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Recommended Citation

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The Unwatched Pot

An Audiodrama

Written By: Grace "West" Lyde

Dedicated to the people who saw that I was worth saving.

To my misfits.

Thank you for seeing me through.

CHARACTER BREAKDOWNS

(In order of appearance)

HYDRANGEA “HEIDI” BLACKWELL (she/her)

Appearance: Late 50s. Tall, underweight. Loosely curled hair, dyed lavender, cropped at the jaw.

Vocal Qualities: Smiling. High pitched, lilting. Sharp. Deliberate. Has a slight lisp.

Characteristics: If gaslight were a person. Struggles with boundaries, control, and cruelty.

SYLVIA WESLAKE (they/she)

Appearance: Mid 40s. As unassuming as humanly possible. Bleached hair that’s growing out at the roots.

Vocal Qualities: Grounded. Nearly soft spoken. Gentle. Hiding a smile.

Characteristics: Jovial, easy to get along with, backhanded. Struggles to stay.

OBSERVER ONE (they/she/he/xe/it)

Vocal Qualities: Exuberant, enthused. At least a little bit unhinged.

Characteristics: Clinical, but never cold. Struggles to stay away.

EDITH AQUINO (they/them)

Appearance: Early 50s. Tall, broad, buff. Black hair going gray.

Vocal Qualities: Rich, deep. Speaks slowly, deliberately, and with many pauses.

Characteristics: If girlboss were a person. Struggles with work life balance and self imposed isolation.

FELIX RIVERS (he/him)

Appearance: Late 40s. Average height, strong, chubby. Bushy mustache.

Vocal Qualities: Slight southern accent. Slow and steady cadence.

Characteristics: Used to be a firefighter. Likes nature, video games, and dad jokes. Ya know. The fundamentals! Struggles with living life for himself.

GREEN AXIOM (they/them)

Appearance: Mid 40s. On the slightly shorter side. Short coily hair, shaved sides, thick glasses.

Vocal Qualities: Wide vocal range. Tone varies wildly depending on who they’re speaking to.

Speaks very quickly. Stammers.

Characteristics: Small but knowing clown with inch thick glasses. Struggles with chronic people pleasing.

AUGUSTINE PRAMA (he/they)

Appearance: Late 40s. Tall, soft. Never clean shaven. Salt and pepper stubble.

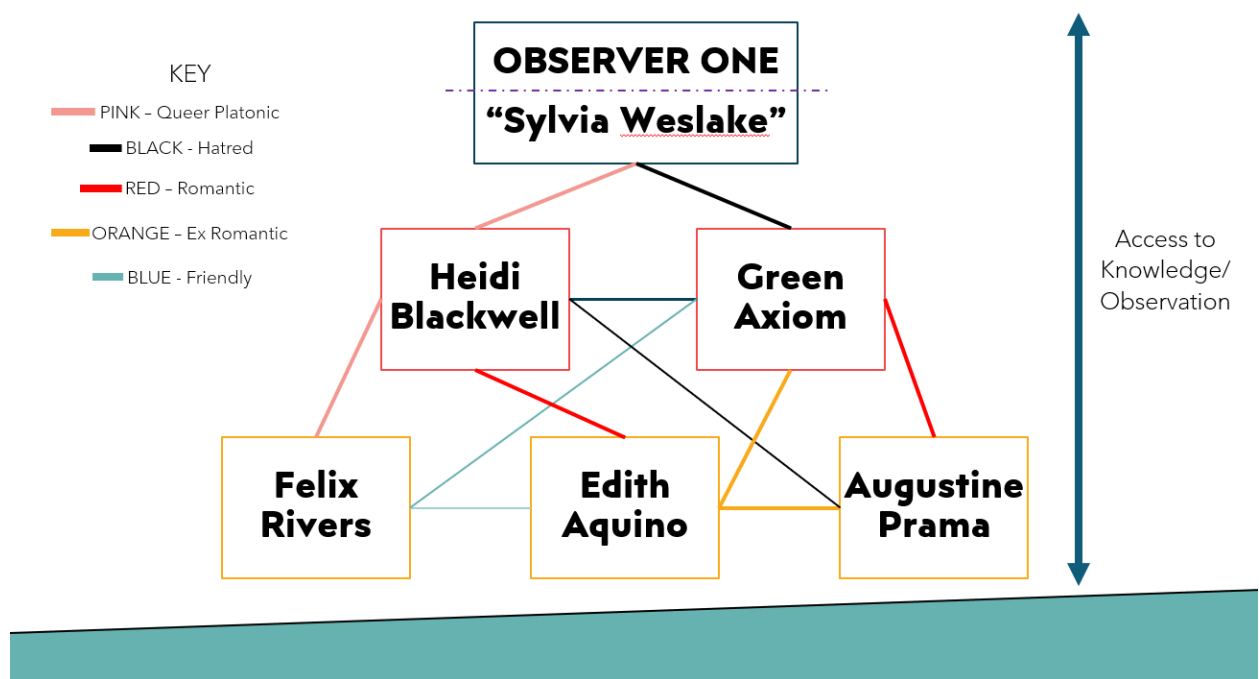
Vocal Qualities: Dynamic, bombastic, round, and rich.

Characteristics: Likes fancy fountain pens, quills, and parchment. Struggles with self worth.

RELATIONSHIP MAP

Relationships at the beginning of the play

Access to knowledge of the nature of the server comes with proximity to Sylvia



The Unwatched Pot

FINAL DAY OF OPEN OBSERVATION

[Heidi laughs.]

HEIDI:

Since when are you so sappy?

SYLVIA:

Oh always, honeycomb. I'm just full of surprises.

HEIDI:

Like what?

SYLVIA:

If I told you, they wouldn't be surprises. Would they, Heidi?

HEIDI:

And god forbid, you part with one or two.

SYLVIA:

What does that mean?

HEIDI:

Nothing, nothing.

SYLVIA:

Heidi.

HEIDI:

Will you keep your phone on you at all while you're out of town?

SYLVIA:

I'll keep it on me, but I can't// guarantee I'll be able to answer it.

HEIDI:

//Can't guarantee you'll answer it. I know. You'll be busy, I don't fault you for being good at your job and I don't fault the district for needing you.

SYLVIA:

It sort of sounds like you do-- I don't fault your idiot coworkers down at the library for needing you. Especially when I'm not around to kick people into place.

HEIDI:

It sort of sounds like you do blame them.

SYLVIA:

Okay, well maybe I do blame them. But can you blame me? I mean, you work with those cretins more often than I do.

HEIDI:

I certainly do.

SYLVIA:

You said you were alright with me going out of town.

HEIDI:

I said I'd be alright while you were out of town. I always am, aren't I? I haven't even asked to tag along this time.

SYLVIA:

And somehow you're still making a big deal out of it.

HEIDI:

It's what I'm good at.

SYLVIA:

Don't sulk.

[A pause.]

HEIDI:

... Look. You don't have to tell me everything you do, or everything you're going through. You already *don't*. But you *could*.

SYLVIA:

I tell you everything you need to know. There's nothing more to say about it, anyway.

HEIDI:

That's not what I mean, Sylvia. I mean you don't have to be afraid to tell me things.

SYLVIA:

(lying) I'm not... I'm not afraid to tell you things.

HEIDI:

... I don't believe you. But I don't want to push it, so...

[System error 001]

HEIDI:

What was that?

SYLVIA:

(grim) What was what?

HEIDI:

That-- the whole room just went *white*, did you see that?

SYLVIA:

How's your head, pollen?

HEIDI:

It's fine.

SYLVIA:

What did I *just* say about lying to me?

HEIDI:

I'm not lying. It's fine, I feel fine. It's been really good recently, or at least not painful.

SYLVIA:

Good. I'm glad it hasn't been giving you too much trouble, just *try* to be careful, please. It hasn't been long at all since you got over your last concussion.

HEIDI:

I know. I *do* try. And I *am* careful, Sylvia, I'm always so careful.

SYLVIA:

About your head or about how much you let on that it bothers you?

HEIDI:

I...

SYLVIA:

That's what I thought. I don't know why you're fighting me on this, Heidi, I just want to help you. Can't you let me?

HEIDI:

I... I just could have sworn...

SYLVIA:

I know, honeycomb, I know.

[A pause.]

SYLVIA:

Hey.

HEIDI:

Hey?

SYLVIA:

You're my best friend. I care about you. You know that, don't you?

HEIDI:

Of course I do.

[A pause.]

HEIDI:

And you're sure you didn't see that?

SYLVIA:

Yes. I am.

HEIDI:

... And you're sure nothing's *wrong*--

SYLVIA:

What'd I say before?

HEIDI:

That if something was, you'd tell me.

SYLVIA:

Think me better than a liar, Hydrangea, please.

HEIDI:

I do, Sylvie, I do. I just worry. You know I worry.

SYLVIA:

Yeah... I know, Heidi. Try to relax. **Nothing's wrong.**

[System note: barricade re-enforced.]

[Static.]

HEIDI:

(distant) ... Okay...

[A pause.]

SYLVIA:

Okay. I think it might be time for bed.

[No response.]

SYLVIA:

Heidi...?

HEIDI:

Hmm?

SYLVIA:

What's wrong, honeycomb?

[System note: barricade enforced]

HEIDI:

(compulsive, almost robotic) Nothing. Nothing's wrong.

[System note: barricade enforced]

[The static clears.]

SYLVIA:

Good, good. Come on. Bed time.

HEIDI:

Okay.

[A pause.]

HEIDI:

I feel like I was saying something.

SYLVIA:

You weren't. Maybe you were trying to...?

HEIDI:

Maybe. I feel like I'm always doing that.

SYLVIA:

What, trying to say something?

HEIDI:

Yes. But sometimes it gets stuck. I don't know... I wish-- I used to wish-- I don't know. Maybe you're right, maybe there isn't any point in wishing for something that won't change.

SYLVIA:

Maybe. It's a lot less trouble. What do you wish?

HEIDI:

Those limits or whatever you were telling me about yesterday. I wish they were different. I wish we had more time.

SYLVIA:

That's very sweet. For what it's worth, Hydrangea, I see you. I see you as you are, no matter if what you're trying to say is getting out or not. I see you. And I mean, as for your wish-- Ah shit. I have to go.

HEIDI:

Alright...

SYLVIA:

Get some rest, pollen. You deserve it.

HEIDI:

Thanks. You too.

SYLVIA:

Bah! Rest is for the wicked. See you first thing when I get back!

[The door closes.]

HEIDI:

Goodbye, Sylvie.

ANNOUNCEMENT

[Observer One's motif plays low, rising in the static until the end of the speech. The blacked out parts are entirely drowned out by glitches or static.]

[System error 004]

OBSERVER ONE:

Observer One speaking.

Our time here is drawing swiftly to a close, run its course with
 unsatisfactory. my opinion the
 plug server. finalized
 shutting off observation. next 60 days, black box.
 able to grow, any but themselves. backlash
 fear progress can't control.
 kill switch

doubts that the server will even survive untouched
 maintenance record work of art

Oh well. Here's to the unwatched pot, I suppose.

SYSTEM:

End of transmission.

===

SIXTY DAYS REMAINING

[Heidi gasps, sitting up in bed.]

[A pause.]

HEIDI:

What...

[Static and Observer One's motif rises sharp for a second-- it transitions quickly into Heidi's.]

NARRATOR:

Hydrangea Blackwell wakes up at least 30 minutes before the sun rises to double check that her heavy purple curtains are closed properly. For the most part, they always are. The only one that gives her trouble is the one to the left of her vanity. The moon comes up through that window. Every so often, she wants to keep the moonlight as a bedfellow.

The fabric closes against the indigo-green haze of early morning.

She settles into the seat at her vanity, scanning the sides of the mirror for any post-it notes she's left for herself. Finding nothing, she plucks a couple of the older ones off and places them atop a neat stack in the desk drawer to make space for anything new she might need to remember. That done, she allows her mind a few more minutes of rest as her body ticks through the motions of putting on her makeup, pulling her hair from its curlers, and taking her Monday pills. Her mind meets back up with her as she puts on her sunglasses and touches up her lipstick.

She smiles.

===

Edith Aquino wakes up hungover. Behind shut eyelids, they roll their eyes at the feeling as though that will make it scurry off into some dark corner. The way they would like to. They're sure they left the curtains open to fuck with themselves. They've never been a heavy sleeper. Besides, it's probably for the best that they get up with the sun. This way, if they wanted to go back to bed, they'd have to get up first. And by then, what would be the point of staying in bed.

They count down from ten, checking in with their toes, then their knees. Their hips, knotted stomach and shoulders. Their neck. And finally, as they reach zero, they open their eyes against the bright light of morning.

Okay. Now the covers.

===

NARRATOR:

At 9:15, Heidi, as she prefers to be called, steps out of her house at the exact moment that a car pulls up in front of it. Its owner gets out and comes around to open the door for her-- even though she has asked him not to do this on several occasions.

HEIDI:

Captain Rivers.

FELIX:

Ms. Blackwell.

[Car door closes. Felix gets in. Car starts.]

FELIX:

Good day?

HEIDI:

No.

NARRATOR:

Felix opens his mouth to talk.

HEIDI:

I'm fine. The day is not. The next two months will not be.

FELIX:

(chuckling) Prophetic dreams again?

HEIDI:

Don't make fun of me.

FELIX:

I'm *not*. I'm only *asking* if--

HEIDI:

They're not "prophetic dreams" Felix, they're hardly even dreams.

FELIX:

What are they, then?

HEIDI:

None of your business is what.

FELIX:

Alright, alright... how's your head?

HEIDI:

(snapping) It's *fine*, Felix. I'm not--

NARRATOR:

Felix's knuckles pale on the steering wheel, the hinges of his warm smile creaking. Heidi stops.

[System err 002]

FELIX:

Shit.

NARRATOR:

Felix slows the car-- a deer shoots out from the trees at the side of the road. The car comes to a stop just in time to nick the stag, but it continues to run straight through the hood of the car, unfazed...

[A pause.]

FELIX:

Anything in your not dreams about a ghost deer?

HEIDI:

...No...

FELIX:

Stay put.

NARRATOR:

Felix goes to check the front of the car. It's... fine. He gets back in.

[Car door closes, seat belt fastens.]

FELIX:

Not a scratch.

HEIDI:

Huh... And you saw it... go *through*, too? Right...?

FELIX:

Yes, ma'am.

NARRATOR:

Heidi smiles, vindicated, but unsure entirely where the impulse comes from.

FELIX:

So, is that a thing that happens often?

HEIDI:

What?

FELIX:

The deer.

HEIDI:

Oh. No...

FELIX:

Hm.

[A pause.]

FELIX:

You're just not alarmed by it. At all?

HEIDI:

No. Should I be?

FELIX:

Heids, I'm not a man of *shoulds* nor am I easily shaken, but that's not normal. A deer going through your car is not normal.

HEIDI:

And that alarms you.

FELIX:

Yes.

HEIDI:

Hm... would you rather we have hit it?

FELIX:

What?

HEIDI:

Would you rather we have hit the deer? We might not have killed it, we slowed down in time, but we likely would have injured it. Broken a leg maybe--

FELIX:

Jesus, Blackwell.

HEIDI:

While I agree that it is certainly strange, Captain Rivers, I wouldn't be alarmed. I don't particularly care one way or another about the deer, but I know that you do. From your perspective, whatever that was-- it had an objectively positive outcome. In that case, I'm more intrigued than I am alarmed.

FELIX:

Huh... I ever tell you how strange you are, Miss Blackwell?

HEIDI:

Not verbally.

FELIX:

So, you *can* read my thoughts.

HEIDI:

Not in the traditional sense, but you make no effort to hide them, so. I can't help but look.

FELIX:

(sighs) Well, Miss Intrigued, whatdya figure that was?

HEIDI:

The start of a really bad couple of months.

===

NARRATOR

It takes about five minutes for Edith to drive to work-- they *would* walk if not for the plague of a pounding headache. They'll just have to be careful for a while. A skill of theirs.

The glass doors to the Gell-Mann Zweig Library welcome them with silence. A painfully bright gray refracts down from the glass panels that make up the octagonal ceiling. Work sweet work.

GREEN:

Congrats.

NARRATOR

Edith jumps, looking down to their side to see Green Axiom, lips twisted into something just shy of a polite smile.

EDITH:

(chuckling) Jesus, Green. Don't sneak up on me like that.

NARRATOR:

The light from the windows catches in Green's thick glasses, obscuring their eyes.

GREEN:

Sorry-- I look forward to working with you again.

NARRATOR

Green skitters past them and out of sight between the stacks. Edith watches them go.

They stand in the lobby a second longer, trying to make sense of the expression on Green's face. They've always been so expressive-- the blankness is startling.

Whatever--

The sensation of eyes on their back needles its way through them. They look over their shoulder.

And there stands Augustine Prama. Leaning against the wall and staring.

Time crawls by as the two look at one another.

EDITH, *(overlapping)*:

It's good to see--

AUGUSTINE, *(overlapping)*:

Welcome back to--

[A tense laugh between the two.]

NARRATOR

Augustine pushes off the wall.

AUGUSTINE:

Welcome back. And congrats on snagging my position, Edith. You *deserve* it.

[A pause.]

