large can of sugar water from the fridge.

"It *is* real food," 112 said. "And nutritionally balanced."

Almost like it was a dare, 486 stormed half a meter to the adjoined office space and jabbed her paw onto a testing station. The readout over it read back *486: nutrition optimal save the following issues: low blood sugar. Daily exercise recommended.* Staring 112 in the eyes, she popped open the top of the sugar water and took a swig.

“Well, I like it,” 059 said.

“Of course you like it,” 486 said, kicking her naked pink paws up on the table. “How could you get bored with something you don’t remember?” She leaned back with both arms around the back of her head, gripping the can with her thin pink tail.

“The memory blanker doesn’t affect *everything*,” 059 said. “You could use yours once in a while, it’s hardly traumatizing.”

486 took a swig without moving her paws. “I like my memories to stay where they are, thank you very much.”

059 took on a coy expression and leaned over the table. “The blanking tests pay out more,” she said in a sing-song tease.

“What do you care?” 486 scoffed. “We never see that money.”

“What flavor do you want?” 112 asked, turning to face 059 from under a row of similar-looking packets on a stuffed shelf.

“Surprise me,” 059 said, paws up and out.

112 ran a finger down the row of paper flaps, then yanked at one near the left side. She turned the packet over in her paws. “Ahh... green berry!”

486 made a face, and washed out the imagined taste with more sugar water. Fifteen seconds in the microwave later, a hot bowl of porridge with little green bits inside slid across the table under 059’s nose. She didn’t know what 486’s issue was—it smelled and tasted fine to her.

“Y’know,” 059 said, “if you didn’t want money for your family back home, why’d you sign up for the Stacks?”

“Oh, I gotta explain it again, huh?” 486 put on a knowing smile. “Maybe it’s the hundredth time I’ve told you already.”

059 rolled her eyes. “Oh, ha ha. I do remember the conversations we have you know. The blanker doesn’t affect our home life.”

486 shook her head. “I just wanted out of the ghetto. And I know you did too. You told me several times.”

“Then I must have also told you I love my family and want them to have a better life.”

With an unconvinced, “mmm,” 486 stood up and walked toward the apartment gym, swigging on her sugar water as she went.

059 sighed. Every mysa in the Stacks took on the job ostensibly for the money, but more than that they all just wanted out. It was peaceful here, deep under the surface.

The broadcast monitor drove the point home all the more. The news reported a battle over some backwater planet, another “turncoat” anup turning out to be a double agent for the krakun, food riots, pollution, and an endless parade of lio politicians who never seemed to face justice for their crimes. Who would want to be out there?

059 spied 112’s reflection in the steel fridge. She wondered how her mother was doing without her.

—

059 took up the exercise wheel next to 486, both wearing monitor cuffs clipped around their necks like leashes and collars. Some stuffy lio drama that 059 never learned to appreciate played on the overhead monitor. It was just enough to keep the Stacks from feeling too isolated.

“Sorry if I sounded cruel,” 486 said, removing the headphones from her ears. “I do sometimes wonder what it’s like to not remember the recent past.”

"It's nice," 059 said, huffing. "I get to live one day at a time without even remembering any of the stress I get put through."

"That's what's curious to me," 486 said.

"Curious?"

"Like, they can just selectively erase a memory *and* it removes the stress of experiencing that memory?"

"Yup," 059 said. "Maybe you should try it out."

"Absolutely not." 486's expression hardened. "I mean, you wake up and only remember experiencing three hours every morning, for months."

"Years," 059 said.

"Right. And one day you'll wake up an old maid."

059 waited for 486 to finish the thought, but apparently that was the entirety of it. "And?" she asked.

"What do you mean, 'And?'" 486 said. "What's the point of living if you don't remember it? By the time you're old, you'll have very little notion of who you were!"

"Who even knows who they are anyway?" 059 said. "I'm not a pup anymore. That part of me only exists as memories anyhow."

"I'm not talking about the past," 486 said. "I mean I don't want to wake up one day to the sudden realization that my life is over!"

"That's how it already works though," 059 said. "What's the difference between dying with a lot of memories and dying with a few?"

486 huffed, and soured her expression, but she didn't answer. 059 frowned a bit, but let her friend stew. It was a harsh truth, she knew. But it was deeply true—what was the point of a long life spent revisiting trauma?

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Multiple tall pillars surrounded the habitat's central park, holding up the ceiling. The pillars seemed to vanish into the painted skybox, though a decent stare gave the illusion away for what it was. Nothing in the theater that morning interested them, so 486 and 059 laid in the fake plastic grass watching the motion billboards that framed the base of the pillar.

One familiar poster flickered by: a lio in a lab coat—more of a cape than anything—along with the words, *“Ask about becoming a lab assistant today! Better hours, better pay! Limited slots available!”*

“Still thinking about it?” 486 asked.

059's ears reddened. 486 grinned.

“I meant the lab assistant position, but I see you're still thinking about Tunac.”

Tunac was the stack supervisor—a lio, at that. It was strange, especially given that 059 had every reason to hate lio. But she didn't. Especially not Tunac.

“Fifty-nine loves a lio!” 486 leaned over her, paws and tail ready for full-body tickles. 059 grinned, pulling away at once and curling into a little ball, laughing prematurely.

“I do not!” she protested amid the fit.

“Do so! Do so!”

486 wrapped herself around the squirming 059, nibbling her up and down her cheek. 059 desperately clawed her paws away, but could barely lift herself off the grass. As she stood, 486's tail wrapped around her ankles, and she collapsed back on the fake hill as 486 straddled her once again.

059 forced herself to stop laughing, and only barely succeeded. “C-come on, you know I'm ticklish—”

“That's what makes it fun!” 486 said. She tousled 059's mane, plucking aside a loose strand of plastic grass.

But all too soon, the stack-wide buzzer sounded. Fifteen minutes to first rotation. And 059 was in first rotation.

486 sighed, looking down at 059, paws planted firmly at either side of her head, legs almost crushing her waist, keeping her pinned to the gentle slope.

“Can I get up?” 059 asked politely. “I don’t want to take a penalty.”

“Fifty-nine...” 486 sighed. “Don’t overwork yourself, please.”

“I literally can’t,” 059 insisted. Besides blanking her memory to avoid trauma, it also avoided regular workday stress. When she’d originally entered the Stacks, she’d done all sorts of tests. But non-blanking tests ultimately proved long, boring and repetitive.

“Come on, lemme up,” 059 insisted. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning, as usual.”

“Of course.” 486 rotated herself off of 059 and sat down on the hill again. 059 composed herself a moment, standing weakly and brushing at her mane. “Does it look okay?”

“It’s fine, go see your boyfriend.” 486 swept her paws at 059, ushering her past the central spire and out of the park towards the steely Stack Transport Facility that took up the entire north wall of the habitat.

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Each habitat stack hosted one thousand mysa numbered 000 through 999. This was further divided into five rotations of two hundred mysa each, each rotation handled by a different lio supervisor. 059 had thanked her lucky stars that they’d assigned Tunac as her rotation supervisor. He’d worked with their group since the beginning, even before the lab arranged the permanent habitat.

Mysa always packed the waiting room with exactly two hundred seats. Fifteen minutes after the first buzzer, the door lifted and the display overhead read out the first number: 000.

059 had started to recognize the particular faces of each of the first few mysa; Triple-oh being something of a celebrity just for her number alone. 001

followed her swiftly, and 002, on up and up until 059's number appeared on the display, and she entered the hallway just behind 058.

058 smiled at her like every time they saw each other. 059 smiled back. She rarely had anything to say to 058 although they saw each other nearly every day. Besides, she was waiting for her chance to peek past the display glass and see—

059's heart melted. Tunac, the enormous lio sitting behind the glass in the observation room, adjusted his reading glasses as he looked at the readouts on the screen for 058. 059 couldn't hear what he was saying from out in the hall, but the golden-furred giant was always so gentle with all his movements, his warm smiles to each of the mysa, his little bits of small talk...

As 059 queued closer, entering the circular L-junction just before the observation room, she could make out his words through the door as he spoke to 058.

"You've been on a streak in the P-series test chambers," Tunac said, his deep lio voice booming even through the PA system.

"Those are the memory-blanking chambers, right?"

"If you don't remember, that tells you everything you need to know." Tunac smiled.

The tease. The big goofball. 059 couldn't stop thinking about him.

The L-junction held a blanker kiosk in its center—a neck-high pillar with a small aperture made to fit the ring in her ear notch. Although most mysa didn't need their memories blanked for the day, standard procedure required everyone to set the blanking semaphore before entering the observation room.

This left her at a conundrum. While 059 was no stranger to having her memory erased, and she always planned on taking on a memory blanking test, she didn't like the prospect of forgetting her daily, minute-long conversation with Tunac. The shunter car that would take her to the test chamber would set the semaphore anyway! They didn't need to do this twice.

Which was why 059 had palmed a long strand of plastic grass into her paw and tied it into a hoop. She slipped the hoop around the ring in her ear. This didn't always work, as the fake grass was not a perfect insulator, but it worked often enough that it became a habit, and nobody ever seemed to take notice.

059 stepped up to the aperture and set her ear inside. The lock closed around it. In a second, she would hear a humming noise and either black out—indicating the semaphore set—and wake up in her bed the next morning, or it would buzz for a bit and let her through anyway. Strangely, though, the kiosk took its time registering—

SNAP.

"Ow, dammit!" 059 attempted to yank her ear free, but it stuck fast for a long moment before the latch on the aperture opened, and she stumbled backwards. The hoop of plastic grass floated to the floor, on fire. Tiny wisps of black smoke billowed off of it.

Well, she didn't have to dispose of it in a crack in the floor this time. Although she'd flinched, that was not a blackout, so it must have worked. Though now, the flesh surrounding her blanker notch swelled with a burn. At least it didn't catch her fur on fire; that would have been difficult to explain.

Once 058 had shunted off, the door opened and 059 stepped through into the chamber, facing the big glass wall, with Tunac sitting behind. Lio stood seven times taller than the tallest mysa, but that didn't matter to 059—she was used to living in a world where they dominated the media, and few sapient species were any shorter than the mysa. If fate dictated 059 to be a xenophile, well, the only direction to go was up.

The lio typed something into one of the dozens of computer consoles behind, swished his long inflexible tail, adjusted his glasses just-so, and turned back to face 059 as she stood in the designated waiting square, inside the dashed line.

"Good morning, Fifty-nine!" he said.

“Hi, Tunac...”

059 blushed, twisting her tail around her wrist and flattening her ears to hide her blush. They barely had a minute together every day, but that totaled to ... something.

“Looking lovely today,” Tunac said, leaning down and peering at her through the glass wall. “You do something with your mane?”

“Just the usual,” 059 said, batting at her locks with an open paw. Truth be told, she wouldn’t have bothered if this lio didn’t infatuate her so. Mysa could do only so much with their head-fur. It didn’t grow nearly as long as lio manes did—Tunac wore his long, dark red hair in a complex braid that flowed down his back, tied off at the end with a brass ring large enough for her to sit upon as a swing. In contrast, 059 just used some dry conditioner for extra bounce. She would have loved a braid like his.

“So,” Tunac said, looking at her stats on the tablet in his paws, “what chamber are you thinking of today? We have double payouts on—”

“I was—” 059 blurted out. She hesitated, but the awkwardness of stopping pushed her into speaking. “I was thinking about that lab assistant position! I think I could do it, I had good grades in school, you know!”

Tunac gave her a look. “So you’ve told me.”

“I did?” 059 wanted to curl up into a little ball.

“I believe so. First day we opened up the position.”

059 couldn’t exactly believe that, but with the memory blanking, she also couldn’t be certain. Regulations forbid him from discussing any of the tests, even with the blanking semaphore set. But he’d always been a miniature maverick with lab rules—and it wasn’t like this subject was about any test chamber in particular.

“Well...” 059 said, now that they had breached the subject, “what do you think about it?”

Tunac’s smile faded.

“Oh, come on!” 059 said. “Me and you, working together in the lab every day. We wouldn’t have this wall between us!” She tried to make it sound as enticing as she could, even though she doubted that Tunac thought much about her. To him, she reasoned, 059 was just one of hundreds of test subjects.

“Fifty-nine, I appreciate your enthusiasm.” His ears seemed to redden. “But this is very dry work. It’s nothing like the Stacks themselves.”

“I like dry work,” 059 said. “It’s *calming*. Did I ever tell you about what it’s like to grow up in the ghettos?”

“Plenty,” Tunac said with a sigh. “I don’t envy your early years.”

“What were yours like?” 059 asked.

Tunac grew quiet. He cast his gaze back at the windows that showed the line building up in the hallway. “We shouldn’t hold up the line.”

“Come on, we barely get to talk...”

At that, Tunac *visibly* blushed. Was 059 seeing that correctly? Did he actually reciprocate some vague feelings for her?

059 simultaneously loved the idea and dreaded it. She’d never quashed her own tiny ambitions, as much as she wanted to keep living every day without memory of their better part. But to speak to Tunac without this glass wall separating them... she could give it up.

“Seriously,” Tunac said with a cough, “please pick a test chamber.”

059 looked down at the small console at the foot of the square, and scrolled through the endless spreadsheet of chamber number after chamber number. Listed beside each entry was the payout and a check mark if the test required memory-blanking.

P-114, a memory-blanking course, seemed an obvious choice, as it was paying out double for return visits, and double again for successes. According to the screen, she had aced it multiple times in the past—though this was the main reason for setting the blanking semaphore before she chose a test, so she couldn’t remember how many she’d really selected a given test chamber. For all

she knew, they were lying to her about her record, to get her to select an easy payday! 059 sighed. These little tricks of theirs were so transparent, why did they even bother?

She tapped the screen, and the row inverted into a dark blue.

“There we go,” 059 said, “and I’ll pick up the conversation tomorrow, don’t forget!” Although she knew he’d understand her remark in jest, she meant it this time. She kissed her paw and blew it in Tunac’s direction. “See you tomorrow, Tunac.”

Tunac’s ears reddened all the harder. He waved back robotically. “Er... see you tomorrow, Fifty-nine.”

059 turned around and marched directly into the shunting chamber. The small cylindrical elevator snapped shut the moment her tail cleared the threshold. It began moving at once, marked by a slight increase in gravity and the quiet whooshing of the rails. The trip would take a few minutes, so they outfitted the blanking kiosk inside with a computer console that the test subjects could use to finish their preliminaries.

The screen read: *You have selected a test that requires memory blanking. Do you consent to having your memories of the test erased after completion?* She pressed “Yes.”

Please place your memory blanker notch into the aperture, the readout said. *If you require instructions on how to proceed, press the “Help” button. Press “Confirm” when ready.*

That part was the only bit that made her heart race. Although she’d only remember waking up back in bed, there was a version of her, to be deleted later, who would experience the test chamber. But she would be that other version for a while. She’d never experience it, whatever it was she did, and so did that make the other version of her some automaton? If she watched a video of her other self on playback, would she think herself possessed, a puppet under foreign control, even if that control was herself?

As a pup, she had invented a similar thought experiment. She considered everything she experienced a vivid hallucination, or that it could become one at any time. She'd be doing something perfectly normal, like joining in the solstice choir, but nobody in reality had begun to sing or dance. All the mysa would stop and stare at this lunatic suddenly detached from reality. She would be unaware of how they'd drag her off to the asylum, ignorant of the real world, lost in a fantasy that life was going on as normal.

Some version of her, living another life, unaware of the other. Such thoughts were games for pups. There was no use in overthinking this.

As she placed her ring in the aperture, bare and with full contact this time, she took a breath, told herself, "You'll just wake up back in the habitat," and pressed the button. The machine made a small squeaking noise. 059 blinked, wondering if it worked, and then—

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Her vision returned, patchy at first. She was lying on the floor of the shunting chamber, looking up. She sat up. A massive headache overtook her and *all* her muscles ached. Hurt, even, especially around the joints and in the back of her neck. She coughed, and struggled to pull herself up, but she felt like she hadn't moved a single millimeter for over a week.

"Ah, damn, damn!" she swore at the pain. She blinked several times, her face just a centimeter away from the kiosk monitor, as she could only make it up to her knees.

