

SCENE: Home Stack 110

[059 wakes up and readies her morning routine—hygiene first. Home Stack on its face looks outwardly idyllic, like an old mysa town from centuries ago, down to warm (tudor-like) buildings, even if the sky is totally artificial. There are 1000 mysa to a home stack, and a little over half of them participate in experiments daily.]

[059 makes note of the memory blanker switch, which is implanted in her ear. The major part of it is a computer hooked up to her brain, but the switch is the most obvious part.]

112. Morning, fifty-nine!

059. Morning, one-twelve.

112. Nutritional porridge again!

486. Ugh. Did they get my request to stock some real food? I could kill for some actual cider oats.

112. We HAVE real food, but you need to keep your nutrients optimal.

059. Well I like it.

486. Of course you like it. You can never remember having tasted it before.

059. The memory blanker doesn't affect everything, you know. You could use yours once in a while; it's hardly traumatizing.

486. I like my memories to stay where they are, thank you very much.

059. The blanking tests pay out more~

486. What do you care? We never get to use any of that money ourselves.

112. What flavor you want?

059. Surprise me.

112. (looking over the packages on the shelf, pulls one out at random) Ahhhh...green berry!

[486 makes a face; 059 eats breakfast]

059. If you didn't want money for your family back home, why'd you sign up for the stacks?

486. Oh, I gotta explain it again, huh?

059. Oh, ha ha. I do remember the conversations we have.

486. [rolls eyes] I just wanted out of the ghetto. And I know you did, too. You told me several times.

059. Then I must have also told you that I actually love my family and want them to have a better life.

486. Mmm. (Chugs a sugar water as she goes for her morning workout)

[news of outside world is playing on the broadcast monitor, so they don't feel utterly isolated here. 059 considers this, misses her family as she was the only one who signed up for the stacks. She wonders how they're doing without her, given she's not allowed to make contact with the outside herself.]

[059 joins 486 for the workout. They're running in wheels, obv]

486. I do sometimes wonder what it's like to not remember the recent past.

059. I get to live in this nice place one day at a time without even remembering any of the stress I get put through.

486. That's what's curious to me. Like, they can just selectively erase a memory, and it removes the stress of experiencing that memory?

059. Curious? Maybe you should try it out.

486. Absolutely not. I mean, then you'd have only lived for maybe three hours a day! At that point, you remember being a pup, and then one day you wake up, and you're an old maid.

059. And?

486. What do you mean "and"? You'd have very little notion of who you were!

059. I really only sorta know who I am anyway. I'm not a pup anymore. That's only ever gonna continue to exist for me as memories.

486. You wouldn't feel like you lived your whole life, though. You'd feel like you were young one moment, then wake up, and your life is over!

059. You're saying that's not how it already works? What's the difference between dying with a lot of memories and dying with a few?

486. ...

[They go through the Early Market on their way to the Stack Transport Facility. On the way, they see the poster about promotion to Lab Assistant]

486. What, you think you can make it to Lab Assistant?

059. ...

486. It's really hard to learn everything you need to in order to make it.

059. It's not that. *she sighs* I'm gonna get to the STF early today.

486. You go early every day! You really only want to remember three hours of every day you live?

059. ...I'll just go now. Thanks for spending the morning with me.

486. As usual, Fifty-nine. Don't overwork yourself.

[059 has another reason she's been idolizing memory blanking—she doesn't want to keep her own memories, but she's stuck with those. Living with 112 and 486 is nice, and she's still perfectly aware of how repetitious this lab work is.]

[SCENE: Stack Transport Facility, about three hours after wake up. About two hundred mysa show up in a large waiting room for the early rotation, which 059 is always part of.]

[On the other side of the glass is their lab tech, Tunac, a lio. 059 gets blushy at the sight of him—despite lio being about seven times taller, or maybe because of it, she’s always had a bit of a crush on him. The way he smiles so charmingly certainly helps. He speaks with each of the mysa in turn about their testing record and his recommendations of which test to run that day.]

Tunac. Two-sixty...you’ve been on a streak in the P series test chambers. Golds across the board.

260. Those are memory blanking chambers, right?

Tunac. I think if you don’t remember, that tells you everything you need to know.

[059 finally makes her way to the front of the line.]

059. Hi, Tunac...

Tunac. Hey, Fifty-nine! You’re looking lovely today.

059. I’ve really been thinking about that lab assistant position.

Tunac. So you keep saying.

059. What do you think about it?

Tunac. ...

[Tunac gives her a look, and 059 tries to make herself out as very sweet and affirming]

Tunac. ...you know it’s hard for a lio and a mysa...

059. To be partners. In a professional sense.

Tunac. Right. Not that I... I mean...

059. Come on, tell me how you feel about it! Me and you, bumping shoulders together in the lab every day...

Tunac. This is really dry work, Fifty-nine. It’s nothing like the stacks.

059. I like dry work. It’s calming. I ever tell you about the ghettos?

Tunac. More than enough. I don’t envy you growing up.

059. Well tell me about your life! How’d you even get this gig?

Tunac. We shouldn’t hold up the line.

059. We barely get a minute to talk every day, though.

Tunac. Fifty-nine... [blushes] Okay, seriously, please pick a test chamber.

[059 looks over her records, which indicate she frequently accesses P-114, and it’s paying out double for return visits today. Seems an obvious choice.]

[059 blows a kiss]

059. See you tomorrow, Tunac.

Tunac. [blushes harder and waves sheepishly] See you tomorrow, Fifty-nine.

[059 goes into the shunting chamber and is greeted by a screen. "Do you consent to having your memories of the test erased after the test is complete?" Yes. "Please place the memory blanker notch in the reticule. This will mark the start time of the blanking period." She does so—the effect causes her to black out for a second.