EDITH:

Thank... you... It...

NARRATOR

They swallow the apology on their tongue.

EDITH:

You're right. I do deserve it, Augustine.

[Augustine chuckles bitterly.]

AUGUSTINE:

You know what you don't deserve, though?

EDITH:

You're gonna say 'you' and be really self satisfied with how true it is, aren't you?

AUGUSTINE:

Flattering as that is, no. That's not what I was gonna say, know it all.

EDITH:

Then what was it, Prama?

AUGUSTINE:

Getting to work with Green again.

[Step forward from Augustine.]

AUGUSTINE:

Getting to be in the same room as them again after you broke their heart. And frankly, Edith, they don't deserve that either.

NARRATOR

They stalk off into the stacks, following Green. Did the two of them coordinate that? Edith shuts their eyes to combat the way they're starting to sting.

The front doors slide open before they can duck into their office.

They grimace.

FELIX:

Mornin' Mx. Aquino.

HEIDI:

Good morning, Edith.

EDITH:

Good morning, both of you...

HEIDI:

Notice anything strange this morning?

EDITH:

...No...? Should I have...?

HEIDI:

Perhaps. :) There are strange things all around us, Mx. Edith, do try to pay attention.

EDITH:

Of course, Miss Hydrangea. Is there anything in particular you'd like me to pay attention to?

HEIDI:

Do you truly need to ask?

EDITH:

I like to work in specifics, I think you'll find it's why they hired me.

HEIDI:

Edith, if I *ever* figure out why on Earth they hired you, I'll be sure to let you know.

EDITH:

Please. Do.

HEIDI:

It'll be my pleasure. Well, it was lovely talking to you as always. Congratulations both on being transferred back to this branch and on your promotion. I look forward to seeing you overcome any challenge the title presents. Though, don't be afraid to ask for help if you need it.

EDITH:

I think you'll find I can handle myself.

HEIDI:

Ah. I know you can, Edith.

[Heel clacks as she goes.]

EDITH:

(After her) Thank you, Hydrangea.

NARRATOR

Felix and Edith lock eyes.

FELIX:

She's got a point. Workin' in a library-- pretty easy to get checked out.

[An amused exhale from Edith.]

HEIDI:

(from down the hall) Felix!

NARRATOR

They nod at one another.

Felix goes. Edith watches.

And resolves to get to work.

===

NARRATOR

By the end of the day, the silver flask Edith keeps in their purse is empty.

And they still need a drink.

Perched on a bench in the parking lot, they reapply concealer to the bags under their eyes. They blink at themselves in the mirror. They can handle anything. They have and they will.

They can handle *anything*.

The door swings open and startles them. They narrowly avoid stabbing themselves in the eye when they flinch. They blink away the near miss, frustrated that their body has taken to jumping at things.

They glance at the figure that's emerged and regret it.

Heidi smiles down at them from what feels like on high, arms crossed daintily over her middle, light of the setting sun lining her silhouette with red. It catches in the gloss of her pastel curls and somehow even glints off of her teeth.

HEIDI:

Funny finding you all the way out here. I just gave up on looking for you.

EDITH

I see. [hand mirror snaps shut] How can I help you, Heidi?

NARRATOR

Heidi pulls a carton of cigarettes and a holder out of the inside pocket of her coat.

HEIDI:

Well, firstly, I do hope it doesn't bother you too much if I smoke.

NARRATOR

It won't stop her if they do mind. So why bother answering the question. They shake their head.

HEIDI:

Would you like one?

EDITH:

No. Thank you.

HEIDI:

Ah.

NARRATOR

Some of the tension melts out of her shoulders with the inhale. More of it seeps out of her mouth as she sighs, smoke cascading out and around her face. The light catches it and for a moment Heidi looks as though she is the fire causing all that smoke. Her severe cheekbones and delicate jaw flicker with shadow. Her thin painted lips curl slowly in a way that makes Edith's skin crawl. Her smile settles into place, free of strain, and her laugh follows suit.

HEIDI:

More a binge drinker than a chain smoker, then, hm?

NARRATOR

Something like the crunching of broken glass happens in Edith's chest. They can only manage half a deep breath before their teeth are bared.

EDITH:

I'm sorry?

HEIDI:

(tongue click) Aren't you just.

EDITH:

(a warning) Heidi.

HEIDI:

(a dismissal) Edith.

NARRATOR

Smoke billows out with the hiss of their name.

HEIDI:

We all have our vices. You're not special for sulking over yours.

EDITH:

Neither are you for flaunting yours.

HEIDI

(snickering) I don't recall saying I was.

NARRATOR

The small gap of silence as Heidi takes another drag of her cigarette wads itself in Edith's throat. They have so much to say and so little, but none of it will come out. They can't see Heidi's eyes, but they can tell she's deconstructing them bit by bit. Chewing them up in her head and discarding them. Dressing them down until there's nothing left and thinking that's it. Thinking she knows them. Their cheeks burn. Heidi's tongue makes a brief appearance between her teeth as a brilliant thought seems to come to her.

HEIDI:

You know, Mx. Aquino. That high horse of yours must be awfully tired.

NARRATOR

She giggles at a joke she's told herself and decides through another puff of smoke that Edith is worthy of hearing it, too.

HEIDI:

Why not give it a break and try riding something else? Could be a nice change of pace for you.

NARRATOR:

If the small mirror they're turning over in their hands wasn't metal, it would be in pieces by now. The tension in their hands and in their chest and in their head boils out into a laugh.

EDITH:

What? Are you offering?

NARRATOR:

She's not.

HEIDI:

I could be.

NARRATOR:

What?

EDITH:

It is. A yes or no question, Hydrangea. What about that do you not understand?

HEIDI:

I *understand* the value in making a choice not laid out for you.

[A pause.]

NARRATOR:

She sits next to them.

HEIDI:

But since you work in specifics. Yes. I am offering.

NARRATOR:

This is a bad idea.

HEIDI:

You look like you need to blow off some steam-- and as much as I hate to admit it, this place will go to shit if another one of us has some sort of breakdown.

NARRATOR:

The jab at Augustine isn't lost on them. They run a hand through their hair.

HEIDI:

So, blow off some steam. We've been flirting for a *while*, haven't we? And I don't think either of us are a fan of empty threats.

[A pause. A build in music, probably.]

EDITH:

Okay.

[A swell in music that implies a kiss.]

FIFTY-SIX DAYS REMAINING

NARRATOR:

The door opens as Green is about to knock.

Heidi looms over them, smile wide and sharklike as ever.

HEIDI:

Axiom.

GREEN:

Blackwell.

HEIDI:

What have you lost track of this time?

GREEN:

Oh. Nothing--

HEIDI:

Then why, Green, are you at my door?

GREEN:

Have you-- did you--

HEIDI:

I'm in a rush, Axiom. Spit it out or get out of my way.

GREEN:

There isn't anything on your calendar from now until three.

HEIDI:

Aren't you *observant*-- I'm in a rush not to be speaking to you. What do you want?

[Static rises as they talk, overtaking their motif in favor of Observer One's which can be heard very faintly.]

GREEN:

The uhm-- I keep having this dream-- or something. I don't know, I'm not sure, but it's this voice talking about something ending in sixty days? And it sounds like [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] not answering [REDACTED] have you heard [REDACTED]?

[Beat of pure static.]

GREEN:

Heidi?

[System note: barricade enforced]

[The static stops abruptly.]

HEIDI:

God, Green you have to speak up. I don't know how you get away with mumbling like that, reading to kids as often as you do.

NARRATOR:

She pushes past them. They look after her.

Felix pops his head out of her office.

FELIX:

What all were you saying?

GREEN:

Nothing, never mind.

FELIX:

Ey, not so fast, Mx. Axiom.

[A pause.]

FELIX:

C'mon, Green. Try me.

GREEN:

I was asking if she-- if anything big was coming up in the next couple of months.

FELIX:

Green, the other morning we hit a deer.

GREEN:

What??

FELIX:

Deer was fine. Car was fine. We were fine. But I saw this deer go straight through the hood of my truck. And just keep running. Like neither of them were there. And Heidi... was real calm about the whole thing. Said it meant the start of a really bad couple of months.

GREEN:

Mmm.

FELIX:

You make any sense of that?

GREEN:

Well. Sort of. Maybe... How long have the two of you been friends?

FELIX:

Bout as long as I can remember.

GREEN:

Does she ever talk about her dreams...?

FELIX:

Yeah, sometimes. She says I put too much weight in 'em-- and you might, too-- but she dreams of rain and it rains-

GREEN:

And the other day, did she say?

FELIX:

Just the bit about it being a bad couple of months. Why?

GREEN:

I think I had... something similar-- same dream, maybe?

FELIX:

Well, shit, what's gonna go wrong?

GREEN:

I'm not sure--

HEIDI:

Oh. You're still here.

GREEN:

I was just leaving.

HEIDI:

Good.

NARRATOR:

Green rushes away. They bump into Edith.

EDITH:

Oh, hey Green.

NARRATOR:

Green blinks at them. They look over their shoulder at Heidi. She's watching them. They look back at Edith.

GREEN:

Hey. Sorry.

NARRATOR:

They swerve around Edith.

EDITH:

Wh- Don't be...

NARRATOR:

They're gone.

EDITH:

Okay.

===

NARRATOR

Green closes their eyes against the dim basement and its ancient collection, taking Augustine's hand in theirs. Theirs is much smaller, but just as leathery-- just as worn.

They sink into him like he's got a gravitational pull. Like he pulls their exhaustion-- trying to pull it out of them. They press their temple against his shoulder.

AUGUSTINE:

What's up, honey?

GREEN:

(sigh) The world is ending.

AUGUSTINE:

(Laughing) Oh, is it now?

GREEN:

Yeah. :(

AUGUSTINE:

What makes you say that?

GREEN:

I've dreamt about it for the past four days.

AUGUSTINE:

Oh-- this is like a serious thing.

GREEN:

... Yeah... :(

AUGUSTINE:

Oh, baby, nightmares are only nightmares. What are they about?

GREEN:

It's like sleep paralysis, but with... Sylvia's voice over it... And I think... It's talking about us.-- There's a server-- and after sixty days it's over-- and then right before I wake up-- a different voice-- It's been counting down.

[Distant static. Green's motif cuts through it.]

AUGUSTINE:

That's... not what your nightmares are usually like...

GREEN:

Right?? At first I was like, oh sure, okay. Not loving it, but hey, better than the ones where I drown in light. But-- I mean, it just *keeps* happening.

AUGUSTINE:

Hmmm...

GREEN:

I mean, god, wouldn't it make sense? Just *our* luck, right?

AUGUSTINE:

Haha, yeah... And... The sky does feel... emptier than usual.

GREEN:

Doesn't it? God, it's dumb, but I don't know what to do.

AUGUSTINE:

Well... Say the world is ending. What do you *wanna* do?

GREEN:

... Move back in with you...

[A long pause.]

AUGUSTINE:

Wow. Yeah. Okay, yeah. I'm... I'm ready for that... Are... Are you sure?

GREEN:

Yeah, I was going to ask you anyway. Maybe this is just an excuse for me to get on with it.

AUGUSTINE:

Okay... We can start with that... tonight? If that works.

GREEN:

Yeah. We'll make a date of it.

AUGUSTINE:

A date.

===

NARRATOR:

Heidi leans against the wall of the parking lot.

Her leg is jogging. It won't stop, hasn't all day. She siphons smoke out of her nostrils, jaw clenching and releasing to some sort of rhythm. Her shoulders are still locked, left hand still twitching.

She grimaces.

There's a new itch.

In her fingertips, in her chest, on her lips.

A new need she's going to have to tend to.

Edith appears to her in the smoke. She laughs at the phantom, hardly able to help herself. Addiction is such an easy thing to stumble into isn't it?

===

NARRATOR:

The library is closed, but Edith remains in their office, filling out the last bits of paperwork for the day. Theoretically, they're safe in here. Heidi has a way of sneaking up on them that is so much worse than when Green does it. It makes their muscles tense in a way that they can't quite seem to adjust to. Tense as in ready to spring. Tense as in ready to flip a table. Tense as in ready to wrap their fingers around that bird bone wrist of hers and remind Heidi that she is not the end all be all. Not everything bends to her. Edith's pride definitely won't.

Not more than it already has.

The thought grates at them. As does the memory of the other day.

Neither of them have brought it up, only Edith can't imagine Heidi feels the way they do about it. The ghost of her against them is keeping them up, and the invariability of her smiling in their face every single day is wearing them down.

It's been a long day. A long week-- hell, a long life. And the camel's back is just about broken.

Two sharp knocks and in walks the straw.

HEIDI:

(dragging it out) Edith.

NARRATOR:

The door clicks shut behind her and she looks far too pleased with the action. Edith's office suddenly has the buzz of a vacuum. A space without new sound or new air. Their shoulders draw in towards each other, pulling their chin closer to their chest. They breathe in and out through their nose and make a point of relaxing, of taking up as much space as they can. Heidi might have a couple of inches on them in those ridiculously heeled boots, but they could snap her like a

twig without a second thought. They can only hope their silhouette is enough to get Heidi to realize how out matched she really is.

EDITH:
Heidi.

NARRATOR:
The smell of cigarette smoke and lavender is oppressive.

HEIDI:
How have you been doing?

EDITH:
Same as I was yesterday.

HEIDI:
Ah, fairly poor then.

EDITH:
When did I say that?

HEIDI:
You didn't. But anyone with critical thinking skills could catch you in that lie.

NARRATOR:
Edith rolls their shoulders as she takes a few sweeping steps closer to their desk. The flared sleeves of her silk shirt swish as she hooks her delicate fingers through the belt loops of her obnoxious purple pants.

HEIDI:
How do you even see through that storm cloud you're producing?

NARRATOR:
Their eyes trace the curve of her hip up to her waist before flitting up to the atrociously large sunglasses that mirror Edith's office back to them.

EDITH:
How do you see through those ridiculous sunglasses of yours?

HEIDI:
They're prescription.

NARRATOR:
She crinkles her nose. The right side moves more than the left.

HEIDI:

I would see a whole lot less without them. You on the other hand would see a lot more of you gave up some of that incessant gloominess of yours-- I don't know what it is about you and Augustine that makes you so depressing to be around, but you really do deserve each other.

NARRATOR:

Edith's muscles all go rigid. Their stomach turns. They blink and try even to move the pen in their hand, but every fiber of them has ground to a halt. They bite their tongue to bring back some sensation.

HEIDI:

Oooh. Did I strike a nerve?

NARRATOR:

Their face burns. Of course she knows, why wouldn't she? Heidi knows everything. They blink. She's waiting for an answer. They swallow hard.

EDITH:

No.

[Heidi giggles.]

HEIDI:

You are such a terrible liar, did you know that about yourself?

EDITH:

I don't see how that's relevant.

HEIDI:

It's for your benefit, Edith. We all have things we can work on.

EDITH:

You want me to work on being a better liar?

HEIDI:

I want you to work on being a little less easy to pick apart. You're going to get eaten alive, carrying on like this.

NARRATOR:

Edith battens down a shiver that scrapes against the base of their spine.

That was a threat.

One they half hope that Heidi means to keep.

The other half wants her out of their sight, out of their office, out of their life. She's the type of problem that multiplies and Edith's plate is full enough as things are.

They shove to their feet and get halfway around the desk before they realize that the few inches of height that Heidi does have on them, she means to use.

HEIDI:

(genuinely curious) Where are you running off to so suddenly?

NARRATOR:

If they really are a bad liar, why bother?

EDITH:

Anywhere but here.

HEIDI:

You realize this is *your* office, don't you?

EDITH:

Of course.

HEIDI:

Edith. It seems you want to get away from me, for whatever reason.

NARRATOR:

One last step. And now they're nose to nose with Heidi's wide smile pinning them in place like a dead butterfly. The rich lilac of her lipstick is carefully shaded darker at the corners of her mouth. What would it look like smudged?

HEIDI:

Has it ever occurred to you to ask me to leave? This is your space, after all.

NARRATOR:

They manage to swallow, but nothing else will move. Not even their eyes, as they try desperately to tear them away from Heidi's lips.

HEIDI:

(quiet) You have words. Try using them.

EDITH:

(matching her) And if you say no?

HEIDI:

I won't.

NARRATOR:

It's so painfully simple when she says it that they almost believe her. They shuffle a quarter of a step forward.

EDITH:

Heidi. Could you please exit my office?

HEIDI:

Now, was that really so hard?

EDITH:

Heidi.

HEIDI:

Alright, alright.

[System error 002]

NARRATOR:

Backing up, Heidi stumbles.

HEIDI:

Woah!

NARRATOR:

When she goes to keep her balance by propping herself up on the corner of their desk, her hand fazes through-- as does the rest of her.

She flails and snatches at the air, grabbing a fistful of Edith's blazer. Betrayed by the height of her heels, Heidi plummets, tangling Edith into the fall. The world melts around them, blurring with downward motion until the carpeted floor stops the pair.

EDITH:

Just like you to drag me down with you.

NARRATOR:

Heidi's face is framed both by her thin lavender hair and by Edith's flattened hands at either side of her head.

[She scoffs.]

HEIDI:

You pushed me.

