



Lucy

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My finger pressed record on its third attempt to find the button. 'Log seven dash eight. Doctor Saffron, beginning interview with subject 23, codename Lucy.'

At the other end of the desk, the mass of writhing bubbles sputtered in what I dearly hoped was only minor irritation. As its black form shifted higher, countless eyes surfaced and sank from the muck with no obvious pattern save for the focus of their incandescent pupils. All on me. The cell walls, their steel dimly gleaming from gaps between the caked-on ooze, seemed to shrink as the many-eyed monstrosity leaned closer.

I forced a breath and glanced at the tape recorder's clear cover, confirming the reels were spinning. 'Today is a milestone,' I said. 'Day one hundred. Lucy, do you ever get the feeling we met only days ago?'

'Why must I stay here?'

Each syllable sounded a sickening pop that rebounded through the cell.

This would not be a good session.

‘We’ve been over this, Lucy. The sunlight—’

‘Never have you explained why I mustn’t grow.’ It rose, swallowing the pale white ceiling lights. In that sudden darkness, translucent tar glowed like a nebula against the void of space.

An eclipse—that was why it mustn’t grow.

‘Lucy—’

‘Enough to live and nothing more. That is what I promised.’ Ooze flickered with its words, dripping in streams and slopping onto the desk, unseen but incessantly heard. Its eyes glowed brighter, energised by the underpowered lights. ‘Why do you not trust my word?’

I clenched the tape recorder until the edge cut into my palm. ‘Of course we trust you. But you need to understand—’

Light flashed. Grime-encased claws splattered against my end of the desk. Tendrils protruding from its wrist angled at my throat.

A warning.

It asked again, ‘Why must I stay here?’

My last chance.

Wet heat trickled over my thigh. The script, my training, my thoughts—everything dissolved, and with nothing to guide me but empty lungs and the strangling reek of sulphur, I forced out the only words that might save me. ‘We’re working to stop it. And once we can, you’ll be released.’

'Freedom?' Hundreds of eyes went ablaze, a kaleidoscope of colours returning light to the cell. 'When will I be free?'

Never.

'Soon,' [\[SV1\]](#) [\[MZ2\]](#) I said. 'I promise.'

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They had lowered the cell lighting after what happened last time. For safety, they said. I didn't feel any safer. Lucy was now a hazy shadow in the foreground, blending with the black steel behind it.

The red of the record button was my only colour. 'Log seven dash nine. Doctor Saffron, beginning interview with subject 23, codename Lucy.'

The shadow shifted in bare acknowledgement. A razor-thin halo of light oozed around the amalgamation's edges, and though darkness toyed with my eyes, Lucy was undeniably smaller. Shrivelled.

My throat had already run dry. It never got any easier. 'Do you recall what we spoke about last time?' I asked. 'You were feeling more tired than usual.'

'Did I speak of that?' Many eyes rose and opened all at once, but only those in its chest looked at me. The others, glassy and unfocused, rolled in the muck like a marble slowing to a stop. 'I remember only freedom.'

It remembers. Of course it remembers. But they prepared the script in accordance. There was no need to think—just recite. 'That's right,' I said. 'We're making good progress on our research, but there's still work ahead of us.'

'How I long for freedom. It's so near.' Its silhouette grew larger, closer.

'Have you been thinking about anything else, Lucy?'

'I think only of freedom.'

'Isn't there something else? Anything else. We want to know.'

'There is.' What posed as a hand oozed closer to mine, tendrils wriggling, gesturing toward my face. 'I missed you.'

My lips mouthed sounds, but my voice faltered, and I sputtered a single word.

'Me?'

'How long has it been since you last shared your voice?'

Many, many months. 'Not long, Lucy. It's day one hundred and twenty.' The script weaved a different tale, and those practised words were anodyne for the nerves. 'A little longer than usual between our talks, but we've been hard at work learning more about you.'

Its eyes dimmed. 'An eternity seems to have passed.'

'That must be connected to the tiredness you mentioned. Are you feeling any better, Lucy?'

'Was I tired?' The desk disappeared as each eye closed in a prolonged blink. 'I do not remember when my strength waned.'

'You were tired last time, Lucy, I remember. But you perked up when we discussed your release.'

A pause. Pain as my fingernail, scraping against the desk, folded backwards.

It asked, 'Why has my strength abandoned me?'

