

D-I-E (Prologue)

By Bartan Tirix

It was dark when the noises returned. Earlier than usual which made the griffon half grumble as he shifted around in his bed. Still comfortable and warm, but their vocals seemed to be growing beyond the walls. Nothing of panic or alarm, but of... Rushing and excitement? He hardly knew.

Or did he? Yes, his foggy mind began to recall them stating something special was going on today, but for now all his body craved was sleep. Trying to ignore the voices when they passed his room and beyond the distance, but they continued to last. Hour after hour, until eventually the sliding door to his room opened and the lights began to turn on. Starting dim and at the far side of the room where a medical bench resided. Making the dark bird grumble as he started to get up.

The heavy scent of fresh coffee filled the room as it invaded the griffon's boxed area. Giving him plenty of room to stretch and spread those wings, even if they did still touch the upper corners of it. Spotting the smaller one looking over some notes on a tablet of sorts, her usual large cup of coffee beside her as the bird sat patiently in front of the see-through door to his box. Giving off soft grunts at the information given, half ignoring the creature nearly triple her size.

Even after he tapped the protective plastic with his beak a few times, trying to get her attention. Even perking up his ears and following the woman's every move as she retrieved an object and began taking little notes on a whiteboard. Half looking at the bird's position and mumbling. "Awake, are you?"

It was a language he didn't understand fully, but enough to coo in response. That always seemed to make them happy and keep talking. This one was never fond of talking though, so the griffon never thought any different... However, now that he thought about it, it was a little strange how different she was compared to the others. Usually the cup of stimulants helped this species stay awake or become more alert, yet her with a larger cup than most seemed to be more... Lacking energy.

The automatic door slid open again, getting the sharp attention from the bird as a young

man walked through. Instantly getting that black tail to wag and the bird to nearly vibrate with happiness as he put his coffee down on the medical desk. "Good morning." He greeted the woman, only getting a grunt in response as he looked at the griffon, smiling at the black one and letting out a chuckle. "You didn't let him out again?"

"We're told to keep the subjects in containment. I'm just following orders." She finally spoke, getting a light response from the man as he walked over to the see-through door. Getting some excited body language as the black one attempted to remain still and composed, but couldn't when the door finally opened and that large beak bunted the guy's chest. Nuzzling while getting pets and scratches.

"Good morning, 4-9-5." The good words. Words that called for attention, but it was the bird's words. Causing that tail to wag and tap against the safety glass of the pen as the large bird couldn't contain his excitement for the attention. Letting out soft coos and deep purrs as the man chuckled. "How are we doing this morning? Survived the cold night, I see."

"They have heated beds for cold snaps like this. They should be fine." The woman bluntly stated, still writing on the whiteboard as the two had their moment. Sipping at her coffee as he led the griffon out a bit so he could read the signs. "You really shouldn't be getting him used to being out like that."

"Relax. A little attention never hurt them. Besides, giving them some love has been proving my theory about Pals and how showing them affection does make them stronger."

"I can't disagree with the numbers, that's for sure. But we won't know until later today. I still haven't seen the other subject's, it is possible they might be higher than ours."

"I dunno." The man almost sang, still half playing with the bird while rubbing those soft cheeks. "I've heard people talking, and I think we cracked the formula."

"Victor is incredibly difficult to please. Don't get your hopes up Allen, it'll hurt when they get dropped."

"You sound like one with experience." The young man teased.

"Working here isn't my first choice."

"Nonsense, Steph. Working here is one of the best and safest places to be in the archipelago. It's-"

"Until the power fails and we all freeze to death or starve because nobody here believes in manual doors anymore." He only chuckled in response to the dark outlook, finally stepping away from the griffon as he looked over her numbers. The bird coming to her other side as she

was still writing, not understanding any of the markings, but more curious about the device she was marking with. Usually things were digital, but the marker was something she wrote with every morning. Often before he was let out, causing that beak to be curious and attempt to sniff at the strange smell.

Only for her to suddenly streak that smooth black with a red mark, getting the large one to curl his neck and step away. Making the man chuckle and the woman to almost. "He's just playing with you."

"And he's a distraction. We don't have long until the presentation, but I want to run these numbers and make sure everything's okay." The man nodded and made a noise in agreement as he looked over the medical desk on the far side of the room. "I didn't give him the morning shot yet."

"Didn't think so, I'll do it. I still think he should eat something first, but-"

"Against orders."

