

Eyrie

There was another incident today.

The men in the white coats ran around for a long time trying to fix it. Number 102403 counted this time, per advice from the whitecoat it liked best. It took somewhere between two thousand and three thousand heartbeats for the alarms to stop. (Too long in 102403's opinion—the blaring noise and pulsing red lights hurt its senses to a point where it would rather claw its own eyes and ears out than listen any longer.) Another thousand heartbeats for the yelling to die down. And finally, exactly six hundred and fifty seven beats for everything to go back to the way it was before.

The sharp, tangy scent of blood still lingers in the hallway outside of 102403's room, however. It knows from experience how long that smell will take to fade completely. When it tried counting in the past, it would always have to restart from the beginning.

Once it becomes clear that the hallways will remain empty and the incident is truly over, 102403 rises from the corner it was crouched in and presses its face up against the bars that act as the only door to the room.

An image flashes behind its eyes of itself much smaller, able to fit through the bars with ease. Its form has always been slight, even as it ages. Its wings, however, make matters more complicated. When before it could slip between the bars to their room with ease, as some of the others can, the bulk of their large black wings prevent it from doing so now.

102403 nuzzles its cheeks against the cold metal of the bars and stares down the empty white hallway at the large but faded patches of red coating the walls and floor.

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The only decoration in the room is a mirror, and it is cracked.

At one point 102403 had resided in a room with a window overlooking the barren courtyard of the establishment. It had been pleased, for a time, to be able to look at something other than white walls and the hallway through the bars, but the foliage was always dead and the sky always three shades darker than the walls. The view never changed; at least there is an ever-changing face stuck in the mirror.

It likes to move its head around to watch how the cracks warp its face with each movement. Outside one of the windows it passes when everyone gathers to run the end times simulations, an overgrown pond sits, its murky surface glittering in the too-bright sun.

Sometimes it sees small winged creatures floating on the surface, their round bodies sending ripples across the water as they move. When it stares at its face in the mirror, refracted by the cracks, it likes to imagine those sunlit ripples cutting bands of light through the hazy sky.

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7 AM: Lights up, alarm sounds.

Sharp sound waves penetrate 102403's sleep, propelling it out of bed. It stretches its arms up high above its head, hips and spine popping, then twists around and rolls its shoulders and wings. Time to start the day.

7:02 AM: A quick glance in the mirror before the door opens.

Same short, ragged hair, same gaunt face stretched over hollow bones. Same alert eyes, their color more black than any black 102403 has ever known. Same crack in the mirror cutting its way through the familiar image.

As it moves to stand in front of the opening door it wonders if the nice whitecoat will be waiting there today. Usually he gives it more time to fully wake up before walking to the meal hall.

7:10 AM: Mealtime.

Usually they pass without hindrance or interruption. The institution has a system where each individual gets the sustenance it needs to survive, in some variation of what they will be eating after they are released. They don't know how to prepare meals like the ones the whitecoats eat, tucked away in their separate spaces.

After all, one can't exactly prepare proper food in an apocalyptic wasteland.

7:45 AM: Mealtime ends, preparation for the first simulation begins.

The halls are empty of all other personnel, leaving room for the large groups to make their way to their designated rooms for simulation training. The wall to the left is solid white,

with doors here and there leading to rooms 102403 has never seen inside. The wall to the right is made entirely up of glass, allowing for a view into what the whitecoats call the “Big Lab.”

102403 looks away every time it passes by this window.

8:00 AM: Doors of each simulation room are locked, subjects briefed, simulations begin.

They are separated by groups: aquatic life, aerial life, terranean life, and subterranean life. 102403 stays with the aerial life group, which consists of individuals with wings like theirs; some with different colors and patterns, some with spindly black limbs and hard outer shells protecting a pair of more delicate wings. The room is utterly silent.

The type of simulation is chosen at random. 102403 has experienced different terrain, air quality, extreme temperatures, and what it feels like being both predator and prey. Today is a prey day. Even though it knows it is going through a simulation, which the whitecoats explain during every briefing, it wonders at times where the whitecoats keep these dangerous monsters whose only mission is to kill.

12:00 PM: Simulations end. Subjects transported to designated Little Labs for post-sim testing.