The monitor read: *All tests have been canceled. Please return to your habitat and await further instructions.*

059 blinked, confused. What happened? Was she still going to get paid? Maybe it was an issue with the P-series, she could still ask Tunac to get her to another chamber...

Why was it so hard to breathe?

The doors of the shunter stayed shut. Straining her aching muscles, she slipped her tiny fingers into the crack between the doors and pulled. The mechanism creaked, and the doors slid apart without too much protest, which was good because there weren't any tools inside the shunter to wedge the door open.

The gap she opened up immediately sent a billow of dust into the car. 059 fell to the floor, choked and spat multiple times. Her mouth was dry. That pain in her organs? Hunger, she finally realized.

She looked up into the darkened observation deck. No lights except for a single red emergency egress light shining just above Tunac's back wall of monitors.

"Tunac?" she called, crawling out of the shunter and collapsing onto the dusty tile floor. "Tunac!"

Nobody answered.

"Tunac!" 059 cried, whimpering from the pain. "Where is everyone? Four-eighty-six! One-twelve! Fifty-eight! Tunac!"

After some time struggling against herself, 059 finally stood all the way up. Her organs seemed to shift back into place. Her breathing was no longer quite so labored, but the pain remained. It just wouldn't stop her from walking out that door. There had to be something she could do!

But...what had even happened?

Moving her body helped the pain, though not the immense hunger or the weakness resulting from it. And less helpful still was shoving open the front doors of the Stack Transport Facility, only to find the entire park—at least so far as could be seen under the lone flickering lamplight overhead—covered in dust and ash like patchy snowfall, leaving it smelling of dampness and neglect. The smell was the worst, as it reminded 059 of the ghettos.

The A/C kicked on somewhere in the distance, sputtering to life with grinding pain, kicking up the dust as 059 waded across the park, down the old metal road between broken facades of the hostel walls. 059 coughed and hacked as dust tried to fill her lungs—at least the air pumps were functioning! Though 059 was deeply uncertain how little comfort “at least” could afford her. There were so many “at least”s. At least she was alive. At least there were no bodies to stumble over.

Possibilities raced through her mind—plague, war, famine, though few made sense or much difference. The most obvious fact was the lab had closed down. Her time out had displaced her more than a few months. She needed information, dammit! Were the other computers still working, even with minimal power? Could she still get out of here, or catch up with any escapees?

059 forced open the door to her residence. The place looked like someone had ransacked it—and while shocking, it was, again, not dissimilar from how the ghetto often looked. She owned little in the way of personal possessions to lose, but that gut reaction and fear clutched at her, threatening to drag her into the dark with panic.

The exercise wheels in the gym had collapsed onto themselves like tipped-over bookshelves. Empty holes in the walls marked where mysa had torn out computer consoles. Dust consumed everything.

059 raided the pantry first, finding a dusty old jar of sweet preserves. With what little might she had remaining, she unsealed the lid which came apart from the top of the jellied fruit with some weird green slick—something in the preserves had separated strangely, but she didn’t care. She scooped the gel out and then dug into the preserves with her bare paws. It tasted awful, like licking the underside of the refrigerator. But it had still kept some of its sweetness and most of its substance.

She had to ignore her queasiness when she looked into the jar again and found she’d nearly emptied it, she’d been so hungry. Sitting and digesting would

have been preferable, but sitting around would mean thinking about what had happened here, and it was the last thing she wanted to linger on. She was already on the verge of tears.

Instead, she scoured the home for a little water to wash off her paws, and found some under a large dripping stain in the ceiling. 059 carefully wandered into the middle of the large mold patch on the floor, and let the large droplets smack her on the wrist a few times as she looked away. She didn't want to know what contaminated the water. Once she'd taken just barely enough water to wipe the rest of her paws clean, she hurried back out of the room.

Trying to calm herself, she opened up one of the computer consoles at the desk, finding it had enough battery power to give her a few minutes. That was when she noticed the date, specifically the year—7184.

Her heart dropped. More than a few months. More than a few *decades*. She was over four hundred years out of time.

The residency files backed this up—she found a photograph of her own face as the 059 of 6764, listed as Missing. A parade of other 059s came after, serving in Habitat 110 for anywhere from a few weeks to fifteen years at a stretch. Four hundred years of 059s scrolled before her eyes.

059 clenched her paws tight, and refusing to let any of this get to her, she looked up the fate of 486.

Discharged 6788.

It was hardly a comfort. 486 and 112 would have been long since dead—even Iio didn't live that long. How had 059 survived, then? And how *could* she survive in this abandoned hellscape?

The battery indicator blinked. 059 didn't have much time left—but what else was there to find? What was she supposed to do now?

Next to 486's photograph, she found links to her personal files. 059 clicked them.

Password?

059 typed in “Alyadega”, the name of 486’s mother. Incorrect. She tried 486’s real name. Incorrect.

She rapped her knuckles on the desk and considered a moment—and she also didn’t want this to be true, but she typed in her own name.

Relaria.

The folder opened, and 059 broke into tears.

486’s private journal read quite candidly: *I know Fifty-nine told me she wasn’t interested, she just wanted a friend, but I can’t help myself. I need someone to look after, to care for, to love, and I love her, even if she doesn’t want it. Maybe she’ll change her mind when she accepts that Tunac really can’t love her back. I’m not holding my breath.*

And another: *It’s been three days since 059 disappeared. Tunac has been running diagnostics in the system, elevated the problem to the higher-ups, but the AI that runs this place can’t seem to figure out where it put her.*

And another: *I don’t think 059’s coming back. I have some things to think about. I wish I co—*

The console shut off. 059 collapsed face-down in the dust, clutching her arms around her head and sobbing. She’d known for a while...she’d even tacitly accepted that 486 was harboring a crush on her, but now she felt the weight of that disappointment she’d foisted onto her friend.

And now 486 was gone. There was no going back to apologize, to comfort, to reassure. Minutes of tears passed, until 059 could compose herself enough to sit up, brushing dust away from her eye but not bothering the rest that stuck to her.

Had the shunter misfiled her? Some computer error perhaps took her to long-term storage... she didn’t even know the Stacks *had* long-term storage, but it was the only explanation that came to mind.

What was she supposed to do now?

059 stood up and wandered weakly to the broadcast monitor at the head of the dining room table. Hoping it also had some battery power left, she turned it on, and nearly jumped backward when she saw the face of a krakun take up the screen. It spoke in krakunese, a language 059 had never learned, along with all the tickers scrolling along the bottom. Images flashed before her eyes—lio in cages, the World Parliament building housing dozens of the gigantic, building-sized lizards. What the lio were to the mysa, the krakun were to the lio.

When their enemies overran the world, what had happened to the mysa? Did her kind even exist anymore?

059 smashed her paw against the monitor's power button, and wandered her way back out of the kitchen. What was she supposed to do now? Leave? She had no other choice. She couldn't stay down here forever, and she didn't want to. But what would she be on the surface, in a world she didn't understand anymore? What was waiting for her up there? What could she do when even the lio were powerless?

She trudged about the bleak and empty stack for over an hour, pacing footprints into the A/C-stirred dust, looking back up at the Stack Transport Facility facade every once in a while, thinking that if there was a way out, it'd have to be there.

So she returned, her body finally having shrugged off most of the waking pain, though sluggishly, and began her search through every wall and corridor, most of which she'd never seen before. There were no "employees only" sections because the only section for employees was behind the glass. But how was she to get there? There had to be an emergency exit somewhere, right? Otherwise, where did all the mysa go when they fled? The shunter could only take a few at a time out of thousands.

Peeking into Tunac's darkened office, 059 spotted something she'd never noticed before—a mysa-sized hatch, peeking just slightly ajar from the outer wall of the habitat.

There must have been a corridor, somewhere in this building and probably just behind the right-side wall of the observation room, leading to that egress hatch. But again—the habitat had no employee entrances. She had no obvious way to get behind that wall.

From the observation room, she traced the wall through the corridor to the waiting area, looking for some hint of a hidden opening. Between the two areas, two frosted glass doors, now propped open, separated the circular L-junction, cylindrical like the shunter.

059 groped around the darkened wall, searching for something in the panels—only to realize that the wall opposite the door to the observation room held a thin door frame less than a centimeter deep that opened flush against a blank metal wall. The thin lining that encircled the room was apparently built to house three doors in a T-junction, but only two openings existed to create the L-junction. Odd, because if the circular lining of the room was just a stock piece, why three doors and not four to create a potential cross-junction—

Wait.

She put her ear to the remaining blank wall and rapped on the metal. It echoed. Hollow behind—a passage?

That's it.

If the entire inner lining of the airlock were just turned ninety degrees clockwise, and if there turned out to be an opening behind the frameless wall, that would create the T-junction. The new passageway would lead directly into the space behind the right-side wall and to the hatch in Tunac's office.

There had to be a switch somewhere nearby. But she'd already searched every wall! If only Tunac's side of the habitat could access the switch, well, she was screwed. She might find the tools to dig through the wall, but they had held for four hundred years—what could she do to them that time hadn't already? She couldn't recall a pickaxe anywhere in the habitat. They had no weapons or explosives. Why would they need them?

Returning to the observation deck, 059 attempted to access the console in front of the glass wall. No such luck, this one had no power. Not that she could recall any options of emergency egress. But she'd been in this room countless times, and there was nothing else here. Just the door out, the glass wall, the computer, a long-empty tipped-over medical cabinet, the shunter—

Then she realized: she'd never seen the wall immediately behind the shunter. A shunting car had always taken up that space. And the car had brought her here—did it still have power?

059 entered the car and accessed the console on the kiosk. She tapped the Help button on the screen.

What can I help you with?

059 tapped, "shunter issue."

What seems to be the problem with the shunter?

What would get it to move? She tapped the option, "person or item has fallen into the shaft."

Can the person or item be retrieved if the shunter car is moved?

"Yes."

Please step out of the car. Do not enter the shaft until the doors have re-opened. If the person or item cannot be retrieved, wait for car to reset, enter again and request for maintenance.

059 exited, and the door shut behind her. The car whirled behind the steel doors, which re-opened to no floor. She swallowed and peeked inside. The shaft sealed two meters down, though that was a decently long fall for a mysa.

She looked up again at the opposite wall of the shaft. A panel hung open on the wall with a two-pronged lever thrown into the "down" position. That was it!

She didn't know how much time the car would give her, so, gripping the rail that lined the outer wall of the shaft, 059 sidled around the edge, trying not to think about the pit behind her. First, she reached with her tail to grasp and throw

the lever, but it held fast. She sidled closer, trying to throw it with one paw. It still didn't budge.

This time, 059 wrapped her tail around the handlebar, positioned her toes just-so on the minuscule ledge, and grabbed the lever with both paws. She heaved. The lever creaked, and suddenly snapped into the up position.

The motion was so sudden, and the whirring noise so loud, that 059 reeled backwards. She squeezed hard with her tail, and tumbled over the edge—only for the twang! of her tail reaching maximum tautness as she smacked the wall of the shaft. That *hurt*. Blinking the stars from her eyes, she looked up—or rather, down—the additional meter and a half of open shaft to the very hard surface below. Again, it wasn't a long fall, but she'd broken bones on less.

She looked up at the switch—technically it made contact with the upper connectors and completed its circuit, but it jutted out at an angle. If the car moved again, it'd throw the lever back down.

Her tail was not strong enough to hold her body weight like this for very long, so she heaved herself upright so she could grasp the tiny ledge with her fingers, and made her way back to the open shunter doors.

Pulling herself up, she sighed heavily, her arms shaking again from the strain. Then the doors closed behind her. The shunter car rumbled to life.

"No no no!" She muttered, rushing back into the airlock to see if she was right. And she was—the L-junction had become a T-junction with a new doorway leading behind the room, just as she had predicted. Just as she spotted it, she heard the CLACK through the walls, and the inner sleeve of the airlock rotated once more.

059 leaped through the rapidly closing gap—only to hear *cccrunch*. She shrieked. An intense, searing pain ran immediately up her spine and ended in a loud, burning sensation she could feel in her teeth. She fell over, no more air in her lungs, and she shivered even more violently than before, swearing to herself.

Stumbling to her knees, she turned her head to the closed-off doorway, but it was pitch black in the corridor. Carefully, she gripped the mid-point of her tail, and tugged as best she could. It pulled taut.

The last four centimeters of her tail jammed between the walls, the tip pulled back as the inner cylinder had rotated back into position. 059 winced and pulled harder. Eventually, it came loose with a *scraaape* and *pop*.

She did not want to look. But she could feel it anyway—the bit where the sinew had given way, was all wet. She shivered, and gripped the end tight to avoid bleeding out, as little as a shredded tail would bleed.

Dammit, you idiot, you idiot, she told herself, trying not to collapse again. Somehow, she made herself feel more angry than anything—this place would not defeat her. She stood and marched down the corridor, broken tail in paw, until she spotted the faint red light of Tunac's room.

She pushed open the hatch. The room didn't look much different than from behind the glass, but it felt bigger. Was Tunac's chair always that large? It had fallen into the corner. The consoles didn't seem the kind to run on battery power. 059, clutching her tail in both paws, made her way around the desk, seemingly purpose-built to let her walk upon it, and tried to wake one of Tunac's consoles by stepping on the lio-sized touchscreens. None of them responded.

She was finally here in the room where she'd always seen Tunac, and nothing of him remained. No embossed mugs with his name on them. No personal items. Not even his fingerprints had survived.

059 sighed painfully. She briefly glanced at the remains of her shredded tail and winced. But it had stopped bleeding, and so she let go. She'd find some way to bandage it later.

A red emergency lamp illuminated the exit door. The desk ended before she could get there, but a convenient ramp led to the floor, and out the door, into the empty hallway of similar-looking doors that reminded 059 of an ocean vessel

more than a lab. At least this place was almost properly lit, its emergency light still a strong bright white.

Something rumbled. It didn't shake, exactly, just all the walls carried the sound of something big happening from far away—most likely up above. 059 stopped, but only for a moment. If she was going to die then she'd rather die out there than in here—already she was feeling very bitter about everything she had to go through, this whole damned facility, the ways that the lio treated her people that necessitated her to sign up for this in the first place...

Her stomach rumbled, and she sighed. She'd burned through what little she'd eaten, it seemed. And her resulting mood just wasn't in the best place to stop and think. She kept going.

After some wandering and following the yellow lines on the floor, she found her way to the exit elevator. Perhaps like the shunter, it was still working. But she could not figure out how to open up the giant lio-sized door just before her, until she spotted a small side door with the word *mysa* just below the dust.

She entered and found **an appropriately sized looping elevator: a long chain of platforms rising up one side and descending the other for more efficient mass transit.** *Please pull your tail in close to your body,* the sign next to the elevator said, and 059 couldn't help but read it as mocking. It was just as well, because this elevator wasn't moving either.

Another door read *stairs*. That was her only option, so she went in. A prefab construction of a spiral staircase stamped out of sheet metal rose up and up and up a concrete shaft. They faded into the distance in the minimal light.

059 went up anyway. Up, and up, and up.

She didn't know how far down this part of the Stacks even went. Every fourteen landings ascended was only *one* floor for the lio.

She lost count after a while. Her legs hurt. She was out of energy. But she kept going anyway, because what was she going to do? Stop and wait for herself to not be hungry? For the next several hours, her life became stairs.

Stairs.

Stairs.

Stairs.

Stairs.

Was she at one hundred landings yet? Perhaps she'd already passed two hundred. The walls of the shaft were unmarked, and she didn't want to spend any extra energy checking just outside the doors that led to the other floors. They were not what she was after.

Her thighs burned. Her shredded tail hurt. She wanted to fall on her knees and cry, to remember the loss she'd suffered or the horrible world she was forcing herself into, but she was only about the stairs now.

Stair after stair after stair.

And then, the next time she looked up, there were no stairs. She attempted to take a step up, but there was no stair, and she fell to a black carpeted floor. Grasping it with her paws, the floor contained no dust.

She looked up. A kiosk. The memory blanker out and ready to receive the notch in her ear. The monitor bright.