However, the moment she awakens, the computer informs her that the test is canceled. She's confused, thinking maybe she'll be able to convince Tunac to let her take another test.

She opens the doors manually. All the lights are off. Everything is covered in a thick layer of dust.]

059. Tunac?

[Nobody is there. She stumbles out of the chamber and is suddenly struck by how painful everything is—she feels extremely weak and has to will herself to stay upright. She realizes that she's ravenously hungry. Tunac isn't there behind the glass.

059 goes back to the main residence area—everyone is gone. The A/C unit is still running but making dreadful sputtering sounds.]

059. What in the...

[In her old residence, she looks up the residency files. Her face appears besides her name as one of the first to take residence in that house. Then a long, long list of other residents as they're replaced, year after year, for the next four hundred and twenty years.]

059. No... no!

[She even looks up journal files, and guesses 486's private journal password. Indeed, 486 maintained residency for another seventy years until she was moved to the old resident stack.

She blushes hard, reading how 486 always had a crush on 059, but one day 059 was apparently shunted to the wrong test chamber, and Tunac was unable to find her, given how absolutely, ridiculously complicated the stack system was. They eventually found her in the long-term stasis chambers, but by then it was too late to interrupt the process.

059 then finds the broadcast monitor, and it still seems to be functional, even if the screen is heavily faded. She turns it on and is suddenly terrified to hear a krakun voice. Liotec's been overrun. They're in control. She shuts off the broadcast monitor immediately.

059 sits down for a bit, unable to process this. After wandering around, she finds a long-term food storage bin and manages to eat some mummified-tasting grain. She gets it in her head that maybe she should just stay here for now—although it won't be pretty. She'll run out of food eventually.

After weighing her options, she realizes that what she wants more than anything is to figure out what happened to Tunac. But there isn't any way out of the stack except via the shunter, is there?

She returns to the STF and begins searching everywhere, eventually finding a hidden exit door. She breaks it open and goes into the technician's lab where she's always seen Tunac sitting. The computer files on his machine turn up nothing; all his old records are gone.

Which means there's only one thing left to do, and that's leave through the employee door. 059 paces a lot at first. She isn't certain she wants to go outside. Even if the krakun didn't take over Liotec, she doesn't want to go back to her life before the stacks.

Resignedly, she concludes that she really has no other choice. However, she needs to get the security code to open the door. She starts searching through the old records on the computer, but she's so distraught that she can't organize her thoughts long enough to find it.]

059. No, no no!

[She runs back to her old stack home, sits down on her old bed, and breaks down, her sobs echoing through the dusty desolation. Finally, as her grief gives way to numb exhaustion, she sinks to the bed and pulls the covers back over herself...]

[SCENE: Next Day]

[059 wakes up back in the stacks. She blinks, checks herself over, then groans. Oh, you idiot, that was the test!

But, wait... Her memory of the test should be gone. Something is wrong. She notes the day on the calendar, and something is off about it, but she can't determine what. She goes through morning hygiene and goes down for breakfast.]

112. Morning, fifty-nine!

059. ...morning, one-twelve.

112. Nutritional porridge again!

486. Ugh. Did they get my request to stock some real food? I could kill for some actual cider oats.

112. We HAVE real food, but you need to keep your nutrients optimal.

(059 blinks)

486. What's wrong? You look like you've seen a ghost.

(059 shakes herself out of it)

059. Nothing, I guess. (She sits at the table without speaking further to 486)

112. What flavor you want?

059. Erm... surprise me?

112. (looking over the packages on the shelf, pulls one out at random) Ahhhh...green berry!

(486 makes a face)

059. (quickly) Actually, you know what--I want the red...flavor.

(112 shrugs, pulls out the red bean flavor packet, and 059 eats that instead. 486 chugs a sugar water, then pauses. She sits next to 059 and places a paw on hers. She squeezes 486's paw.)

486. Fifty-nine, you feeling okay today?

059. I... I just have the strangest feeling of deja vu.

486. Ah, must have had your memory blanked one too many times. (She pats 059 on the shoulder.) Maybe you should stay off of it a while, like me. I like my memories to stay where they are, thank you very much.

(486 leaves for the exercise room. 059, curious, takes the remote and turns on the broadcast. She was only half-paying attention yesterday, but she could swear it's the exact same news as the day before. ...Maybe it was an ongoing story? Or a rerun?)

[059 joins 486 for the workout. This time, she wonders if what the test made up was true, and if 486 really does have a crush on her. She's already got her heart set on Tunac, in any case.]

486. I do sometimes wonder what it's like to not remember the recent past.

(059 says nothing)

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

059. It's...supposed to work like that, yeah.

486. Your heart rate is awfully high today.

059. It's the workout.

486. So um... I know it's a bit of an invasive question, but do you ever feel like only experiencing three hours of every day is going to leave you one day with little to remember?

059. At the moment, I'm wondering why I'm still recalling so much.

486. You really trying to escape your memories that hard?

059. I don't want to talk about it.

486. You know, the world sucks, but we gotta keep living it.

(059 gets off the wheel)

059. I'm going up to the STF.

486. Already? We still have two hours.

059. Uh...listen, maybe tomorrow. I just...have this feeling, okay? I need to get up there.

(486 gets off and stops 059 before she leaves. 486 sighs)

486. 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's mouth drops open.)

486. 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.

059. I don't... I don't want to be his lover, Four-eighty-six; I just like talking with him. And imagining. You know, girl stuff.

486. So what's all that about wanting to become his lab assistant?

059. That's still part of the fantasy... They don't actually want to promote mysa. They all hate us.

486. Oh, I see. Except Tunac.

059. Probably the nicest lio I've ever met. I'd just really like it if they were all like him...

(486 wraps her tail around 059's. 059 blushes—she doesn't share 486's feeling for her, but she doesn't want to alienate her. Maybe one day she'll want to settle. But not today. She clasps 486's paw in both of hers, squeezing her tail tightly with her own, before parting.)