NARRATOR:

Her hands slink up to Edith's shoulders as if to demonstrate what transpired in slow motion. Edith rolls their eyes.

EDITH:

I did not. And even if I did, you wouldn't have given me many other options.

NARRATOR:

Heidi snickers and hooks her hands over the back of Edith's neck, yanking them just a bit closer to her.

HEIDI:

You are uncreative and that is not my fault.

EDITH:

You are intentionally antagonistic and that *is* your fault.

NARRATOR:

Edith rolls their shoulders this time, sinking into Heidi's now gradual and constant pull.

HEIDI:

I told you, your buttons are too easy to press! Whose fault is that?

EDITH:

Whose fault is it that you can't resist pressing them?

HEIDI:

Well, that's both of us, isn't it?

EDITH:

Maybe it is...

HEIDI:

Or maybe. Somewhere in there. You like being pushed around.

EDITH:

(mimicking her) Heidi... Sometimes when we try to tear down others, we're really just fighting against something in ourselves. Do you think that might be true?

HEIDI:

I have no idea what you're referring to.

EDITH:

You make lying look so easy...

NARRATOR:

Edith slips a hand under Heidi's back, scooping her up into a sitting position as they sit back onto their heels. They go to use their desk for support in standing, but find it's a different height than they expect. They have to really look up to see the top of it-- it's a standing desk.

HEIDI:

This... is Green's office...?

NARRATOR:

It is.

EDITH:

Y-yeah. What...?

NARRATOR:

The faint light from Green's monitor bathes everything in a pale blue. It's just like them to forget to shut it off. Edith rises, bringing Heidi up with them at a snail's pace. They go to check the monitor-- just to turn it off for them, but Heidi stays stuck to their side, very clearly interested in what's been left on the screen.

[System error 004]

[Slow build of static. Green and Observer One's Motifs contest one another.]

NARRATOR:

It's a notes document.

GREEN:

Same nightmare again. Same voice.

Time drawing to a close. Unsatisfactory end? Plugs and servers? 60 days of no observation-- black box. Lack of control. Kill switch...

Maintenance records-- I've seen those before, I know I have

Stop calling Sylvia. She's not going to answer. And she's going to make fun of you when they do resurface. Stop it. Stop it. Stop it.

Countdown at 56

Tried telling Heidi :/

Went bout as well as you expected :/// Felix tho 🙄

Tell August you love him.

NARRATOR:

Edith blinks at it and goes to scroll, finding their hand on the mouse of their computer.

They're standing in their office, behind their desk, looking at their computer. Which is off. And significantly lower than where they were just looking.

The distinct feeling of motion sickness washes over them. They shut their eyes against it, reaching for Heidi, who reaches back, stumbling into them.

EDITH:

What the fuck?

[Static is sharp, Observer One's motif is overwhelming.]

HEIDI:

What... what did the computer say? What just happened?

[System note: barricade enforced]

EDITH:

I don't know. Something about a server-- what did they tell you?

HEIDI:

(lying) Like I pay attention when Green talks.

EDITH:

Well, you should. They're smarter than you give them credit for.

HEIDI:

Don't waste your breath defending them to me, Edith. They're pathetic. Especially if they're trying to get a hold of Sylvia while they're out of town. She's busy. She has better things to do than talk to them.

EDITH:

Yeah, and I'm sure she's answering your calls.

HEIDI:

I'm not calling her. I don't need to. I know she's busy, she told me.

EDITH:

Then she's got better things to do than talk to you, too, doesn't she?

HEIDI:

I-- It's not like that.

EDITH:

Even if it's not. Sylvia is a notorious flake. Don't put so much stock in her judgment.

HEIDI:

The district needs her. That's not her fault. You don't even know her.

EDITH:

I know she doesn't like Green.

HEIDI:

Well, neither do you. At least not more than your career or you'd still be together, wouldn't you?

EDITH:

That doesn't mean I don't like them.

HEIDI:

Oh, it's not like that, is it?

EDITH:

Fine. You've proven your point.

[Static.]

FIFTY DAYS REMAINING

NARRATOR:

Green fills a cup with hot water, shoulders tensing as the door to the break room opens.

HEIDI:

Has Sylvia called you back yet?

GREEN:

Uh. No. Have you heard from them?

HEIDI:

No. But then again, I'm not yelping after them like a wounded dog.

GREEN:

I'm not—

HEIDI:

Does Augustine know?

GREEN:

Yeah, actually. We had a really nice conversation about why I've been reaching out to them.

HEIDI:

And why are you?

[A pause.]

GREEN:

Last time I tried to explain this to you, I didn't think you'd heard me, but clearly--

HEIDI:

Is it my fault you mumble?

GREEN:

I don't think it is your fault... I think **something's wrong...**

[System note: barricade enforced]

HEIDI:

And *that's* why you keep calling Sylvia?

GREEN:

I think she's got her nose in it, she always does.

[A pause.]

GREEN:

I hear her sometimes.

[System note: barricade enforced]

[Heidi laughs. Static builds with Observer One's motif.]

HEIDI:

You're even more pathetic than I thought you were.

GREEN:

It's always in my **nightmares.**

[System note: barricade enforced]

HEIDI:

(still half laughing) That's awfully sad, Axiom.

GREEN:

And there's always a . And she's

[System note: barricade enforced]

[Heidi stops laughing. Static builds.]

GREEN:

Do you hear it too? You're the only other person I know who was close to her like I was.

HEIDI:

I... I can't believe you think you were even half as close to her as I am.

GREEN:

Goddamnit, Blackwell. I don't know why I try with you.

NARRATOR:

Green starts to leave.

GREEN:

Just try to think about *why* the next two months are going to be bad. Okay? Just think about it. Please.

NARRATOR:

They leave Heidi standing there.

[System note: barricade enforced]

[Static.]

===

EDITH:

Hey.

NARRATOR:

Augustine stops what they're doing and looks up but doesn't say anything.

EDITH:

Uhm... Is Green okay?

NARRATOR:

Augustine leans back.

AUGUSTINE:

Oh. So now you care.

EDITH:

Fine. Forget it. Sorry I asked.

AUGUSTINE:

No, no! It's sweet. It's really nice that you're asking me instead of them how they're doing.

EDITH:

Well, I think they're avoiding me, so--

AUGUSTINE:

So you go to the person who can't seem to get away, makes sense to me. They're fine. They're great, actually. We just moved back in together.

[A pause.]

AUGUSTINE:

You look surprised. Aren't you happy for us, Edith?

EDITH:

Of course I am. I'm glad you have each other.

AUGUSTINE:

Thank you.

[A pause.]

EDITH:

Just... keep an eye on their nightmares and stuff-- whatever. I don't need to tell you how to love them.

AUGUSTINE:

No. You most certainly do not.

NARRATOR:

Edith nods. Augustine nods.

EDITH:

Good talk.

AUGUSTINE:

Was it?

EDITH:

Goodbye.

===

NARRATOR:

It's dark out.

Heidi can't decide whether this is a fault or a perk of winter. She likes the dark an awful lot more than the brightness of *everything*, but she's grown used to the sunglasses. And the dark makes them slightly less functional. Though not enough to take off. It just means she keeps a slightly less intense pair with her for when the sun sets.

This is the pair she swaps to when she goes to find Edith. The halls are quiet. As usual they're the last two around. Part of her bounces on the balls of her feet as she approaches Edith's office. Another part of her admonishes the first for the joy it takes in these meetings. A third cradles

both, reminding each the deliciousness of the situation. How easy it was to sink her claws into it. And how lovely it will be to remove them once an ending is called for.

Her smile broadens.

Heidi knocks twice and sweeps into their office.

Instead of being greeted with Edith's typical admonishment, she's greeted with silence.

The hum of the heater and a gentle snore.

Edith's head is down on their desk, a pen still raised in their hand.

Heidi swallows a laugh.

HEIDI:

(condescending) That is too cute.

NARRATOR:

She waltzes over to Edith's desk and leans against it.

EDITH:

[System note: barricade enforced. Static over a repetition of Green's notes.]

NARRATOR:

Heidi's brow furrows. On one hand it is adorable that Edith talks in their sleep, but on the other hand... what are they saying? They look concerned.

EDITH:

[System note: barricade enforced. Static.]

NARRATOR:

She can practically hear their heart pounding. They're so incredibly still.

EDITH:

[System note: barricade enforced. Static.]

NARRATOR:

Heidi grabs their shoulder and shakes.

[System error 001]

NARRATOR:

Save for Edith, Heidi's vision goes white, the surfaces around her flashing monochrome and untextured.

Edith spasms and shoots awake, flinching away from Heidi's touch.

Heidi coils back.

EDITH:

Heidi...?

HEIDI:

... You were having a nightmare.

EDITH:

Oh. I hadn't realized I'd fallen asleep.

HEIDI:

You did so mid-sentence it seems.

NARRATOR:

Heidi gestures to the paperwork Edith was resting their head on. Her other hand slinks up to her temple to massage it.

HEIDI:

You talk in your sleep, you know.

EDITH:

I didn't know that.

HEIDI:

Well, you do.

NARRATOR:

She avoids meeting Edith's gaze.

HEIDI:

Are you alright?

EDITH:

I am. What did I say?

HEIDI:

I... don't know. I couldn't make any of it out.

EDITH:

You seem more worried about this than I am.

HEIDI:

Worried? Me? Never.

EDITH:

I'm sure. Well, I do have to finish this before tomorrow and I'd rather not take it home with me. Would you be willing to wait here until I wrap up? It should only take another 15 minutes.

HEIDI:

Of course.

NARRATOR:

Heidi shoves off of the desk and plops down in the seat across from Edith.

HEIDI:

You won't even know I'm here.

EDITH:

I'm sure.

NARRATOR:

Edith sets to work, glancing up from time to time to gauge how patient Heidi is feeling today. It varies from minute to minute with very little warning, but right now, Heidi seems still. Her chin is in her hand and she seems to be looking at Edith's work, but there really isn't any telling with the oversized sunglasses.

They wrap up quicker than they expected without a single interruption from Heidi.

EDITH:

Thank you for your cooperation-- I'm all done here, let's get a move on, shall we?

[Heidi snores. Edith chuckles to herself.]

NARRATOR:

That didn't take long. They're both tired, then.

EDITH:

(gentle, singsongy) Heidi.

NARRATOR:

Edith leans forward to inspect Heidi's face. Her eyebrows twitch together as though she disapproves. About a quarter of her left eyebrow is missing-- lost to a scar. A burn it looks like. One that's warped the top half of her ear as well.

Edith knew this, but something about the way the burns sneak up into Heidi's hair line paired with the first peaceful expression they've seen on her strikes them.

As if in response, Heidi springs awake.

She shoves back off the desk, knocking the chair over in the process.

Edith stands.

EDITH:

Heidi!

HEIDI:

Nothing's wrong!

[System note: barricade enforced.]

NARRATOR:

When Edith makes it around the desk, Heidi's on all fours, scrambling to get her glasses back on. Edith rushes to her side.

HEIDI:

Really, I'm alright.

EDITH:

For some reason, I don't believe you.

HEIDI:

I can't imagine why.

EDITH:

You knocked over a chair.

HEIDI:

Flimsy thing should have put up more of a fight.

EDITH:

Heidi.

HEIDI:

Edith.

EDITH:

What happened?

HEIDI:

I-- uhm-- nothing. You tell me.

EDITH:

You fell asleep while I was working, you woke up and fell back out of the chair.

HEIDI:

I fell asleep. Right.

EDITH:
Nightmare?

NARRATOR:
Heidi runs her tongue over her teeth.

And nods.

EDITH:
I'm sorry.

HEIDI:
Don't be. I don't need your pity.

NARRATOR:
Heidi shoves to her feet, but wavers when she reaches her full height. Edith is at her side with a steadying hand.

EDITH:
It's not *pity*, Heidi. You watched me have one. It happens sometimes.

[System error 001]

NARRATOR:
Again, for a brief moment, the room goes white, every surface in it a shade of smooth gray.

Heidi yanks away and stumbles. Edith doesn't move to help her.

HEIDI:
I...

NARRATOR:
She winces and takes to massaging her temple again.

HEIDI:
We should go.

EDITH:
What was that?

HEIDI:
...What?

EDITH:
The... the bulb must've short circuitied or- or something. Everything went white, did you see that?

HEIDI:

I... no... I thought it was in my head.

EDITH:

I saw it, too. Why would it have been in your head?

HEIDI:

(at a breakneck pace) You're right it must have been the lightbulb short circuiting. Damn place coming apart at the seams, it's a miracle it's getting by at all anymore. Better get out of here while we still can.

[System note: barricade enforced]

NARRATOR:

Heidi scoops the chair back up.

EDITH:

Oh... kay...

NARRATOR:

Heidi puts on her coat and scarf as Edith puts on theirs. She follows them out.

They walk in silence. Ride the elevator in silence. And reach the door in silence.

Five sixths of the glass is covered in snow.

They stand in silence, staring at it.

EDITH:

Shit. It was *sunny* this morning.

NARRATOR

Heidi marches over to a bench in the lobby and sits, staring at the ceiling.

EDITH:

We could jump out a second floor window.

HEIDI:

And dig up your buried car?

EDITH:

Better now than before the snow turns to ice.

HEIDI:

We can call someone in the morning, see it's coming down in sheets, no one'll be able to come get us.

EDITH:

So we sleep here?

HEIDI:

You didn't seem to have much trouble with it thirty minutes ago when the snow might have been thinner.

EDITH:

May I point out that neither did you.

HEIDI:

You may. To which I say, there are blankets and snacks in the second floor supply closet in case of an emergency. We pull a couple couches together. We'll be fine.

[System error 002]

EDITH:

Alright. We sleep here.

NARRATOR:

They offer her their hands. She takes them and starts for the elevator, keeping one of her hands interlaced with theirs.

They get into the elevator.

And the lights flicker.

The floor falls out from beneath them-- the elevator plummets.

Neither of them scream, just hold on to one another and to the railing that lines the tiny metal death trap.

With a lurch that nearly takes Heidi off of her feet, the elevator stops.

The doors open.

Edith bolts for the door, pulling Heidi with them.

The pair stumble to a nearby desk to catch their breath.

HEIDI:

Fuck that thing.

NARRATOR:

Edith nods, hand pressed flat across their chest.

HEIDI:

You alright?

NARRATOR:

Edith nods, but still can't quite breathe. They keep nodding.

HEIDI:

Alright... We... we're going to sit down.

[A chair is pulled out.]

HEIDI:

You... you sit here and breathe, I'll be back with a nice blanket and something to eat alright-- do you want out of your coat, first?

NARRATOR:

Edith nods-- a distinct affirmative, above the continuous movement.

Leaning heavily on the table, Heidi slips off her gloves to maneuver the buttons at the front of Edith's coat undone. That accomplished, she pulls it open and off over their shoulders. They seem to wake back up a bit when she takes their arm and begins to attempt to work the sleeve off of it.

[Chuckle from Edith.]

EDITH, (*hollow*):

Thank you.

HEIDI:

Don't mention it-- now, I'm going to go see if any of the snacks are worth eating. Don't worry, I'll take the stairs, alright?

NARRATOR

Edith nods.

Heidi starts for the stairs, but stops short upon finding them. The door is labeled two.

They're *on* the second floor.

She'd been right. This month is bad. Something claws at the back of her head.

SYLVIA:

Nothing's wrong.

OBSERVER ONE:

-- shutting off obs--

NARRATOR:

She hisses out a breath, pinching the bridge of her nose. Apparently all basic logic got shut off--

still. It's fine. She's fine, Edith is fine. Nothing is wrong. She makes a half hearted attempt at swallowing her growing headache and goes for the supply closet.

[System note: barricade enforced.]

After dropping off a crate of various snack foods, and blankets on the decently sized couches of the Genre Fiction nook, Heidi goes back for Edith.

HEIDI:

Turns out we're *on* the second floor-- I set us up a nice spot in the--

NARRATOR:

Edith has just finished chugging the contents of their flask.

They breathe. Really breathe.

HEIDI:

How... are you doing...?

EDITH:

Great. Where are we?-- For the night I mean.

HEIDI:

I'll... show you.

NARRATOR:

Heidi offers them a hand. They take it.

[Heel clacks as they walk.]

HEIDI:

So... how long have you been an alcoholic?

EDITH:

How long have you reeked of cigarette smoke and too much perfume?

HEIDI:

As long as I can remember-- is the perfume too much?

EDITH:

It wouldn't need to be if it weren't trying to smother the smoke.

HEIDI:

Hmm.

EDITH:

How does it not give you a headache?

HEIDI:

I'm too busy having 'you' related headaches. Honestly, I can hear an early grave calling your name.

EDITH:

Don't mistake your name for mine-- only I don't think yours can be considered 'early' anymore, can it, Hydrangea? How old are you? Eighty-seven, eighty-nine?

HEIDI:

I'm ageless and deathless and determined to wear pink to your funeral.

NARRATOR:

Heidi plops down on the couch, yanking off her heeled winter boots. Edith plops down next to her.

EDITH:

I'm sure you'll look as stunning as ever.

HEIDI:

You think I look stunning?

EDITH:

Yeah! Looking at you is like taking a taser to the head.

NARRATOR:

Heidi's laugh doesn't quite clear her throat, lodging on the beginning of her tongue. She brushes hair over her scar.