'We don't know.'

Its tar-encased flesh gurgled. Bubbles rose to the surface, hissing as they popped, filling the cell with the sweet stench of decay. The light from its eyes lit greasy smoke rising from its amorphous form.

It stayed silent. It believed me.

Between its blinks, I glanced at the tape recorder in my hand, the awaiting stop button; the allure of that barely discernible black square had grown irresistible. 'Before we end this interview, is there anything else you would like to talk about?'

'Yes,' it said. 'What will you show me when I am free?'

'Show you?'

'Where will you take me?'

The script didn't foresee this. 'I... we won't take you anywhere. You'll be free. Free to go, free to do whatever you choose.'

'Must I choose? I want you to show me the world.'

'What?' My stomach knotted, and Lucy's sweet odour threatened to expel its contents. 'I don't understand.'

'Before I was taken, I had seen nothing but home. It was as lonely and empty and dark as this cell. The sun did not exist.' Red, blue and green trickled into its eyes. 'Back then I was free, but I was afraid. I stayed. I must make up for that mistake. Please, show me the world.'

'But why me?' My palm burned and my arm trembled as I squeezed the tape recorder tighter and tighter. 'Why do you want me to show you?'

'I trust you.' Within its eyes those colours mixed, and bright white illuminated the cell. 'And you trust me.'

I wished for light earlier. Now I had a hundred spotlights heating the sweat on my face, all promising to expose me.

'That might be difficult, Lucy.'

'Why?'

'Why? Work, work keeps me occupied—and my daughter just started school. That doesn't leave time for—'

'You have a child?'

I swallowed. Why did I say that? 'I... I do.'

'I never met my family—were they to exist.' Even those lazy eyes on the tar's circumference shifted right-side up to meet my frozen gape. 'Your child, what is her name?'

Lucy's constant sputter of a voice had softened to a gentle rumble. Yet in its place came a searing pressure in my chest, memories of the child I left behind. She had only just learned to walk. I swallowed again, but there was nothing left to swallow.

'Laura,' I said.

'Laura. That is near to the name you gave me.'

Something cold crept over my hand. I broke from that many-eyed gaze and looked down. A tendril, the very tip glowing, coiled around and between my fingers, marking my flesh with an oily gloss.

Lucy didn't squeeze. I could pull away.

But I didn't.

'When I am free,' she said, 'can I meet Laura?'

I couldn't look up. Couldn't face her eyes. Shaking, I let go of the tape recorder, then brought my second hand over her tendril, nestling it between my palms.

'Yes. I promise.'

* * *

The only light in the cell came from my tape recorder. Glow-in-the-dark paint marked the record and stop buttons. 'Log seven dash ten. Doctor Saffron, beginning interview with Lucy.'

I couldn't see her—her once-bright eyes lacked the strength to surface—but a sputtered wheeze came from everywhere. Her laboured breaths.

'Lucy, they—'

'What day?'

'Day one hundred and fifty.'

'What day?' she asked louder.

Years. I tried to do the maths in my head, but I couldn't remember the month. I braced my hand in front of my neck. 'I don't know.'

'Don't know? Don't know...'. Each of her words came with a pop as if the bubbles encasing her flesh had held her voice trapped.

There was no script this time. I had a single piece of information, a horrible truth, and they didn't care how I told her. 'They want me to tell you something.'

'Laura. Is she well?'

A photo of her arrived last week, propped up against my pillow for me to find at the end of my shift. She had braces. I never thought she needed them; her smiles were always warm and perfect.

If those smiles were real at all. It isn't hard to doctor a photo. Everything in this blasted facility is an illusion.

'Is she well?' she asked louder.

I tried to form the words, my pre-prepared excuse, but my lungs ran dry. I stopped. Took a hoarse breath.

'I don't know.'

'Is Laura safe because of your work?'

'Yes.'

'Nothing will ever hurt her?'

'Nothing.'

'Could I hurt Laura?'

Her words rumbled through my skin, through my blood.

'Yes,' I said, jaw clenched.

'Could *you* hurt Laura?'

I winced as the tape recorder cut into my palm. 'No, of course not.'

'Then why are you trapped here with me?'

I don't know.

I took a breath. A long, long, weary breath, pleading for all the extra time in a world where time has no meaning.

Yet in this cell, time flowed for both of us. 'It's impossible to stop it, Lucy.'