059 shakily stood up and walked over to the monitor to read it. For a moment, she thought she was hallucinating, like the little game she played as a pup, but it was all solid to the touch.

Congratulations. You've completed P-114 in four hours fifteen minutes, a new record by sixteen minutes. Please place your memory blanker notch in the aperture.

059 slammed her fists onto the console and screamed. *Of course this was the test! Of course it was!* She felt like an absolute fool for falling for it, but it was just so... *real*. She didn't even know the testing chambers were this extensive! All the non-blanking chambers never occupied a testing space larger than a single habitat.

She had so *many issues* with this. Did they really use 486's private journal data? Was the emergency exit really in her habitat? Did this happen to her before, and they merely fixed her tail before she woke up?

As enraged as this all made her, it was moot. *She was the 059 she feared to be, the 059 that would soon no longer exist.* She took several deep breaths. Tunac would be back. 486 would be back. She'd go back to how things were before. She wouldn't remember any of this.

But she wondered how many times she felt this right here, now, before. Every time she'd run this test chamber? That regret she felt toward treating 486 so badly, for missing Tunac, for feeling like she wasted all her time spinning her wheels instead of really aiming for what she wanted...

She didn't want to forget.

"Help," she tapped on the monitor.

What can I help you with?

"I don't want to have my memory blanked."

Our apologies, but blanking is mandatory. Your blanking semaphore has already been set, and the nature of the test must remain a secret.

059 sighed. She knew her protests were futile, but it was for the best.

She carefully stood next to the aperture, and slid the notch in her ear inside until it locked in place. Something buzzed loudly, and 059 blacked out.

—

Subject 059 woke up. She sat up in her bed, yawned, and stretched. Just as she expected: she was back in her bed, as she always woke up. Briefly, she pulled her tail out from under the bedsheet and inspected it, to find it restored—she couldn't even see the surgical mark where they would have replaced it.

Then she paused.

"...why do I remember what happened?" she asked the empty room.

Initially, she feared that she was still in the testing chamber. But the moment she threw open the shutters of her bedroom window, the sound of music from the plaza below filled her ears, and she sighed with relief at the sight of the mysa milling about just as they did the day before. It didn't exactly rule anything out, but at least she was not still in that hellscape that was room P-114.

Composing herself, 059 paced at the foot of her bed, wondering if she needed to report this, or if they were already coming for her. Even though the powers that be surveilled the habitats constantly, interference was uncommon. Why else could she repeatedly resist the initial blanking semaphore? They couldn't have eyes everywhere.

Still. This could have tainted their data.

After checking herself in the bathroom mirror—inspecting her tail once again because she was *certain* she recalled the last four centimeters being mangled, showering herself off and re-applying her make-up, 059 went back down the stairs to the common area.

"Morning, Fifty-nine!" 112 said again, standing in the same place in the unbounded kitchen area.

059 paused. Something was very familiar about all of this.

"...morning, One-twelve," 059 said anyway, because surreal feelings were no excuse to be impolite.

"Nutritional porridge again!" 112 said as she sauntered to the pantry, her tail swishing behind her.

"Ugh," said 486, popping up from hovering behind the fridge door with a can of sugar water wrapped in her tail. "Did they get my request to stock some real food? I could kill for some actual cider oats."

"It *is* real food," 112 said. "And nutritionally balanced."

486 jabbed her paw onto the testing station right next to the common office space. *486: nutrition optimal save the following issues: low blood sugar.*

Daily exercise recommended. She popped open the top of the sugar water and took a swig, while staring 112 in the eyes.

059 stood on the last step of the staircase, blinking at the scene.

“Fifty-nine?” 486 said, pausing in her stride as she passed. “What’s wrong? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

In a way she had, as 059 believed for nearly six hours that 486 was long-dead, but at the moment this bizarre sensation had superseded that feeling. However, when 486 spoke up, it broke the spell, and 059 shook her head.

“Erm, nothing, I guess...” she eyed 486 as she walked past her to take the same seat at the table. 486 mimicked her stare back. She took up her same seat as yesterday, paws kicked up on the table.

There was that feeling again. Overcome, 059 leaned in and wrapped her arms around 486, startling her.

“Hey, what’s the deal?” 486 asked, stroking 059’s shoulder. “You’re usually not this cuddly on purpose.”

“Just making sure you’re not a ghost,” 059 said.

486 opened her mouth as if to say something, but instead just wrapped her tail, can of sugar water attached, around 059.

“What flavor do you want?” 112 asked, oblivious, facing the pantry.

059 looked up at 112’s paw. She said, “Uh... surprise me.”

112’s paw swept over the packages in a familiar manner. She yanked at one near the left side and turned the packet over in her paws. “Ahh... green berry!”

“Actually you know what I want the red...” 059 blurted out, uncertain what she wanted different. “...flavor.”

112 shrugged, placed the green packet back on the shelf and pulled down the packet labeled “red bean”. 059 exhaled a breath she’d been holding in.

486 sat up, concerned, placing a paw on top of 059’s fidgeting fingers. She squeezed 059 tighter with her tail.

“Fifty-nine, you feeling okay today?” she asked.

“I... I have the strangest feeling of déjà vu,” 059 said. “On top of other things.”

“Ah, must have had your memory blanked one too many times.” 486 grinned.

“Maybe something like that.”

“Maybe you should stay off the blanker tests awhile.” 486 nodded. “Like me. I like my memories to stay where they are, thank you very much.”

486 was about to stand and leave, but 059 grabbed her friend’s wrists with a gentle wrap of her tail.

“Can you, uh, stay here for a moment?”

486 looked at 059, smiled, and shrugged. “Sure. I don’t have anywhere important to be.”

112 placed the bowl of red bean porridge in front of 059, who regretted asking for it because it was her least favorite flavor. Still, she ate it—then recalled how hungry she was when she ended the test. She’d been far hungrier than when she’d woken up. Had they fed her something when they mended her tail?

059 looked up to the broadcast monitor at the other end of the dining table. She’d only half-paid attention to it yesterday, and it was a relief to see that the krakun hadn’t overrun the Lio Empire within her lifetime... but was the newsfeed the same? It felt familiar.

“Fifty-nine,” 486 said, “You can let go of my paw now.”

059’s ears turned as red as her porridge, and she released her tightening tail-grip from 486’s wrist. “Sorry.”

—

059 began her morning exercise with 486 at the same time instead of joining her some minutes after, but it still felt very much the same which was also strange.

Considering the zillion steps she'd climbed yesterday, plus the nerve pain she should have been experiencing from her tail surgery, why didn't it hurt to walk today? Had they let her rest up for a few days to recover? No, her suitemates would have said something if she'd gone missing. Had the entire test been a hallucination?

She glanced over at 486, red fur flowing over a toned figure, and wondered just how much of the fake journal entries were accurate to 486's personality.

486 caught her peeking, and grinned. 059 turned to face forward at once, blushing fiercely.

"Look all you want!" 486 said, swaying her hips and tail in her stride. "I'm not keeping my figure for any male, that's for sure."

"I should get to the Facility early today," 059 said. "I need to see Tunac sooner rather than later."

"That again!" 486 scoffed. "Fifty-nine, think about it. They're not gonna let you be an assistant to a lio. I've seen a lot of research teams and they don't have *one* mysa, even for consultation. They don't care about us—that's why we're in here and they're out there."

"It's not about that," 059 said. Though, truth be told, she hoped maybe buttering up Tunac would help. He seemed so resistant to 059 pursuing the position, he'd gotten so quiet about it, avoided saying anything in particular...

But the current situation seemed more pressing than that.

"I wouldn't normally say this, it's just that you seem preoccupied with him, and I have to say it before you go down that burrow-hole... it's not going to work between you and Tunac."

059 became quiet. Her ears burned.

"We're different species, you know? And he's a lab technician. It's his job to put you at ease. But you're not gonna be his lover."

“Four-eighty-six!” 059 snapped, stopping her run and yanking off her vitals collar.

“Hey, wait!”

059 was already halfway out the gym nearing the door as 486 removed the monitoring equipment and caught up to her, seizing 059 by the shoulder. 059 pushed her away.

“What’d I say?” 486 asked.

“You don’t get it!” 059 shouted, and stormed out the door. 486 followed. When 059 had crossed the plaza and park and reached the transport facility doors, she turned, with 486 nowhere to be found.

059 sighed, ears drooped so far they laid against her shoulder blades. She pushed opened the door and went inside.

—

After requesting a brief consultation with the technician, 059 still had to wait another twenty minutes for Tunac to even arrive. He appeared behind the glass, pulling his labcoat on. Then he paused and looked down at the mysa already standing in the observation room.

“Uh... is there an issue?” the enormous lio asked, pulling his chair away from the wall.

“Tunac, it’s me,” 059 said. “Fifty-nine.”

“Oh... oh right!” Tunac wiped his face with a paw as large as 059 herself. “I am so sorry, there’s so many of you to keep track of...”

059 didn’t think she could wilt anymore, but she did. “It’s fine,” she said, quietly. “I didn’t expect you to remember me without the console saying.”

“No, of course I know you,” Tunac said, paw over his eyes and glasses now. “It’s just this insistence on numbers instead of names, I swear they’re trying to infect us all with dyslexia.”

“Uh-huh,” 059 glared incredulously.

He chewed his lip in thought, keeping his eyes covered. “You are the one that prefers to take blanking tests... and you keep flirting with me.”

“You must say that to half the gals here.”

“One time before the habitat switch, you showed me the mysa tail-hoop dance, and you tripped over your paws and fell, but I applauded anyway because I was a dummy and thought it was part of the act.”

059 brightened.

“I get it right?” Tunac peeked out from behind one lifted finger.

“Yes, dummy!”

Tunac grinned with a little wiggle of his ears, and placed his paw back down on his knee. “So, why are you here early? I have a lot of setup to do.”

“Ah,” 059 said, “I have a problem with the test I took yesterday. I figured I needed to come see you first.”

“Of course. What’s the problem?”

“I remember it.”

Tunac blinked. He adjusted his glasses and narrowed his eyes. “P-series or—”

“P-series.”

“Let me pull up the records.”

As he did, the little console in the observation room also powered on. 059’s pawprint opened up her own records as well, the same listing that she’d scrolled through yesterday. She found the P-series, and then paused.

“Wait... this isn’t right,” 059 said.

Tunac swiveled around in his chair. He bit his lip.

“I know, I went to test chamber P-114 yesterday,” 059 said. “And it showed me my records. It said I aced it every single time I took it, but this time it shows I’ve only ever failed it.”

“Are you sure you weren’t mistaken?” Tunac leaned toward the glass as though it’d help him see 059’s console. “Perhaps you looked at the wrong line.”

“No,” 059 said. “Because part of what I remember from running P-114 was that I *succeeded*. It even said I set a new record. That should at the very least be recorded here.”

“Ah...” Tunac sighed, scratching his cheek. “Database issues, perhaps.”

“Database issues!” 059 protested. “I don’t think so. I already suspected that you guys purposefully alter the records for testing purposes. Am I wrong?”

Tunac’s ears reddened, and he fiddled nervously with his reading glasses. “Well... I’m not supposed to say.”

“But I already know! What’s the point of dancing around the subject when I already have you figured out?”

“Okay, *maybe* that’s the case, but that doesn’t have anything to do with the blanker issue.”

059 frowned. It was true. She worried that perhaps her little trick with the hoop of grass had caused a problem, but she was hoping she didn’t need to admit to that. Who knew what the lab would do to her payments if they had to throw out all her data?

“What if instead of erasing, the blanker dumped my memories back into my brain?” 059 asked. “It can do that, right? ‘Wetware dump’?”

“Er, technically yes,” Tunac said. “But I don’t think that’s the case.”

“But it’s *possible*.”

“Listen,” Tunac said, “the best I can figure is that the egress memory blanker didn’t trip properly. You might be misremembering any number of things. So, first thing to do is to blank your memory again. If it takes, it takes. Right?”

059 paused, and nodded. “But... I’ll end up missing out on running a test for today.”

“It’s fine,” Tunac said. “I can mark you as having a maintenance issue. We won’t penalize you for it. Your memory will revert to your semaphore mark yesterday, and you’ll wake up in bed again tomorrow.”

The shunter opened up behind 059, and she stared at it. Knowing that she wouldn’t remember any of this ate at her. Not just the test, but her yelling at 486 just moments ago. Was 486 going to remember? How would 059 feel when 486 hated her and 059 couldn’t remember anything?

“You all right?” Tunac asked. “You must return to the restore point in your memory eventually. The blanker can really only go fifty to ninety hours before the capacity strains.”

“Are you sure it didn’t already restore my memory?”

“Absolutely.”

“Right,” 059 whispered. “I...”

She also kinda hoped she’d have more time to talk with Tunac. The 059 who woke up wouldn’t remember how desperately she wanted to talk to him. She needed to say something—about the guilt, about her real feelings.

“You’ll be okay,” Tunac said. “We’ll take care of you.”

059 returned to the open shunter car, and the kiosk therein. She placed the notch of her memory blanker into the aperture, and tapped the accept button. Sighing, hoping it would work this time, her vision blacked out.

—

059 sat up in bed.

It didn’t work.

“Dammit, dammit!” She marched to the bathroom and inspected the notch on her ear, wondering if there was something wrong with the blanker physically—if she’d really damaged it. But the scorch marks had vanished. Cleaned away? It felt the same as it had when it was first installed, and besides

some vague scratch marks in the metal, the ring didn't seem to have any structural weakness to it, or any obvious breaks in the gold wires inside of her ear lining.

Wondering what to do this time, and brushing her mane almost as a reflexive tic, 059 then noticed the digital calendar on her bedside clock. She'd barely given it much notice, but something *e/se* was wrong this time.

She'd woken up around 0:15 as she had every morning, but the date read 60/6764. Sixtieth day. She hadn't paid attention to the date, but her half-collected thoughts did *not* recall it saying "5X" on any of the previous times she'd woken up.

Perhaps she misremembered, like Tunac thought, but she made a note of it.

After adjusting her make-up a bare minimum, 059 stopped at the top of the steps and checked the time again. 0:26—was that the time she walked down the stairs yesterday?

"Morning, Fifty-nine!" 112 said from the exact same spot.

059 locked up. "Aah... morning, One-twelve," she said.

"Nutritional porridge again!"

"Ugh," said 486 from behind the fridge door. "Did they get my request to stock some real food? I could kill for some actual cider oats." Sugar water wrapped in tail.

It is real food. "It *is* real food," 112 said. *And nutritionally balanced.* "And nutritionally balanced."

Testing station. 486 placed her paw on the reader. *486: nutrition optimal save the following issues: low blood sugar. Daily exercise recommended.* Pop open sugar water. Swig, staring 112 in the eyes.

059 tried to remember exactly what she said the first time she experienced this. "Well, I like it," she said, before quickly stepping forward and taking her seat at the table.

“Of course you like it,” 486 said, sitting down next to her. “You can never remember the taste, and therefore you can’t get bored with it.”

And then 059 recalled herself saying, “The memory blanker doesn’t affect everything. You...” What’d she say? That was two days ago now, but it was really only about nine hours to her. “You could use yours once in a while, it’s hardly traumatizing.”

486 swigged from the can, using her tail. “I like my memories to stay where they are, thank you very much.”

“The blanking tests pay out more,” 059 blurted out.

“What do you care?” 486 scoffed.

And then 059 and 486 said simultaneously, “We never see that money.”

486 blinked, staring at 059. She was just as lost as 059, but probably for a different reason.

“What flavor do you want?” 112 said, not having paid much attention to the conversation.”

“Surprise me,” 059 said, still looking directly at 486.

She heard the flip-flip-flip of 112’s finger dragged over the packaged of porridge. “Ahh—”

“Green berry,” 059 said.

“Green—” now 112 paused. “How did you guess?”

“I need to get to the facility right now,” 059 said, standing up at once.

“Wait, wait!” 486 stood up, intercepting 059 before she barreled through the door. “What’s wrong?” Her touch was still very gentle. 059 almost felt like crying, that she should apologize right away, but something was *wrong*, even more than she suspected.

“I...” 059 wasn’t really sure how much she should talk about it, but she said it anyway, upfront, no dancing around the subject. “I think my memory blanker is on the fritz.”