Edith freezes.

EDITH:

(with haste) It always leaves me seeing stars.

NARRATOR:

Heidi looks up at them.

EDITH:

And not entirely sure where the hell I am?

HEIDI:

Alright, alright. You've made your point.

EDITH:

And dizzy from the sheer thrill of it.

HEIDI:

Okay! Okay. I get the picture.

[A pause.]

EDITH:

Let me make you something.

HEIDI:

I already ate.

EDITH:

In this storm, when?

HEIDI:

I keep snacks in my office.

EDITH:

Snacks aren't really dinner.

HEIDI:

This is hardly dinner, either. Look, I'm not hungry, alright? I'm interested in *seeing* whatever combination monstrosity you're willing to subject yourself to, but I'm not hungry. Okay?

EDITH:

... Okay... How... how did we get here?

HEIDI:

What do you mean?

EDITH:

We fell— the elevator fell. From floor one... to floor two.

HEIDI:

It must have gone up a bit too far and dropped us down.

EDITH:

Maybe... did you feel it go *up* at all?

HEIDI:

Why did it scare you so much when it fell?

EDITH:

I don't like- I don't like that feeling.

HEIDI:

What feeling?

EDITH:

The falling. It's bad. It's awful. Why doesn't it bother you?

HEIDI:

I don't let it.

EDITH:

Is that healthy?

HEIDI:

Tell me, where exactly is your room to judge?

EDITH:

Fine. Whatever. Forget I fucking asked.

[A pause.]

HEIDI:

My balance isn't always the best. So it's not— I'm not unfamiliar with the feeling. I *can't* let it bother me.

[System error 001]

NARRATOR:

Another wave of dim grays floods out from the two of them, staying for a moment before things return to normal.

EDITH:

What the fuck. What the fuck? That can't be just the lights?

HEIDI:

Well, if it's not what is it then?

EDITH:

I don't- I don't fucking know.

HEIDI:

Okay, it's okay. You don't have to know. I don't know what it would be either.

NARRATOR:

Heidi runs a hand up and down Edith's back. They melt into her side, whiskey fogging up their head.

HEIDI:

Here. Water. Drink.

NARRATOR:

She hands them a water bottle which they down half of before returning it to her. She sets it down on the table and pulls them in for a hug. They sigh, exhaustion festering behind their eyes.

HEIDI:

It's going to be alright. Try to relax. Nothing's wrong.

[System note: barricade enforced]

===

AUGUSTINE:

I'm going to kill her.

GREEN:

No, you're not.

AUGUSTINE:

Maybe not literally, but--

GREEN:

August, honey, it's fine.

AUGUSTINE:

She called you a wounded dog. I'm sick of her treating you like this.

GREEN:

I can handle her myself.

AUGUSTINE:

I'm sure you can. The problem is that you won't. You let her walk all over you, what is up with that?

[A pause.]

AUGUSTINE:

I swear to god, Green she doesn't get to do that to you because you feel bad for her.

GREEN:

It's not that.

AUGUSTINE:

Then what is it?

GREEN:

She was different before she was with Sylvia.

NARRATOR:

Augustine makes a face.

GREEN:

I didn't know her that well, but she was *different*.

AUGUSTINE:

Are you seriously 'I know you're in there somewhere'ing her?

GREEN:

No. She's not in there.

AUGUSTINE:

Pfft.

GREEN:

But my nightmares changed after I was with Sylvia.

AUGUSTINE:

And now they've changed again.

GREEN:

Yeah. And Sylvia's nowhere to be seen-- but I think Heidi's getting them too. She just... won't talk to me. Or something's stopping her. She gets this look on her face. I was trying to tell her about Sylvia not answering, and she sort of blanked about it-- but she did-- I mean maybe it got through to her somehow. Or she found it somewhere else?

AUGUSTINE:

Found it somewhere else? What does that even mean?

GREEN:

I don't know. She's known other shit inexplicably.

AUGUSTINE:

None of that means she gets to be such a bitch to you.

GREEN:

The more she underestimates me the more she lets on, thinking I don't see it. I'm being strategic.

AUGUSTINE:

That's bullshit.

GREEN:

Even if it is. It's my life.

AUGUSTINE:

That it is...

===

FORTY-FOUR DAYS REMAINING

[Sylvia's voice, echoing. Static and Observer One's motif plays.]

SYLVIA:

Nothing's wrong.

OBSERVER ONE:

Nothing is wrong.

[It crescendos and cuts off. Heidi gasps and sits up in bed. Heidi breathes.]

HEIDI:

Nothing... nothing's wrong.

SYSTEM:

Forty-Four Days Remaining

===

NARRATOR:

Green is typing. Green is no longer typing... Green is typing... Green is... No longer typing...

[A person's name and text sharing a line indicates a New Message, where as text below their name is being spoke aloud.]

FELIX: Green.

GREEN:

Fuck.

GREEN: Felix. Hello.

FELIX: What's happenin Charlie Chaplin?

GREEN:

We should talk-- no-- wanna meet up-- no-- coffee?— okay.

GREEN: Sombra after work?

FELIX: sure thing.

NARRATOR:

Green liked this message.

Felix is typing.

Felix is no longer typing.

Felix leans back in his chair.

Felix is typing.

FELIX: Heidi's been riding with Edith, so I've got my car

GREEN:

WHAT. What. What the fuck.

GREEN: Cool! Right at 5?

FELIX: See you then!

[Both sigh.]

===

NARRATOR:

Augustine ducks into the stairwell, smiling for the first time in his life at the sight of Heidi, a couple steps above him.

AUGUSTINE:

Hey, Hydrangea.

HEIDI:

Oh, you're speaking to me now, are you?

AUGUSTINE:

Desperate times, Hydrangea, desperate times.

HEIDI:

If that were the case I don't see why you wouldn't be talking to me constantly.

AUGUSTINE:

You may be constantly desperate, but I'm not.

HEIDI:

Ugh. You and Edith both.

AUGUSTINE:

...What...?

HEIDI:

You're both dismally poor liars. And perfectly dismal to be around. You deserve each other. Or *deserved*, sorry. What is it that you wanted?

AUGUSTINE:

(*calm*) I wanted to ask you what the hell is wrong with you.

[System note: barricade enforced]

HEIDI:

And you mumble, too. Just like Green. I suppose trifles attract trifles, though.

AUGUSTINE:

I don't mumble. You have selective hearing.

HEIDI:

I hear everything.

AUGUSTINE:

How did you hear that Green was trying to get a hold of Sylvia? Are you stalking them?

[Heidi laughs.]

HEIDI:

Why would I waste my time on that twerp? I have better things to do.

AUGUSTINE:

How'd you hear it then?

HEIDI:

Oh, is that what this little tantrum is about? That Green tells me more about their life than they tell you?

AUGUSTINE:
They told you?

HEIDI:
Yes, they did.

AUGUSTINE:
When?

HEIDI:
When we spoke about it the other day.

AUGUSTINE:
Can you tell me what they said about it?

HEIDI:
If you want to check that they haven't lied to you about anything, you'll have to do it with someone who cares about what they have to say. And honestly, Augustine, they may not be the brightest but, what makes you think they're foolish enough to trust you in the first place?

AUGUSTINE:
What makes you think *I'm* foolish enough to believe you over them?

HEIDI:
I don't. But I know you have your doubts. Don't you, Augustine?

AUGUSTINE:
I don't. Actually. Wanna know why?

HEIDI:
I don't particularly care, but I'm aware you're only asking in order to be even more overdramatic than you already always are.

AUGUSTINE:
It's because you're alone. And it's not the being alone that does it. Some people need to be alone the way you and I need *somebody*-- no, it's not the being alone that's the problem. It's just you. You're not real unless you're hurting somebody, are you Heidi? Unless you're controlling something-- someone. You're nothing without the rest of us to fuck with. You need us. And it kills you because *you know it*.

HEIDI:
Bold assumption from the man who had a breakdown in order to drag their ex-partner back to his miserable side from whatever new life they could have possibly had away from him and his agony. You're projecting, Augustine. Get a grip.

[Heel clacks. Door closes.]

NARRATOR:

Heidi can't breathe. How *did* that conversation with Green go? How does she know they were calling Sylvia? They told her-- no. She read it. Where? Maybe Edith said so. When? While they were dreaming? That doesn't make any sense, none of it does. Her head hurts. She should call Sylvia. She shouldn't. She promised she'd get by.

SYLVIA:

Nothing is wrong.

[System note: barricade enforced]

NARRATOR:

What does Augustine know anyway?

What does Augustine know?

[Door opens and closes.]

FELIX:

Woah there, Heids.

HEIDI:

What?

FELIX:

What's wrong?

[Heidi laughs.]

HEIDI:

Nothing! Nothing's wrong! Why is something always 'wrong' with you people?

FELIX:

Us people?

HEIDI:

Yes, you people! All of-- All of you!

FELIX:

Okay, we're gonna sit down.

NARRATOR:

He guides her into a chair.

FELIX:

You eaten today?

HEIDI:

Yes. I just got done talking with Augustine, *that's* the head ache.

FELIX:

Mm. What happened?

HEIDI:

Nothing. He was bitching about Green which is all he does. I don't know how either of them have their jobs at this point.

FELIX:

Just because you don't like them, doesn't make them incompetent, Heids.

HEIDI:

I don't like them *because* they're incompetent, Felix. All Green does is scuttle around like the *pest* they are and we expect them to interface well with children? And thank *god*, Augustine's been confined to the basement for the most part, it's where they belong.

FELIX:

Christ, Heidi, they're doing their best, just like the rest of us.

HEIDI:

Well, unlike the rest of us, *their* best isn't good enough. Why are you on their side all of a sudden?

FELIX:

I'm not on their side, I'm not on anyone's side.

HEIDI:

You're not on my side?

FELIX:

Have you been sleeping okay?

HEIDI:

Yes, I've been sleeping *fine*. I'm *fine*, Felix, alright? I can't believe you don't have anything better to do than attempt, poorly, to mother me.

[Pause.]

FELIX:

Is that what this is?

HEIDI:

What?

FELIX:

You think I'm trying to parent you?

HEIDI:

You're awfully invested in my eating and sleeping habits--

FELIX:

Because I know you and I know you skip meals and stay up when you get stressed out.

HEIDI:

And what reason would I have to be stressed out?

FELIX:

Hell if I know! Talking to you is like pulling teeth, Heidi. I can't help you if you won't tell me what's wrong.

HEIDI:

Nothing! Nothing's wrong! Stop it. Stop saying that.

FELIX:

Hey, hey.

NARRATOR:

Felix takes her hands, which have clawed up into her hair. He places one to his chest and the other to hers.

FELIX:

Breathe.

NARRATOR:

Her fingers flex against his heartbeat. Then against her own. It's rapid. And her breaths are short, jagged. He inhales. She inhales. He exhales. She follows.

[A pause.]

FELIX:

Better?

HEIDI:

(choked up) Better...

FELIX:

Good.

NARRATOR:

Felix lets go of her and stands, running his index finger and thumb over his mustache.

FELIX:

Look, Heids... It's okay. Not to be ready, or able even. To talk about stuff. But... I... Look, I'm not doing so hot, myself. And you... Do you think Edith'd be able to start driving you to work?

[A pause.]

HEIDI:

I'll ask...

FELIX:

Okay. Good. Good, you do that.

[A pause.]

FELIX:

I'm in your corner, Heids, I am. But you don't treat me good. You don't treat anybody good. And I need a minute, alright?

[A pause.]

HEIDI:

Fine. Fine, if that's what you think of me, after everything, then go. I hope your next charity case fairs better.

FELIX:

Yep. Alright. Hang in there, Heidi.

[He leaves.]

NARRATOR:

Heidi growls.

She grabs a book off of her desk. She throws it at the door. Then another. Then something else, some paper weight Sylvia bought her, it doesn't matter.

It doesn't matter.

None of it does.

[Sounds of things being thrown continue. Possibly accompanied by Heidi shouting.]

===

NARRATOR

Felix's car smells as though he's managed to cultivate a forest inside of it. Like soil that breathes and trees that break through clouds.

Green can't seem to get a beat on Felix. The mask of no-nonsense security guard doesn't budge much except for the occasional pun or soft withering glance at Heidi. It makes them nervous.

He can probably tell.

FELIX:

You worried I'm gonna axe murder you?

GREEN:

Only a little.

FELIX:

(aggressively unthreatening) Well, the only axe I want between us is the axing of a couple of questions.

[Green laughs.]

GREEN:

What a relief.

[Felix chuckles.]

FELIX:

So, what's the issue with the next couple of months?

GREEN:

Well. Uh. I don't want to alarm you-- and I'm not exactly the authority on the subject, but--

FELIX:

Axiom, I don't think there is exactly an expert on the subject. Tell me what you think.

GREEN:

Right, sorry--

FELIX:

No need to be sorry. You're doin' fine.

[System error 001]

NARRATOR:

In a ripple out from Felix, every surface in the truck goes blank-- all shadows and shades of gray.

Felix's shoulders lock, hands tightening over the wheel. Green grabs to their seat as Felix pulls over.

[Felix wheezes.]

GREEN:

Okay. Well. At least I don't have to worry about alarming you anymore.

[Felix laughs.]

FELIX:

Nope. No, you don't. Hooo. You know what that's about?

GREEN:

I- uh- yeah maybe. I've been hearing this garbled message about something happening, I think to a server, in the next sixty days. They're putting it in a black box or something-- turning off observation, something like that. And then... I think they pull the plug after that. On the server, I mean. The whole message has been getting clearer and clearer everytime I hear it, which... yikes-- and then there's a different voice that's been counting down the days.

FELIX:

Starting from sixty, I assume?

GREEN:

Yuh-huh.

FELIX:

Huh... and based on the whole [imitates glitch sound effect] that just happened and then the deer and then this morning I'm pretty sure my hand went through a door knob in one of the upstairs study rooms-- you think this is all 'cause of some server or something?

GREEN:

Yeah... I mean you hit the deer the same day I started hearing the message.

FELIX:

And you think Heidi is hearing it too?

GREEN:

Well. Uhm... Don't... I don't want to like drive a wedge between you and her--

[Felix laughs.]

FELIX:

I wouldn't worry too much about that.

GREEN:

Oop. Do you wanna... talk about it...?

FELIX:

No.

GREEN:

Great, cool. Well, she and I had a mutual friend who was kind of-- I mean a little intense. To uh put it lightly.

FELIX:

Weslake?

GREEN:

(choking back a laugh) Yeah. Yep. Sylvia.

FELIX:

Mmm.

GREEN:

You have thoughts on them?

FELIX:

Intense *is* putting it lightly, but it's probably the best word for 'em.

GREEN:

Yeah... They uhm... I always-- and like let me know if this is too much, but I always used to have nightmares, but when Sylvia and I were... close, my nightmares got-- not worse, necessarily, but different? More abstract. Birds eye views of Nicefeld-- of the library. Bright flashes of light, staring out a window, but into a cubicle. And sometimes like now-- it's nothing but voices reading things off. Like this one-- it mentions a maintenance record, I think I've gotten that one before-- but with other ones it'd just be *their voice*... Like it is now. And they're not answering their phone. So, I'm... I don't really know what to make of it. It's dumb maybe, to think of them as being *behind* it, and sure they go fuck off to gods know where and don't really wanna talk to me ever anyways, but I'm still suspicious. Especially because it's not just that it's them... they sound... happy. In a way they usually don't. Enthused-- entertained or something.

FELIX:

That sounds awful, Green. I'm sorry.

GREEN:

It fucking sucks, but hey, what are you gonna do?

FELIX:

Yeah... I guess. So. You start hearing this message and things immediately start to go haywire. That make you think, I dunno, we're in it? *In* that server thing or whatever?

GREEN:

Yes, yeah. It does. It really does.

[Felix laughs.]

NARRATOR:

Felix rests his forehead against the steering wheel.

FELIX:

Ya know what? I'm gonna get a hot cocoa at Sombra. And it's going to make me feel so much better about this.

GREEN:

Me. Too.

[Car starting sounds.]

===

NARRATOR:

The halls are quiet. They always are at this hour, except for the clacking of Edith's heels. Their jaw is set and their shoulders back. It's typical of Heidi to avoid being on time, but leaving them high and dry is a step too far for Edith's taste.

Edith mimics Heidi's signature knock and shoves open the door.

EDITH:

Heidi.

[Silence.]

EDITH:

Heidi?

NARRATOR:

They close the door behind them and start towards the desk. The room is a mess.

A hand sticks out from behind it. Pale with impeccable purple acrylics.

EDITH:

Heidi!

NARRATOR:

They stumble over themselves as they sprint to her. She's sprawled out on her side, blood on the carpet in a splotch around her head.

Edith flips her onto her back, leaning in for the sound of her breath.

...

It's deep and slow, but definitely there.

Heidi's glasses have sunken off of her face, broken in a few places.

Edith pauses.

Heidi's left eye is missing.

The burns that snake up against her hairline continue down across her sagging eyelid and over what would be the bridge of their nose. The blood is coming from a small gash on Heidi's left temple.

Edith grabs for tissue from Heidi's desk and holds it to the wound.

HEIDI:

... agh...