[At the STF, 059 waits, and finds an opportunity to get in line in the exact order she had been in last time. She hears 260 ahead of her, expecting to hear the same conversation as yesterday]

Tunac. Two-sixty...Hmm, I'm not really sure what to recommend you.

260. I know...

Tunac. Maybe it's time to start in the A-series again. Get your skills up. Sharpen your instincts more.

260. I've just been here for so long... Starting over again...?

Tunac. B series?

[059 has no idea why everything was the same except the one thing that should have been the same. She thought she remembered 260 as having a high rating in P-series? Why would that change?]

059. Hi, Tuanc...

Tunac. Hey, Fifty-nine! You're looking lovely today.

059. I, um... Thank you. Say, um, I have a question.

Tunac. What's that?

059. Do we have any testing facilities to check out the efficacy of the memory blanker itself?

Tunac. As in, you'd get paid for it? No, if there was an equipment malfunction, we'd have to pull you out of rotation and check manually. It's not a test, so you don't get the daily stipend.

[059 thinks about this—she really doesn't want to miss a day if she can help it. Maybe this was all a fluke.]

Tunac. Um, do you think something's wrong with your blanker?

059. No, it's just, we never seem to need much maintenance on these things.

Tunac. Built to last!

[059 goes over her record. To her surprise, her record looks completely different than before. P-114 shows her failing it twelve times. And P-series is paying half today. She selects it anyhow.]

Tunac. [Blinks when he sees her choice.] Uh—

059. I thought you weren't allowed to discuss our selections once we've made them.

Tunac. Technically, no, I just... Don't you usually go for double pay? Q-series is double pay today.

059. I'll talk to you about it tomorrow. I just want to get today over with.

Tunac. Um, suit yourself. Good luck.

[059 goes in the shunting chamber, and everything happens according to procedure. She blacks out. She wakes up, and it's the empty chamber all over again. This time, knowing that it's definitely part of the test; her muscles ache, but she recognizes that it's not from atrophy but because of a drug fed into her system. She finds some counteragents at the clinic. Then she makes a beeline for the emergency exit, this time finding out that there's a way to open it without breaking it down. She goes out into Tunac's office, and this time she figures out how to open the emergency latch to the outside door.

This time she's much more confident and finds the security footage, finds the most recent time a technician used the lab, and sees them tap the code into the door. 059 does that right away, needing to rig up a pulley system to get up to the lock, and she manages to open the lio-sized door. She enters a very decrepit hallway, none of the doors she can reach but they all lead to different home stacks, or at least they're meant to look like they do. She finds the mysa exit, a doorway meant for her kind's size—apprehensively, she tries it, only to find the shunter is gone. So she climbs up it—thankful she managed to find the counteragents or she'd never be able to force her way nearly a kilometer up the shaft, all the way to the top. She smells fresh air, but then she comes across a kiosk.

Congratulations. You've completed P-114 in one hour fifteen minutes, a new record by three hours and fifty-six minutes. Please place the memory blanker notch in the reticule.

059 sighs, and hopes that it'll work THIS time.]

[059 wakes up in bed. She checks the calendar--it's the same date. She quickly hurries through her hygiene before taking a close look at the notch, wondering what could possibly be wrong with it. But if something is wrong with it, why is it the same date?]

112. Morning, fifty-nine!

059. Aaaa... uh, morning, one-twelve.

112. Nutritional porridge again!

486. Ugh. Did they get my request to stock some real food? I could kill for some actual cider oats.

112. We HAVE real food, but you need to keep your nutrients optimal.

059. ... (thinking to say exactly what she said before, which to her wasn't all that long ago) Well...

I like it.

486. Of course you like it. You can never remember having tasted it before.

059. That's not how the memory blanker works. You... you could stand to use yours a bit more often.

486. I like my memories to stay where they are, thank you very much.

059. (a little too quickly) The blanking tests pay out more.

486. What do you care? (059 says at the same time) We never get to use any of that money ourselves. (486 just looks at her. 112 wasn't paying attention.)

112. What flavor you want?

059. Surprise me.

112. (looking over the packages on the shelf, pulls one out at random) Ahhh—

059. Green berry.

112. Green—how did you guess?

059. I really need to get to the STF right now.

486. Uh...something wrong?

059. My memory blanker's on the fritz.

(486 and 112 share a look)

112. What makes you think that?

059. I think this might be more than deja vu. I should probably talk to Tunac, though.

486. Ohh, I see. Want to get some time in with your lio boyfriend.

059. He's not my boyfriend, I just flirt with him. I told you that yesterday!

486. You did?

059. I know you don't like lio, but Tunac's different. He's genuine!

486. Okay, okay. If it's a technical problem, I'll believe you. Here. Good luck. (hands her the can of sugar water. 059 rushes out while drinking it)

[At the STF, 059 rushes into the chamber, but Tunac is facing his computer doing his morning paperwork. 059 remembers the emergency exit from the test and wonders if it's actually the same as in the test chamber—and sure enough, it works. Tunac is startled to see her outside]

Tunac. Fifty-nine? How'd you—

059. My memory blanker's not working.

Tunac. ...come on, let's get you to the diagnostic center.

[Tunac takes her hand and leads her down a hallway. 059 feels strangely exhilarated that she actually gets to touch him for the first time, but she's too freaked out to really enjoy it. Still, she extracts some comfort from it]

059. For the past two days I've run P-114, but I've remembered it both times. I thought it might have been a fluke, that I didn't get my ear notch marked correctly, but then it happened again despite me reaching the end of the chamber and finding the kiosk.