486 and 112 exchanged a look with each other.

“Okay,” 486 said, carefully putting the can of sugar water in 059’s paw.
“But do eat something first.”

486 lifted her tail with the sugar water can. 059 wrapped the can in her own tail, and 486 released her grip. 059 sniffled and wrapped both her arms around 486.

“Hey, I’m sure it’s nothing too serious,” 486 said, holding onto her. “I’ll see you tomorrow, all right? Positive thoughts.”

—

059 arrived over an hour earlier than Tunac would even show up. She could access the observation deck, but all the lights were out as was the lab office on the other side of the glass.

After banging her fists on the glass to no avail, she turned to the shunter and tilted her ears. Was the emergency exit switch *really* just behind the car, like it was in the test chamber?

059 tried it. The doors closed, and when they reopened the empty shunter chamber revealed the exact same switch underneath. A few moments of sidling later, 059 flipped the switch, which gave way far easier than the old and rusty one had and sat flush with the wall—no shredding her tail apart this time. The exit path stayed open.

When Tunac entered the lab, he placed his briefcase down behind the rows of servers. He pulled on his labcoat, adjusted his glasses, stepped around the desk, and stopped suddenly at the sight of 059 sitting, waiting for him.

He seemed so alive from this side of the glass.

Tunac cast his eyes to the ajar emergency exit hatch of the stack.

“How did—” he started.

“Tunac,” 059 said, trying to keep her voice calm so as not to be too alarming, “the memory blanking *still* didn’t work.”

Tunac blinked, staring at her like she had grown a few extra heads.
“...what are you talking about?”

“Well, let’s see!” 059 stood and paced back and forth across the open desk space. “I told you about the memory blank issue yesterday—I entered a P-series chamber the day before, but it did not take. You insisted that the problem could not have been a result of an accidental wetware dump, then you told me to just run it again. I woke up in bed about eighteen hours later. Maybe it worked at first, then somehow reverted? Or was I just put immediately to sleep?”

“What do you mean I ran a memory blank on you yesterday?” Tunac asked, pulling up a chair to sit so he could be more equal with 059’s eyes.

“...I was in here early yesterday.” 059 said. “Or maybe some days ago? My roommates didn’t mention I was gone or anything, but maybe I just spontaneously recalled a memory that happened a while ago. I suppose it could be months, if this thing is time-delayed!”

“Uh... I don’t recall that.”

059 halted, feeling as though her brain just hit a segmentation fault. Her eye twitched.

“How’d you find the emergency exit, anyway?” Tunac asked, looking at the hatch again.

“Wait, *what?*” 059 nearly shrieked to get the words out. “I didn’t make this up, you lab jockey!”

“I can see that!” Tunac said, putting his paws up and backing away as if he really had a chance of being clobbered by a mysa. “I’m not saying you *did*, but... well, something’s clearly wrong, and I’m not going to just leave you like this.”

He held out his paw to her. She looked down at it—massive, but his pink pads looked soft and shiny, like a gel mattress. She glanced up at him—this massive, muscular lio possibly hadn’t even lifted a heavy object in his whole life.

So cute.

“Please, come with me,” Tunac said. “I’ll take care of this.”

059 stared at his paw before carefully stepping atop his fingers, resting her own paw on his thumb like a hand rail. She sank into his soft pads. He curled his fingers, holding on just tight enough to keep her in place like the restraining bar on a theme park ride, and lifted her up. Lio had lifted her many times before, but it was never with such gentle or steady motions.

She curled her tail around his thumb anyway, just in case.

"If the previous attempt bore no fruit," Tunac said, "I'll need to run a focused test on your memory blanker."

"I won't have my memory blanked just to wake up tomorrow and do this again," 059 muttered.

"Not a regular blanking test." Tunac stood and crossed the lab to the wall of testing equipment again, this time stopping in front of a different device altogether. "This is a live blanking test."

"What's the difference?" 059 asked, peeking over his fingers as he set her down on the desk before the device. It was like a kiosk, except it had straps for her head, arms and legs, as well as a muzzle brace. 059 had seen one before, it was used to keep patients from biting their own tongues.

Tunac gestured to it. "The usual memory blanker activation makes you black out for a moment because... well, restore point setting and blanking can be traumatic. But we *can* run it while you're awake." He pulled his paw back, his voice turning sheepish as he realized how awful that sounded. "Erm... if it's okay with you."

This meeting should have been in better circumstances, dammit.

"Tunac, I have something to confess," she said, only now because it might get her out of having to board the scary chair. "I think I might have damaged the blanker."

She expected Tunac to get upset with her, but he took it in stride. "Those things are meant to take a beating."

"Even an electrical surge?"

“Fifty-nine, think back to when you first got here. How often did we use electric shocks as penalties?”

059 didn’t want to recall that far back, and she didn’t appreciate his matter-of-fact tone. But maybe he had a point. Still, it was a fairly focused electric shock.

“But even so,” Tunac said, “if there is an electrical fault or an accidental wetware dump, this should identify it. Go on!”

“If it’s the only thing left to do,” 059 said. She hesitated, carefully exiting Tunac’s paw, uncertain how to approach. She climbed up into the chair and laid down, stiff as a board. The cushion was a soft gel, though still far too firm for someone of her weight class. Pointy things lowered from the array of tools above her, and 059 squeezed her eyes shut.

SNAP.

“Ow, dammit!”

One pinched into her ear notch harder than the kiosk usually did. It radiated electricity, and she squirmed inside her chair. Tunac reached in and adjusted the straps for comfort, then guided the blanker aperture onto her ear notch.

“But the weirder thing—” she said, trying to distract herself from the discomfort and the sharp things near her eyes, “I could swear this all started on the 60th, and when I woke up this morning, it was *still* the 60th.”

Tunac, tapping at the console next to the device alcove, froze. The expression on his ears was—alarm?

059 opened an eye and perked her free ear. Did he know something about this? Was there something more to 059’s repeated memories than she thought?

“A faulty memory blanker could have some side effects,” Tunac said, his voice faltering as he grasped for a plausible explanation.

“What side effects?” 059 said. “I keep thinking it just dumped my memories back into my brain, but you insisted it couldn’t.”

"That's right."

"So are the side effects like knowing *exactly* what my housemates are going to say before I say it? I'd think they were following a script except they deviated when I did..."

Tunac froze, fingers hovering over the touchscreen.

"What'd I say?" 059 asked.

"Uh," Tunac sputtered, "Perhaps you *did* experience a wetware dump..."

"What's *deja vu* have to do with me getting my memories back?" 059 asked. "Is there something you're not telling me?"

"Fifty-nine," Tunac whispered, leaning his elbow against the desk. He looked at 059 with pleading eyes—so *soft* for such an enormous creature. "I could lose my job."

"I don't want you to lose your job, Tunac!" 059 pleaded, though whether it was from the stress of everything, or the more immediate stress of her ear pinned down inside of a microsurgery chair, she could not say. She just started crying as she squirmed about uncomfortably under the weight of the device. "I just want to know what's wrong with me!"

"Okay, okay," Tunac said, reaching a paw into the chamber and stroking 059 down her side. She sighed and relaxed.

"I will tell you," Tunac said again. "I promise. But I need to set your semaphore. This isn't something you can walk around knowing."

059 nodded, sniffing, stiffly cuddling his fingers. Tunac finished his typing into the console with his free paw.

"Let me run the live blanking first. I won't send you to processing or anything, I will just set the semaphore, give you a simple memory test, then reset you to that interval. This should give me all the data I need. Ready?"

"Okay," 059 said. "But if I wake up in bed again, I'm gonna kill—"

—

“Relaria! Out of bed!”

Relaria woke in her dismal bedroom. The drip-drip-drip of the leak in the buckling ceiling into overfilled kitchen pans had rang in her ears all night. She would have to dodge more such messes when she climbed out of her bed, but she was still in bed, the patchwork quilt, once perhaps beautiful but now patchy from bleach to save it from mildew, caught around her leg and tail.

“Mom, I can’t!” Relaria protested as she fell to the creaking floor.

“You’re going to school,” said the mysa silhouette in the hallway, swatting at the buzzing insects with a wooden spoon. “You *will* make something of yourself or you’re going to spend the rest of your life washing dishes! Which? You have five seconds to decide!”

But Relaria couldn’t force herself up. The quilt almost seemed to pull her back, and she shrieked, clawing at the floor. Suddenly she flew off, and whipped against the wall.

When she stood back on her own paws, she was already at the train station—the mysa-sized one, like toys to the lio less than twenty meters away, past the piles of gravel, on the “real” platform. A large, ancient clock tower in the distance showed the time but she couldn’t tell where the hands pointed.

“We aren’t even at war with the krakun,” said Swendi, a male mysa who’d more than once tugged on Relaria’s mane when they were both in first bracket. “It’s just an excuse they made up to push austerity.”

“Swendi,” Relaria said, her ears burning with anger at him—a ridiculous amount, more than his hot air deserved. “Even if that’s true, what difference does it make?” She shifted the weight of the pack on her back. The thing was heavy, painful even. She didn’t want to look Swendi in the face. She never did.

“What, you believe any of the shit they feed us?” Swendi scoffed, getting into Relaria’s face. “Why are you standing up for them?”

“I’m not,” Relaria said. “It makes no sense that they’d have to *lie* to justify this shit.”

“So you’re saying the lio are just that noble, huh?”

“Fuck you, Swendi!” Relaria snapped. “Every fucking time. I try to be even the tiniest bit nuanced but you don’t want to hear anything except that lio are like cartoonishly evil manga villains. But it doesn’t even matter, it’s not like you care about mysa, either. Your shit conspiracies are just an excuse to be unhelpful, so you can say, *‘the world is too cruel, why bother living?’* Fine, whatever, insult the lio all you like, but it’s not gonna stop your mom from stringing out daily on pethedine!”

Swendi spat in her face. Relaria didn’t even hesitate—she clobbered him, fist to his jaw, snapping it. Another to his solar plexus. Swendi gasped, and Relaria shoved him. The edge of the platform moved, swooping half a meter closer just under Swendi’s heels. He stumbled, gasping for breath, as he fell to the tracks.

Just then, the train arrived. The brakes squealed, but they were not enough.

The red spray coated Relaria, her bag, and three other mysa just behind her. She stared in horror, wide-eyed, mouth open, Swendi’s gore tasting metallic on her tongue.

It didn’t happen like that, she said. But it had happened, and she was there when it did.

Relaria found herself in a cage. Several lio officers chatted with one another in low tones, ignoring the prisoner in their midst.

“I didn’t touch him!” she screamed, sobbing. “I didn’t... I hit him, but he just jumped onto the tracks himself, honest!”

“We know,” said a black-maned lio officer, her cage suddenly on a desk atop a mess of empty fast food containers.

“Then let me go!” Relaria pleaded. “I need to go back to school, I’ve been here for four days!”

The lio officer opened the cage and roughly pulled Relaria out. He batted aside a space to lay her down on the desk, claw pinning her by the ear.

“We can make an arrangement,” he said. “Just stay quiet.”

Relaria squeezed her eyes shut. When she opened them again, she was in her bedroom, but the dripping rang in her ears. Though she turned her head and realized it wasn’t the dripping ceiling, but the squeaking of the mattress from the room adjacent hers. Through the slanted doorframe, she caught sight of her brother Owan—or at least his rear end, jutting out like a ringel advertisement with his aggressively large testicles on display, and the speckled paws of some mysa stranger. *Creak, creak, creak.* Her brother’s tail clung to the bed rail.

The motion was sickening. Relaria turned, but the noise continued. She clasped her ears, trying to drown it out, but a bag in her paws got in the way. Pill jars inside, full of pethadine and pethadine dust.

“Relaria!” her mother shouted again.

“Mom would you shut up, just shut up!” Relaria screamed. She grabbed the pan full of water at the base of her bed and hurled it at the silhouette in the door. The water splashed, and flooded the room, and congealed into rain.

Relaria fell on her knees in front of the shrine of the very slender, very un-lio-like She Who Was Consumed, the third of the four prophets. The wooden statue—and it always had to be wood or stone, never refined metals—depicted a lio with sagging breasts, knelt over in much the same position Relaria was now. A cloth covered her head and shoulders—traditional, as even now lio society considered a cropped mane unsightly for public religious display, but no one could depict She Who Was Consumed with a full mane. That would miss the point.

Etched around the stone shrine, the words read, “*Suffer now on behalf of the sinner, the lost, the desperate, the atheist, the poor, defending against the evil deeds of the righteous. May all see peace at the end of the universe.*”

They weren’t *mysa* gods, or part of the ancient *mysa* tradition, but the *lio* insisted the prophets were for *all*. Nevertheless, they were of the *lio*. And if the *lio* were to ignore any of their prophets, it was this one—a prophet tailor-made to hammer some humility into a rich and disconnected world. Even here, someone had built this modest shrine into the side of a park wall, obscured by greenery drooping from the rain.

Relaria clutched at the sidewalk bricks under her knees as she cried.

“Who the fuck put me into this damn life...”

She found a rock in her paw—a pebble to a statue so large, but she stood and threw the rock at the icon. The rock clipped the wood, bounced back and struck Relaria in the head.

The world silenced.



That was unpleasant.

059 awoke strapped to the surgical chair, Tunac facing her. Well, it wasn’t her bed, but now she wished she *had* just experienced a blackout.

“Okay, test,” Tunac said. “What did I show you?”

059 blinked. Had it worked? This was the second phase of the test now?

“Um, I don’t know, but I assume you used the cards.”

“How many?”

“...Five?”

Tunac shook his head. “First symbol?”

“Triangle.”

“Second symbol.”

“Square.”

“Okay, you definitely don’t remember anything.” He sighed. “I showed you three cards in a row, all sine waves. Semaphore is working perfectly. You’re not experiencing a forced wetware dump.”

059 heaved a sigh of relief. That was the bad option ruled out—but it still didn’t explain what *was* going on.

“I’m finding no electrical fault. Your memory blanker says you were primed for test chamber P-114 yesterday, which erased successfully. You *ran* P-114 for at least the last... while.”

059 was dubious, but she assumed he was looking at the real record. “So my semaphore is no longer set for P-114?” 059 said into Tunac’s thumb.

“That’s right,” Tunac said, scritchng 059 under her chin.

“But that means you can’t fix my memory now.”

“I should still be able to. The first blanking semaphore is still set. So I should just be able to reset you back to that.”

“What do you mean, first blanking?” 059 thought back to the grass hoop trick she’d used to interrupt the semaphore, wondering if her troublemaking would catch up with her.

Tunac pulled his paw away from her, and while she missed its warmth, she relaxed. Tunac sat down on a chair in front of the chamber to face her.

“Don’t get angry with me, this was not my decision.”

“What!” 059 exclaimed. “Tunac, stop dancing around it. I know your role in this, I know *my* role in this. There’s nothing I should get angry at you for.”

Tunac spoke carefully. “Habitat Stack 110 has been researching chaos as it applies to memory.”

“Chaos as in—”

“As in chaos theory. That subtle differences in starting conditions can result in vastly different outcomes. It is a notoriously difficult math problem, P

equals NP sort of thing, but we've been developing an algorithm that may help some aspects of behavioral prediction."

"Right," 059 said. "Which is what the blanking tests are for, I know. You get to test me for the very first time every time. Or at least, you should."

"But the testing chamber isn't enough," Tunac said. "There's a reason that the habitats are *also* part of the Stacks. You..." Tunac hesitated. "...you have been repeating the same day for the last five years. *Everyone* in Stack 110 has."

059 blinked. "What's the real date?"

"It's the 113th day of 6769."

"What!" 059 shouted, attempting to get up, but pulled back to the seat because the machine had caught her ear. "I don't remember *anything* from the last five years?"

"I'm sorry, I know," Tunac said. "It wasn't meant to be a permanent arrangement or anything, but we'd finally settled into an equilibrium. Everyone's memory reset. Everyone's *body chemistry* reset. All the little objects in every room reset *every single day*. It resulted in *very* little variation in the mornings of one thousand test subjects! That is *difficult* to ensure and has been a platinum mine of data!"