The tests last hours, oftentimes longer than the simulations lasted. There aren't enough workers, a whitecoat complains while gesturing haphazardly with a scalpel. Ever since the BBC came out with that last study ten years ago, the birth rate has been abysmal.

During the post-sim tests is when the most incidents occur.

4:00 PM: Survival training.

Includes foraging skills, learning how to make adequate shelter, and camouflage techniques. Occasionally the whitecoats assist in language learning and basic math. The subjects devised their own languages within their groups long ago, so the whitecoats work as translators.

6:00 PM: Mealtime and free time begin.

102403 likes this time the best. Free time is when it can fly.

9:00 PM: Subjects return to quarters, doors shut.

10:00 PM: Lights off.

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According to the whitecoats, subject number 102403 has lived for close to twenty sun cycles. Twenty times has the broken Earth traveled around the too-bright sun, and 102403 has never been outside the walls of the institution.

Until today.

The whitecoats have been preparing them for the last two sun cycles, gray day in and gray day out. The simulations grew more and more intense with each run-through, feeling more and more realistic every time. No matter how it felt, the situations hadn't been real. The resulting injuries, however, were.

It's to prepare you, the whitecoats said. Had said at the end of each briefing, a reminder of why they did what they did. Mankind destroyed the planet; the planet needs something more than mankind to fix it. Something better. Something attuned to the planet itself.

Release was a concept 102403 never took seriously, despite the whitecoats' warning that the day would come. It has never known a life outside of bars and white walls, simulations and tests, the cracked mirror and the overgrown pond. Even the term "release" never felt correct. It is a strong word, overpowering at times. Like the rush of a waterfall in the terrain simulations, a release could knock it off its feet.

No, the word it uses—in its own devised language, that is—is "wveilfyar". The full phrase, "WveilFyar uent yt eHllw," roughly translates to "Farewell and hello." Farewell to the existence it has known all its life, to the mealtimes and simulations and tests and bars. Farewell to the monotony, yes, but also to the safety the whitecoats provided. There isn't any love lost between the subjects and the whitecoats; but as the aerials, the aquatics, the terranians and subterraneans alike make their own ways out of the institution, 102403's rapidly beating heart breaks at the sight of the building going up in flames.

WveilFyar, uent yt eHllw.

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For the sake of acclimation purposes, the whitecoats released the subjects close to when they thought the big apocalypse event would happen. However, no scientist could accurately predict the end of times to any degree of certainty other than “soon.” A month after the institution went up in flames, the subjects find themselves living scattered and alone. They were prepared for an abandoned wasteland, had run countless simulations and trials to prove they could survive and thrive. They were not prepared for ten billion humans and everything that came with them.

The first, and largest, shock was just how disgusting the outside world was. The majority of the aquatics died due to the waters being so polluted that they suffocated. Only a small fraction remains, to the best of 102403’s knowledge. Which is very limited. The sky is gray everywhere, not just outside the windows of the institution; the land, which the whitecoats had shown them old photos of, is scorched in some places, barren in most.

The second shock was the technology. The institution used to sit in the middle of a desert, far from human civilization. Not just for the safety of the subjects, but for the safety of those outside. Upon arriving at the nearest city, many more subjects died due to being struck by rapidly moving contraptions from all angles. It was a quick death, but not painless.

But as the whitecoats were wont to tell their subjects, their job was to repopulate, adapt to the disaster. Not to fix it, and certainly not to save it.

Another shock was how they were treated by the humans. Even though it has been a month, people still react violently to the subjects. They were never taught to speak English by the whitecoats. So when news stories with headlines such as “IS NATURE RETALIATING? HALF-HUMAN HALF-ANIMAL BEINGS ON THE LOOSE,” “FIGHT OR FLIGHT: WHAT TO DO WHEN YOUR CITY IS BEING INVADED BY MUTANTS,” or “TOP TEN WAYS TO TELL IF YOUR NEIGHBOR IS NOT HUMAN” began to be published, 102403 and the others had no way of knowing, nor a sense of what to do.