Tunac. Let me look that one up, see if I can find the recordings of it.

059. But the weirder thing is that I wake up and it's still the same date, and I go downstairs, and everyone is behaving exactly the same as the day before.

Tunac. A faulty memory blanker could have some side effects.

059. Side effects like knowing exactly what my housemates are going to say before they say it?

Tunac. ...um... about that.

059. What?

Tunac. Okay, I really shouldn't tell you this, but since it looks like your memory blanker was marked correctly, I should be able to roll you back to a point where you won't remember any of this anyway.

059. Tell me what?

Tunac. I mean it. Do not tell anyone else this, or I could lose this job.

059. Of course not! I don't want to cost you your job... Please, what's wrong with me?!

Tunac. Testing is about a lot more than just the individual chamber runs. Honestly, if that were about all it was about, we wouldn't be paying you to run them all the time. Stack 110's primary purpose is to test for extremely subtle variations in how free will operates.

059. ...What do you mean?

Tunac. Um... Okay, don't get angry with me. This was not my decision. But for the last five years, everyone in Stack 110 has been having their memories blanked daily. Body chemistry tested, reset. Everything consumed, replaced. Everything marked, cleaned.

059. ... I've been reliving the same day for five years?

Tunac. Yes.

059. ...I must have been awfully repetitious.

Tunac. A bit. It's okay, though. At least I know you've always been the same fifty-nine every time.

(059 leans into his paw as he looks up the last two tests she did. He winces as he runs through the recording of the first one.)

Tunac. A lot of the testing of the memory blanker has been to remove symptoms of PTSD. That's what P-114 was about in the first place. It wasn't about getting to the end of the test; it was about making a subject suffer something traumatic.

059. That's horrible!

Tunac. But you don't remember. Or at least, you're not supposed to...

059. You just smile and let me throw myself into a testing chamber that's meant to traumatize me?!

Tunac. That was the agreement.

059. I came here to get away from the ghettos, Tunac! I've already had enough trauma for a lifetime—please, just wipe my memory! I don't even care if I can't remember the past five years; just reset me. I want to have a decent life. Even if it's the same three hours every day.

Tunac. ...Okay. I'll run you through a manual blanking. We'll need to head back to the front desk first, though. The early shift testers will be coming in soon. Let me process the first two hundr...well, 199 subjects. *he seems a bit upset by this*

[059 sits, watching from a small diagnostic table next to the front desk for the next hour as Tunac runs through the mysa test subjects. She is hurt, and she wonders if Tunac is even telling the truth. She could have been here for the last twenty years for all she knows. She signed up when she was fifteen, and she must have lived to at least twenty, because she does have memories of living inside Stack 110 that weren't the same day every day...

When the line gets to 260, Tunac once again gives a completely different set of numbers for his test results. Eventually Tunac gets back to 059.]

059. What's with the test results, anyway?

Tunac. Oh...that's also part of the test. The entire same-day is the control. The computer has a quantum randomizer in it to scramble actual test results.

059. Do you have the real results?

Tunac. Well, somewhere. This video is of you running P-114.

059. Yeah, but if I've been running P-114 any number of times with the exact same starting variables, then that video of me running P-114 and losing my mind should be exactly the same as any other time I've run P-114 in the past five years.

Tunac. ...You are absolutely correct. But I do also have the one of you completing P-114.

059. Have I ever completed it before?

Tunac. No, the video is unique.

059. Unless it isn't.

Tunac. ...

059. ... *sighs* I'm sorry, I must sound absolutely crazy.

Tunac. Now, listen to me. No matter what, you are not crazy. I've looked at your brain chemistry, after all. We don't use schizophrenics for testing in 110. You're not imagining this.

059. But maybe this is all part of a test. I mean, P-114 was really convincing.

Tunac. ...Hmmm. If this is all part of a test, then so is this.

(He leans in and kisses 059 in the cheek. She gasps and blushes)

059. That's not fair! Now you're gonna blank my memory, and I won't get to remember that...

Tunac. That'll keep the data from being contaminated!

059. I... Dammit, why can't I keep my memories for all the nice stuff that happens to me?

Tunac. Oh, you know testing chamber R-002?

059. ...It's marked with multiple death warnings.

Tunac. All-day massage parlor.

059. You jerk!

Tunac. I'm not allowed to tell you! It's part of the test.

059. Well what about X-05? The one I would need to complete in order to be promoted to lab assistant?

Tunac. ... I wouldn't test it.

059. You could be lying to me.

Tunac. I swear, I am not. There's no survival rate on the X series.

059. They could be lying to you.

Tunac. Okay, maybe. But would you really put your life on the line to test that?

059. ... Probably not.

Tunac. Okay. I want you to stay around, 059. It's a decent enough life in 110, right?

059. Yeah, just... I think it'd be a bit nicer out here.

(Tunac kisses her again. She holds onto his face and nibbles into his cheek fur. She's crying, upset that she doesn't get to keep any of this.)

Tunac. Okay, blanking time.

059. Please try and find a way I could be with you longer than this.

Tunac. ...I'll try.

[059 blacks out]

[059 wakes up in bed. At first it seems like she might have really forgotten, but soon enough, she groans.]

059. IT DIDN'T WORK.

112. Fifty-nine? What's—

059. Gimme that. (She yanks the sugar water from 486's paw)

486. Fifty-nine, this isn't like you! What's wrong?! Where are you going?!

[059 heads to the STF and goes through the emergency exit even before Tunac arrives. When he does, he's surprised to see her outside]

Tunac. Fifty-nine?

059. Tunac! The memory blanking still didn't work.

Tunac. ...What are you talking about?