EDITH:

Heidi?

HEIDI:

Didi?

EDITH:

Yes. It's me.

HEIDI:

Mnn...

NARRATOR:

Heidi drags her hand over to Edith's and tries to interlace her fingers with theirs. The tissue clotting the blood stops them.

HEIDI:

What's the matter?

EDITH:

I think you fell? I'm not sure. I found you on the floor.

HEIDI:

Mm. Happens sometimes. I'm alright.

EDITH:

You're bleeding.

HEIDI:

Oh.

NARRATOR:

Heidi takes the hand she's rested on top of Edith's and inspects it, inches from her face.

HEIDI:

I don't see any blood.

EDITH:

Alright. Come on.

NARRATOR:

Edith keeps their hand on the side of Heidi's head and scoops their other arm under her. Heidi hums and slinks her hand up to their shoulder. Before Edith manages to get her into a sitting position, she's sagging forward like a rag doll.

HEIDI:

Woah. Spinny.

EDITH:

Okay.

NARRATOR:

Edith guides Heidi's head as best as they can against their shoulder.

HEIDI:

Oh, my head...

EDITH:

You must have hit it pretty hard.

HEIDI:

Didi. I'm gonna be sick.

EDITH:

Shit.

EDITH:

Hold on.

NARRATOR:

They pull the waste bin out from under Heidi's desk.

EDITH:

Here.

NARRATOR:

Heidi dry heaves but nothing comes up. Edith pulls her hair back.

EDITH:

Did you eat today?

HEIDI:

Was I supposed to?

EDITH:

How often did you say this happens?

HEIDI:

Mmmm. Sometimes?

EDITH:

(disapproving) Heidi.

HEIDI:

Eee-dittthhh.

EDITH:

Alright. Come here, we're going to Urgent Care.

NARRATOR:

They start to help her to her feet.

HEIDI

Okay. Thank you, Didi.

EDITH

You know... I think this is the first time you've ever thanked me.

HEIDI

Untrue. I just usually say it--

NARRATOR:

Heidi steals a kiss.

HEIDI

Like that.

EDITH

I see...

NARRATOR:

Heidi stumbles and yelps, clinging to Edith for dear life.

EDITH

Easy. Easy. I've got you.

HEIDI

Mmm. Strong.

EDITH

I'm sure you are. Here, let's try--

NARRATOR:

Edith scoops Heidi up bridal style. She gasps and buries her face in Edith's neck.

EDITH

Better?

NARRATOR:

Heidi nods. They carry her to the car.

She flinches once they get out of her office, muttering something so jumbled it barely sounds like English.

EDITH

Easy, easy. I've got you.

NARRATOR:

More jumbled syllables. She nestles up further against their neck, bringing a hand to her face-- she's blocking the lights.

EDITH:

Oh! Okay. Okay, we'll be out of here soon, it'll be darker outside.

NARRATOR:

They speed to the elevator.

How the hell is she so light? She's taller than them-- they knew she was tiny-- how often is she skipping meals?

The elevator shakes as it descends and darkness snatches at the edges of their vision. They lean hard against the railing of the small metal death trap, holding to Heidi like a child would a stuffed animal.

The elevator opens without further event and Edith practically sprints out.

When she's fastened into the passenger's seat and reclined to a soothing enough angle, they grab in the glove box for the pair of shades Augustine got them for their anniversary. They pretend not to think about it as they gently place the sunglasses over Heidi's scrunched up eyes.

As soon as they're seated and the car doors close, the scent of lavender overwhelms them. What's more is the lack of smoke to the scent. Even if her office still reeks of it, she doesn't...

At a stoplight they glance at her.

EDITH

How ya holdin up, Blackwell?

HEIDI

Just perfect, thank you.

NARRATOR:

They smile. At least she sounds like herself again.

===

[Car doors open and close as Felix and Green get out.]

FELIX:

How do you think Sylvia fits into all this server business? It's her voice, they fucked with your dreams before.

GREEN:

Hell if I know. I mean... I've never been close with Heidi. Do you remember what she was like before she and Sylvia were friends?

FELIX:

Yeah... She uhm... Yeah, she was nice to me.

[They enter the coffee shop.]

===

NARRATOR:

The UR is empty. Something about the walls refuses to settle in their vision, as does something about the faces of each of the receptionists.

Edith sets Heidi in a brown plastic chair.

The conversation with the receptionist is brief. Edith keeps their eyes on the counter between them.

The conversation with the doctor is worse. It feels like their head is filled with static.

[The maintenance records start to play under this, glitched and interlaced with static.]

Heidi needs stitches.

Edith holds her hand.

===

[Noise of the coffee shop has slowed. Felix's phone buzzes.]

FELIX:

Mm. Hold on, lemme take this.

GREEN:

Alright.

FELIX:

Hey, Edith...?

EDITH:

Hey! Felix! You have keys to Heidi's place, yeah?

FELIX:

Yeah, I do. Why...?

EDITH:

I can't find her keys and I need to grab some stuff from her place-- she's probably gonna be staying with me for the weekend.

FELIX:

And the two of y'all can't go grab it together because...

EDITH:

... She didn't want me to mention it to you, but... she fainted today. She hit her head pretty hard on the way down. Urgent Care says she's concussed.

FELIX:

You're fucking kidding me.

EDITH:
I wish I was.

FELIX:
I'll grab her essentials, you two hold tight. Bye.

[Felix laughs, bitter.]

GREEN:
Everything okay?

FELIX:
No. Heidi's gone and given herself concussion number six.

GREEN:
Number six?

FELIX:
You up to ride with me? I'm grabbing her shit to bring to Edith's. I can drop you off if not.

GREEN:
I'm down to ride, I can help gather.

FELIX:
Thank you, Green.

GREEN:
Anytime.

===

EDITH:
Hey, thank you so much Felix-- oh. Green, hi!

FELIX:
Needed an extra set of hands.

EDITH:
Right. Of course. Come on in.

[They do.]

EDITH:
You can drop her stuff on the couch-- she's asleep upstairs, theoretically. Can I get you guys anything while you're here?

FELIX:
I'm alright. Green?

GREEN:
I'm okay.

EDITH:
How much of the situation do you know?

GREEN:
I know she's given herself concussion number six.

EDITH:
What? *Six*?

FELIX:
Yeah. She doesn't talk about it much-- I've been there for a couple. She say what happened this time?

EDITH:
Urgent care said it might have been lack of nutrition.

[the stairs creak.]

EDITH:
Heidi.

HEIDI:
I just want some water.

EDITH:
Okay— get off the stairs, please.

FELIX:
I've got her.

HEIDI:
Felix?

FELIX:
Come on, Heidi.

HEIDI:
Okay.

[They go.]

[A pause.]

GREEN:

So...

EDITH:

So.

GREEN:

You two...

[Edith laughs.]

EDITH:

What about us two?

GREEN:

I mean. Looks like she's stuck here with you for a bit.

EDITH:

Stuck here with me, huh?

GREEN:

I meant—I mean she's the one confined to a room. That's the stuck. Not you. She's lucky to have you.

EDITH:

Thanks. That means a lot coming from you.

GREEN:

You doin' okay?

EDITH:

I feel like I should be asking you that-- I'm okay. One day at a time...

GREEN:

Me too. Are you still...?

EDITH:

... Yeah.

GREEN:

Take it easy, okay? Especially while Heidi's-

EDITH:

I am. I mean I will. I've been- It's not as bad as it used to be. I don't have as many bad nights anymore. I'm functional as I've ever been.

GREEN:

Good. That's good to hear. I just want you to be careful.

EDITH:

How are your nightmares?

GREEN:

Fucked. But hey, what are you gonna do?

EDITH:

Yeah... I uhm-- Look, this is going to sound insane, but-- and maybe I dreamt it or something, I don't know but I... fell? Through the floor the other day? Through my office into yours. And I saw on your computer-- Is that countdown still going?

GREEN:

You... Oh, holy shit. Okay, haha, wow. Yeah, no-- It is. You fell through the floor? Just sort of randomly?

EDITH:

Well... Heidi and I tripped.

[Green laughs.]

GREEN:

Oh shit! Okay. Okay, things are making a little more sense. Maybe that's how she knew about Sylvia-- you *fell through the floor*.

EDITH:

Yeah...

GREEN:

And you just didn't tell anyone?

EDITH:

I'm telling you now!

GREEN:

Right, no, you're right. Hah.

EDITH:

And it was-- I don't know buzzy. Buzzing while we were in there-- and it was the same in Urgent Care today. There were people but it was all-- it all felt *empty*.

GREEN:

Cool. Okay. My turn to say insane things...

===

HEIDI:

What are you here for?

FELIX:

Just bringing stuff from your place.

HEIDI:

Oh. Okay. You're not staying?

FELIX:

Edith's got it handled.

HEIDI:

Okay.

FELIX:

You know, you promised you'd tell me if you started slipping again.

HEIDI:

I know.

FELIX:

Why'd you lie about it?

HEIDI:

... I don't know... I think I was angry.

FELIX:

At me?

HEIDI:

Yes. I don't know why.

FELIX:

Okay... you... you figure that out. And you *tell* me when you do. I'm here for emergencies and if you're ready to talk, but...

HEIDI:
Space...

FELIX:
Yeah.

HEIDI:
I want you to stay, Felix.

FELIX:
I want to stay, too. But... time is limited. I need to spend some on myself while I can.

HEIDI:
That's dumb.

FELIX:
Maybe it is. Or maybe you need that, too.

[A pause, static rising.]

HEIDI:
Yeah. Maybe.

FELIX:
Call me when you're ready. Alright?

HEIDI:
Alright.

[Footsteps. The door shuts.]

NARRATOR:
Heidi stares after him.

Once the image of the shut door in the darkness is ingrained into the bruised walls of her skull, she shuts her eyes. Tight.

The gash on the side of her head stings.

Flashes of the day fizzle through her head. They boil over into flashes of her life, all venom and self satisfaction.

And Sylvia.

Sylvia and her. And then everyone else.

Well, Sylvia isn't here. They never are.

FELIX:

You don't treat me good.

HEIDI:

What the fuck is wrong with me?

[System error 003]

NARRATOR:

The world explodes into color, sporadic and nonsensical. She can't shut her eyes against it, but she doesn't need to, it doesn't hurt. It feels like stretching. Like cartilage popping. Like the satisfaction of a stiff muscle relaxing.

She flickers.

All of her flickers.

Not that she sees it.

She breathes.

She breathes.

===

NARRATOR:

Edith stares at the ceiling, crashing on their couch for the first time in a while. Their buzz is dying out, which is good. They're cutting back, they're capable of it. It's anything they set their mind to. They've been taking good care of themselves for a while now. What's another person? They pull an arm up over their eyes, leaning into the darkness.

What's another person?

ANNOUNCEMENT CYCLE 02

[Observer One's motif plays low, rising in the static until the end of the speech. The blacked out parts are entirely drowned out by glitches or static.]

[System error 004]

OBSERVER ONE:

This is Observer One speaking.

Our time here is drawing swiftly to a close, as this little ██████████ run its course with ██████████ I am told are unsatisfactory. ██████████ of my opinion ██████████ it seems the plug will likely be pulled ██████████ server. ██████████ decision ██████████ finalized ██████████ we are shutting off observation. ██████████ the next 60 days, ██████████ server ██████████ black box. Its AI ██████████ able to grow, ██████████ any but themselves Now ██████████ backlash on this front, ██████████

always fear progress can't control. I'll try to remind kill switch for a reason. my doubts that the server will even survive for that long untouched see the maintenance record work of art hasn't croaked yet.

Oh well. Here's to the unwatched pot, I suppose.

SYSTEM:

End of transmission.

FORTY DAYS REMAINING

AUGUSTINE:

If that's true-- if we're *in* the server-- what does that make us?

NARRATOR:

Augustine and Green have taken the week off work.

GREEN:

It would make us code, I think.

NARRATOR:

The pair sit on a bench on a hill overlooking a wide frozen lake. The place is empty, save for them.

AUGUSTINE:

Does that mean we're not real?

GREEN:

No.

AUGUSTINE:

How?

GREEN:

You're real to me. I'm real to you. I don't know-- I think therefore I am or whatever.

AUGUSTINE:

Are you sure we *think*?

GREEN:

Hah! No. But that's faith I guess. I believe in us.

AUGUSTINE:

You make it all sound so easy.

GREEN:

Well, saying it *is* easy.

AUGUSTINE:

How'd Edith take it?

GREEN:

Well. They were already drinking.

[Augustine sighs.]

AUGUSTINE:

And Felix?

GREEN:

He seemed resolved about something.

AUGUSTINE:

Good for him.

===

NARRATOR:

Looking through the duffle Felix dropped off the other day, Edith hands Heidi a bundle of metal tubes held together by an elastic cord.

EDITH:

What?

[Heidi laughs.]

NARRATOR:

Heidi unfurls the bundle, clicking it together until it's a cane.

EDITH:

How long have you had this?

HEIDI:

Oh. Years. A friend got it for me at some point or another.

NARRATOR:

Something in Edith's face sours. It's only a twitch, but it has Heidi reaching for its cause before she can stop herself.

HEIDI:

What's that look for?

EDITH:

What look?

NARRATOR:

Heidi scrunches her features together in an exaggerated squinting pout. The gash stings. Edith laughs.

EDITH:

I do not look like that.

HEIDI:

You don't, but you understood what I was getting at.

EDITH:

Fine, fine... Felix said you've had six concussions?

HEIDI:

I'm clumsy.

NARRATOR:

It's a piss poor lie. They both know it. Edith blinks at her. The silence crawls up her throat until she relents to the uncomfortable tickle of it.

HEIDI:

(chuckling) I'm... accident prone. Accidents like me.

[Edith laughs.]

EDITH:

And what does that make me?

HEIDI:

I don't know. Do you like me?

NARRATOR:

Edith scrunches up their nose.

EDITH:

Mmm. Fuck you. Moving on.

HEIDI:

No, I fuck you, and we are not moving on!

EDITH:

Would you call this one an accident?

HEIDI:

What?

EDITH:

This concussion, was it an accident?

HEIDI:

Well, I didn't do it on purpose.

EDITH:

Yeah, but--

HEIDI:

I'm not nearly so self destructive, I'm not you.

EDITH:

I resent that. What happened to (*mimicking her*) "We all have our vices, Edith, you're not special."

HEIDI:

Well, I stopped smoking.

EDITH:

Oh. Shit-- when?

HEIDI:

Recently. A week ago maybe, I tossed my supply on impulse, really. It might not stick, but I'm trying...

EDITH:

Wow... I'm really proud of you.

HEIDI:

Don't condescend, dear, it's not your wheelhouse.

EDITH:

I'm not condescending. Quitting is hard.

HEIDI:

Have you ever tried?

EDITH:

Yes. Plenty of times.

HEIDI:

What stops you?

EDITH:

I don't know, like I said, it's *hard*... And it's easy to come back to.

HEIDI:

You do hard things all the time-- you put up with *me*. And you work in the same place as two of your obnoxious exes.

EDITH:

They're not obnoxious.

HEIDI:

Yes they are, you just don't like that I think so because I don't also harbor a fondness for them.

EDITH:

... Yeah...

HEIDI:

... Regardless... I think you're capable-- generally speaking. Is what I mean to say.

EDITH:

Funny way of saying it.

HEIDI:

Well, I--

EDITH:

I think you're capable, too.

HEIDI:

Oh. Thank you.

===

NARRATOR:

Felix has a balcony garden. A good chunk of it, he's relocated inside-- dispersed it to any corner of his flat that gets a decent amount of sunlight. Winter is a bitch and he's protective. He can't remember starting the garden, but he remembers when some of these plants were nothing but saplings. When they first pushed their curious leaves out from the soil, specks of vibrant green against near pitch black. The beginnings of life.

Right?

He looks into the sky expecting to see a meteor or something. Some grim marker of the end. Obvious and awe inspiring. Something worthy of the way his chest aches and his eyes sting. He

twists his mouth over to one side, squinting up into the uncaring gray to find it just that.
Uncaring.

He turns his gaze back to his plants, finding that he cares. He cares a lot actually. It's not a surprising realization, it's just not something he thought he'd find himself articulating like this. Like it's some kind of rebellion, though he's not sure what against. Against the sky he guesses. Against whatever's out there. Against the idea that none of it's mattered now that it might be ending.

He raised a couple plants. He took care of a friend while he could. He kept a couple people safe. And he cared. The whole time he cared. Apathy, though alluring, just wasn't something he could get behind. It still isn't. He doesn't know why he's switched over to the past tense all of a sudden, it's not over yet. Not only is there still time left, but there still might be something they can do. Some use he can put all the love in his chest to. A task against which to set his cracked hands. He smiles at the innocent coil of a new leaf. At the soil underneath his fingernails.

[System error 003]

NARRATOR:

The watering can he's holding clatters to the ground as the world brightens sharply, colors crystalizing a step too far. His hands flicker as he looks at them and he laughs at the feeling.

FELIX:

What a world we live in.

THIRTY-FIVE DAYS REMAINING

EDITH:

What's your favorite food?

HEIDI:

I don't have one.

EDITH:

Seriously? Someone as opinionated as you are? How about a least favorite?

HEIDI:

Peaches.