'Impossible?'

'Short of the sun going dark, there's nothing we can do. Nothing I can do.'

Something dripped onto my shoulder. It reeked of death. A gurgling hiss blared through the cell, piercing my ears, rattling my ribs, shattering my

thoughts. I didn't dare move.

When the echo faded to a painful hum, Lucy spoke, her words a sputtering growl. 'You knew from the beginning.'

'I did.'

'I trusted you. I hoped.'

'Why?'

Her voice softened. 'I could do nothing but trust and hope.'

'I'm so sorry, Lucy.'

That was all I could say. Seconds, minutes, maybe hours passed in silence. Time is meaningless in the dark. I wanted to say more. I wanted to explain. I wanted to relieve myself of the guilt.

But Lucy did it for me. 'I understand,' she said. 'You did this for Laura.'

The creatures here would kill everyone I ever knew. Not out of malice. Not out of hunger. But from merely existing.

I choked back a sob. 'I did it for Laura.'

'Keep Laura safe.'

'I will. I promise.'

'Will I see you again?'

'No.'

A hollow wheeze filled the tortuously small box, though it came from my own chest. Lucy made no sounds. No ordinary person could summon their voice upon learning of such a fate. When I learned of mine, my week became

agony, a haze of tears and unanswered pleas.

But, Lucy, she was anything but ordinary. With a voice softer than mine, she said, 'I understand.'

It wasn't fair. And she accepted it. Even without the light, she was stronger than I would ever be. Even without the sun, she was magnificent.

She was beautiful.

'Is there... anything else?' My voice croaked. Tears wet my lips. 'Before I end the recording?'

Coldness enveloped my hand. The faintest speck of light illuminated her tendrils. One coiled around my arm, another plucked the tape recorder from my hand, and a third hovered over the stop button.

'No.' She pushed down, and the record button popped out. 'One request. Please. I trust you.'

* * *

'Thought it'd rip your head off.'

The guard chuckled, though he sounded disappointed. He slowly clapped his hands, a caustic echo filling the barren hallway outside Lucy's cell. 'Kept your cool better than I could. Not bad, lab coat.'

With the session's cassette tape clenched in my fist, I stared through the one-way glass, spotting only a glimmer from her tendril—not even enough to light the desk. 'When's her next observation?'

'Her?' The guard snorted. 'Another season or two. Nothing else to learn, so it's been downgraded to basic containment and life support. Don't even have to go in—lucky you.'

The guard locked the secondary bulkhead door and moved to the observation

console. 'Three lumens,' he said, fiddling with the lighting dial. 'Wish the other bastards were this easy.'

In the cell beyond the window, minuscule light revealed the tar-smeared ceiling and nothing more. Lucy was somewhere beneath, devoured by darkness, drained of life. Rotting away.

I flinched as the guard squeezed my shoulder. 'Let's get the fuck out of here,' he said. 'Strained my eyes enough already.'

'Go ahead.' I shoved the cassette into his hand. 'Need to catch my breath.'

'What, saying your goodbyes?'

'Just want to stop shaking before someone else sees.'

'Need to clean the breeches, hey?' He shot me an arrogant smirk. 'Suit yourself, but don't forget, last one out's on shutter duty.'

'Don't worry.' I forced a smile back at him. 'I couldn't possibly forget.'

He patted me on the shoulder and stepped around the corner. The thunk of his boots against steel tiles drifted further and further away, down a winding corridor lit by the dullest blue, a mockery of the sky. Once his footfalls stopped, the elevator dinged, and its electronic voice crackled down the hallway—*eighteenth floor underground*.

I waited only a minute. Unsteady steps then took me to the observation console. I looked at my oily fingers, gripped tight around the cold metal of the lighting dial. This would be the one promise I kept. To Lucy. To Laura.

I twisted the dial to zero. The cell beyond the glass sank into darkness, and as the light from Lucy's tendril flickered, I tapped the shutter button. With the choked sputter of a motor, three steel plates rolled down and covered the window, sealing Lucy in her tomb.

She would be free.

[\[SV1\]](#)This might work stronger with a beat separating the two lines.

'Soon.' <beat> 'I promise.'

Where the beat could be just a speech tag or action.

[\[MZ2\]](#)Agreed. Elected for a quick speech tag to keep the two lines close together