059. Well, let's see. (starts pacing) You ran the memory blanking test on me, and then I woke up in bed about fifteen hours later. I don't know. Maybe it worked for those fifteen hours? Or was I just put immediately to sleep?

Tunac. What do you mean I ran a memory blank on you yesterday? You mean you had your memory blanked in one of the kiosks, right?

059. ...No, you did a manual blanking on me yesterday. Or maybe some days ago? I came out here, and we were talking, remember?

Tunac. Uh... Fifty-nine, I've never seen you outside of the Stack before.

059. ...

Tunac. How'd you get out, anyway?

059. Wait, what? I was out here yesterday! We talked! You told me that Stack 110 has been repeating the same day for the last five years, except for the randomized computer records.

Tunac. How'd you know about that?

059. YOU TOLD ME.

Tunac. I've never mentioned that to anyone! That's kinda critical to the whole...

(059 is about to cry)

Tunac. Okay, okay, please don't... *sighs* Something's clearly gone wrong, and we need to figure out what it is. Here... *he wipes her tears*

059. I don't know what's going on anymore! I thought it was just the day repeating like you told me, but now you don't even remember? What should I do?

Tunac. We need to run another memory blanker test.

059. No! I'm not gonna wake up in bed tomorrow and go through this again!

Tunac. I know! I know. I mean a live test. The usual memory blanker activation makes you black out for a moment because...well, memory setting and blanking can be a bit traumatic. But we are able to run it while you're awake.

059. ...okay.

[Tunac gets the diagnostic ready for a live blanking.]

059. Tunac... you would tell me if there was anything else going on, right?

Tunac. Of course.

059. But you never told me I've been repeating a day for the last five years. Or is it ten? Or twenty!

Tunac. I'm... *sighs* I'm so sorry I have to lie to you about that. You really are never meant to figure that out for as long as you're stationed in 110.

059. I know. I'm just a test subject. Barely paid a couple krona per day. Probably not even worth that much.

Tunac. Fifty-nine, I know you. I've been watching your progress since you started.

059. ...Since I started? Really?

Tunac. ...Do you remember the initial testing phase?

059. Oh yeah, when they'd shuffle us between home stacks on a whim.

Tunac. I did my best to make sure you didn't end up in the really bad stack.

059. ...What about the time they put me in the "Electric Shock Suite"—

Tunac. I tried. I really wish I had more control over the project, but I don't. I'm just a lab jockey, honestly. Got this job after getting out of university because, well, government job. It's stable, it's honorable, and it pays well. Then I'm here for the first week, and I see what they're doing to the mysa, and I'm outraged. But...

(he gets quiet)

059. Tunac? 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.

Tunac. I can't stand it, Fifty-nine. I hate every bit of what we're doing to you, and I tell myself it's okay because of what they and what you told me. You signed the agreement of consent 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.

059. 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. I've still been made to be a liar.

059. Okay. So...you don't have to lie to me anymore. We can start fresh.

[Tunac thinks about this. He gets 059 in the chair and readies her for live memory blanking.]

Tunac. It'll be really awkward to have to tell you my confession every day.

059. I'm sure it'll be easier the day I'm out of here and your lab assistant.

Tunac. About that—

059. I know. X-series tests are lethal. They don't really want mysa lab assistants. Don't blame yourself for it, Tunac, it's just a dream. And dreams are just memories we can't remember.

Tunac. ... Fifty-nine...

059. Yes?

Tunac. ...maybe some day.

[He activates the blanker.]

(059 is suddenly re-experiencing a lot of fractured memories, but they're strung together like a dream)

Mom. Reliara! Out of bed!

(For some reason, 059 isn't surprised to hear her old name, or the fact that she's in her old room, which is fairly dingy with cracked wallpaper, leaking pipes, and low, buckling ceiling. A large pan is overflowing with water from a drip in the ceiling.)

059. Mom, I can't...

Mom. You're going to go to school and make something of yourself or you're going to spend all day washing dishes. Which are you gonna do, huh? You have five seconds to make up your mind!

(059 drags herself up slowly, and she's standing at the train station that is supposed to take her to the public school for mysa. The train platform is run-down)

Swendi. We aren't even really at war with the krakun. It's just an excuse they made up so they don't have to put any more money into social programs.

059. Swendi, even if that's true, what difference does it make?

Swendi. What, you believe any of the shit they feed us? Really love fellating lio, I bet. Oh yes, tell me more of your lies, sir (making lewd thrusting gestures) Unf! Unnnf!

059. (completely ignoring him) I think I missed breakfast...

Owan. You had the option of breakfast? Lucky bitch.

059. *getting angry* Fuck you, Owan! You think you have it tougher than any of the rest of us? I have to work in my mom's kitchen all weekend, all your mom does is lay around strung out on pethidine!

(Owan spits in her face. 059 clobbers him—right as the train arrives. 059 is quickly covered in red spatter.)

It didn't happen like that... he stepped in front of the train himself...but...

(059 pulled backwards, into a cage, carried by lio officers)

059. I didn't touch him! I didn't ... I hit him, he just jumped onto the tracks himself, honest!

Officer. Yes, we have the camera recording of the event. I know.

059. Then let me go!

Officer. On one condition...

(The lio officer starts grabbing at 059 in very lewd ways. It doesn't last long, even though 059 closes her eyes. 059 is in bed again, this time seeing her brother in the next room having very, very loud sex. She starts crying. She has drugs under her pillow)

Mom. Reliara!

059. Mom, would you shut up! Just shut up! (throws the pan of water at her. It splashes. Rain. She's kneeling down in front of a shrine to She Who Was Consumed, crying)

059. Who the fuck put me into this damn life...(She throws rocks at the statue. It flies back, strikes her in the head, and she comes to)

059. PROPHETS SAVE ME!...

(She's still in the small kiosk. Tunac rushes over to her)

Tunac. Are you okay? I know I warned you about live blanking, but it doesn't help much when you don't remember the warning, I suppose...

