

LAB RATS
by
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The Corporation's Lab squatted in the downpour like an ugly toad. Its grey stone skin pocked with mortar shrapnel, courtesy of the Cause. Tatters of cloth hung on razor wire around the perimeter of the compound, lonely witnesses to earlier attempts to breach the fence.

A slight movement caught Dog's eye. A bored guard spat out a weed wad, hawking it into the slimy moat. From this distance he couldn't smell the rank sourness of the guard's breath over the fetid water. But Dog's brain imagined the dread stench, the stained digits, the reddened eyes. An exploitable habit.

A second guard approached the first. Heavier set, his ears low on a rounder head. But still slouched, tail down, no flag of alertness, no milligram of joy.

Probably a weeder too. Who else could they get to guard this back-of-nowhere, bug infected swamp?

A slosh of rain drizzled into his ear from an overfull leaf. He shook his head carefully, but then an involuntary shiver agitated the undergrowth and released more noxious fumes.

His vaunted nose would be lucky to sniff out fresh meat in this miasmatic mud—even if it fell on his face.

His hind feet squirmed in the ill-fitting boots. He'd have to try to re-pack them with paperbark, again. Though in this humid weather that'd soon end up like mush squelched between his toes. Times like these he wished for webbed feet like the damn amphis. About the only amphi thing he did envy. How could they love living in this malodorous marsh?

He sniffed, tasting the air. Above the deep swamp stench, nothing but sulphurous rain and the smell of pack behind him. Hopefully. His lip curled. If he smelt pack, then maybe the guards could too, weeder or not. The mission party would have to disguise their scent better if they were going to sneak in and not get caught.

Sneak in. Ha! What a laugh.

Nobody ever sneaked *in* to a Lab. Plenty of creatures tried to get *out*. Maybe that'd work to their advantage. Guards'd be watching the Lab more than the grounds outside. He glanced at the flapping, ragged flags, realising the stains were lifeblood. A growl began deep in his chest, his hackles rose, and the zing of anger ramped up his alertness.

Freaking repis. How the hell did they get off overseeing this Elemental forsaken planetoid? Damn Els.

A touch on his flank. He pivoted to attack. He lowered his knife. His lieutenant dropped her head, submissive, no threat, apologetic.

“What?” Brusquer than he intended, embarrassed by the slip of attention and anger.

“Time to recon. Next shift’s here.”

Den gestured over her skinny shoulder. Dog watched two dark shapes shift against the soggy backdrop. He squatted.

“Bring ‘em in.”

Den signalled, dropping beside him. The shapes left the trees and slithered along the undergrowth towards them.

Repis. Ugh, how he hated their staring eyes. Disrespectful deadbeats never lowered their peepers. Broad heads with vicious snouts swayed left and right on thick necks, weaving through the sword grass. Carious orbs bored into his.

Freakazoids. They gave Dog the creeps. He hated how comfy they were in this festering humidity too. Sweat and slime poured off his matted fur in rank rivulets.

How many times had he wished for a purebred army? Trained and hardened cani soldiers who’d fight for the real Cause. Not for food, shelter, company, and whatever revenge these armoured repis had signed up for. Though they had the lab scars to prove it, he still didn’t trust their guttural epithets of vengeance.

His rag-tag pack was the dregs, only those that hadn’t been taken by the Corporation and retrained. Leftovers, discards, every last one damaged.

Retrained. Yeah right. Provided with cultural certainty—or so the policy touted.

Yeah. Certainty that their life was over. They be owned, collared. They’d know their place in the new world order.

And that place wasn’t sneaking around in the rain and slush looking for a way into the Corporation’s not-so-secret Mind Lab.

What the hell was this mission for anyway? Rescue some other freak who’s supposed to have something worth risking his team for.

Team.

Yeah. Dog supposed that’s what they were. He glowered at the repis.

“Los, Liz. Slow rotation, follow the guard routine, scan for any opening, any threat. You’ll be relieved in four hours.” They bobbed their heads, unblinking and slithered off. Sharp claws dragged them forward through the grass and mud.