059 didn't know how to process this. She'd wanted the memory blanker, sure, but she wanted *something* to recall, even if it was three hours per day. She wanted to feel like she was getting farther and farther away from her past.

Not... *this*. And losing her own time was one thing. Perhaps she'd called this down on her own head, but 112 and 486 didn't deserve this.

But the lab never meant for 059 to *know* this. Until she insisted Tunac tell her, she *and her friends* *might as well* have only lived for a single day for the past five years. Who *were they* to know?

Well, she knew *now*.

"So every day was the same up until we entered the observation room?" 059 asked.

“That’s right,” Tunac said. “With the ultimate control sample, we run mysa through a lot of different starting variables that would influence their behavior. Incentives for certain test chambers. My word choice in greeting you. It changes depending on where we need data...”

Tunac’s nerdy expression dropped once he saw how miserably 059’s ears fell.

“That’s not okay, Tunac,” 059 said. “I didn’t consent to being handled this way, and One-twelve and Four-eighty-six *definitely* didn’t consent to this—you’re stealing their years from them.”

“Fifty-nine, I am so sorry...” Tunac said. He leaned over the chamber tabletop, head buried under his arms.

“I... I didn’t mean you, specifically. It’s not your fault,” 059 mumbled. “I’m sure I must have gotten very repetitious these past five years.”

Tunac was quiet for a long moment. “To tell you the truth,” he said, “I kinda liked you flirting with me.”

“Why?”

“This job is so dull,” Tunac said. “Sometimes I wish I could have a memory blanker installed. I get to see the mysa all day, but they never change. And you... you’re cheery. Even the days the script told me to treat you coldly, I couldn’t help but crack a smile as you tried to make me open up. My superiors didn’t like that, but at least I couldn’t contaminate the data too far.”

Tentatively, Tunac reached out a paw again, and stroked 059 down her front. She wanted to feel hurt. Despite what she said, she *did* blame Tunac a little, for being part of all of this—but the moment he touched her, it didn’t seem to matter. 059 relaxed under his firm weight, and wrapped her tail around his wrist. She wanted him to touch her even more firmly, she wanted him to envelope her completely, to hold her safe and sound.

She had to settle for Tunac’s paw. To be fair, it was a very nice paw.

“Tunac,” she said as the lio booted up the machine to start the process, “you *would* tell me if there was anything else going on, right?”

“I suppose I already have,” Tunac said.

“But how many times *have* you told me what was really going on?”

“Well... none,” Tunac said, his ears flattened.

“I know,” 059 sighed. “I’m just a test subject. Barely paid a couple krona per day. Not even worth *that* much.”

“I’m sorry,” Tunac said. “I *tried* to tell you more. I wish I had more control over the project, but I don’t. I *am* just a lab jockey. Got this job going out of university because, well, government job. It’s stable, it’s honorable, and it pays well. Then I get here first week, and I see what they’re doing to the mysa, and I’m outraged. But...”

He stopped. 059 tilted her head, a little difficult in the restraint, to see Tunac’s with his head covered, fingers buried in the top of his mane.

“Hey!” 059 said. “Stop despairing. That’s my job right now!”

“I feel so awful about everything,” Tunac said. “Every day I push it down, but...”

“Tunac?” 059 whispered. “I don’t blame you for this. For what it’s worth, you’ve always been really nice to me. Even when you have to keep a straight face telling me it’s gonna be fine right before I’m sent to a terrible stack for testing.”

“I can’t *stand it*, Fifty-nine,” he sobbed. “I hate every bit of what we’re doing to you, and I tell myself it’s okay because of what everyone tells me. That you consented to *whatever* they chose to do to you. That it’s *worse* out in the ghettos. That as long as you wake up in the morning and don’t remember the awful things that happened to you, it’s okay. And it’s not. It’s never been okay. And I don’t know what to do because I *need* this job. I’ve been awful and cruel to you and I hid behind a glass wall smiling the whole time.”

Tunac broke down into more tears. 059 found it difficult to reassure him, especially as her rictus position in the straps made it difficult to comfort. But she tried anyway.

“You have not. You’re one of the best parts of the Stacks, Tunac. I’d rather have you here. I mean, when I woke up in the morning at the start of all this I was looking *forward* to seeing you.”

Tunac sniffled, pulling himself off the desk. “I’ve still been made a liar.”

“Okay. So... you don’t have to lie to me anymore. We can start fresh.”

Tunac thought, then nodded carefully. “Okay. Okay. I don’t want to lie to you, so I won’t. It’s that simple. **If this comes up again in the future, I will find some way to tell you the truth.**”

Right. Because he was going to reset her memory to the “first semaphore,” and she was about to wake up in bed remembering none of this. What if that only applied to today, though? She’d still keep the handful of memories she wasn’t supposed to have. That’d mess up whatever experiment they had going with Habitat 110.

Good riddance.

Tunac took a moment to compose himself, then returned to the console to finish the setup.

“Though, given you won’t remember this,” Tunac said, “It’ll be awkward to confess every day.”

“I’m sure it’ll be easier the day I’m out of here and your lab assistant,” 059 said.

Tunac paused again. He tapped a few more commands into the console. The thing whirred with its activation pulse, along with an annoying high-pitched hum.

“... Fifty-nine...” he said, his finger hovering over the button.

“...yes?” 059 said, wishing he’d hurry and just start.

“...maybe someday.”

He pressed the button.

—

Subject 059 sat up in her bed, yawned, and stretched before climbing out. The clock read 0:15 in thin numerals. Throwing open the shutters, light flooded in from the open plaza just outside her bedroom window and up at the painted blue sky box. Mysa poured into the street, walled with faux-plaster housing, raising their stalls for the Morning Market, while others danced around the fountain playing the reed-flute and tambourine. Fresh air—or rather, recycled, but just cold enough to be bracing, billowed into the overly-warm room.

059 took in the air for a long moment, before bending over the sill. And then she screamed into the open market.

“It still didn’t work!”

Mysa from below stopped what they were doing and looked up in her direction, but 059 slammed the shutters closed before they got a good look at her. The music resumed.

059 took only the barest amount of time with the hairbrush in the mirror, not even bothering to touch up her make-up or take a shower—let whoever was resetting her body chemistry every night clean her up, dammit!—and stormed back down the stairs before anyone was in place for the script.

486, sitting at a desk, quickly exited out of a writing program, turning to look at 059.

“Hey! Was that you—Fifty-nine, what’s with the expression?” 486 asked.

059 didn’t answer her, she just marched straight to the fridge, opened it, grabbed a sugar water, and marched out.

“Uh, okay,” 486 said behind her. “See you tomorrow.”

“That much is inevitable,” 059 snipped. She pushed past 112 on her way out, and didn’t stop at the front door to hear their exclamations of surprise.

It didn't matter, did it? They'd remember none of 059's rudeness tomorrow. 059 didn't want to remember this frustration, either.

"I just want them to fix me, dammit!" she muttered to herself, passing concerned faces of other mysa on her way to the Facility.

—

When Tunac entered the lab, he placed his briefcase down behind the rows of servers. He pulled on his labcoat, adjusted his glasses, stepped around the desk, and stopped suddenly at the sight of 059 sitting, waiting for him.

He cast his eyes to the ajar emergency exit hatch of the stack.

"How did—" he started.

"It didn't work!" 059 snapped, trying to keep her voice calm so as not to be too alarming, "The memory blanking *still* didn't work!"

Tunac blinked. "...what are you talking about?"

059 sputtered, enraged. "What the hell do you *mean* what am I talking about? You took me to the manual blanker and ran it on me while I was awake.

This is now the *second time* you've claimed to not have had this conversation with me. Do you just forget? Are all mysa just that interchangeable to you?"

Tunac's ears lowered, saddened. He spoke with a convincing tone, "Um... I'm sorry... I've never seen *any* mysa outside of the Stack before. I think I'd remember that."

059 halted, feeling as though her brain just hit a segmentation fault. Her eye twitched.

"How'd you find the emergency exit, anyway?" Tunac asked, looking at the hatch again.

"Wait, *what?*" 059's voice cracked to get the words out. "You told me that Stack 110 has been repeating the same day for the last five years except for the test randomization."

“How’d you know about that?” Tunac exclaimed.

059 grasped at her own face, stuck between whether to claw her own eyes out or to slap him. Neither would do much good, so instead she just screamed, “You told me!”

Tunac raised his paws up defensively, now as confused by the proceedings as her. He opened his muzzle to say something, but 059 had already collapsed onto her knees and paws, openly sobbing again.

“Hey, hey, don’t cry! Don’t cry!” he said, scooping her up. She balled up in his paws like a puddle of water. “Fifty-nine, right? I’m sorry, the...”

“Numbers are hard to remember. You told me,” 059 creaked.

“I suppose I would have.” He stroked her with his fingers, but it was less comforting a gesture than the day before.

“I just want this to end,” 059 said. Tunac’s thumb brushed over her cheek, wiping away her tears. That was a bit better.

“Well, I don’t know what’s gone wrong,” Tunac said. “If I don’t remember what happened, but you do, then there’s likely some kind of... I don’t know. We need to run tests.”

“We already did! We already did the test! You confirmed the blanker was working properly, that the first semaphore was set, and you reset me to that. There aren’t any more tests! I’m just going to wake up again in the morning and it’ll start over!”

“Okay, okay,” Tunac said. He sat down on his chair and turned to the computer. “Let me pull up your file here. Assuming you’re right, then we have to make some assumptions. You’ve woken up with your memories for the past...”

“Four days.” 059 sniffled and sat down on the edge of the table, wiping her eyes. It would have smudged her makeup if she’d put any on. “I didn’t even run a test chamber yesterday...”

“Well, the data here says you did.”

059 perked her ears. “What chamber?”

“P-114.”

“That’s the one that started this whole mess!” 059 said. “But I didn’t *do* it yesterday. I mean, that thing still knows the real date, doesn’t it?”

Tunac turned to her. “Did I tell you the real date, too?”

“Yeah, today would be the 114th of 6769.”

“113th, but close,” Tunac said, turning back to the screen. “That *is* concerning, though; it can’t be a false memory, because there’s no way you should even be able to get that close.”

059 paused. She thought back. “...no, *yesterday* you said it was the 113th.”

Tunac shook his head. “Today’s the 113th. Maybe you got it confused with the number of the test chamber?”

“No, if that was the case you would have said it was the 112th,” 059 said. “Yesterday was the 113th. That’s what I remember!”

Tunac tilted his ears. “I don’t... are we sure this isn’t a false memory, then?”

“I thought you couldn’t *invent* memories, though. The only reason the blanker works is because it automatically tailors to naturally formed memories. They told us during orientation that real, perfect, consistent made-up memories were still beyond science.”

Tunac sighed heavily, and stared at the data over his computer screen. He scratched at his head, digging his paw into his mane as if to get at his brain.

“Okay,” he said after a long pause. “Okay, this is just a conjecture. But given that you’ve been living the same day over and over for five years, it’s *possible* that someone dictating the experiment is using *that* to develop perfect false memories. Since you experience every day exactly the same, and we know your body chemistry inside and out, that *might* be the foothold to start testing on you.”

059 tilted her head. “Why would they do that?”

“You said it yourself, it’s beyond science. We’re researching possibilities beyond science.”

“But why this way?” 059 whimpered. “Why these memories?”

“*If* you were given these specific false memories, that means whoever is running this experiment wanted you to come out here and talk to me about this.”

“But that’d make you part of the experiment!”

Tunac didn’t reply. He bit at his lip, turned his gaze away and curled a strained paw into a fist but said nothing.

“...Oh prophets,” 059 swore, smothering her face in her paw.

“In order to get this job, I signed a waiver same as you,” Tunac explained. “They just haven’t actually cashed in on that waiver yet... or at least, I *thought* they hadn’t...”

059 sat down. She glanced briefly at the digital clock high on the wall, but it didn’t particularly matter. She’d wait out here as long as necessary for someone to *notice* and *do something*. Maybe she’d just tear out the memory blanker and never do this again.

Tunac reached over carefully and stroked 059 down her back. She sighed, wishing that the gesture could be a little more than just a temporary comfort, as it did little to take her mind off the problem. Still, that enormous paw on her, she wanted to dig into it, to bury herself into it. She didn’t know why. Lio were just somehow aggressively attractive to her—no matter what happened, no matter how they abused her, no matter who it was, there was some primitive part of her mysa brain that said “big and strong equals protector”. What mysa could compare with that?

And she hated herself for it. She hated that she didn’t have the *right* reaction to their abuse of her or her family, that even after all this time she hadn’t weaned herself of the need to just let her life, her thoughts, become subordinate into someone else’s. She didn’t want the responsibility of being an individual. She

just wanted someone else to take care of it all. Someone with power over her. Someone whose fingers she curled her tail around right now.

She was just so tired of fighting for herself.

“What do we do?” 059 asked.

“Only thing I can do is contact my supervisor about this,” Tunac said. “Tell him what’s been going on. That okay with you?”

059 nodded.

Tunac released her, but she didn’t remove her tail from his fingers. So instead, he scooped her up and moved her to the armrest of his chair. The spot was difficult to balance on, but wrapping her tail around Tunac’s elbow she had plenty of balance to spare—and she got to feel his body heat next to hers.

“...So,” 059 said, while the “*waiting for call to connect*” screen flashed on the large monitor, “how would I know *this* isn’t a false memory?”

“You’re experiencing it right now, aren’t you?” Tunac asked.

“Yes, until I wake up tomorrow and am told it didn’t happen.”

“Even if you can’t trust what happened yesterday,” Tunac said, “You should be able to trust what’s in front of your eyes, right?”

059 wasn’t sure.

A white-faced lio appeared on the screen. His wild black mane, which matched his eyes, descended off the bottom of the screen. The plaque on the desk read *Pummar*.

His eyes met 059’s at once. The display of the mainframe monitor was good if it could make the supervisor appear in the same room as the both of them. It was like he really was three seconds away from swatting her!

“Sir, we have a major issue,” Tunac said.

“I can see that,” Pummar said. His tone was completely to-the-point, strong, like he had lungs the size of weather balloons.

“This is Subject Oh-Five-Nine of Stack One-Ten. There is something wrong with her memory blander, but the diagnostic has turned up nothing. And she’s been having weird experiences.”

“Weird how?” Pummar asked. He looked at his screen. “I don’t see any diagnostic results.”

“I... haven’t actually run the blander test on her. But that’s just it. She insists that I have, that all her results came out clean, and then she woke up this morning with those tests having been retroactively not-run.”

“Hmm. Give me a moment. I believe there is a procedure for this.”

“Yes, sir.”

Pummar’s thick lio brow undulated as he consulted the screen before him and another screen behind him.

“Yes, here it is,” he said, and he mumbled as he read. “Mysa subject outside of stack... memory blander not working... memory of multiple tests and corrections... retroactive... yes. Please take her to the special shunter for Test Z-691.”

“Z?” 059 asked. “I’ve never heard of a Z-series.”

Pumma scoffed, but didn’t look back. “I did not ask you for your knowledge of procedures.”

“But what is it?” 059 insisted.

“Obviously, this whole situation requires clear and concise documentation, which is saved for the proper testing procedure, not random conference calls. You will learn the details when you arrive and no sooner.”

“I’m not just stepping into a shunter because—”

“Subject Oh-Five-Nine!” Pumma snapped, his eyes darting coldly to her, their blackness like a tremendous pit. “You will do as instructed, or else have your stipends for the past year *canceled and recalled*.”

059 squeaked. She said nothing else.

“The shunter car should have arrived by now,” Pummar said. “Do not keep the research team waiting.” The connection shut off.

059 and Tunac exchanged a long look.

“I don’t want to go,” she said. “If they want answers, I’d rather you be with me.”

“I... I know, Fifty-nine, but,” Tunac said, stammering. “This could be our jobs if you don’t. I mean, think about a stipend recall. If your family already spent the money...”

“Which they likely have,” 059 said, sinking.

“...the government could take them to court over the debts! What choice do we have?”

059 didn’t know.