"I know, I know." The man moved to the desk and opened a drawer, unknown to the bird as he attempted to get the strange mark off his beak. At least until the human turned around with the injector 'gun', with the shot already loaded. A sight that made the large one grumble loudly as the man lifted his hands slightly in surrender. "And I know that too. You don't like it, I don't either." The bird sat down hard in near protest, but didn't fight it when he approached with the device. "But it only stings for a moment."

A snort in response as if the griffon could understand him, feeling it up against his neck and a sharp pierce as the little 'gun' hissed. Making the large one feel a bit numb in the area, even after the jet injector was removed and the man rubbed it to comfort the creature. "Good boy." More words that made the black one happy, but was still irked at the event. Patiently waiting for the man to put away the device and turn around for the bird's treat... Except he didn't go for the treat drawer, instead looking at the whiteboard and the tablet in her hands. "Those are looking really good."

A neck curl by the griffon as he waited a bit longer, then nudged the man in the side. Getting a chuckle and a small pet, but still no reward. Taking it a step further with a paw and a snort got Allen's full attention as he held that large black head, rubbing the fluffy bits and giving the crown feathers a nice grooming. "I know, buddy. You usually get one, but we've got a presentation today. It's against orders, when we come back we'll get you one, okay?" A little grumble morphed into a purr as the man continued to give attention to the large beast, looking over the numbers. Spotting one significantly higher than usual. "Is that right?"

"I triple checked, yes." She said with about as much surprise as the woman could muster. "I'd call that a record so far, but again: haven't seen the others." It made the male smile brightly, still giving the griffon more attention before hearing a tone over the speaker system and people in the hallway began to move.

"That's our cue to get ready." He said to her, getting a noise in confirmation but not stopping her from working. Once again returning his attention to the bird who was more focused in the hallway movement. "You're going to make me so proud 4-9-5." The good words again, getting the attention of those large cyan eyes and that tail to wag. "Let me grab my notes real quick and I'll get the harness. Did you want to try putting it on him-?"

"No." She bluntly stated, making Allen chuckle.

The griffon never liked harness days, making him grumble at the tightness of the straps all around his chest. All so they could keep him on a leash of sorts and have better control over him while outside the room. Yet, the excitement of going outside was kind of worth it... Wasn't it?

Something strange fell over the bird's body, that numbness still wasn't shaken off. If anything, it felt like it was slowly spreading just under his feathers. Making them puff out a bit and instantly getting Allen to double take. "Is everything okay 4-9-5?" The good words, calling for attention but unsure of what the man wanted. "Nervous? Don't worry. Just follow us, that's all you need to do." A few pets did help the unease, but he couldn't shake it off.

Some guards in surprisingly heavy winter attire came to the door and motioned the two scientists. The long objects they carried made the griffon feel a bit more anxious. "Our cue." Allen suggested, offering his assistant to take lead while he guided the large one to squeeze out the doorway. Having to tuck his wings deep in before even remotely fitting and getting the bird to grumble, making it through and following down the large hallway with the guards behind them.

Those cyan eyes looked back once in a while at the many people around, all walking the same direction while talking with each other. Even seeing other black birds like him in the

distance! There were more? Since when were there more of his kind? That was strange to 4-9-5 to even think about, believing he was the only griffon around.

The mix of a new place and that harness made him more anxious, occasionally looking back at the guards and unable to see through their masks. Then there was that numbness from the shot, creeping up to the base of his skull and giving him a little bit of pain. One that grew as the bird grunted, being led with the harness to keep moving. Until one sluggish step got their attention, now seeing many of the signs that something was wrong with the griffon; feathers and fluff puffed out, wings drooping, panting and visibly breathing. Head swaying as he attempted to take a step, being caught by Allen as his hearing was replaced by a large piercing noise...

The griffon collapsed in the hallway. Alerting a few people as his vision filled with white and the impact to the ground was barely felt. Unable to sense anything for what felt like hours before the overload on his senses began to fade. Sight finally returning and seeing the flood of people led by the guards move around him. Including another griffon. The constant ringing fading away and replaced with... Words? Words he understood? Feeling of pets along his head as those sky blue eyes focused on Allen's brown ones. "Are you alright? Hey, 4-9-5. Look at me."

"You realize that thing can't hear you." One of the guards grumbled, instantly getting the attention of those eyes. Able to move that neck and support the weight of his own head as he sat up. Constantly looking around at all the noises and people moving along.

"Hey." The soft call of his caretaker got the griffon's attention. "Are you okay? Can you stand?" A faint nod in response as the bird attempted to get up. Losing a little bit of balance at first but able to keep himself standing with the help of the wall. Not realizing the strange looks from both Allen and Steph, ones of concern but also slight surprise. "Take it easy, one step at a time. Okay?" Another nod and the bird moved forwards without any motion of the harness. Making his two caretakers share a look but not discuss it there.