(059 pulls herself off the seat, yanking the clip from her ear. She's crying.)

Tunac. Fifty-nine?

059. It didn't work, Tunac...

(Tunac sighs)

Tunac. Still. That was about half a second. You seem distraught.

059. I'll deal with it. Just...some things I hoped to forget. The memory blanker doesn't cover it. I've dealt with it so far.

Tunac. Here...

(Tunac gently reaches for her. She instinctively shrinks away.)

Tunac. Okay, okay. No touching right now. I'll go over the data.

(059 remains curled up in the corner as Tunac goes over the data)

Tunac. According to this...memory dumped successfully.

059. Well it didn't work. I still remember everything.

Tunac. I don't... there's nothing about the memory blanker that worked improperly. You should have been reset to the first point you had your ear marked, however many days ago this has been happening.

059. Four...

Tunac. Are you sure any of those four days really happened?

059. It did! I swear, Tunac, I'm not making up any of this!

Tunac. So let's get this straight. You remember it happening.

059. Yes...

Tunac. Have you heard about false memories?

059. False memories?! But I was there!

Tunac. That's kinda how false memories work.

059. I was there, Tunac. It wasn't even that long ago!

Tunac. But that's the problem with false memories. You're not there now. Now it only exists in your head.

059. I thought you couldn't invent memories, though. That real, perfect made-up memories were still beyond science.

Tunac. ...*thinking* 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 running the experiment is using that as a baseline to work on creating 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. ...why would they do that?

Tunac. You said it yourself. It's still beyond science. We're currently researching things that are beyond science.

059. But why this way? Why these memories?!

Tunac. Okay okay... if you were being given these specific false memories, that means that whoever's running that experiment wanted you to come out here and talk to me about this.

059. But...that'd make you part of the experiment.

Tunac. ...

059. Oh prophets.

Tunac. Let's just say that my university grades weren't exactly pristine... in order to get this job, I signed a waiver same as you. They just haven't actually cashed in on that waiver yet... Or at least, I thought they didn't...

(They're quiet for a moment)

059. So what now?

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

(059 nods. Tunac puts in a call over his large monitor)

059. So... how would I know this isn't a false memory?

Tunac. Well, you're experiencing it right now, right?

059. Yes. Until I wake up tomorrow and I'm told that what I experienced right now didn't really happen.

Tunac. Yes, but you should be able to trust what you're experiencing right now. You aren't crazy.

[Tunac's boss, Pummar, comes up on screen.]

Tunac. Sir—

Pummar. What is that.

Tunac. This is Subject 059 of Stack 110. There is something wrong with her memory blanker—or something—but the diagnostic has turned up nothing. And she's been having weird experiences.

Pummar. Weird how?

059. Sir—

Pummar. I did not ask you. You're already in serious trouble for being outside of your Stack. Contaminates data. The entire reason you're here is to collect data on you. I could have your stipends for the past year canceled and recalled.

059. No!!

Pummar. Then you will not speak again. Tunac, as you were saying.

Tunac. ...

Pummar. Tunac. You can be in trouble for this as well.

Tunac. She claims that for the past four days, she's woken up remembering everything when her memory was supposed to be blanked. I don't have any recollection of this myself. But I ran a live blanking test on her, and not only does she still remember everything, the blanker is working perfectly.

Pummar. Perfectly, you say?

Tunac. Yes, sir. It's in the data I sent you.

Pummar. If this is accurate, then there's only one thing in the procedure to do. I've commanded the transport shunter to have the mysa subject sent up to me right away for further testing. Please replace them into the stack.

[Com off]

059. W-what's going to happen?

Tunac. *thinking* I... I don't know.

059. I don't want to go up there with them.

Tunac. I don't even know if we have a choice, Fifty-nine. If you don't go up there soon, that's both our jobs.

059. But you said this can't be a false memory because I'm experiencing it now. This is real—right now, what I'm thinking and saying is really real. And I'm terrified if I go into that shunter I am not coming back.

[Tunac sits there and thinks]

Tunac. [very quietly]...do you want to get out of here?

059. W—out?

Tunac. I'll make some excuse like I forgot something in my car and smuggle you out.

059. Don't they check you for that sort of thing?

Tunac. It's fine, I know the security working today. I'll leave my labcoat behind so he won't think there's anything on me to check. He'll give me three minutes. We'll be out of the lot by then and we won't be coming back.

[059 looks back to the shunter behind the glass. It's probably death either way.]

059. Let's go.

Tunac. I'll make it look to the camera like I'm putting you back in the stack. We'll be just out of camera range for a few moments.

[He does so, making a point to open the emergency door which is just in sight of the camera]

Tunac. In my mane, just above my braid. Squeeze yourself in, and please don't tug.

059. *looking at Tunac's mane* Really? Your mane?

Tunac. Be gentle, okay?

[059 pulls herself into the widest part of the mostly-loose hair, standing on the braid as she does so and pulling her tail in]

Tunac. Ow. Stand a little lighter, please.

059. I'm trying!

Tunac. If you need to hold onto my hair take a large lock, not a few strands.

059. Okay, okay, I got it.

[Tunac makes some gestures in range of the camera like 'oh I forgot my pen' and immediately gets up to rush out and down the hallway. There's security personnel standing at the end near the elevator]

Security. Twenty-five minutes to start.

Tunac. I know, I know. I'll be right back.

Security. Better hurry.

[Tunac gets in the elevator on the way back up.]

Tunac. See? Didn't even notice.

[Elevator stops. A large lio gets inside]

Tunac. Hey, Bironn. Forget your coffee?

Bironn. Spilled it. What'd you forget?