The “special shunter” was not difficult to spot—a pinpoint light hung next to the long tube beside the exit door. Tunac carried her over and she stepped inside. The center of the shunter car held the small blanker kiosk inside with the aperture for her ear, but with a small change. Instead of sitting on a pillar on the floor, it hung down from the ceiling. There was no reason for an alternate design that 059 could see. She took a deep breath and stepped toward it.

“Well, worse comes to worse,” Tunac said, “I’ll see you tomorrow.” He spread his ears in a grin.

059 smiled softly. “Promise me you’ll be less difficult to convince?”

“Oh, definitely. But, um...”

059 looked up at the huge lio, who was suddenly very unsure. He looked like he had a hundred things to say and could not say any of them.

“Tunac...” 059 said. “I’ll be fine.”

Tunac didn’t answer. Even after 059 paced her ear notch into the receptacle, it closed shut, and the door shut behind her.

She blacked out for the barest second, as the shunter was liable to do. But even after she came to and removed her ear from the device, the trip took ages.

The kiosk had no clock, so she had no idea how long she was even in that car. By the time it got to wherever she was going, she was already starving for a real meal.

She blinked, and waddled out of the open car doors into a small black room marked with an intense light. It reflected off the black walls, glinting like obsidian in the sun. A monitor switched on before her, and a brown speckled mysa addressed her.

“Subject Oh-Five-Nine, Stack One-Ten,” the mysa said. From the way it spoke, haltingly saying every numeral instead of “Fifty-nine,” it was not a real mysa but a robot simulacrum.

“Er, yes,” 059 said. “That’s me.”

“Paw print please.” A cylinder popped up from out of the wall, with a large scanning plate at its end. 059 sighed, and placed her paw there. It hummed a moment before the device went *ding* and the cylinder retreated into the wall.

“First is documentation. Please repeat the entirety of your situation, leaving out no details. I will ask questions from time to time. Please answer to the best of your abilities.”

So 059 told the computer everything. She was feeling particularly truthful, so told them about the hoop of grass—just in case it still had something to do with this—the repeating day, and so on. She left out the part where Tunac had spilled lab secrets however, and merely implied that she figured it all out on her own.

“Excellent,” the robot said. A number scale appeared next to her, and she gestured to it like a gameshow model. “On a scale of one to ten, with ten being the most confident, how confident are you that your memory of the date discrepancies are accurate?”

“Ten,” 059 said. “At least by today, I have no doubt that the date has remained static both inside and outside of the Stacks.”

“On a scale of one to ten, with ten being the most confident, how confident are you in your memory in general?”

“Um. Eight, perhaps,” 059 said. “But you have access to my record, right? I’m usually pretty good with memory tasks.” 059 realized how ironic that sounded the moment it left her muzzle.

“Your past test results will be taken into account. Please give me a moment to tabulate your—your data has been tabulated. The next test is a memory game.”

“Oh goodie,” 059 sighed.

“You will need to remember this following code.”

A series of numbers and letters appeared on the screen below the robot:
1AB429KP.

“1AB429KP?” 059 repeated. The characters each lit up blue in turn as she spoke them. She had difficulty concentrating because she was so hungry, but eight characters weren’t particularly taxing.

“That is correct,” said the robot. “This string is very important. Remember this string and, tomorrow, enter it into any console you have access to.”

“But I just told you I’m going to wake up with nobody recalling any of this!”

“Correct. This fact has been taken into account.”

059 tilted her head. “Okay... any specific program?”

“Any lab console in any state will do,” said the robot. “Can you repeat the sequence for me?”

The characters vanished from the screen before 059 had a chance to look at them again.

“1AB429KP,” 059 said, the characters appearing as she spoke.

“Very good,” said the robot. “Now backwards.”

This went on for some time. The test broke up the memorization task with other simple tasks, asking 059 to repeat the string every so often, until she must have said it or recreated it a hundred times. Even when the robot asked her to

repeat the string with loud noises calling out random letters and numbers from all corners of the room, she said it perfectly. She wrote it down a half dozen times, she wrote it backwards on a wall of glass, she sang it, she recited it while doing a handstand, she said it twenty times in a row in under twelve seconds, no mistakes.

059 was panting, her stomach growling, but it was by far not the most taxing test she remembered taking. But she was sick of the entire sequence by the time she finished, and just wanted to sit down and eat some porridge. She didn't care what color or flavor.

"1AB429KP!" she shouted at the screen. "I got it already! Prophets help me, how many times can you possibly make me repeat the same number?"

"There can be no mistake about this," said the robot. "Once you are certain you have this number correct, please return to the kiosk and activate your memory blanker."

"...what do I do after that?" 059 asked. "How is that supposed to—"

The monitor shut off.

"...help me," she said to no one.

059 looked back to the shunter doors, at the lone kiosk sitting inside, clasp open. She folded her arms.

She was just going to wake up like this again, wasn't she? She wanted them to solve this before everyone forgot about this entire sequence of events altogether. They didn't say what they would *do* once she entered this code in the morning, probably shunt her to some other testing chamber, or...

...

Something about this smelled. She couldn't print her nose to what, just that there had to be something else going on.

Someone *had* to be watching her outside of this loop, but they made her report the incident in full. And now they expected her to do it again? Why? They acted like they didn't know what was going on. But they'd *have* to know by now.

She shouldn't have to run up to Tunac and explain it every morning. They didn't need any of this pageantry!

Or did they?

She didn't want to do what Pummar ordered, anyway. For one, screw that guy. He threatened to put her family in debt! And for two, it wasn't *her* job concern herself with the sanctity of the data she provided. That was *their* job. They screwed it up!

But what else could she do? Did she have any other options?

059 entered the shunter car, and stared at the aperture for her ear notch. Her heart pounded, and she almost felt light, or like she was going to shake apart. She wished she brought along one of the blades of plastic grass to tie in a hoop and interrupt the blanker again. She could live out the rest of the day, go somewhere else, get real answers, or just throw a wrench into the works and get kicked out, *something* else other than this damned cryptic double-blind science shit.

059 lowered her ear into the receptacle. The latch snapped shut. Lock. Crank as the electrodes connected...

And 059 grabbed the top of her large ear and *yanked* back as hard as she could. The notch in her ear ripped away, along with a considerable dousing of blood. It was the most painful thing she'd experienced, even worse than the installation, as multiple thin surgical wires snapped from inside her ear cartilage. She collapsed back on the floor, whimpering, staring up at the piece of her that was now stuck to the kiosk.

Did I just do that?

She lay in shock following that, feeling hot and cold, fully flush and shaking like she'd been locked in a freezer for hours. She couldn't move. Her neck, shoulders and arms had stiffened, horrified by what she'd done to herself.

It... it's not real. They were just going to fix it and put her right back in. Gross as it was, she couldn't bleed out from a minor ear wound like that.

Oh prophets. She shouldn't have been staring at a piece of herself.

Before she could figure out what to do, the latch opened, and the piece of her ear fell to the floor. But the shunter doors did not close. Instead, the floor shifted. She blinked, glancing at the space under her, which upturned and curled into a funnel, until she couldn't sit any longer. Too late she thought of grabbing onto the kiosk and holding on, but it retracted toward the ceiling. She spilled out of the shunter and into the obsidian room.

Blinking, dizzy now from the pain and from tumbling end over end, she felt queasy. What—why did it dump her back here? The shunter should have delivered her to the processing center...

CLANK. The floor split, dipping into the center of the black room, revealing a deep black void.

059 gasped. She scrambled for the shunter door and grabbed on, only for the shunter doors to close. *Snap.* Right on her fingers. Not enough to crush the bones, but it held her fast.

The floor slanted father and farther open until it sat flush with the wall. 059 dangled from the shunter door, all her weight thrown onto her wrists and knuckle bones. The piece of her ear that she'd torn off stuck against the tiny remaining ledge, caught on its own sticky blood, and a black, empty nothing swelled below. She kicked her legs, she screamed, she tried to find purchase with her tail as the horrible pain seared through her arms.

"Tunac!" she screamed. "Tunac, help me! *Someone help me!*" The only answer was the metallic echo, and a loud banging from somewhere down in the nothing.

The torn piece of ear released from the edge and fell. The nothing below her lit up. She didn't want to look. She didn't want to identify the heat was at her paws—so hot, it threatened to blister her paws and set her fur aflame. She opened one eye. Flames licked up from the bottom of the shaft, incinerating the remains of her ear, turning it to ash in an instant.

The flames died, leaving her in darkness, the pain in her paws and wrists worsening by the moment. She cried out—no, if she could get her paws purchase somewhere on this wall, she could—

Pop. Her paw slid out of the closed shunter door, taking with it a good chunk of her skin. *Pop.* Fingers displaced. Ligaments torn. Blood lubricated the way out, and 059 slipped and fell. She screamed. She fell, over and over into the black pit, into the fire which billowed out and consumed her fur, boiled her skin, and cooked her organs until she couldn't scream anymore.

—

059 sat up in bed.

“Prophets save me,” she whispered to the cold bedroom.

—

Tunac entered the lab. He placed his briefcase down behind the rows of servers. He pulled on his labcoat, adjusted his glasses, stepped around the desk, and stopped at the sight of 059.

She shivered, twitching, crying, and looking up at him with more anger than any mysa had ever shown.

Tunac's ears flattened out, looked to the open hatch door, but did not comment. He knelt down to look 059 in the eyes.

“Today is the 113th day of 6769,” 059 said, her voice quaking. “It was the 113th day *yesterday*. It's been the 113th day for at least five days in a row. And you don't remember anything about what happened, but I do.”

“What happened?” he asked.

“*I don't know*,” 059 stammered. “I don't *know* anymore, I don't even have a working theory. But yesterday, when I told you I had a problem again, that the live

blanker didn't work, you contacted your supervisor Pummar, who instructed you to send me in the special shunter to test Z-691. It instructed me to remember a string of letters and numbers and enter it anywhere when I woke up today, but something struck me wrong about everything, so I tore out my ear notch before it could black me out. Instead of the shunter taking me to wherever you fix and prepare mysa for the following morning, the entire floor of the test chamber opened up and dumped me into an incinerator! *I died*, Tunac. *I remember dying.*"

Tunac blinked. "But... you're right here."

"I know!" 059 shrieked. "I know I'm right here, and that only raises even *more* questions! Am I a clone? Are *you* a clone?! Why the *hell* would they want to incinerate me? If this really is just a false memory, why would they want me to think they did? *What aren't you telling me, Tunac?*"

"I..." The outpouring of information visibly flustered Tunac. He collapsed on his swivel chair, head buried in his paws, and cried.

"Tunac?" 059 asked, perking her still-shaking ears.

"I'm sorry, I'll..." He looked up, and wiped his nose on his sleeve. With just a couple words, 059 had reduced this massive lio to a mewling cub, and now he looked completely broken. "I'll tell you the truth. I don't care if it gets me in trouble. I don't... I don't know anything about Z-series, but I've known for a long time that X-series is lethal to the subjects."

059 blinked. "...What?"

"I don't think I was supposed to know," Tunac said. "And no mysa subject was supposed to go there anyway. We can't exactly waste test subjects on lethal tests—"

"*What?*"

"But that's just it. The lab procedure instructed us that for as long as Habitat One-Ten has been functioning in a loop, we were to lose no subjects. I had to discourage everyone from the X-series tests."

“They put up those damned billboards in the habitat!” 059 gestured back toward the open shaft behind her. “Complete the X-series test and you could become a lab assistant!”

Tunac nodded, whimpering and wiping his face on his arm. “They didn’t allow us to change those out. So we just told everyone that the X-series would not pay out on failure, and made it look like you failed it a lot so as to discourage anyone from trying it again. The shunter in the habitat doesn’t even go to the X-series test.”

“But why? Just to be sadistic? What possible reason is there to kill the subjects?”

“I don’t know why!” Tunac said. “They barely let me know anything about it, because it was part of my Habitat One-Ten orientation! Testing like this requires so many blinds and double-blinds that sometimes only the computer running the place knows what’s going on.”

059 collapsed to the desk, knees curled up to her chest. If that was the case, there was no telling how far this situation extended. Maybe she was *still* inside test chamber P-114 and there was no way for her to know otherwise.

Was there?

059 looked up at the remorseful Tunac, and had a thought.

“Tunac...” she said. “Let’s get out of here.”

Tunac blinked. “W... What?”

“You and me. Out of here. Now. Pick me up, hide me in your briefcase, get out to the parking lot and take me wherever. As far away as we can get. I don’t care. We just need to leave.”

“But... that’s our jobs.”

“Either I wake up again and it doesn’t matter, or else we don’t, and we’re gone. Either way I need to know what the boundaries of this... *thing* are. I don’t want to be trapped here, Tunac. I know you don’t want to be trapped here either.”

Tunac turned to stare at his monitor. After a long minute, he nodded. He threw his coat back on the hook he collected it from, then opened up his briefcase for 059 to step inside.

It took far longer, far more bumping around inside the dark case than 059 would have liked, with just a thin crack for air at the corner where Tunac had wedged a pen. After nearly an hour, Tunac rapped on the outside of the case and clicked open the latches. 059 climbed out, into the backseat of an open-top vehicle with the wind buffeting her face. She looked up.

Blue sky. Patches of white clouds rolling past. It'd been so, so long since she'd seen the real thing.

Tunac had pivoted around in the driver's seat, facing her. He was out of his labcoat, making him look significantly more naked than she was used to seeing him. The loose strands of his mane billowed in the wind. Green trees lined the highway, zooming past.

059 fell to the seat, overwhelmed. She didn't think she'd ever miss it.

"Well," Tunac said, "now what?"

"I don't know," 059 said. "I didn't expect that to work. I didn't even think I'd convince you."

"I don't know how far we can get," Tunac said. "If they realize I'm gone and I took you with me, they could remotely disable my car. That could be anywhere from a few minutes to a few hours from now, depending on how long it takes them to get authorization from the traffic department, but either way, I doubt we'll get very far."

"Then we need to go to Ponitaro," 059 said. "But not directly. Drive up to Ekar, ditch the car, walk the bridge to Kinna, then we take the train."

“Okay,” Tunac said, gesturing for 059 to climb off the back seat and into his lap. “But what’s in Ponitaro?”

—

Tunac rapped at the small door **four** floors up—face-height for him. An older mysa answered the tenement door, startled but not surprised to see a lio before her.

“I told you the bank patched the payment through!” she snapped at him, waving a broom handle at his nose. “If you want the confirmation number for a fourth time, I’ll shove it up your tailhole so hard—”

“Mom, it’s all right!”

059 stepped out from where she’d been hiding in Tunac’s mane and onto his shoulder. The older mysa blinked and rushed forward to embrace her as she stepped onto the balcony.

“Relaria!” her mother exclaimed. “What are you doing back?”

“Mom, I’m so sorry,” 059 said, embracing her mother tight.

“Who’s this lio?” She stepped away and peered at the giant before her, who was uncertain of what to say. This was not his neighborhood, as every floor of every apartment was just over half a meter tall. He barely fit standing on the sidewalk, his tail jutting into the tiny street behind him.

“This is Tunac,” 059 said. “Don’t be afraid of him, he’s risking everything by even coming here.”

“Erm,” he said, waving. “Hi, Mrs. Fifty-nine. I can just... go if that’s okay.”

“Mom, please?” 059 asked. “He’s just awkward because he’d never been to the ghetto before.”

Warily, she pulled back from such an intense stare. “Well... step around back. There’s room for a lio to sit in the yard.”

“Thank you,” Tunac said, then looked back and forth at the spaces between the building and its neighbors. Not finding either ideal, he tried his best anyway, squeezing through the narrow alley between apartments. The whole apartment jostled and leaned by almost a degree.

059’s mother jumped, and ran down the balcony, shouting all the more. “A block down! A block down!”

“Too late,” Tunac said, all air expelled from his lungs.

059 couldn’t help but crack a smile at the sight, doubling over. It was the first she smiled since she woke up.

—

Her brother Owan—as much as she disliked him—welcomed her with a nuzzle and a comfortable embrace. There were biological reasons why male and female mysa stopped sharing the same living space when they came of age, but it never seemed to stop Owan. The other traditional solution for male heat aggression was castration, though Owan had apparently opted for otherwise—he had used 059’s income to get heat surgery.