He and Den slunk away, ducking under mangroves, sloshing through tidal pools. They swam when they couldn’t walk through.

The whole damn place made his skin crawl, literally. He’d picked up some sort of fungus infection between his pads from the constant damp. And every

time he hiked out to the Lab, he had to spend time burning out the freaking leeches that burrowed into his soft, exposed skin.

Like under my bloody arm, he thought as he felt a new nibbler hook on.

Hands raised high to protect his knife and rations, he didn't stop to pluck the sucker out. He knew better. Now.

In the early days they'd watched Ditz rip the leeches off in a frenzy, their heads still stuck deep in her skin. When decapitated these blood-suckers released a deadly toxin.

Three hours later, a bloated, pungent Ditz had thrown herself off the edge of the nearest crater wall. Ran, didn't walk to get away from the decay. She'd rotted from the outside in. Just her brain and enough movement to keep her bones and muscles pumping to launch her out over the rocky shelf.

Didn't make any sound at all when she went over. Maybe she couldn't. They didn't hear a splash anyway. Those craters had opened deep wounds in the earth. The sulphuric steam that roiled from the vents added its rank smell and heat to the already steamy atmosphere. The planetoid was a volcanic time-bomb, too damaged for the Els to restore, so they said. Only used to experiment on and discard useless litter runts.

Like me.

Damn pescis were probably waiting for Ditz at the crater bottom. Probably in league with the damn leeches. Freaking filthy world. Cursed freaking swamp. He stomped on a slimy crap brown critter not quick enough to evade his boots. It painted his leg with a jet of sticky black sludge in retribution.

He wished he believed in the myths the oldies told. Warm homes, clean water, tasty food, time to play. He'd almost believe the first few, but—time to play? He knew that was a myth.

The old ones got forgetful, fanciful towards the end. Started spouting trash that stirred the pack youngsters up. Best to put them out of their misery. Out of our misery. Quick slash to the throat, let the lifeblood flow. Everyone took a sip, passing the spirit along, sharing the memories.

Maybe that's how the insanity started. Maybe we should let the spirit flow back to the earth like that crazy one said, restore the balance.

Nah. This earth was dead, got no spirit left, no need to waste the lifeblood. Kept the pack together, sharing it.

Damn it, another leech latched on, his groin this time. He gripped his knife hard to resist reaching to wrench the bastard out straight away. He held his breath as the leech got its own good grip.

He heard Den pause behind him, panting with a similar challenge. Her scrawny body mass wasn't much good in a fight, but her brain worked just fine, she was as sneaky as they come. And she could get into tighter places than he

could. They needed that. Canis didn't have the flexibility of the felis, nor the articulated backbone of some repis. And he'd yet to find a way to turn an amphi to the Cause.

He negotiated the shallows and dodged under the low hanging branches, winding through the scrubby brush that marked the edge of the swamp. He made out a partial trail in the soft grey sand.

Damn, they'd been here too long, the pack was getting sloppy. Any amateur tracker would pick that up. What if the Corporation stopped being so bloody lazy and did a broader sweep? They'd have to move camp again.

He and Den arrived unchallenged. A few squalid lean-to's lay haphazardly around a central hearth, scorched stones cold now in the light of day. Too easy to see the smoke, even in the drizzly haze.

The pack stopped when he and Den hit the outskirts of the motley collection.

Where were the freaking sentries?

Pack waited for a sign from him. Mad, mean, or somewhere in between. The weight of leadership bowed his shoulders and settled like a stone in his belly. He went for mean. For their own good. He raised his head, lip curled, ears pricked, a subvocal growl. Pack slunk back to the camp fringe, tails tucked. He threw himself down beside the cold hearth stones and called for fire. Bleeding leeches made it worth the risk.

He flung off his saturated groin cloth and winced as he knocked a blood-swollen parasite. Den did the same, accompanied by a small whimper. Dope and Dig hurried over with hot coals and built up a small fire from their hoard of dry wood. Dog's stench saturated nose could barely make out the pine from the eucalypt. Drain brought a plate of cold offerings and a bowl of clean water. He set them beside Dog and stayed, docked tail stiff but still, floppy ears flat, eyes cast down.