Tunac. Left a data card in my car.

Bironn. Personal?

Tunac. *conspiratorial* Shh.

[They ride the rest of the way up, and the door opens. Tunac lets Bironn go first to the exit stall. Bironn flashes his employee ID]

Security. Spilled again?

Bironn. At least I didn't get it on the keyboard this time.

Security. Hold on a second. *listens to his earpiece.*

[Tunac starts getting nervous.]

Security. We're to hold everyone going out for inspection, no exceptions. Sorry.

Bironn. But it's twenty minutes until we have to start!

Security. Please do not resist.

059. Tunac...

Tunac. I know, I know, just... um...

Security. Tunac, you heading out?

Tunac. Ah... you know what, it probably wasn't that important.

Security. Fine, but please stand over here until we've received clearance to let you return.

[Tunac, relieved, goes to stand in the holding area. However, 059 wonders if she should slip out now, another security guard steps up with a handheld scanner]

Security. Sorry, need to check you out.

[The scanner goes over Tunac's body as he stands rigid, especially the hair—and it goes up 059's legs, and she stops short of getting to her head. 059 sighs in relief]

Security. ...did something in your mane just move?

[059 tenses]

Tunac. ...no?

Security. Can you please undo your braid for me?

Tunac. Sure. Lemme sit down.

[He sits on the table over the low dividing barrier]

Tunac. Fifty-nine, run.

[She doesn't need to be told twice. She leaps out of the hair over the barrier. Some of the security notices—shouts, "Hey, wait!" 059 runs—but she looks back, to see Tunac being tackled and held down by security.]

Tunac. Don't look back! Go!

[However, she's waited too long. One of the security stops her by stepping on her. One of her ribs cracks.]

Tunac. Fifty-nine!!

[Security officer picks up 059 and looks her over. She's in pain and having trouble breathing.]

059. Let go of me!

Security. Escapee, huh? Your pay'll be docked for this. Let's get you to the shunter and see where you're supposed to be.

Tunac. RELIARA!

[059 has a moment of—wait, he knows my name? Though she hardly notices as she's in the midst of being taken into the security office. She tries to bite the paw of the lio taking her away, but he throws her against the wall. She's dizzy. He stuffs her into the shunter capsule, and forces her ear notch into the scanner before she can force herself back up. He pulls his paw out, the door closes, and she blacks out.]

059 wakes up again, but not in bed. She's in a test chamber, but one of the more obvious ones. The entire room is black. She's still dizzy and it's still painful to breathe. She wonders if she can just stay in the capsule, but there's no abort function like in P-114. So she staggers to the only thing visible in the room, a control panel.

Computer. Welcome, Subject 059 Stack 110. Please enter the passcode.

059. ...I don't know any passcode.

Computer. Please, enter the passcode. Code consists of five symbols. You will only have one try.

[059 focuses on the console before her. There's a series of 10 shapes and 10 colors in a hundred-button grid.]

059. I don't know any passcode! I thought I was going to the boss! Why am I being tested?

Computer. Please, enter the passcode.

[059, frustrated, crying, just punches in four white squares. The siren blares a short, disturbing note]

Computer. Sorry, that is incorrect. The correct password is on the wall in front of you. Green circle. White cross. Blue diamond. Blue circle. Red invert triangle. Thank you for your participation.

[the floor opens up underneath 059. She gasps, barely managing to clutch into the console—but the thing is smooth, and she has no grip. The space under her turns alight into an inferno. She loses what little grip she has, and falls. She screams as she's burned alive.]

[059 wakes up in bed, Stack 110. Same day. She's spooked. She remembers dying. She was being burned alive! And she doesn't want to get out of bed. She just stays there. Several minutes later, 112 comes up.]

112. Fifty-nine? You okay?

059. Go away.

112. You haven't been down for breakfast. You were doing just fine last night—

059. Last night was five years ago. Or more. I don't even know.

112. ... *pulls up stool and sits down* What's this about?

059. You're not going to believe me if I told you.

112. Try me.

059. I don't even know where to start explaining because if I did everyone would just double-guess me.

112. Just tell me straight-up.

(059 then tells her. 112 sits and listens the whole time.)

059. So that's where I am now. I don't know if it's fake, or real, or how I'm experiencing any of this and I just want it to stop...

[059 breaks down crying]

112. You know...you could look at this as a gift.

059. A gift?!

112. You're living the same day. You wake up here every time. So... learn from it. I know you like the tests where they erase your memory so you can go in cold every time, but if this is all real, then you apparently aren't getting to do that anymore. Start learning from it. Maybe you can get what you want.

059. I was thrown into an incinerator for it!

112. Yes, but will you be thrown into an incinerator for it this time?

[059 sits and thinks. 112 goes back downstairs. 059 gets up, goes down. 486 is already in the exercise room. 059 pulls her off the wheel and kisses her]

486. !! What's that for?

059. For being a friend to me.

486. We only bicker though.

059. I know. But if you never see me again I want you to know I appreciated the bickering.

[She kisses 486 again. 486 drops her can of sugar water and holds 059 close. Then 059 pulls away, and runs off for the STF.]

486. Where are you going?...

[059 arrives at the STF, steps through the emergency exit, and sees Tunac. Tunac is about to say something, but she just holds up a sheet of paper. Tunac takes it, and reads it. He blinks, and looks at 059.]

Tunac. ...you sure about this?

059. As I've ever been of anything.

Tunac. Come on. Let's hurry.

[This time, because security wasn't alerted ahead of time, Tunac manages to peel out of the parking lot. Within five minutes, they're on the highway. 059 climbs out of his mane.]

Tunac. Well, I can't go back to my apartment...

059. Let's just go back to my home city. I need to see it... I need to know we're really out of there and that this isn't some other huge trick.