“Paying rent to live in a male lodge would have been cheaper,” 059 fumed. “Heat surgery’s like two months of my stipend!”

“And leave mom to fend for herself?” Owan asked. “Absolutely not. Trust me, this is better in the long run.” And he hugged her again. “I never thought I’d see you again, sis.”

Hugging a male sibling felt so bizarre. He smelled familiar, yet new. Owan was like a different mysa.

He introduced 059 to his daughters, the third also named Relaria. 059 didn’t know how to feel about any of it; the way the family talked to her, it was like she’d already died, and she was loathe to admit it had happened to her at least once already.

She looked in on her old bedroom, which was now the room for Owan's pups. It was significantly less deteriorated than when she'd left, the walls re-plastered, the sagging ceiling held back up with a steel crossbeam. Small glittery decorations littered the walls and ceiling.

On the desk by 059's old bed—sheets replaced, mattress the same **dented shape**—sat a small desk calendar, clicking away the seconds.

113th day of 6769. 059 sighed. It didn't make any sense. She was *here*, wasn't she? This was her old room, her old life, shifted forward more than fifteen years. There was no possible way that this could have been a fabrication or simulation. It could not have been so accurate down to such tiny details unless she was *really* standing there.

So why was it still the same day, even hundreds of kilometers away from the lab? Was running for naught? Was it all going to start again the following morning?

"Relaria, are you coming to dinner?" her mother asked.

The back porch sagged **precariously underpaw, and the concrete pillars holding up the fifth floor bowed like** they'd give way at any moment. But the apartment had stood for over a hundred and fifty years; it'd continue to stand when 059 was dead and her body incinerated.

For obvious reasons, she did not want to think about funerary rites.

Tunac peeked in between the beams. 059's mother, hospitable as always, had a large mixing bowl filled from the stewpot, which little Relaria dutifully handed to him. "Thank you," he said, looking down at the thick, vegetable-laden passuhan. He didn't use the large wooden spoon provided, as its surface area was just too small for his lips, so instead he sipped from the bowl like it was a cup of tea instead.

The little pups were most interested in what 059 had to say about the labs, so she told them all over dinner the stories she could remember, a handful of interesting tidbits from the hundreds of test runs in the early days, and the mysa

she'd met and left. So many details, the pups clamored for more, but 059 couldn't tell them everything even if she wanted.

She had a feeling it wouldn't matter. They wouldn't remember in the morning anyhow.

As the sky turned from blue to red, 059 sat out back, waiting for Tunac to return from a run to a lio restaurant somewhere across the city. It took 059 at least an hour to convince her mother it was not meant as an insult, just that a lio couldn't possibly subsist on the amount of food that mysa could, plus they needed meat.

By the time Tunac returned, dusk turned to night, and for the first time in over fifteen years, 059 could see the stars overhead. She listened to the music playing from the apartments all around and the cheers from happy mysa drinking beer. 059 never touched the stuff.

"So... no more paychecks, then?" her mother asked.

"I'm sorry," 059 said, leaning over the railing with her eyes to the sky.

"We've patched up the tenement. Rohixy's doing better in school. Maybe something good will have come of this."

"I don't know." 059 sighed. "I don't even know what they'd do to find me, if they'll threaten to take it all back. I'm still not sure this is really happening."

"Dear, of course this is happening," her mother said with a paw to her shoulder.

"But it *hasn't been* happening. I died in that chamber, mom, and I still woke up in the Stacks. If I go to sleep I might just wake up back there again."

"So why come back here at all? From what I remember, staying here was the last thing you wanted."

"Because I missed you," 059 said. "The mail doesn't come through anymore. I just had to hope they told the truth when they said you were getting the money."

“And then you ran away, which cuts the money off anyhow,” her mother said—though more matter-of-factly than as an accusation.

“I’m sorry.” 059 looked up to her. “I also need to know how much control the lab is exerting over me. Over *us*. You know me, I’m not given to conspiracy theories like a lot of mysa, but these last few days, I have to wonder...”

“Relaria, I taught you better than that,” her mother scolded. “There is a lot of hidden information in the world, certainly. And we’re hardly privy to even a small portion of it. But **you don’t need conspiracies**—the reasons why the lio do what they do are as plain as the looks on their ears.”

“Hey,” Tunac said, still working on his gross-smelling fried poultry, “I’m sitting right here!”

“You heard me!” 059’s mother peered right at him, like if he was leaning any closer she’d have smacked him on the nose with the broom handle. “You’re not helping!”

“I don’t know any more than she does!” Tunac said.

“But you’re a scientist!” her mother exclaimed. “Have you even applied what you know? Have you tested and hypothesized?”

“Nothing makes sense, mom!” 059 said. “We’ve ruled out everything. I can’t... I can’t put it together. I’m not a clone of myself because that doesn’t account for Tunac’s lack of memory, or why it’s somehow still the 113th even out here. It’s not a simulation—I mean, I’m *pretty sure* this is all real. But if it wasn’t, well, it can’t be just some computer making things up. It wouldn’t get things this precisely, even if it was reading my mind and cross-referencing it with the real city where I grew up. And I’m *still* sure the science can’t read minds that well, memory blanker or not.”

“I can’t follow half of that,” 059’s mother said, “But maybe it just is what it is.”

“And what is it?” 059 asked.

“That you really are reliving the same day.”

059 blinked, and thought. “But that’s impossible.”

“I know,” her mother said. “But it’s happening. You need to accept it. And if you can’t find the cause, examine the effects first. Before you try to unravel it, ask what it can do for you. Perhaps it will turn out to be a blessing.”

—

Their escape never made it onto the news—one of the advantages of the work being classified. The government never came. Having no room, Tunac went to sleep in a hostel some kilometers away while 059 slept on the couch of her tenement with a thin blanket. She wished she could have both her family and Tunac together, but it wasn’t meant to be.

She woke up, unsurprisingly, in the Stacks, on the false day of 60/6764.

“Morning, Fifty-nine!” 112 said as 059 descended the staircase.

“Good morning,” 059 said, her voice flat and unenthused. After being out of the Stacks the day before, the townhouse felt so artificial all over again. She was tired of living in the Stacks.

“Nutritional porridge again!” 112 said as she sauntered to the pantry.

“Ugh,” said 486 by the fridge. “Did they get my request to stock some real food? I could kill for some actual cider oats.” She removed a large can of sugar water from the fridge.

“It *is* real food,” 112 said. “And nutritionally balanced.”

“Hey!” 059 shouted so they both stopped in their tracks. “Can we not do this again? Four-eighty-six, I want to pick your brain for a bit.”

486 and 112 looked at each other, heads tilted in confusion.

“Uh, sure,” 486 said, grabbing her sugar water from the fridge and sitting down next to 059. “What’s on your mind?”

“What flavor do you want?” 112 asked from the pantry.

“Not green berry,” 059 said. She turned to face 486. “I’ve been having trouble with this one puzzle, and I don’t know what it means.”

112 smirked. “I thought you’ve been taking the blanking tests. You remember a puzzle?”

“I changed my mind yesterday,” 059 said. “That’s not important.”

“Right, right...”

059 tried to think of how to best explain the obsidian room without getting into the real details and muddying it all up. If her mother was right, and this was all some kind of time travel, that still didn’t explain what the deal was with the Z-series. And saying it was some kind of time travel would be silly. So she made up something that was very close to what happened.

“Let’s just assume that I’m not *supposed* to remember anything,” she said, “but I do anyway. I come into this chamber and it tells me to enter a passcode. I don’t know a passcode, so I punch in something at random. It’s wrong. It then gives me the passcode, and they blank my memory.”

“How would you know about the test, then?” 486 tilted her ears and sipped.

“That’s the catch. Maybe I wasn’t really in this test chamber, but I know anyway, like it just exists in my memories, or I saw it in a dream.”

“Maybe it was a dream,” 486 said.

“Granted,” 059 sighed. “But let’s assume it *can’t* be a dream—I go back to that test chamber and it all turns out to be real. What else would it be?”

“A trap,” 486 said. 112 set a bowl in front of 059 and sat down alongside, folding her paws politely as she listened.

“That’s what I thought!” 059 said, with a huff. “But what could they possibly be testing for? I can’t figure out their motive. Is it just to screw with me? Are they really planting elaborate, accurate false memories in my brain somehow?”

“The first thing that comes to my mind,” 112 said, “is precognition. They set you up with a ‘vision of the future’.”

059 paused, and blinked.

Of course... prophets save me, of course!

"Precog's a myth," 486 said.

"You never know," 112 said. "If it weren't a myth, well, they'd *never* stop predicting the outcomes of battles and the war. Perhaps they test for it every so often to see if it can't occur as a fluke." She shrugged. "There's stranger things in the universe."

If 112 was right, 059 *could* still be inside an experiment—or at least fluke that the Z-series chamber was meant to turn into an experiment. Not a simulation, but the real future unfolding before her, resetting at some point at the end of the day. So maybe there *wasn't* anyone at the top observing this as it happened—that's why they needed the code, for her to call out to someone and say, "This is really happening to me," and someone could end the loop.

486 snorted. "Even if it was all real, I still say it's a trap."

"How come?" 059 asked too quickly.

"Fake or real, they control the outcome. If you went back into that chamber and put in the correct password, they'd know whatever they did worked, then it's on to round two. Then round three, round four... who knows where the ride ends? I say, don't cede control. They want their data so bad, they need to do better than these cheap tricks."

That was also true. Whoever did this to 059 wouldn't have her best interests at heart. She didn't need to prove *shit* other than that she wasn't going to let them dictate the terms of this experiment.

She had a better idea.

"Thank you!" 059 exclaimed, pulling a startled 112 close and hugging her tight. She squeezed 486 even harder, kissing her. She didn't care if it sent the wrong message, she could have done anything 486 wanted in that moment.

"H-hey!" 486 exclaimed as 059 released her and rushed for the door.

"Fifty-nine, where are you going?!"

The moment 059 left the habitat, she crossed the desks and stared up at the special shunter. If the shunter inside the habitat wasn't going to take her to the X-series tests, then that one certainly would. But she didn't know how to *get* there. There was currently no car inside the tube, so how would she summon one? Tunac's computer likely had access to every device in the place.

Some time later, Tunac arrived. He entered, and noticed 059 standing at the corner of the desk before he even set his briefcase down.

"Uh," he started.

"Tunac, I need your help," 059 said. "I want to complete the X-series test and become a lab assistant."

Tunac was quiet.

"I thought it rude to ask your computer password," 059 said, "since I'll be remembering it tomorrow and all."

"Hey, um... we're literally not allowed to let you take the X-series test," Tunac said. "I'm sorry."

"Tunac, please?" 059 asked. "I know it's dangerous—"

"Absolutely not!" Tunac said. "What are you even doing out—"

"Test chamber P-114 has an accurate model of the emergency exit in this habitat. I wasn't supposed to remember that, but somehow I did. I came back, over and over, for the last five days, and today is the sixth day. You told me the habitat has been repeating the 60th of 6764 for the last five years, but it's really the 113th of 6769—except that for the last five days, it's *also* always been the 113th. I'm experiencing *something* other than this lab's repetition of this habitat's day. I don't know exactly what it is, but I'm *living and forming memories of* the 113th day of 6769 while it happens, or even before it happens."

Tunac's briefcase clattered on the floor.

“I should call my supervisor,” Tunac said.

“Pummar? He was the one that killed me,” 059 said.

“I can’t send you to X-5!” Tunac exclaimed. “It’ll—”

“Kill me? I’ve already died once. It’s scary, yeah, but once you know you’ll wake up the following morning all fixed, well... pain is only temporary.”

“Fifty-nine, please no...” Tunac sat down in the seat, not even bothering with his labcoat, so he could see 059 eye-to-eye. “Please, I’m begging you—if you die, this habitat’s broken up. Everything falls apart. I can’t, I—”

“Tunac,” 059 said, “I’m telling you the truth this first pass because I know you trust me. You trusted me enough to sneak me out of this building once already, even when you didn’t understand what was going on.”

She placed her tiny paws on his, as he stared downward with his ears wilted.

“If you don’t send me to X-5 with the truth, then I’ll have to lie tomorrow, and I don’t want to do that. I will get to X-5 somehow. But I want you to do this for me out of your own volition.”

Tunac was silent for a long moment. “Everything you said... how do I know this isn’t a test for me? That someone told you everything to say?”

059 climbed onto Tunac’s paws, sat up on his fingers so they were face-to-face. She dug her paws into the long fur of his chin and tugged him closer. Then she kissed him on the lips.

It was hardly a proper kiss—their mouths didn’t have anywhere near the same size to match, but it was a delightful sensation regardless, so close to such a sensual, soft part of his face.

Tunac immediately had his paws around 059, interlacing his fingers behind her back and pinning down her arms with both thumbs, he returned the kiss almost like he was trying to dig her tongue out with his fangs. Far, far too rough, but 059 loved it anyway; the way he pressed his lips against her neck, and nibbled across her shoulders, and slid his large, rough tongue against the fur of

her belly and chest. 059 giggled—and Tunac pulled away, ears flush with embarrassment, one paw over his crotch to hide his arousal.

“Uh...” Tunac said. “I... I’m sorry, I just...”

“Tunac...” 059 said, folding her arms behind her back sweetly, “when I’m done with X-5 and am officially your assistant, I will show you what a mysa and a lio can do together.”

Tunac immediately turned and frantically typed in his password for the mainframe, then tapped away all sorts of things into various windows and prompts until a car arrived in the special shunter, and the LED on its outside lit up.

“I don’t know how you talked me into this,” Tunac said, his paw sliding up and under 059’s tail as he kissed her on the neck and shoulder again and again. “This doesn’t even make sense!”

“Oh, it does,” 059 said. Tunac lifted her into the special shunter. She giggled at him, and kissed his paw. “I mean, I hope so. I really hope I’m not wrong on this.”

“Wait, you think you might be wrong?” Tunac asked—but the doors slid shut.

—

X-5: WARNING - CHAMBER IS LETHAL. DO NOT GET CAUGHT BY SPOTLIGHTS OR YOU WILL BE SHOT UPON RECOGNITION. SUBJECT MUST GIVE EXPLICIT CONSENT IN ORDER TO CONTINUE.

“Wish they’d told me that on the Z-chamber...”

059 slapped her paw on the CONSENT button prompt, and the doors opened. The room before her was a foggy gray—literally, as fog billowed into the shunter car floor. Tall dark shapes in the distance suggested city streets with the

very dimmest of light. A closer look revealed the shapes were only building-like in silhouette, and bore few features upon their plain metal surfaces.

Spotlights ripped through the fog. 059's heart raced—as much as she hoped she'd be okay, she was not looking forward to the prospect of dying again. But she didn't know how the spotlights worked. A street corner flashed as a hovering drone a meter up, about her height and width but perfectly spherical, turned the corner and continued on away from 059's location. The spotlight it emitted just in front of itself was as wide as the streetlight, covering each street corner-to-corner with no overlap, no way to sneak around its outer edge.

059 carefully stepped up to the corner where he had turned, and looked around the corner.

Bzrt.

—

“Okay,” 059 said, shaking a bit as she stepped out of the shunter, “The fixed lights on the street corners *a/so* count as spotlights. Prophets help me, why don't they explain these things...”

The **laser** ripping through her cerebellum lingered on her mind—was that ironic?—as it was particularly unpleasant to lay there for nearly forty seconds, **numb**, thoughts diminishing until she bled out and suffocated. The pain was temporary but still too long.

059 figured she wouldn't get much of anywhere until she had the area mapped out precisely. The city blocks were irregular rectangles, sometimes with odd corners jutting out here-or-there. While the blocks had no natural dead-ends, the fixed spotlights created many. Most paths had those orbs which patrolled fixed routes—some clockwise, some counter-clockwise, others in figure-8 patterns or others that 059 could not precisely distinguish, because she did not travel anywhere in that direction if she could at all help it.

In what she deemed the “center” of the foggy maze, *eight* such orbs circled around a tall building a fixed width apart from each other.

Where was the exit, anyhow? 059 must have traveled a good quarter of the entire stack looking for it, but unless she missed a turn somewhere, there was no way past many of the stationary lights.