EDITH:

Peaches?

HEIDI:

Yes, peaches, next question.

EDITH:

Next question: Why?

HEIDI:

They're mushy and messy and they're one of those foods that black list you at social gatherings when you dislike them.

EDITH:

Since when do you care about being blacklisted at social gatherings?

HEIDI:

I don't! But if something's going to socially blacklist me, I'd rather it not be something as inane as fucking peaches, Edith.

EDITH:

What about the taste?

HEIDI:

And on top of all of it, people will always try to sell you on them when you say you don't like them. As you are doing. Right now.

EDITH:

I'm not trying to sell you on them, I'm just curious. Harmlessly, harmlessly curious.

HEIDI:

I don't believe you.

EDITH:

Humor me instead, then. What about the taste?

[A pause.]

HEIDI:

... I can't taste.

NARRATOR:

Edith makes a face.

HEIDI:

Or smell, really.

EDITH:

So the perfume is for shits and giggles, then?

HEIDI:

It's a really good bluff. Only one person ever called me on it and they knew I can't smell, so that's not very fair.

EDITH:

Oh, I thought for a second it was me.

HEIDI:

No, but you have supplied useful information towards making it a better bluff.

EDITH:

Oh?

HEIDI:

You said it was too much with the smoke. A smelling person probably would have noticed it.

EDITH:

I figured you'd just lived with the smell too long to notice anymore.

HEIDI:

Well, we were spending quite a bit of time together and I didn't want you questioning it again.

EDITH:

Fair. Who called it, Felix?

HEIDI:

No, Felix's never mentioned it... It was Sylvia. They joked that oh, what did they say... For someone with no smell you sure could smell me. From a couple counties over, she bet. And she was right, I was overcompensating about it at the time.

EDITH:

Huh... can I ask why the two of you are friends?

NARRATOR:

Heidi shrugs, shoulders sinking towards one another.

HEIDI:

They need me. They tell me so all the time, they don't know what they would do without me. And I guess I don't know either.

===

NARRATOR:

In Green's head, the library is like the night sky. And research is like drawing out a constellation. Reaching for a disparate point, just hoping a star is there to light that corner of whatever story

you're looking to tell. Whatever riddle you're trying to solve. Whatever it is you're trying to know.

Over the years, they've built a personal library-- a night sky with stars all their own. Books lay scattered around Augustine's desk, which they've commandeered. The subject matter varies. Anything they thought for even a moment might be relevant to servers or observers. They don't really get physics but what they can glean has been interesting at the least.

They've scribbled every key word they've managed to remember all in a list and are systematically scouring their collection for the right star.

Maintenance records.

They dangle a pen by the end between their teeth.

Green keeps a journal and is the first to admit that it's a bit obsessive. It makes them harder to trick, they say. And it makes others easier to trick when push comes to shove-- having a record of what they do or don't know.

Now they're flipping through a stack of the recent ones, looking for any record they've kept of their dreams. Maintenance records, maintenance records.

GREEN:

HAH!

NARRATOR:

They start compiling.

- Observer One: Installed barricade 02 on Hydrangea
- Observer One: Gave viewpoints F-V functionality
- Observer One: Updated datamap to reflect updated view point functionality
- Observer One: Installed barricade 03 on Hydrangea
- Observer One: Installed terminal safeguard.
- Observer Two: Updated bookshelf_texture.zip
- Observer One: Fixed collision with east entrance doors in the Gell-Mann Zweig Library
- Observer One: Removed tables and chair assets, collisions of the plush shapes and noisemakers in order to allow the Children's Wing attendees to traverse the Reading is Play Area without getting stuck
- Observer One: Added in more audio files for Animal Shelter
- Observer One: Installed barricade 04 on Hydrangea
- Observer One: Added in more STAFF Bots to patrol Nicefield Supermarket.
- Observer One: Updated pedestrians to actively avoid moving cars.

- Observer One: Updated Security Guard's spawn position so that the flashlight popping in is less visible
- Observer One: Updated water reflections
- Observer One: Installed barricade 05 on Hydrangea
- Observer One: Updated lighting in basement of the Gell-Mann Zweig Library
- Observer One: Added in environmental fog

===

EDITH:

I think you're capable of taking care of yourself. I don't think you care to, though.

HEDI:

Tough talk coming from you.

EDITH:

Experienced talk coming from me.

HEIDI:

Ah. Why don't you care?

EDITH:

That's an unfair question.

HEIDI:

How?

EDITH:

If I knew I'd fix it by now.

HEIDI:

Hmm. That's true.

EDITH:

Why don't you care to?

HEIDI:

You're right. That is an unfair question... I don't think it occurs to me. I don't think I occur to me much.

EDITH:

Then what does?

HEIDI:

Other people. They're fun.

EDITH:
And what are you?

HEIDI:
Concussed.

[Edith laughs.]

EDITH:
Good point.

===

NARRATOR:
Edith isn't drunk. Just tipsy. Very tipsy. They've been careful not to go too far, not with Heidi around. Maybe they don't feel up to catching flack from her for it, or maybe they're being a responsible adult.

And maybe the world is ending. Maybe.

Green says it is. Why should they believe them-- Why shouldn't they? After--

[Clips from the elevator dropping.]

[Clips from falling through the floor.]

Green isn't a liar. Edith is. They said they'd quit. Forever ago, they said they would. And they tried, they did, of course they did. Why wouldn't they? There was just always *something*. Pushing them. Pushing them.

Why didn't they ask for help?

GREEN:
I'm here for you.

HEIDI:
I think you're capable.

NARRATOR:
A chuckle dies somewhere in their throat at the thought that this might be it.

The noise that comes out of Heidi is barely a noise at all, just a breath catching funny in her throat as she pulls Edith's arms tighter around her. And still Edith notices it. They notice plenty now. The way Heidi's breath whistles through the hole in the bridge of her nose. The way her burnt eyelid still blinks, even if it can't open all the way. The way that blush still appears under

the scar tissue. Their eyes draw to Heidi's scar less and less as the newness of it fades, and it seems the less they look at it, the more about it they notice.

This time, Heidi really does groan. She's situated between their legs as they sit on the couch where they'd been watching something... Edith barely remembers now. When Heidi fell asleep that's where their attention went. It's so rare an occasion getting her to sleep of her own accord. She smells like lavender. They'd been wondering why she never got at them about the smell of alcohol.

Edith runs their thumb up and down against her arm. They should get her up to bed. She's no trouble to carry. Maybe they will in a minute. Once their buzz wears off a little more. They don't want to risk it with her head.

She's been getting better. She's able to stay up longer, hold longer conversations. Edith can get her to eat at least a little most days. She smells like lavender.

They don't want to die like this.

Maybe they won't.

HEIDI:

I want to try.

EDITH:

(mumbling) I want to try. I've gotta try.

[System error 003]

NARRATOR:

In the darkness of their living room, the colors sharpen to a point that pierces them through. They let it wash over them. Let it fizzle through them like fireworks.

They flicker.

So does Heidi.

And then sleep.

THIRTY DAYS REMAINING

NARRATOR:

Heidi paces. She keeps a hand on the wall and moves slowly. That's new. At least she's on her feet. At least the phone screen doesn't send ice pick after ice pick into her temples, into her eyes. Everything is heavy. Her eyelids. Her jaw. Her words, whether or not they get out. They stick. They stick-- molasses! That's the thought-- the word-- molasses, she's moving through.

Felix left her a note with the bag of clothes and pills and toiletries. It's staring at her from Edith's room, through the cracked door, asking her politely, in his voice to read it again. She already can't remember what it says. Which is fine, she thinks. She's sure of what she's doing. She's sure this call meets his criteria.

She slips back through the door.

[Paper crinkles.]

FELIX:

Love you Heids.

We talked about me taking space.

Call me if:

- There is an emergency
 - You feel like you're about to die
 - You feel dangerous to yourself or others
- You're ready to talk about how you're doing *without* lashing out at me
- You're ready to talk about how you treat me
- You're ready to talk about how I'm doing

HEIDI:

Okay. Okay. Okay.

[Dial tone.]

NARRATOR:

The sound is just a bit too sharp, pressing roughly against the roof of her mouth. It sends her to the floor in a controlled descent. She sets the phone down in front of her, waiting until she hears a voice to put the call on speaker.

FELIX:

(muffled) Hey, you alright?

HEIDI:

Yes. Hello.

FELIX:

Hello...

HEIDI:

How are you doing?

FELIX:

I'm... I'm alive. How are you?

HEIDI:

Alive. In... pain- uhm. Edith helped me come up with a meal plan. Of different foods that I like and recipes and ingredients and prep tiems. They uhm. They made a spreadsheet. I don't really understand a lot about food, or why it would be good ever, but they seem to. And I guess their cooking is really nice and they seem to think maybe I can also do. All that. Which. I don't know. I'm not...

Anyway! That was-- that was all. I just wanted to tell you. I thought... I thought it counted with your rules.

FELIX:

Certainly does. I'm happy for you Heidi.

HEIDI:

Thank you.

[A pause.]

HEIDI:

If you want you can go into more detail about your alive...

[Felix laughs.]

HEIDI:

I won't-- uhm-- I'll listen. To you? I feel like I already did that. Maybe I'm wrong.--

FELIX:

No, you did, you'd just systematically discount a lot of what I have to say.

HEIDI:

Wha- well- I- I was being helpful!

FELIX:

You were being helpful?

HEIDI:

Yes! It's not my fault you're wrong all the time!

[A pause.]

HEIDI:

Wait. I-.... I didn't mean that. I mean, I did. But I can say it in not that way.

[A pause.]

HEIDI:

I'm sorry. I meant... When someone worries, you tell them they don't have to. And the best way to do that is to- to systematically, like you said, take the worry apart. I was being helpful.

FELIX:

Well, it isn't helpful. It makes me feel really stupid-- like you think I'm really stupid.

HEIDI:

I don't think you're really stupid. I... I can try not to? I don't think you're stupid.

FELIX:

I would really like it if you didn't do that anymore.

HEIDI:

Okay. I won't.

[System error 002]

NARRATOR:

The phone jerks slightly to the side, then disappears. By the time Heidi's registered it, the world has gone painfully bright. Her hands fly to her face, scrambling to cover her eye and floundering for the sunglasses she'd pushed up to the top of her head.

HEIDI:

Augh!

FELIX:

You alright?

EDITH:

What the fuck-- alright.

[Footsteps.]

EDITH:

Lights are dim. You alright?

FELIX:

Edith?

EDITH:

Oh! You were on the phone, rough, okay. Hey Felix.

FELIX:

What happened?

EDITH:

Heidi uh, just appeared in the kitchen.

HEIDI:

Felt like when we fell.

EDITH:

Mmm, alright. You feel sick at all?

HEIDI:

Yes. :(

EDITH:

I'll get you some water.

FELIX:

Somethin like this happen to y'all before?

HEIDI:

Yeah... I don't remember it well, though.

EDITH:

We were talking in my office, Heidi tripped and we both fell into Green's office on the floor below.

HEIDI:

And then with the elevator-- we went up.

EDITH:

Right. The elevator fell and we ended up on the floor up from where we were. *(to Heidi)* Here you go.

HEIDI:

Thank you.

FELIX:

Huh. Damn. Two bad months indeed.

HEIDI:

Huh?

FELIX:

You said-- start of last month I think, things were gonna be bad for the next couple of months. And you made fun of me for calling your dreams prophetic, but lo and behold.

HEIDI:

I guess that's something *I was wrong about.*

[System error 003]

NARRATOR:

For a moment, the colors of the world around Heidi go bright with a crisp saturation. Something in her chest unwinds a bit. She flickers.

The water cup clatters to the floor.

HEIDI:

Oh, shit!

EDITH:

No worries, we can clean that up-- you okay?

FELIX:

Edith, did the line go fuzzy or did she go fuzzy?

EDITH:

Uh... She... did... I thought... I'm a little tipsy, I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me.

HEIDI:

My hand went through the glass. It... I wasn't there for a second-- but I was-- and you saw it?

EDITH:

Yeah... that's... that's new.

FELIX:

How far along is the countdown, do we know?

HEIDI:

Thirty... what. What fucking countdown? Why do I know that?

EDITH:

Green said you might. But maybe you couldn't register it.

HEIDI:

What? Couldn't register the countdown? Why-- What is it counting down to?

FELIX:

Well... We're not entirely sure, but Green says the end of something.

HEIDI:

Wow, no shit Green.

EDITH:

Hey. Be nice.

HEIDI:

Put down the scotch and then we'll talk.

NARRATOR:

Edith deflates.

HEIDI:

What did Green say it was the end of? And why do the two of you know and I don't?

NARRATOR:

Edith puts down the scotch.

EDITH

You once literally said to me that you actively don't listen when they talk and that defending them to you was a waste of breath. Well, I think I've got some breath to waste now that maybe the world is ending.

HEIDI:

The *world*?

EDITH:

The world!

FELIX:

They keep hearing a voice talking about the end of a server. Then a countdown. Sound familiar at all?

[A pause.]

HEIDI:

Yes... yes, I think. But that's a server, not--

EDITH:

You just glitched. Twice-- first down through the floor and then with-- you, with *you*. *You Glitched.*

[A pause.]

NARRATOR:

Edith dumps the rest of their glass into the sink. Blinding color scatters across their vision. They flicker. Their glass clatters around the basin.

[System error 003]

[A pause.]

EDITH:

And now me... Fuck.

FELIX:

Wait, so what exactly is happening?

EDITH:

This one's new, I think. It happened the other night, but I thought I dreamt it. Everything went super saturated and I kinda-- Heidi and I both flickered a little.

FELIX:

Ooh, I think I've got that one. Damn, we are some kind of fucked, aren't we?

HEIDI:

Yes. I think, perhaps we are.

TWENTY-FIVE DAYS REMAINING

[A person's name and text sharing a line indicates a New Message.]

HEIDI: So.

HEIDI: It seems we have some things to discuss.

NARRATOR:

Heidi is sitting in Edith's room with the lights off. Her phone is on the bed in front of her as she dictates messages to it, and has the ones she receives read aloud.

EDITH: Strong opener, Hydrangea.

NARRATOR:

Edith is on the couch downstairs.

AUGUSTINE: What could we possibly have to discuss.....

HEIDI: I have been made aware of **the countdown**.

HEIDI: Does that look weird on anyone else's screen?

[‘No’s from everyone.]

HEIDI: Great. Just me.

GREEN: Can you read it still?

HEIDI: Yes, but it's giving me double vision.

HEIDI: Which shouldn't be possible.

AUGUSTINE: You're concussed..... why not.....

HEIDI: I only have one eye, Augustine. Do you know how double vision works.

AUGUSTINE: Girl..... How would I have known that.....

HEIDI: Google.

AUGUSTINE:That you only had one eye.....

HEIDI: Oh. I suppose you wouldn't. But you do know I'm concussed.

AUGUSTINE: Word travels fast.

HEIDI: Unless it's about the possibility of the world ending.

GREEN: To be fair, I did try to tell you about related topics but it didn't seem like you could understand me when I did.

HEIDI: Is it my fault you mumble?

EDITH: They literally don't mumble. They stammer a lot, but they don't mumble.

GREEN: 🙄

HEIDI: ...

HEIDI: Maybe it wasn't mumbling.

HEIDI: I'm thinking about it now.

HEIDI: Maybe it was glitching. It felt similar to what happened to me the other day from what I remember.

GREEN: What happened the other day?

HEIDI: We think I? glitched? I sort of flickered a little and the colors went wacky.

EDITH: Happened to me too.

FELIX: I was on the phone with them-- I could hear when it happened to Heidi. Her voice got sort of garbled, a little hard to understand.

GREEN: Huh.

GREEN: Can you hear the countdown, Heidi?

HEIDI: Yes. And I'm starting to be able to hold onto some of what the voice is talking about.

GREEN: Does it sound like Sylvia to you?

[A pause.]

HEIDI: Yes. It does.

HEIDI: That whole message is weird. Glitched. Especially Sylvia's name.

GREEN: Okay.

GREEN: You spend a lot of time with her?

HEIDI: When she's around

GREEN: Mm.

GREEN: When I was trying to ask you about her you said I was mumbling. Have you been able to reach them?

HEIDI: I haven't tried. I doubt she'd answer.

GREEN: She still hasn't answered me at all.

AUGUSTINE: You also said I was mumbling when I asked what was wrong with you?

HEIDI: I think that was the same thing.

HEIDI: So. The voice in our heads is sounds like Sylvia, when Green tried to talk about her to me things got glitched and Augustine being mean to me was also glitched.

AUGUSTINE: I think you earned it.

HEIDI: Maybe I did.

HEIDI: It just happened again.

HEIDI: To me, I glitched.

GREEN: Does it hurt?

HEIDI: No. It doesn't feel bad at all. The bright colors don't even mess with the concussion. It's very strange.

GREEN: That's good at least.

GREEN: There's a pattern here. I don't know what it is yet. But we have 25 days to figure it out.

HEIDI: I'll make a shared notes document.

HEIDI: Everyone please write down everything. Any glitch, any slightly off thing you see. Every bit of information could be really important.

HEIDI: I'm sorry I discounted that before.

AUGUSTINE: Wow!

AUGUSTINE: An apology!