[It takes a day and night. Tunac doesn't let the car stop for anything, and 059 is laying against his chest the whole way. Finally, they pull up to a mysa district in Ponitaro. Tunac takes 059 out of the car—she's starving, naturally, and a bit lightheaded. But when she sees her mom answer the door she nearly collapses on her.

Mom. Reliara?...what are you doing back?

059. Mom, I'm so sorry...

Mom. Who's this lio?

059. This is Tunac...don't be afraid of him, he's risking himself by even being here.

Tunac. Hi, Mrs. Fifty-nine.

[Mom looks at him suspiciously]

Tunac. Um, I'll just go wait in my car.

059. Mom, please...

Tunac. What? It's not like she can invite me inside.

059. He's never been to the ghetto before.

Mom. Well...step around back of the building. There's places for lio to sit.

Tunac. Um. Thanks. *he looks warily at the small gap between the building and sidles through*

Mom. A block down!

Tunac. Too late.

[Soon, 059 is sitting with her family on the somewhat precarious back porch. There's twelve mysa there, and mom offers Tunac a heaping serving dish of passuhan, which would be ethnic food to him. He tries his best to eat it in small bites, though 059 knows he's gonna have to get something real to eat soon. There's eating and talking, and 059 telling stories about what happened in the facility, mysa she met.

Later on, mom sits down with 059 and talks to her one-on-one, sorta, with Tunac sitting there looking awkward]

Mom. So...no more paychecks then.

059. I'm sorry.

Mom. Well, at least the tenement has been patched up. Rohixy's been able to do better in school. Maybe something good will have come of this.

059. I don't know. 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 even sure this is really happening.

Mom. Of course it's happening.

059. 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.

Mom. So why did you come back here?

059. ...because I wanted to leave the Stacks and I don't have anywhere to go, not even with Tunac.

Mom. You wanted to leave here that badly. And I frankly do not blame you for it. You were a wreck living here. You've been doing better in the stacks, and so have we.

059. So what am I even supposed to do?

Mom. Well, running away is perhaps a bit hasty. You have nothing. And you're hanging out with a lio who has nothing.

Tunac. You know I'm still sitting here—

Mom. And you're an idiot, too.

059. Mom!

Mom. I know, it's romantic to just drop everything and take your girl away. Love conquers all and all the shit they love to play in the movies. Well, maybe you should have been practical. Are you sure there isn't something you could have done where you get everything you want?

059. ...

[059 wakes up again, in the stacks. She goes downstairs.]

112. Morning, Fifty-nine!

059. Morning...

112. Nutritional porridge again!

486. Ugh. Did they get my request to stock some real food? I could kill for some actual cider oats.

112. We HAVE real food, but you need to keep your nutrients optimal.

059. Hey, can we not do this again? 486, I want to pick your brain for a bit.

[both 112 and 486 look at each other. 486 sits down at the table.]

486. Um, sure.

112. What flavor you want?

059. Don't care.

112. Ahhh... g—

059. Not green berry.

112. ...okay then.

486. What's up?

059. I've been having trouble with this one puzzle. I don't know what it means.

486. I thought you've been taking blanking tests. How would you remember a puzzle you're taking?

059. Let's just assume that I'm not supposed to remember anything. 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 I'm supposed to have my memory blanked, but I don't. So...I should just find my way back to that chamber and put in the correct passcode, right?

486. ...that sounds like a trap.

059. What do you mean?

486. You're supposed to have your memory blanked, but you don't? After a ridiculously simple test where you can't possibly guess the answer until after the fact? No, they did that on purpose.

059. Okay, but what if it was an accident? What are they testing for?

486. On the face of it, I'd say that test was for precognition.

059. ...of course! Oh prophets, I'm such an idiot—that's why that happened!

486. But precognition is a myth. They test for it every so often just to see if there's some way they can make it real. In this case though, I'd still say it's a fake-out.

059. Why do you think?

486. They don't just forget to blank your memory. And if you went back into that chamber they set up and put in the correct password they'd know you fell for it.

059. So the real test...

[059 suddenly realizes what she can do]

059. Thank you! *she kisses 486 and runs off*

486. H-hey!!

[STF. Meeting with Tunac. 059 punches in where she wants to go today.]

Tunac. ...wait... X-5!? Fifty-nine, don't go in there, that's a death trap!

059. I know.

Tunac. Fifty-nine!!

[059 is shunted to X-5. It's a foggy, maze-like corridor with a lot of "watchers" that immediately blast you if they spot you. 059 does her best to mostly move around the safe parts of the chamber, figuring out their patterns. She's shot fairly quickly.

Next day, 059 goes and does the X-5 test again. And again. And again. Some days she changes it up a bit, taking time off to sit with 486 or with Tunac to settle her nerves before she dives in again.

Then, finally, thirty-three days later, she just manages to get through X-5 without being spotted and gets to the other side.

Tunac is crying next time she sees him. He looks up, and sees her coming in the door. Her memory blanker has been removed. Tunac picks her up sprints her out over his desk, kissing her all over. She loves it.

She's lab assistant now, like they'd promised. She reveals nothing about how she completed X-5 and they don't ask. Tunac takes her home that evening—stopping at a restaurant in the rain first, water pouring in sheets over the canopy. Despite the presence of the stacks in town, it's a fairly inclusive city, and 059 loves seeing all of it.

Tunac takes her to bed in his apartment later that night. They have a very raunchy time, and in the morning, 059 wakes up, and she's still tucked into the cradle between Tunac's neck and shoulder. She sighs contentedly.

But she still doesn't know what happened. Maybe she really did beat the system. Or maybe this is all part of the test, or she's gone right back to testing, and this is the fifth year in a row she's woken up next to Tunac.

But at the very least, she's happy.]