“Dammit,” she whispered to herself. “If I know my mazes, they want me to do something that will change the entire spotlight layout, including the orb patrols.”

059 backtracked, checking every wall and corner to look for a switch she had missed. She ended up finding one in an out-of-the-way corner, a plain black plastic toggle just sitting on the wall like it was meant to be barely noticeable. She flipped it immediately.

CLACK. All the lights switched off for half a second, rendering the entire maze in pitch black. Lights clanged on again, this time washing over the foggy room in a deep red difficult to see through. As well, three of her paths back were now newly blocked again by spotlights taking up the corners. This made the path she took back a single narrow corridor, emptying her into a street where she felt thoroughly turned around.

Trying to find the “center” of the maze again to orient herself, 059 jumped when a spotlight cut through the street ahead of her, a large black orb following the spotlight just behind it. She had no choice but to turn and run back.

The orb followed silently.

The orbs follow a new pattern after the light change. Running, she got ahead of the spotlight and turned a different way down another open street. The black orb turned and followed.

059 nearly stumbled into an opposing spotlight from another orb, but skirted the edge of the light and ducked into an alleyway. The silver orb continued until it met the black orb, then it turned and went the other way. The black orb turned and followed 059 between the buildings.

Shit. It's a chaser, isn't it?

059 ran even farther. Lost in the new configuration, her heart slammed into her chest as she tried to find something—*anything*—to reorient herself. The toggle, the maze center, the shunter—anything!

But after some blind running, she finally recognized the narrow corridor that led back to the red light toggle. Great! She'd just throw the switch back to white, and she could orient herself that way!

After winding through the corridor, she approached the switch, and threw her weight into it.

The toggle would not budge.

"Oh... hell," she groaned. She turned. The black orb turned the corridor for her, slowly making its way to her boxed-in position. 059 thought she would have a heart attack right there—but, this was inevitable, wasn't it? What was she so scared of? Dying, again?

But she still instinctively backed away from the light. She thought she might throw up, or cry, or both. She didn't want to die again, she thought as the spotlight of the black orb crawled up her legs, she didn't—

—

Flipping the red toggle released the black orbs into the maze, **though 059 could keep ahead of them if she kept moving around some safe loops in the street.**

Once the black orbs found her trail, they did not seem keen on taking shortcuts to intercept her unless she crossed her own path; they merely followed a footprint trace she could not see.

She still didn't have a good idea *where* she was going, but after a good long study of the shapes of the various buildings, she grew certain another quarter of the maze had opened up.

She tried not to think about anything but the maze. But what if this was the last time she experienced the time loop? What if this was the final iteration of herself, and she died for real, and was made a liar to Tunac? He'd be grief-stricken, not to mention how seriously he'd be in trouble for helping her with this illicit venture. She couldn't afford these kinds of thoughts, and yet with her own death still ringing in her ears, she couldn't help but have idle thoughts.

She found a new toggle that changed the layout again, shifting all the lights blue. Then, while she was walking one of the same streets, the buildings shifted, closing in on both sides.

—

Red. Blue. Green. Yellow. 059 had been over the entire stack, corner to corner, but had not spotted any additional exit.

But then she realized as she swept through the mist, that left only one option. If there was no other exit, then the exit was back where she started. The shunter doors closed after she left, so perhaps she was to return after she completed some task in this maze. Flip all the toggles? That could have been it, even if it seemed too simple.

Hah. Simple. Thought the mysa who'd already died a dozen times in this maze.

While looking for the next toggle in the yellow maze configuration, 059 spotted something new—a rail ladder rising out of the fog into the darkness above. Not knowing what else to do, she climbed it. Up, up, up, all the way to a catwalk above the false city. Darkness enveloped the space. She followed the catwalk by feeling the railing with her paws.

This was *nice*. She could spot the orbs below her, passing by with their spotlights shining toward the ground, and not one was focused on her. They were

much less menacing from up here, and she could just take her time feeling out the wide, maze-like catwalk.

After some wandering, she noticed a light shining down on another toggle. 059 wound her way there and threw it, because what else was she supposed to do?

At once, all thirty of the orbs on the floor below her rotated one hundred and eighty degrees, shining their spotlights upwards and through the catwalk, each light broad and covering multiple narrow, twisting catwalk paths at once.

“Ah... shit.”

—

Red. Blue. Green. Yellow. Switch back to gray. Reverse order now. Yellow.

Green. 059 jumped the gap between the catwalks, narrowly avoiding the spotlight she'd failed to spot in time, but missing, dangling on by her paws over the streets five meters below.

Dammit! Dammit!

She slipped. She smacked her head against the concrete wall and fell to the floor, her back shattered.

Dammit! The orbs all faced their lights upwards—she couldn't move! She had to die in order to start the cycle again, but everything below her neck rapidly numbed.

“Dammit... dammit...” she creaked, as she stared at the ceiling.

She did not know how long she laid there this time. She didn't have to die to reset the cycle—but she was in too much pain to sleep. Could she even breathe? She couldn't feel her lungs moving. *Prophets, kill me, please, I don't want to linger like this, please...*

As she laid there in a heap, she bawled loudly, in hopes that the orbs would somehow hear her, turn back around and put her out of her misery. But

they didn't. She cried anyway. She was sick of this, sick of this horrible lab that would configure tests that killed their subjects.

Hours passed.

"She Who Was Consumed, if you can hear my prayer," she pleaded to the fog, "just take me to hell now. Let me stay with you until the end of the universe. Please, let me be the last out of hell. I beg you, just end this!"

The fog did not respond.

—

"Can we just skip today?" 059 asked 486 as they sat in the fake grass in the park.

486 sat up. "You never say that. You're always terrified the penalties will hurt your family."

"I know," 059 said. "I'm just... tired today."

486 took her paw.

"You're shaking," 486 said. "Maybe we should get you to the doctor."

"It's nothing," 059 said. "I really, really just want to be with someone right now."

486 looked at 059 in the eyes, drawing a paw over her chin and studying her weary expression.

"Well, if you want," 486 said, "I have a few ideas of things we could do. You ever fry some soft kernels and watch movies under blankets with all the lights out?"

"I'd like the lights on," 059 said, wrapping her arms around 486.

"We can do that," 486 said. She gestured for 059 to follow, and they wound their tails together tightly as they hurried back home, away from the Stack Transport Facility.

059 made no more flying leaps over the railing. While she could not see the railing maze during her first pass, there were safe spots above the buildings where the orbs could not move, and 059 could sit and plan out her movement to the next toggle and avoid the spotlights. But it was much harder to memorize the catwalk with no clear landmarks delineating the paths.

Even after she'd memorized it all, the maze was taking upwards of five hours. She had started eating extra in the morning just to be certain she wasn't trying to think through a dizzying fog of hunger during the final stretch. She was close. She knew it. She *had to be*.

059 found her way to, and flipped, the last switch. Every spotlight turned red once again. She turned and looked out over the catwalk again, looking at the spotlights to see how their movement patterns changed before making a move.

The spotlights all grew larger, and larger, as they moved in on her location. When they got to the corner, just before the umbra in which 059 hid, they stopped. All of them stopped. They surrounded her on all sides, grouping up next to her, spotlight shining upwards through the bars.

059 took a deep breath, sighed loudly, and stepped out into the lights again.

059 threw herself into the shunter for the *second* time, this time making sure her notch got all the way into the receptacle before the swarming spotlights caught up. The doors snapped shut. It was the moment of truth. 059 really hoped she wouldn't have to rip the tag out of her ear again in order to avoid blacking out, but to her surprise, she didn't.

The kiosk released her and she stood up. The shunter car moved, but where to? She stepped around the kiosk to read its console.

Congratulations! You have completed test chamber X-5. This is the first time any mysa has completed the test chamber. You will now be taken to the reception room for further orientation.

059 blinked, staring dumbly at the words before her. She'd lost count of how many times she'd attempted the chamber. She had been at this for at least a month. And that was it?

No, that wasn't it. She'd won, but in order for it to stick, she had to now break the loop herself. Until then, she'd perform X-5 again, and again, and again. At least she did it without dying this time. Maybe with a few more cycles, she could have it perfect. Maybe she'd beat her time.

She prayed she could find her exit before she grew tired and cynical.

—

The clock read 11:70. Tunac entered the bright white office surrounded on all sides by picture windows facing the blue sky. His eyes were brimming with tears, but they brightened at once when he saw 059 standing before him, alive.

"Surprise!" 059 said, turning around in her tiny lab coat. "I'm a lab assistant now, just like they promised! To be honest, for a while there I didn't think they'd really do it, but apparently the lab computer insisted they must follow protocol, and you know scientists—"

The first thing Tunac reached for was 059's ear. She'd spent the last two hours in surgery, where they had removed the memory blanker and left her with an anesthetic headache. He touched the scar where had once been the notch, but otherwise no more metal ring, no more electronics, just a velvety ear that slid between his enormous fingers.

“How did you do it?!” Tunac asked, sweeping her off the desk and embracing her.

“I told you, silly.” 059 kissed Tunac on the lips eagerly. She whispered. “I just did it over and over and over again until I got it right. But, don’t tell the suits that. We’re still keeping that between you and me.”

Tunac pressed her up against his shoulder, crying the whole while. 059 stroked him on his cheek—at first attempting to kiss away the tears, but they were too large, like bowlfuls of salt water. She cuddled him instead.

“Hey, please don’t,” 059 said. “I’m okay. At least for now.”

Tunac sat up and wiped his eyes.

“They didn’t even care that this breaks the habitat cycle of Stack One-Ten!” 059 exclaimed. “They said I could have whatever I wanted! So I asked them if I could work with you. I mean, if that’s also what you want...”

“Fifty-nine...” Tunac said, sitting down on a chair. “I don’t... I don’t understand. Don’t you resent me for this? Or us?” Tunac asked. “If you went in there, and you were killed, I mean... I’m complicit in that.”

“Tunac,” 059 tugged at his fur to bring him down to her level again, “I’m not dead. And I swear to the four prophets if you do not take me somewhere nice tonight I will eat you.”

Tunac tilted his ears. “Eat me? How could you...?”

“One bite at a time!”

—

The canopy of leaves kept the rain mostly off the sidewalk as it poured in sheets over the other side and emptied into the gutters. 059 sat on Tunac’s shoulder and watched it all, taking in deep lungfuls of the humid air. He stopped at the roadside meat pie stall, which smelled disgusting. 059 wrinkled her nose and glared at

Tunac incredulously, but he was right. The pies were delicious, even the mysa-diet offerings. She'd never eaten food prepared by a lio that tasted so close to home cooking—she thought she might fall over and cry.

The clock at the street stand read 13:62.

Judging that they were far out of range of any of lab surveillance, 059 explained in full on the park bench.

"I didn't want them to know they'd sent me to the Z chambers, so I pretended going to X-5 was a misunderstanding, and that I didn't know it was deadly. Their explanation was that they never meant to use the deadly test chambers on live subjects. Maybe. But they still exist. I suspect they're in place until some evil bastard in power wants to thin the mysa population and approves of their use for real."

"But that doesn't make any sense for the Z-series just incinerating your unconscious body," Tunac said. "That's just cruel."

"Well, think about it," 059 said. "The only reason they'd send anyone to the Z chamber is if they're claiming precognition. They couldn't just blank my memory if they wanted to be sure. What if the blanker had been faulty? What if my brain had somehow adapted to its presence? What if I was just *lying* and circumventing it some other way? No, they had to be absolutely certain that I was in a time loop, that the information couldn't be in my mind from any other source."

"That's still horrible," Tunac said.

"It is," 059 said. She took a tall drink from her **sugar** water. "I don't *like* it. Even if nobody's actually *supposed* to die, it's still *there* as a possibility. Whoever thought up this test for prognostication in mysa clearly didn't give any thought to how a mysa would actually *experience* it, or else they're just sadistic. Given it's government work, I suspect it's both."

"I'm sorry," Tunac sighed. "I am surprised they gave you the job anyway. Though after all that, I wouldn't think you'd want it."

“I can’t change anything from the outside,” 059 said. “This is military work we’re talking about. Its momentum is enormous. I can’t simply stand in its way and just hope it will stop; it’s crushed so many already. But maybe I can do something from inside. Maybe we can find a way to stop the abuse before it happens in earnest.”

Tunac looked down at his half-eaten meat pie. He seemed to have lost his appetite. “But selling your soul to do that...”

“Hon.” 059 placed a small paw on Tunac’s arm and looked up into his beautiful eyes. “My soul’s already worth nothing. I’m getting a bargain.”

—

Tunac took her to his apartment, a little small and dingy but still plenty spacious for a mysa—even if none of the furnishings were for mysa. They spent part of the evening with 059 atop tables and chairs, scouting out where on the walls they could place ramps for her ease of access so she didn’t have to climb up so high. She was, after all, going to be returning to this apartment night after night from now on.

The clock on the wall read 15:11. Five hours to sunrise.

As Tunac composed his shopping list, 059 considered the part she didn’t tell him: she still hadn’t solved the time loop. This was all for naught; she would wake back up in her bed in the Stacks in five hours or less. If she wanted to do any of this again, she was going to have to run X-5 all over again.

But, damn, what a night. It may have been worth the months of grueling memorization work to get there, to feel Tunac’s rough tongue all over her fur, to feel the barest suggestion of his overwhelming weight as he pinned her down against the bed. It didn’t seem like it could work all that well between a mysa and a lio, but all they needed to do was switch places—he pleased her, then she

pleasured him, then they switched places again, like a long dance where the lead changed every time the song switched out.

059 nearly forgot that she would not wake up in his bed. It didn't matter to her—she'd run X-5 again, as many times as she needed to be with her lio.

—

059 woke up in bed, mane tousled and flopped in front of her eyes. The alarm clock read 1:17.

Light hit her eyes through the window curtains. She sat up, cradled between Tunac's neck and shoulder, his face smashed awkwardly between pillow and mattress, his and her manes both scuffed up from the activity the night before. He snored like a train horn.

059 touched her ear, then part of the skull just behind it where her memory blanker had once been and wondered. Then she leaned back into Tunac's fur and rested there, waiting for him to awaken on his own—or for his alarm to startle him, whichever came first.

Maybe then she'd call her mom.

—

So... did removing the blanker stop the loop retroactively? 059 hadn't solved whether her experience had been a vision or played out for real. How did living them for real even work? She considered this as she, standing at the lab desk and looking up at the lio-sized monitor, looked up scientific papers on the many-universe theory, wondering if prognostication had something to do with lateral movement through the multiverse instead. Perhaps somehow dumping those memories into an earlier version of herself?

At least now she could read it as a hypothetical rather than lived experience. But those intrusive thoughts crept in again. The lab supervisors never questioned *how* 059 completed X-5 without implying she had developed precognitive abilities. They just took the computer at its word, no elaboration required.

“Relaria, dear, can you log into the central mainframe?” Tunac asked. He was studying the new classification of Stack 110 now that the internal time-loop experiment ended. “I need to ask the Stack’s AI about the new designations.”

“I would,” 059 said, clicking off her browsing of scientific literature over to the unified login prompt. “But I just started working, I don’t know the password.”

Tunac reached into his briefcase and glanced at his authenticator.

“1AB429KP,” he said, without looking up.

059 started to type the string of characters in, then she paused. She perked her ears and turned back to look at the back of Tunac’s head, his mane obscuring his face.

“...Say that again?”

—END

—

As a child, Rick Griffin frequently played out elaborate stories with stuffed animals and became weird in the head due to it and associated traumas. Therefore he decided that when he grew up, he would tell stories for a living and also become a real live dragon, or perhaps a kangaroo. Naturally, everyone shook their head at the young boy’s naivete, since as adults they knew that it was impossible to write stories as one’s sole career. They calmly explained that maybe he should get a day job as well.

The whole “day job” thing didn’t pan out. Now as the artist and author of *Traitors Thieves and Liars*, *Housepets!*, *A&H Club*, and other stories and comics, he is ultimately responsible for instigating this world and many more like it.

He ended up writing this short story ten thousand words over the submission limit because he’s paying for this anthology and can do what he likes.

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