The first time 102403 killed a human was in retaliation. It had been minding its own business, sitting on a warped wooden bench next to what seemed to be the only tree left in the city and watching those same small, winged creatures it had seen in the overgrown institution pond hop around on the ground. They were making the most beautiful sounds 102403 had heard, and it was content to listen for as long as it could.

Until a man approached. 102403 couldn’t understand him, but he was gesturing to its wings—which were too large to hide tidily under clothing, so they protruded proudly through

slits in its shirt—his face steadily growing redder with each word he spoke. He clutched a small metal object and wouldn't leave. He was going to kill it, and wouldn't that defeat the whole purpose of its existence? So 102403 did what it had to do.

Even now, a month later, similar situations arise every so often. More of them have been killed by human retaliation than by any modern misgivings.

But they can't do anything about the current inhabitants of the planet they were promised. All the subjects can do is sit and wait.

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A year passes. The planet holds on still. "Soon" seems to slip further and further away.

Humanity accepts that the hybrids won't be going back to where they came from. It doesn't take them long at all to realize the true purpose of the numbered beings. Though the language barrier sits firmly in place, it was only a matter of time before humanity figured out they were being replaced.

If they weren't violent before, they sure as hell were now.

102403 hadn't kept in touch with any of the other subjects; why bother, when they would all find each other again at some point? They would all be the only inhabitants of a deceased planet. Even if it knew how to find the ones that weren't in the public spotlight, it never needed nor wanted to, in any case.

Instead, it learns.

It had found someone—a girl with drawings on her skin and a dimmer sun than the one in the sky in her smile—who was willing to teach it. The girl called herself Crys, and after some miscommunication and trial and error, gave 102403 a name too: Eddi.

Crys had seen 102403—who now calls itself Eddi for her—at its worst and most vulnerable, after killing that man. She offered to help. She let Eddi stay with her, and they spent hours working to bridge the language barrier.

For the first time in a year, 102403 feels safe when it falls asleep and wakes up. No more sleeping in trees or at the tops of the highest buildings in the city. No more waking up choking on the gray. Here, in their haven, the sun shines red through the windows each morning, tinted by

pollution. Here, they have access to real food—more real than what the institution provided, anyhow. Here, there is what Crys calls love and what Eddi learns is joy.

102403 had never felt human before. There was no need to align itself with a species doomed to die so soon. But the sight of Crys tangled in blankets, dark curls falling over her face, her figure tinted red by the sun... well. Eddi suspected there could be no more human a feeling than the twisting warmth in its chest.

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The end of the man-made world introduces itself with a sigh of relief.

The whitecoats prepared the subjects with a vast array of simulations depicting possible scenarios by which the world would end. They faced everything from fires to floods to bombs. But in the end, Mother Nature decided, why not all of the above?

Despite their efforts, humanity couldn't come to an agreement on what to do about their climate crisis. Stark-faced reporters rattled off statistic after statistic while those in power did nothing, hoping the problem would go away.

The wars come first, as they tend to do throughout history when humanity can't agree. The bombs fall. Then the fires, whose smoke turns the light gray sky a heavier, darker color. Ash falls like snow. It stays like that for three years, then the floods from melting glaciers and rain wash it all away. Eddi hoped at first that the end would come and go in a matter of heartbeats. It stopped hoping once it lost count for the twentieth time.

Eddi loses Crys in the floods. It remembers the moment it couldn't feel her anymore as being quiet, but it was sure it had screamed. The feel of Crys' hand slipping out of Eddi's grasp prickles its skin as it lays alone at night in the nest it made, as it had been trained to do, warmth and light giving way to cold water.

And in the end, it is as it was always meant to be. The last of humanity makes its final exit, leaving the world to those who were created to inhabit it. Broken, changed, reformed as it is.

Those with numbers for names populate the earth slowly but surely. With the others Eddi abandons its name, wearing its number like a shield. But sometimes, when it is alone, it whispers two names to itself over and over and over. *Crys Eddi Crys Eddi Crys Crys Crys Crys*. Some-

times it screams them into the wind that rocks the tree it had made its nest in, and in the act of screaming the wind tears the heavy feeling from its chest.

But 102403 can't hang on forever, screaming for its lost human warmth to an invisible, unfeeling entity. It has children to care for.