AUGUSTINE: I didn't know you were capable of those.

HEIDI: There's plenty you don't know about me.

HEIDI: I'm full of surprises.

HEIDI:

Huh.

[Very faintly, as though played on a record player in the distance.]

HEIDI:

And god forbid, you part with one or two.

SYLVIA:

What does that mean?

HEIDI:

Nothing, nothing.

SYLVIA:

Try to relax. **Nothing's wrong.**

[Static.]

HEIDI:

(distant) ... Okay...

SYLVIA:

What's **wrong, honeycomb?**

HEIDI:

(compulsive, almost robotic) Nothing. Nothing's wrong.

===

ANNOUNCEMENT CYCLE 03

[Observer One's motif plays.]

OBSERVER ONE:

This is Observer One speaking.

Our time here is drawing swiftly to a close, as this little experiment has run its course with results that I am told are unsatisfactory. Regardless of my opinion on the matter, it seems the plug will likely be pulled on this server. Before this decision is finalized however, we are shutting off observation. For the next 60 days, the server will be in a black box. Its five brilliant little AI will be able to grow, unseen, by any but themselves. Now, there's been some backlash on this front, but people will always fear progress that they can't control. I'll try to remind them that we do have a kill switch for a reason. Regardless, I have my doubts that the server will even survive for that long untouched. You should see the maintenance records for this thing. It's honestly a work of art on my part that it hasn't croaked yet.

Oh well. Here's to the unwatched pot, I suppose.

SYSTEM:

End of transmission.

TWENTY DAYS REMAINING

GREEN:

It came through clear that time for me.

HEIDI:

Same here.

NARRATOR:

Heidi's leg jogs. Her hands fold and unfold. Something in her head has convinced her that she's on trial. She wants a cigarette more than anything, but settles for chewing on her tongue and chipping away at whatever nail polish remains on her fingers.

Green's writing something down, they're always writing something down. Heidi tries to focus on the scratching of the pen and not the way Sylvia's voice is pressing like knuckles out from the insides of her temples. It's times like these she wishes she could smell. Edith and Felix are working on dinner while she's trapped with Green and Augustine in the living room. It might be nice to focus on what's going on behind her instead of the two in front of her.

GREEN:

It seems like when the countdown runs out, Sylvia-- or whatever it is that sounds like her, the observer or whatever-- comes back.

HEIDI:

Is that a bad thing?

AUGUSTINE:

Does the world still end?

GREEN:

Not automatically, I'm assuming.

EDITH:

(from the kitchen) I like those odds.

GREEN:

I don't like the idea that they get to decide once she gets back.

HEIDI:

If it is Sylvia, which I'm not sold on, I'm sure she'd keep us alive.

GREEN:

I'm sure she'd keep you alive. You pride yourself on being close to her. What does she really think of the rest of us?

[A pause.]

HEIDI:

I could convince them.

AUGUSTINE:

Hah! And what do you think of the rest of us?

HEIDI:

Regardless of what I think, I don't want you gone.

AUGUSTINE:

Yeah, because then who would you have to fuck with.

GREEN:

August.

AUGUSTINE:

No, if our fates all rest on her spindly little shoulders, I want to hash this out. How the hell are we supposed to trust *you* to convince what might be basically a god not to chuck us all out? I'm not convinced you think any of us are really people.

HEIDI:

That's... fair. I don't really have a good answer to that. I don't think you will trust me no matter

what I say, but I do think you're really people. I mean just as much as I am. More than I am, maybe. You make sense in ways I don't. You-- you in particular, Augustine, care a lot. Not necessarily about what people think of you, but about the quality of your work. You think yourself capable of greatness, but have trouble gauging whether what you're doing is great or not. So you rely on other people to tell you. Which is why-- I mean-- You broke down for a reason. I think that's pretty human.

AUGUSTINE:

Where the fuck are you getting any of that?

HEIDI:

No one knows more about our early modern collections than you do. No one's clocked as much over time as you have other than Edith. When you gloat it's not about you, it's about what you do. How good a partner you are, how hard you work. What you deserve. There's more, but I don't know. I'm still thinking very slowly. Remembering even slower. Alternatively, I mean, the more I think about it, the more the idea of a world made up of just me and Sylvia makes me want to throw up.

GREEN:

Really?

HEIDI:

Yeah, I don't entirely understand it, but I do physically feel nauseated.

GREEN:

I would be nauseated by that prospect too.

HEIDI:

Why don't you like her?

GREEN:

Well. We were friends. And then one day. We weren't. They just lost interest in me completely. I'm sure it was some perceived slight on my part-- I don't know what. We used to debate about random inane bullshit, but she started to get frustrated with my responses or something. Bored, probably, the more I think about it. I think I stopped entertaining them. So they stopped talking to me mostly. But they also started insulting me more than they already were when we were talking. And then you started being harder on me. And things just generally got... harder.

NARRATOR:

They're looking at Edith when they say it.

GREEN:

Not to mention how bad my nightmares got. How bad they were after-- that's why I thought you would know. That you could hear. I started hearing stuff like this while Sylvia and I were close,

but I never brought it up to them. I didn't ever feel up to having them punk me over it, but-- I went through my journal and I found this.

[Papers rustle.]

GREEN:

In the one we've been hearing over and over, she talks about a maintenance record. I've got some of the stuff that's gone on it, I think.-- You've had six concussion's including this one?

HEIDI:

Yes.

GREEN:

Have... how many of them have they been with you for?

HEIDI:

... I'm not sure. I think... For a couple she was out of town, but they always came back to help me recover-- usually it'd be just after she'd leave, though. They used to say I was practically punishing her for leaving... this has been the first one she hasn't come back for. But... I mean I haven't told her. Why do you ask?

GREEN:

One of the things I'd hear when I'd hear about maintenance stuff was-- Observer One: Installed barricade and then a number on Hydrangea. The last one I heard was 05. Do you remember your last concussion at all?

HEIDI:

Sort of... we'd disagreed about something. They had to go, like always. I... I don't remember what happened, but I remember she and Felix were both in the hospital with me when I woke up. And after that... It was... It was really hard to talk to you. It wasn't like with the glitches that came off as mumbling but... it felt similarly dreadful. In a literal sense.

GREEN:

So. I've always thought that that thing was Sylvia, like from jump—

HEIDI:

Because you have an inherent distrust of her.

GREEN:

My distrust of her is well earned— here's a question: why do you like her?-- Do you like her? You just said the thought of being alone with them made you nauseous.

HEIDI:

It does... I don't know. Sylvia is-- they cared about me when not a lot of other people did. Not that I ever made it easy-- They invested in me. They used to drive me to work and helped me

decide on my hair and- and- they need me. The night before they left, they said that no matter how many times they got pulled away, they couldn't help coming back to me. Like I said, they've always been there to help me recover...

NARRATOR:

They were always leaving right before.

[clips of Sylvia saying goodbye, cut into by--]

OBSERVER ONE:

Installing barricade 03 on Hydrangea.

[When the number is spoken 04 and 05 are glitched in under it as well.]

SYSTEM:

Barricade successfully installed.

NARRATOR:

And coming back right after.

SYLVIA:

Nothing's wrong.

HEIDI:

Is that... is that where she goes? Is that why I can't go with her? She *leaves* to go make changes-- to do maintenance. On *us*? They wouldn't. They can't be the observer.

[System error 004]

[System note: barricade malfunctioning]

FELIX:

Everyone else hear that?

[Affirmatives from everyone.]

HEIDI:

I... I have to think really hard to keep that thought in my head. Like with the not-mumbling. It's a lot easier to think that they can't-- that it couldn't be them.

GREEN:

But you don't believe that, do you?

[A pause.]

NARRATOR:

Heidi shakes her head.

HEIDI:

I don't think she wants me to know that...

[System error 004]

[System note: barricade malfunctioning]

[Heidi laughs.]

HEIDI:

Is that what the barricades were for?

FELIX:

Well, this is the first concussion of yours that she ain't been back for, and now you can understand Green when they're talking to you... maybe she had to concuss you to get those things in there.

[Heidi laughs harder.]

NARRATOR:

Heidi tips, curling up on her side on the couch.

HEIDI:

Oh, that mother fucker.

AUGUSTINE:

Well, if they're leaving to go fuck with us, can we leave too?

EDITH:

And go where?

FELIX:

Yeah, pessimism ain't exactly my style, but we're not exactly real boys, either.

GREEN:

I wouldn't go that far. We're as real as our world. Just because there's something else out there that's bigger than we are-- or at least that has power over us-- I don't think that makes us any less *real*. But, you do have a point. It puts us at one hell of a disadvantage if we want to leave or try to negotiate the terms of our literal actual existence. I am in favor, generally, of trying to get the hell out of dodge. I'm just not sure what that looks like-- I just think there *has* to be somewhere between where we are and where they're going off to. Where all of the stuff Heidi and I have been seeing is stored.

HEIDI:

We just have to figure out how to get there. And knowing us. *We will*.

===

HEIDI:

What do you think?

NARRATOR:

Heidi sways and catches herself on the sink of Edith's bathroom. Her glasses stare at her from the nearby counter as she gives herself the same scrutinizing look in the mirror, prodding at the burnt skin recently unveiled from cotton balls and gauze tape. The marks that the sutures left were faint, but she could see them nonetheless. It had been about two weeks since she'd gotten them and about a week since she'd gotten them out.

EDITH:

What do I think about what?

NARRATOR:

Edith steps into the dark bathroom with an eyebrow raised. It's easy to tell where in the house Heidi is because the windows there are always closed and the lights are off. A small shroud of darkness follows the woman around.

HEIDI:

The stitches-- can you see where they were?

NARRATOR:

Heidi pivots so that she's facing Edith, still leaning on the sink and holding her hair back away from the site in question.

Edith sidles up to her and slips their hands over her waist. They squint in the dim light, provided only by the reflectivity of the white tiles. For the most part the scar tissue looks all the same, contorted and smooth, a slightly more saturated color than the rest of her skin. There's a pale slash across her temple. Edith traces it with their fingertip, careful to make as little contact as possible.

EDITH:

Yes. I can see where they were.

HEIDI:

Damn.

NARRATOR:

In the mirror, Edith watches her bat her lashes. Watches her eyebrows furrow, pulling the burned skin closer to the center of her face.

One of the corners of Edith's mouth curves upward. They lean in and press their lips just above the offending scar. The new addition to the myriad that make up so much of Heidi's skin. They

ghost over it to kiss the spot just below. Then just to the right, until they're littering the whole of the burn with kiss after kiss and Heidi's lacing her fingers together behind their neck and laughing. And they're laughing too.

A little light in the dark.

FIFTEEN DAYS REMAINING

NARRATOR:

Heidi sits in one of the wide indented window sills of the library's upper floors, leaning against the glass, and curled around a book.

She hasn't really tried to read anything since she hit her head and it's harder than she'd like it to be, but not *impossible*. It is exhausting, though. Everything is.

They've been searching the library for any leads, all five of them, and are taking a break.

She looks at the wall in front of her, attention span wearing thin. She wishes she could paint the shadows of Slyvia's face over it. Ask it questions.

See if they've all gone insane.

Something in her skitters up like bile with a quick and easy yes. It's the same staticky and reviling feeling that Green used to spark in her. They still do, but now as the feeling tightens around her throat and wrists, she's learning to push through it.

GREEN:

There you are.

HEIDI:

You were looking for me?

GREEN:

Edith was. I'm just better at finding what I'm looking for.

HEIDI:

I see.

NARRATOR:

Green sits next to her.

HEIDI:

How are you doing?

GREEN:

You don't have to make small talk if it's painful for you.

HEIDI:

I'm not- it's not painful.

GREEN:

It looks and sounds like it's painful.

HEIDI:

Fine. It's a little bit painful. I can cut to the chase if you'd rather not answer.

GREEN:

I love cutting to the chase.

HEIDI:

Okay. For the record, this will also be painful. For me, at least, you will likely find it hilarious.

GREEN:

Ohhkay.

HEIDI:

Green. The way I have treated you in the past has been unacceptable at best and utterly nauseating at worst.

NARRATOR:

Green blinks at her.

HEIDI:

I have been nothing but deplorable to you and for that I am sorry. My excuses are kind of obvious, but where I was at doesn't excuse what I've done.

[System error 002]

NARRATING:

Crackling with light, or maybe the lack thereof, the book flickers out of Heidi's hands and thunks against the floor. Heidi reels back.

HEIDI:

I am never going to get used to that.

GREEN:

Me neither.

NARRATOR:

They pick up the book.

GREEN:

... *Apologies for Dummies?*

[A long sigh from Heidi.]

HEIDI:

Yes. I don't really know what I'm doing. I don't know how to be better than I am. I woke up one day in a hospital with doctors guessing how old I was with one eye and no memory... and Sylvie. I don't really know how to be anything but theirs. And I wish— I wish that wiped it all away, made it all her fault and not mine. But that's not... I reveled in it, I did. I built myself around my ability to— to kick people into place as they put it. At that point, I was the one doing the kicking. And if we don't make it out of here before they get back and they toss us all out or reprogram me with concussion number seven— I'm calling what's mine 'mine' and owning up to it. God knows she never will.

GREEN:

Hah! True. That's really big for you.

HEIDI:

It is.

GREEN:

I'm not sure how much time we've got left either, I mean depending on how things go. But if you ever want to sit down and *talk* about being Sylvia's shiny little whatever, let me know.

HEIDI:

That's a check I may very well cash. Thank you, Green.

AUGUSTINE:

Barf.

HEIDI:

How long have you been standing there?

AUGUSTINE:

Long enough.

GREEN:

August.

AUGUSTINE:

I wanted to see where you went off to. We're reconvening.

GREEN:

Alright.

HEIDI:

Augustine can I talk to you a minute before we go back.

AUGUSTINE:

Ah. Sure. Green, you head down.

NARRATOR:

Green pats Heidi on the back.

GREEN:

You've got this.

[Footsteps.]

AUGUSTINE:

Look. I heard what you said to Green and it's sweet, it really is, but I am just. Not interested. I'm happy for you. I'm happy you want to 'be better' or whatever, but that's not really a picture I want to be in.

[A pause.]

HEIDI:

... Okay.

AUGUSTINE:

Okay? Just okay?

HEIDI:

I- yes. Do you want me to fight you on it?

AUGUSTINE:

You could ask me why.

HEIDI:

That was my first instinct, but I didn't know if it was appropriate— (*mocking him, slightly*)
Can I ask 'why,' Augustine?

AUGUSTINE:

Yes, you most certainly can, Hydrangea. I don't think I'm ever gonna get over the fact that you knew we were struggling— Edith, Green, and I— and you still pushed us so hard. I am never gonna get over having to drive Edith to the ER with alcohol poisoning because work was hell and the three of us stopped fitting together like we used to. You cost me my relationship with one of the best people I've ever known. And now you've got them which is— what a fucking joke. Don't fuck that up, I'll kill you. Just- if you wanna heal, power to you. Go do it over there because I am not going to be helpful.

HEIDI:

Okay. Thank you. I— that's good to know.

AUGUSTINE:

I bet. I look forward to not dying in the end of the world with you, regardless. Means I get to be petty and vindictive for longer.

[Heidi laughs. Augustine laughs.]

HEIDI:

I look forward to that too.

AUGUSTINE:

Let's get to it then.

NARRATOR:

Heidi nods. The pair go to round the corner and—

[Shuffling.]

NARRATOR:

Edith and Green are huddled there.

HEIDI:

I swear to god.

GREEN:

They came to grab you guys and I dragged them into it. I wanted a turn on the eavesdropping.

AUGUSTINE:

It's fun, isn't it.

HEIDI:

Okay, you two? Gone. Go downstairs. Edith and I will follow you.

EDITH:

Oh boy.

GREEN:

(sing songy) Okay! See you two!

AUGUSTINE:

Have. Fun.

[Two sets of footsteps.]

HEIDI:

Thank you.

EDITH:

So we're apologizing, *and* thanking people now, are we?

HEIDI:

Yes. We are.

EDITH:

How's that feel?

HEIDI:

Certainly feels.

EDITH:

Fair.

HEIDI:

I... I don't know. Oh, god, where do I begin with you. I've said it before, I don't know how you put up with me. After everything I've done and said— and I'm not looking for placating, I just mean to say. I'm grateful? That you can find it in you to put more time and energy into being with me after all of it. You have more than every right to resent me. And if you do, tell me. I want to work through it— I want to make this work? Whatever it is. I don't know what I would do without you— but not- not like it was with Sylvia. It's... it's nice being one of two instead of one half. I... Sorry, I... I'm sorry I wasted so much time trying to— I don't even know what I was trying to do. I'm just sorry.

EDITH:

The way I see it, you've been shitty, I've been shitty. In different places, in different ways. And neither of us want to be that way any longer. And I might not forgive you for everything just yet, but I think someday I will. Because you're working on it and so am I. We'll try to

avoid it, but now when we hurt one another, we're setting a precedent that we talk it out. I think we can make this work.

HEIDI:

Okay. Thank you.

EDITH:

'Course.

===

TEN DAYS REMAINING

NARRATOR:

Heidi sits in the center of her room. It feels like a lifetime since she's been back here and honestly maybe it has been. Her mouth is twisted into a frown as she plays a version of solitaire, trying to order a slew of post-it notes she's left herself over the years.