Following instructions from the guards to move forwards as they made room for 4-9-5, occasionally seeing the black beast look back at them. Worry filling his head, especially when he noticed the objects they were carrying as... Weapons. Dangerous ones that shot projectiles- Guns. That was the term they used. Assault rifles specifically- but how did the griffon suddenly know all of this? How did he know they were something to be feared when they've never been fired near him?

For now the bird just kept quiet, following the flow of people in the maze of halls. Specifically his caretakers, both with worried looks on their faces, especially when those cyan eyes were constantly scanning the area. Able to identify what they were, even if he never seen them before. As if the knowledge just appeared before the bird.

The flood of people began to branch off as Allen led the bird in a different direction, along with Steph. The guards were still behind 4-9-5, making him worry a bit more about them as he was led in doorway after doorway. Room after room before coming up to a large stage in an assembly area. Many of the people in the halls were sitting down while the birds were on display, and the only one that was looking around was 4-9-5. Distracted enough that he didn't quite notice the first few pulls of the harness and the man actually had to touch the shoulder of the large bird to get his attention.

"Hey." Allen whispered, getting taken aback when he noticed... Anxiety in the griffon's eyes. "Are you alright?" Those eyes shifted around, as if trying to seek an answer within his own mind. "Here, just sit in this area. That's all you have to do, okay?" Another nervous nod as the bird moved to the instructed spot and sat down. Actually getting looks not only from Steph but some of the other bird's caretakers.

The young woman leaned in to whisper to her boss, looking more concerned than grumpy. "What was that about?"

"I have no idea." Allen whispered back, trying to comfort 4-9-5 who still looked a bit nervous. Visibly breathing with feathers puffed out. "There's something wrong. How are the numbers?"

"Stress levels are high, a little expected but not by this much." She leaned in and whispered lower. "Has he been responding to you...!?"

"I have no idea..." The man continued to comfort the bird, noticing the slouch in his stance. Occasionally looking at his assistant before she stepped forwards, talking to 4-9-5.

"Hey." It was slow, but it got the large one's attention. "Take a deep breath." To her surprise the griffon did. "Hold it in for a moment. Then slowly release it." The woman's instructions were followed, getting his two caretakers to once again share a stunned look.

"4-9-5?" The bird just closed his eyes and took the breath again while Allen spoke to him. "This... Presentation matters. A lot. You don't have to do anything, but I need you to sit up straight." A large nod in response, taking another breath before lifting his head high. Those cyan eyes still showed some nervousness, but he was trying to remain still. "Okay, rotate your shoulders back and stick out your chest?" The griffon did so. "Perfect. Your only job right now is to keep that pose, okay? I promise you that Victor will love you."

That Victor will love him. Who was this Victor? The one in charge? Who... They belonged to, his caretakers? All of the other birds too? For now, 4-9-5 just tried to focus on breathing and standing still. Taking several moments before more guards showed up, making him more

anxious as a surprisingly shorter man dressed in black entered the stage. Along with an assistant, taller but dressed in contrast colors. The two overlooking the griffon farthest from 4-9-5, though mostly at the tablet.

It was hard to make out what they were saying, talking about numbers much like his caretakers did. Most of which was beyond the griffon's knowledge- newly obtained or not. Though not realizing he was leaning forwards to looking at the 'important figure' until Steph gave him a tap on the chest. Causing the large bird to once again stand straight up and listen as the first one was... Disapproved?

Off to the next, more numbers, more conversations about... Mutations? Stabilities? Performance? The other birds? What were they trying to do with them? Why were they important- why was 4-9-5 important? Such thoughts never came to surface when he was in the glass room. It's just where he spent his life. His life with... Them.

His gaze looked over the two scientists he knew since that first day of consciousness. One very friendly and hopeful for the griffon, while the other... Grumpy, but he knew Steph cared deeply. Too lost in thought to notice the taps on his feathered chest again to return to his pose, not until her hand moved up his neck. Causing them to share a look before spotting movement nearby-

And Victor stood before him. Sharply returning to that proud stance even though his eyes were cracked with a near fear. The shorter one's own assistant looked over Steph's tablet while Allen spoke up. "I think you'll love this one, Victor. He's-"

"This is the one that had the fall in the hallway, correct?" The cold question stunned Allen for a moment.

"Well, yes. But that had nothing to do with his-"

"It's."