The last leech was burnt off, the acrid smell lingering on the back of Dog's tongue. He stood to his full hind-leg height, loomed over Drain, making sure he knew the alpha was back. A short nod, Drain's mouth opened in a goofy, toothy smile and his short rump wagged his delight at the approval.

"Gather."

They shuffled out of the cardboard humpies and burrows in the surrounding bush. Some hind-walked, others four-pawed, all had heads lowered.

"Bring in the sentries."

A few had the sense to look shamefaced and Dog snarled, upper lip curled back over his teeth.

"No freaking sentries! You mangy curs. You deserve to get caught. I can't rescue you all over again."

“We thought it’d be okay. No one’s found us so far.” The black and white splotches on Dim’s coat weren’t good camouflage in this grey-green swamp. She looked like a pesci outta water. She was the newest recruit, her neck still scarred from the collar.

“You thought, huh. What if Den and I had been felis or unfriendly reps or worse—Lab Rats? We walked in here easy as. You’d all’ve been in cages before you took your second breath.”

Dim snarled, offended, black wiry hackles stiff with aggression.

“We’d ‘ave fought.”

“Yeah, we would’a fought.”

“Yeah, no one’s gunna cage me.” They all puffed out their chests, stood on hind legs and an assertive rumble erupted around the circle.

“Then you would’ve died.” He barked, silencing them. They dropped to all fours, eyes groundward.

“You useless mongrels, you’ve gotta use your brains not just your hormones. And if you can’t work out how to do that, then do what I tell you.”

His rant poured into an uneasy silence.

“How’s that different from doin’ what the Corporation tells us to do?” Dim broached what the rest of them were thinking.

“I’ve given you freedom, freedom to decide, to choose a life you control. If you want out, you can leave any time. No one’s stoppin’ you.” A few of them glanced around at the soggy shelters they’d spent the last five nights in.

“At least I was dry most of the time working for the Corporation.” There was a bit of reluctant nodding.

Dog snarled, his hackles stiffened.

“They neutered your brain when they neutered your dick. Have you forgotten your mates raped, inseminated with who knows what. Your pups ripped from their mama’s teats. Dragged off to have chems poured into their eyes, to see if it made them blind. Have you forgotten their yelps, their howls, screamin’ for their mamas, screamin’ for you? Have you forgotten the smell of their little bodies burnin’ in the incinerators?”

Cani’s claws! This mangy pack! He was sick of trying to stir up righteous aggression in their empty bellies. Every tail drooped, every ear laid back. Not one met his eye.

“They’re hungry and tired Dog. They’ll be better when we build ‘em up a bit. When we get this job done we’re gettin’ some meat. We’ll find a place to bed down and train. We’ve been goin’ on fresh air for a while.” Den, as always, found the plug on his anger and frustration. He didn’t know how she could find hope, not after what he’d rescued her from.

“Yeah, I guess.” He settled on his haunches and picked a sharp stick from the pile of kindling.

“Right, here’s the plan.” He smoothed out an arc of sand mapped out each task.

“Unless the repis on duty now find another weakness, we’ll go in just before first light. Night guards will be sleepest then and easier to subdue.” The pack shuffled closer and listened. He continued to mark out the steps, slowly, clearly, simply. He repeated them over and over, getting each member to rehearse his role till they could recite it together without missing a beat.

It was the best he could do.

Make ‘em angry enough to go through with it, and then make it easy for ‘em to follow the plan. If they didn’t pull this off he didn’t know how he was going to feed them. His scented the air, seeking any kind of food aroma—nothing. A traitorous thought twisted his gut. Maybe they *would* be better off under the Corporation’s leash. He shuddered, disguising it as he stood on hind legs. He examined the eight sets of cani eyes, glowing in the dusk.

“Get some sleep. We leave well before the sun sets. I don’t wanna cross the swamp at night. Damn amphis.”