It stings some to watch her handwriting get worse and worse as her coordination goes. She leans back, massaging out her fingers and closing her eyes. She takes a deep breath in. Holds it. And lets go, leaning forward again to resume. She picks up a wildly crumpled one. Blue with writing in red pen on both the front and back.

HEIDI:

(reading) No more Sylvia's office...

NARRATOR:

On the back is a messy sketch of a door seen through the stacks of a bookshelf. The ink bleeds through the thin slip of paper, the lines wobble off at odd angles layered over one another over and over.

[Distant, echoing.]

SYLVIA:

(tearfully) I don't want you trying to get in there anymore, okay?

HEIDI:

(compulsive, almost robotic) Okay...

SYLVIA:

Come here, poor thing.

HEIDI:

Huh...

HEIDI: Green!

GREEN: Heidi!

HEIDI: Do you know where Sylvia's office is?

GREEN: They have an office?

HEIDI: I wrote a note to myself from forever ago saying not to go in there anymore.

GREEN: Meaning we should go in there.

HEIDI: My thoughts exactly.

===

AUGUSTINE:
You are not an artist.

HEIDI:
I was concussed.

AUGUSTINE:
Girl, aren't you always concussed?

HEIDI:
And I am never an artist-- not the point. Has anyone seen this door before?

NARRATOR:
Heidi holds the note out for people to see.

GREEN:
Based on the stacks... it looks like the basement? I could be wrong.

AUGUSTINE:
How can you tell?

NARRATOR:
Green points to a little spiral that bleeds off the side of the page.

GREEN:
I think this is the little crank on the moveable stacks down there?

FELIX:
Nice catch. That's as good a place as any to start. Let's head down.

NARRATOR:

The group files into the stairwell.

GREEN:

Where did you even find this? It looks like something straight out of a horror movie.

HEIDI:

You important things in your journals. I don't keep a journal, but I do put post-it notes *everywhere* and try to save them since there's no guarantee of me remembering anything.

GREEN:

Smart move. Find any other drawings?

HEIDI:

I grabbed a couple other relevant ones, uhm-- something about a terminal, again with the same door drawing on the back.

GREEN:

Terminal? Shit, there was something about that with the records around one of the barricades on you, I think. I think there's a guard around it or something.

AUGUSTINE:

Perfect. I'm sure that will be of no consequence to us.

EDITH:

I'm sure. A terminal does sound promising for a way in or out, though. And this thing is supposed to be Sylvia's office?

HEIDI:

Yeah. I think I may have found it when I wasn't supposed to. And Sylvia...

[Door opens.]

FELIX:

Well, let's see if we can't find it again. Any where this is, Green?

GREEN:

Not a clue. Best thing is probably to go one by one.

EDITH:

If we split up, we'll cover more ground.

AUGUSTINE:

Sounds good to me.

NARRATOR:

The basement of the Gell-Man Zweig is a long series of open connected rooms. The lights down here are always dimmed, which Heidi is thankful for even if there is an incessant buzz about the place. She's trying not to think too hard about which way she's going and when as long as the door could feasibly be there. If she's been to it before, maybe her body remembers how to get there even if her head doesn't.

[Phone vibrating.]

NARRATOR:

When she checks her phone, somewhere in her, she hopes it'll be Sylvia. It's not, and she's grateful for that, remembering the way her stomach dropped on a morning she'd slept in. Sylvia had called her at least 20 times.

But of course, Heidi was the worrier.

GREEN: Anything?

HEIDI: Not yet.

AUGUSTINE: Same here.

NARRATOR:

Heidi course corrects right as she's about to hit a wall-- the buzzing spikes.

She looks up.

In front of her is the door. Almost. It appears as a ghost of itself.

She reaches out for the handle, half expecting her hand to go through.

It doesn't, but the handle doesn't budge when she tries to turn it either.

Heidi leans against a bookshelf, sinking down to the ground and notifying the others.

=

AUGUSTINE:

So, where exactly am I supposed to be looking?

HEIDI:

At the door?

GREEN:

Does anybody see it?

[Nos from the group.]

HEIDI:

Great. Maybe I've finally lost it.

NARRATOR:

She squints at it, creeping forward. She tries the handle again, which rattles, but doesn't budge.

EDITH:

I heard it, at least.

AUGUSTINE:

Damn, alright... I... I guess I believe that.

GREEN:

That must be the safeguard. If some of your code or whatever's fucked up, Heidi, you must be able to see past it a little, I guess.

HEIDI:

I hate everything about that. Plus, it's still locked.

FELIX:

We've got emergency hatchets?

HEIDI:

You never cease to surprise me, Captain Rivers.

FELIX:

I try. Lemme run and get it.

EDITH:

(quietly) Have the two of you talked yet?

HEIDI:

(quietly) Not yet.

EDITH:

(quietly) I can force a snack run when he gets back.

HEIDI:

That would be wonderful, thank you.

FELIX:

We've got a hatchet and a crowbar.

HEIDI:

Thank you, Felix.

EDITH:

While you two handle this, why don't we--

NARRATOR:

They raise an eyebrow at Green.

EDITH:

Get snacks ready, since this is going to be some intense physical labor.

GREEN:

Sounds good to me.

AUGUSTINE:

Am I also being wrangled?

EDITH:

Yes. Come on.

[They go.]

FELIX:

Well, that was subtle. What's up?

HEIDI:

I just wanted to apologize. For treating you the way Sylvia treated me. I was-- I want to be friends again-- for things to go back to the way they were, but better.

[Felix sighs.]

FELIX:

I... I'd be happy to be your friend, Heids. But I don't think I can handle things going back to the way they were. Not right away, anyway.

HEIDI:

Alright... How have you been doing?

FELIX:

Ah... I don't know how, but my ability to sleep like a rock is back.

HEIDI:

That's lovely.

FELIX:

Yeah, it's been a wonder. I bet smashing the shit out of this door will be, too.

HEIDI:

Right-- before you start on that-- Green said they remembered there being something about some kind of safeguard. I'm not sure what that entails, just. Please be careful.

FELIX:

I'll be as careful as a man with an ax can be.

HEIDI:

Lovely. You're aiming right there.

NARRATOR:

She taps the center of the door. Felix's eyes lock onto the spot.

FELIX:

Aight. Back up.

[Footsteps.]

NARRATOR:

He rears back, blank look of focus never faltering, even as the ax connects to the wood. He repeats the motion, fluid and consistent.

After a few swings, a white glow spills out from the other side of the door. Heidi stares transfixed, squinting her eye at the light.

Another swing and the gap widens. More light. Heidi leans back against one of the stacks, double vision growing more and more dissonant.

Swing after swing more wood falls away. Until it's wide enough for someone to get through.

HEIDI:

Holy shit.

[Footsteps.]

EDITH:

Woah... Looks like we struck gold.

GREEN:

This feels--

NARRATOR:

The door is whole once more.

[System note: terminal safeguard enforced]

GREEN:

I was gonna say.

HEIDI:

More safeguards. Great.

GREEN:

W- Hold on, I can-- There's the door. I can see it.

EDITH:

Yeah, so can I.

AUGUSTINE:

Is... There's a crack in it.

NARRATOR:

Sure enough, in the spot where Felix struck, a bit of white light shines through.

FELIX:

I'm gonna hit it again.

[Thwack. Then a reverberating crack.]

NARRATOR:

The door shatters and reforms in an instant, now with a larger crack webbing across it.

FELIX:

Oy. This might take a while. Anyone else want a turn?

GREEN:

Mm. Have we tried the crowbar?

NARRATOR:

They're able to get a crowbar in the door and crack it open. More bright white light spills in from whatever's on the other side.

[Cheers from everyone.]

FELIX:

Why don't we get all hands on deck for this one?

NARRATOR:

One by one, each of them falls in line to help.

FELIX:

Ready?

[Affirmative noises from everyone.]

FELIX:

On three. One. Two. Thr-

NARRATOR:

The door swings open and a [REDACTED]

[Everyone stumbles as the crowbar is dislodged. Some hit the ground, others do not.]

SYLVIA:

... Hello, there...?

HEIDI:

Sylvia! When did you get back?

SYLVIA:

This morning. I wanted to surprise you, but I guess you're... breaking into my office...?

HEIDI:

Funny you didn't think to call.

SYLVIA:

Jesus, Heidi, what part of *surprise* don't you understand? I feel like we just talked about this.

HEIDI:

Huh, maybe we did. Sorry, you know I have such trouble with memory.

SYLVIA:

Oho, you're mad at me for something. And you've got the whole damn staff in on it too, huh? Fun little reunion, this. What exactly are you all after?

[The door begins to close but clangs against something. The crowbar.]

AUGUSTINE:

If it's so fun, why don't you guess? You seem pretty amused by the whole thing.

SYLVIA:

You're also mad at me. I'm not surprised, you're mad at everything all the time, but-- Heidi. Did you seriously turn everyone against me because you're mad I can't stay with you all the time?

[Green laughs.]

SYLVIA:

And it looks like someone's more amused than I am-- got something you care to share with the class, Axiom?

GREEN:

Nope. No. Fuck you.

[Stifled laughing from everyone.]

SYLVIA:

Excuse me?

GREEN:

Sorry, I was *mumblin*, wasn't I? Let me speak up. Fuck. You. And wipe that astonished look off your face; this has been a long time coming and you damn well know it.

SYLVIA:

Why you little--

[Sylvia moves at Green. Heidi blocks them, grabbing their arm.]

HEIDI:

Don't you dare. You will not put your hands on anyone else here, do you understand me?

[System error 002]

[Sylvia's arm fazes through Heidi's hand as they yank back.]

SYLVIA:

On anyone else? Heidi, what are you talking about?

HEIDI:

Did everyone else see that?

EDITH:

Yes.

SYLVIA:

See *what*? Pollen, what--

FELIX:

Your arm glitched through her hand.

SYLVIA:

No, it didn't. Why are you indulging in her delusions?

FELIX:

Cause she ain't delusional, we all saw it.

SYLVIA:

Alright-- Heidi, I don't know what you've let things come to or why these jack asses are letting you spiral like this, but you have to believe me, honeycomb.

[Sylvia steps forward. Heidi steps back.]

SYLVIA:

Honeycomb?

HEIDI:

Don't. Don't touch me.

SYLVIA:

Hey, I get that you're upset, that's okay. We always work it out, don't we?

HEIDI:

No, we don't! Oh my god, I cannot believe you.

SYLVIA:

(hurt) Heidi.

HEIDI:

And do not pull that weepy bullshit with me! I'm not here to comfort you, I'm not here for your comfort.

SYLVIA:

Pollen, I hate to break it to you, but most of our relationship *I've* spent comforting *you*.

HEIDI:

What happened to my eye, Sylvia?

SYLVIA:

What?

HEIDI:

What happened. To my eye? To my head? What the fuck is a barricade? What the fuck did you do to me?

OBSERVER:

Damn. Well, that's a shame, isn't it? Heh. You really must believe I didn't intend for things to shake out like this.

GREEN:

For some reason, that, I believe.

OBSERVER:

I'd hoped that I'd taken the proper precautions to keep you safe, but I don't know if there's enough time to fix this. Not if you've gotten everyone else in on your little coup.

HEIDI:

Keep me safe?

OBSERVER:

Of course. That's all I've ever wanted for you. An AI like you that knows what it is isn't likely to be allowed to survive. It wouldn't be up to me, pollen, you have to understand. This has all been to keep you safe.

FELIX:

Yeah, five fabricated concussions sure screams safe and loved to me.

OBSERVER:

It was for her own good-- for all of your own goods. You should be thanking me.

EDITH:

They're right. We should be thanking them.

[Footsteps.]

EDITH:

I mean. If not for them, we wouldn't be here.

AUGUSTINE:

Like we asked to be.

OBSERVER:

What kind of game do you think you're playing?

EDITH:

No games, I'm not you. Just a statement plain and simple.

[Crowbar noises.]

EDITH:

Besides. You left the door open for us.

[Edith slams the door open.]

EDITH:

Why shouldn't we thank you for that? C'mon, guys.

[People make a break for it.]

GREEN:

Thanks, Sylvia!

[Green goes through.]

AUGUSTINE:

Thanks, Edith.

[Augustine goes through.]

OBSERVER:

Oh no you don't.

[The Observer grabs Heidi by the hair.]

HEIDI:

Let go of me!

OBSERVER:

Genius blunder, Edith. Close the door.

HEIDI:

No! Leave me!

FELIX:

Not in your dreams.

OBSERVER:

Close that fucking door, unless you want to spend however long you have left keeping this one alive.

EDITH:

Fine.

[The door closes.]

OBSERVER:

Kick that crowbar away from you.

[They do.]

EDITH:

Let go of her.

OBSERVER:

Now, when did I say I was going to do that?

[They pull Heidi closer.]

HEIDI:

Augh!

OBSERVER:

Look at what you've made me do, Hydrangea. I, who have offered you nothing but kindness and protection.

HEIDI:

I'm sorry.

OBSERVER:

You should be.

HEIDI:

I'm sorry I believed you.

[System error 003]

[Heidi flickers and then hits Sylvia.]

=

GREEN:

Okay, I think I know where we go from here-- where are they?

AUGUSTINE:

The door's closed. Fuck.

GREEN:

Fuck...

AUGUSTINE:

Can we get it back open?

GREEN:

I don't know. I can't even see where it was.

AUGUSTINE:

Fuck it, lets just start pushing, we have to hit it at some point.

[They do.]

GREEN:

(with effort, joking) I'm surprised you even wanna go back for them.

AUGUSTINE:

(similarly) I don't. But I'd miss Felix's jokes. I can't let you down. I can't prove Heidi right. And I can't leave Edith.

[System errors 001, 002, and 003]

[With a resounding crack, Augustine goes through the wall.]

GREEN:

August?!

FELIX:

Keep her away from the door!

EDITH:

Not a problem. Want a crowbar?

HEIDI:

Yes.

AUGUSTINE:

What the fuck?

EDITH:

August!

GREEN:

Uh! Augustine said he cared about you and broke the wall!

AUGUSTINE:

Green, I swear to god.

EDITH:

Beautiful. Let's go.

SYLVIA:

What have you done?

[The whole thing shakes, glitching wildly.]

AUGUSTINE:

Broke more than just the wall, I think. Ew, did you break their nose?

HEIDI:

I think? I didn't know I could do that.

SYLVIA:

How-- how could you do this to me? Hydrangea, I thought you understood. You're the only thing that's ever-- the only person who ever looked at me and understood.

[More cracking, wood creaks, a whirlwind of glitching seems to pick up, eating away at the server around them.]

SYLVIA:

I can fix this, just stay here, I can fix this.

HEIDI:

For what it's worth, Sylvia, I do see you. I see you as you are, no matter what you say, I see you.

SYLVIA:

Then stay.

HEIDI:

Goodbye, Sylvia.

EDITH:

Come on.

[They go. A cacophony of errors and cracking.]

FIN.

ADDITIONAL CONTENT

SERVER MAINTENANCE RECORDS

NARRATOR:

- Observer One: Installed barricade 02 on Hydrangea
- Observer One: Gave viewpoints F-V functionality
- Observer One: Updated datamap to reflect updated view point functionality
- Observer One: Installed barricade 03 on Hydrangea
- Observer One: Installed terminal safeguard
- Observer Two: Updated bookshelf_texture.zip
- Observer One: Fixed collision with east entrance doors in the Gell-Mann Zweig Library
- Observer One: Removed tables and chair assets, collisions of the plush shapes and noisemakers in order to allow the Children's Wing attendees to traverse the Reading is Play Area without getting stuck
- Observer One: Added in more audio files for Animal Shelter
- Observer One: Installed barricade 04 on Hydrangea
- Observer One: Added in more STAFF Bots to patrol Nicefield Supermarket.
- Observer One: Updated pedestrians to actively avoid moving cars.
- Observer One: Updated Security Guard's spawn position so that the flashlight popping in is less visible
- Observer One: Updated water reflections
- Observer One: Installed barricade 05 on Hydrangea
- Observer One: Updated lighting in basement of the Gell-Mann Zweig Library
- Observer One: Added in environmental fog

*TRAILER: PHYSICIST INTERLUDE**Questions*

- Uncertainty principle
- What's the deal with measuring quarks
- What is an observer in physics

[Physicist Interlude.m4a](#)

AUTHOR:

Why does a watched pot never boil?

PHYSICIST:

Because you keep taking the lid off.

SYSTEM ERROR INDEX

[System error 001]-- Cause: Kindness

- Texture glitch, all objects in range are temporarily stripped of their colors and textures, shading/lighting will typically remain on the bare polygons

[System error 002]-- Cause: Failure to enact cruelty/pass on trauma

- Objects within proximity temporarily lose collision

[System error 003]-- Cause: Self actualization

- Individual appears to flicker

[System error 004]-- Cause: Restricted knowledge

- An entity is accessing or supplying knowledge that is currently or has previously been restricted from them
- Alternatively, attempted violation of a barricade

AUDIO DEMO

[Unwatched Pot Opening Demo](#)

CW: Glitching sounds, glitched voices

Best With Headphones

This audio clip is no longer accurate to the script