"...It's performance. He- It... 4-9-5 is a remarkable outcome-" Another interruption when the dark man noticed something on the bird's beak. Grabbing the slight hook at the end of the griffon's maw and pulling it down to observe a slightly color streak along the side of the smooth surface. Nearly making the large bird whimper in surprise, more when a strong gloved finger slid across it and observed what it was. "That's just a marker from the whiteboard."

"So it was out of its cage."

"Only temporarily. Victor, Sir, you're not going to find a more well mannered manufactured griffon here." Manufactured!? "He listens to instructions to a T and is very

obedient-

"Allen, we're developing weapons here. Not Emotional Support Pals. Obedience is beyond expected, not a Selling Point." Victor nearly scolded the scientist letting go of the bird as 4-9-5's head pulled back, ears lowered.

"Sir?" His assistant spoke up. "They're not wrong about the numbers. They are quite astounding." A near glare from the boss as he took the tablet to have a look for himself. "At least 23.4% higher than the rest here. You're probably not going to find a better seed to start with than this-

"It's deteriorating." The three double took at Victor's statement as he looked through the data.

"What...?" Allen nearly whispered in shock.

"Your subject, its DNA is unraveling. It will not last." It made the griffon's own heart nearly stop to hear it, to the point where he could barely recognize the conversation. "I've seen this pattern before, and it's why your numbers are high. But it will burn out too quickly and die before it becomes useful." Victor handed the tablet back to Allen. "Recycle it. That goes for all of you: Recycle Them. Try again." It left the others stunned as he took center stage and began a speech that the griffon couldn't focus on. Only replaying the phrase again and again in his mind.

4-9-5 was going to...?

Silence remained within the room for a long time as the man sat at the desk. The main lights turned off, the lamp over the flat surface shining brightly. Displaying the many tablets and a few old report binders scattered over it, trying to comfort his head as Allen rested on the desk.

The door to the lab slid open quietly, actually getting a pause for a moment before Steph peeked through. Letting out a disappointed sigh when she spotted the man's body over the desk; likely fallen asleep as she came in with a container. Approaching the desk and setting it down- to actually see the man awake and just staring into space. "Eat." She demanded, getting a slow blink in response. "You won't be able to help him otherwise."

"...There is no helping him." Allen sadly muttered, lifting his head up and massaging his crown. "I've looked through every report, every log, found dozens of options that I didn't even think of to keep such an increase in performance. In the end, they all failed." A heavy exhale as the woman frowned. "No wonder Victor saw the pattern so quickly..."

"They don't call him a genius for nothing." She looked over at the opened cage, noticing the full food bowl still in there. "...Did... He not eat either?" The man looked back and attempted to see in the darkness. Barely catching some of the bird's body just laying there.

"...I guess not." Allen mumbled. "He's been... As stunned as I've been since hearing the report. I swear he understood what Victor said..."

"What we've all said." The two looked at each other, half whispering. "None of them have ever become sentient, what the hell? What did we do differently?"

"Aside from treating him like a person, nothing... Just tweaked a few numbers as instructed." The man exhaled heavily as his assistant overlooked his shoulder awkwardly, lifting a hand and finding it difficult to try to comfort him with it. Giving the shoulder-blade area a few taps of comfort that made him lightly chuckle. "You doing okay-?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'll get through it." The two shared a light laugh. But she took a breath afterwards, leaning over and looking at his face. "Do you want me to do it? I know how close you were to 4-5-9." Allen's face twisted at the thought of it, looking away and shaking his head. Hearing the younger assistant take a quiet breath before moving towards the cage, getting his attention at first thinking she was going to...

But she walked into the griffon's living space, barely getting as much as an ear perk when she approached and knelt down. Giving him a few pets to snap him out of whatever thoughts had paralyzed the bird. Cooing in question, he could tell something was off. For Steph to be going out of her way to do this, trying to keep her expression stone-faced but there was still something in her eyes. Rubbing that beak, the black crown feathers along the top of his head and down his neck. Finally cleaning off that marker on the smooth muzzle. "It was... Nice knowing you, 4-9-5." She mumbled, making those ears perk up sadly and those cyan eyes to widen. Puzzled about what she meant.

But the woman just got up and left. Taking a moment to look at Allen before leaving the room. Leaving the two in silence for several minutes before hearing the man get up and getting the attention of the black creature. Staring at the doorway in the near darkness waiting for him to come through, but instead moving to a console beside it.

The griffon thought nothing of it, that's where they got their data and numbers... His

data and numbers? Defining what exactly? Such thoughts were interrupted when the door was shut and locked tightly! Trapping the bird in the cage and a sudden strike of fear flashed in his large chest! Scampering up and to the barely visible barrier made of reinforced glass, the griffon whimpered. Knowing something was up from the sad expression on his caretaker's face. A call to get his attention didn't work, only slowly watching him go through the console as if on auto-pilot, not wanting to think about the task.