He waved at Dot and Ditch. They slunk over, Dot, her tail between her legs, her paps quivering. Ditch, the twitch of an overgrown eyebrow the only sign of his nervousness.

“You two leave in two hours and relieve the repis. Don’t tell ‘em anything about the plan. Better they’re here when we begin and leave with us. No chance for slinking off and warning their mates.” They nodded and headed off to find a sliver of dry ground to kip on.

He moved out from the camp, taking up sentry duty himself. At least he knew it would be done right.

When the air began to run out, the cold was the first thing she felt, bone aching cold. Grey, featureless wall, like everything else in this El forsaken place. Grey and featureless until you broke outta the box, until you cracked the seal.

It’d taken too long. Eyes closed, the feli explored the wall. The seal bumped under the sensitive pads of her forepaw. The softest click with the smallest pressure—a hiss.

Breathed deeply, first gasp like fire in her lungs. Fluf reached for the breach with greedy claws.

Eyes closed she let the zephyr of fresh air play over her face like a lover’s caress.

Eyes opened, clawtips in the crack of the door, torn and bloody. Time to face the music, or at least to get ready for the next chorus.

She sniffed. Alert to subtle fragrances, she registered organics, metallics, chemicals, and the ever-present loathsome swamp. No rotting repi odour.

She levered the door open and stepped over the sill.

“So, you’re out.” The speaker’s sibilant hiss brought her sneer, lips curled back, sharp teeth showing. She knew even as it turned what she’d see—snake eyes. It had masked its serpentine stench with an iron collar—cheater. Its claws clacked on the metal floor, drawing her eyes, flagging how quickly this could go north. Its tail flipped a bird in her direction. It was seriously pissed off to let her see that. Her tension ratcheted up a notch. Fluf opted for sarcasm as a defence, an old favourite.

“Going crazy in there, couldn’t find the freaking door. Imagine that. And I’m such a smarty cat. Someone else might think it was hidden on purpose.”

“You only had to think ‘out’.” The Lab Rat hissed.

“Not letting you crazies in my head. I know what you’d do to me. Freaking brainwashing.”

“You don’t know shit about what I’d do to you, miserable furbag.”

“But you do, right. You know shit, cos that’s what you slither around in all day. Look where those mindfreaks have got you. Freaking nowhere. You’re still on this El forsaken swamp babysitting me and a hundred other miserable mammals.”

Its eyes glittered, gangrenous yellow, black slitted pupils widening with menace.

“Freaking serpent. Get back to swallowing your precious worlds, leave me and mine alone.”

Its jaw opened, fangs exposed, a glistening green drop at the end of each.

“You want the Dream so badly. You’re almost at the tipping point. This dose might take you over the edge.”

Fluf felt the venom splash on her face as the viper’s head left its body. The body paused for a moment, as if unsure what to do on its own. Then it slumped to the floor, green blood spurting from the twin hearts that weren’t quite done.

She ran a paw over the fur on her cheek, captured the green sticky moisture and licked it off. Under cover of searching for more venom from the decapitated body, she leant over, unclipped his access card and slipped it into the pocket of her frayed overall.

“Freaking venom head feli, why’re we botherin’ to help her? She’s no freakin’ good to anyone. She’d sell her soul for a drop of Dream.”

Fluf felt the small hit of venom slide through her veins. Colours sharpened, odours amplified. She heard her blood surging through the chambers of her heart, and the cardiac beats of two canis behind her.

She turned to the voice whammying her enhanced hearing like nails scratching down a chalkboard.

"You had to bring another cani. Who else couldn't make a decision without licking the arse of every mutt in his pack. Stupid bitch." The latter was spat at Den.

The alpha put a restraining paw on wiry female's shoulder and curled a lip in the feli's direction.

The bitch shook him off.

"I'll take that as a compliment venom head. I know where I belong and who's got my back. Who's got yours?" Her sneer made her look attractively foxy to Fluf's overstimulated senses. That is if you took away the deadly looking knives the bitch held in both hands. By the way she spun one to within a few inches of her face, Fluf suspect they weren't only for show.

"Why're you late and why're you out here arguing with the Lab Rat?" The larger male growled.

"You're working with this feli? She's a venom head. You can't trust her." Disbelief coloured the cani's words.

Dog shoved Den aside.

"Go and check the corridor." Den trotted off, but not before she'd hurled a toxic glance over her shoulder at Fluf.

"So?" Dog loomed over the diminutive feli.

Fluf reached a paw up to touch his chest. One claw extended. She pressed until a bead of blood appeared.

"Ooh looky, some of the good red stuff." She sucked her claw and was about to press for more. Dog grabbed her.

"Enough. We gotta get the package and get outta here." Fluf wrenched her paw out of his with a hiss. As she stepped back she slipped in a green blood smear from the dead Lab Rat and fell against the wall. The cani shot out a paw to steady her.

"Freaking cani, paws off. No one touches me unless I say so."

"Really? You agreed to all this torture? Walked in under your own steam, did you?" His eyes ran over the scars on her face, the patches of bare skin, the torn ear. Her head came up, a fiery look in her single green eye. The other burnt black cavity a fierce testament to her time in the Lab. She hissed once more, all claws extended towards his face, preparing to slash.

He didn't move. His eyes didn't leave hers. Without provocation, the fight left her.

"Fine, come on. Let's get this over with and get outta here." She strode down the side corridor. Dog whistled Den back and they trotted after her down two flights of stairs. The feli paused at the stairwell door, listening.

“This is a bad idea.” Den muttered, adjusting the grip on her knives.

“What’re you waitin’ for?” Dog leant over Fluf’s shoulder, scenting. Chemicals, sweat, blood, urine and worse waited on the other side of that door. He could smell fear on the feli.

“Listening for guards.” She shrugged him off and with one withering look back she swiped the access card, unsealed the door and waited. She could hear the singing faintly. A smile appeared, her heart lightened. Dog and Den’s hearing pricked ears as she opened the door wider.

“What’s that?”

She turned to them, eyes wide, a genuine smile growing, her single eye moistened.

“That, my fellow Swampies—is singing.”

All three listened for a moment, mesmerised, as the notes rose and fell.

“Makes you feel real good.” Den’s tongue was lolling, pupils dilating, ears quivering.

They slipped into the darkened hallway, past doors with small windows. Dog peered into the first few. Each was a tiny cell with a single occupant, cani or feli, and even a few avis. All of them beaten and broken, burnt or butchered in some way. They were the source of the sweat, blood and excrement.

Behind him, Den choked back a sob. The singing novelty forgotten as she watched one cani mother cradling a dead puppy, trying to make its floppy head latch on to her swollen teats.

“Okay, enough already. Time to get the package and stop all this shit.” His growl had a sharp edge, hiding the horror of his own remembered violent youth.

Fluf was at the last cell door, the singing was coming from there. She studied Dog as he grabbed Den and approached.

“This’s the package. This’s what you’ve gotta take to a safe place. This’s the Cause’s last hope.” She paused at their puzzled gaze. The short venom hit was wearing off and she worried they wouldn’t get the significance. Cani’s weren’t known for their intelligence and foresight.

Was she right? Would the magic work on them?

Fluf swiped the stolen access card down the security reader and the cell door popped open.

The feli peered in then stepped back, her face a bloom of adoration.

The two canis leant past her, hesitant in the face of her swift reversal.

In the cell was a creature they’d never seen before. It was obviously young, clumsily messing about on the floor with a wooden puzzle. The beautiful sound came from its throat. The harmonies strummed ancient memories deep in the primitive base of their brains.

The creature looked up as Den whimpered, lost in the moment, her tail wagging furiously.

The singing stopped.

Its mouth made an O.

Then a gap-toothed smile that made all three at the door magically goofy with happiness.

It climbed to its feet and tottered over.

Though it barely reached the top of Den's leg, in synchrony the trio dropped to four paws.

The rescuers watched mesmerised as the youngster reached out a pale, hairless, five fingered hand and patted Den's head.

"Nice doggie."