A louder cry from the bird as he pawed and scratched at the door, causing Allen's face to twist and try not to look at 4-9-5. At least not until the black one slammed his weight against the barrier, lightly startling the man already so close to it- and causing their eyes to lock. The deep sorrow from the man's brown eyes; nearly filled with tears, meeting the bright cyan ones that... Could understand what he was doing, for the most part. As if deciphering what 'Recycling' actually meant, and pleading... Pleading for the man- his caretaker, to reconsider. Occasionally calling out again and again until...

The man broke down, returning to the console which panicked the bird before hearing the door unlock and slide open. Immediately getting the griffon to step out and snatch Allen with those strong forearms-!

And embrace him. Pulling him into that soft black and gray chest, wrapping wings around his caretaker and holding him so close to him. Letting the grown man sob as the hold was returned, weakening his knees to force him to sit on the floor as the large one held him up. Hearing the caretaker apologize again and again for several minutes until their arms grew tired. Easing up their grips as they moved from the full embrace to just touching foreheads. "I'm... Sorry, 4-9-5. For not giving you a better life-" Allen's own thoughts interrupted him, making the bird coo in question as he watched the man rapidly ponder in his head. "...But maybe it's not too late."

That head tilted. "I..." A hand was placed on that large fluffy chest. "I can't stop this, what is making you unravel at a genome level..." A sadder whimper. "If you stay here... You'll be disposed of. If not by me, by someone else." Those cyan eyes filled with worry. "But maybe... Maybe you can make something out of your limited life outside of this place."

Some silence as that beak nudged him to go on, getting another pet and a half hug from his caretaker. "You've... Ever since that collapse, you seem more understanding of the world around you. To the point where I swear you can understand me." The griffon nodded. "I... Need to set some things up first. Call in a few favors, but for now, I need you to trust me, okay?" A slightly worried look from the large one. "I need you to eat. You haven't yet, and it might be the last meal you'll have for a long long time." The black one looked at his food dish from afar. "I'll even move it out of your cage just in case someone tries to come in and lock you inside. But... I

won't be able to go with you."

Those black wings drooped, taking a moment before once again pulling the caretaker into his embrace. This time much softer. "...You really can understand me now, can you?" He felt the large head nod. "Thump your tail, like you used to do when you were upset." A faint 'Foomp' was heard beyond the black body, making the man chuckle. "Astonishing... It's a shame this wouldn't convince Victor..." A whine in question as Allen pried himself out. Giving that beak a few pets and getting a lick in return before taking the food dish out into a safer space. "...I'll be back. But we'll have to get you out tonight."

The dark hall's path was barely lined with small lights, almost creating a runway that was leading to a much colder area as the griffon was led. Harness on, escorted by his caretaker. Trying to be as quiet as possible as instructed, something about everyone else being asleep and not wanting to get attention. That much 4-9-5 understood, but leaving the building? To an outside world...? It was beyond his experience... Yet, not his knowledge. The bird could understand what he meant, but it's like his mind could not bring up any example of it.

Carefully taking a corner and the two spotted some lights on a person. A familiar set of ones from earlier... Of a guard. Instantly making the black bird more nervous as he was led closer by Allen. Until they were in speaking distance. "Where is everyone?" His caretaker asked.

"Mess hall. I can escort you." The guard then did something with his helmet... Switching something off? "No trouble making it here, I hope?"

"We were not detected, no."

"It's a wonder with something this big." The guard looked over the griffon, making the large one a little nervous. "You said it can understand people?"

"Yes, he seems to." The bird's eyes shifted between the two until the guard clicked his tongue. Getting the feather creature's attention, then getting offered an armored hand?

"Shake." The guard commanded, causing the griffon's neck to curl back in confusion. Beginning to lift one of his forepaws but stopping midway to make sure it was okay with his

caretaker and getting that conformational nod from Allen. Committing by lifting that forepaw up to the guard's and resting it, flexing a little when a slight grip was felt and the man moved it... Up and down faintly?

It was a greeting. A sign of friends or friendship? Were these guards actually friendly? It relaxed the bird a bit more, even though he was uncertain that's what the process meant. "Some big talons on this one." The guard responded, lowering his hand enough to finish the gesture watching the bird just look at his own paw for a moment. "My father had a falcon when I was growing up. The thing's grip was so strong..." He looked at Allen for a moment and nodded. "Alright. I'm going to take a bathroom break. A long bathroom break. I don't want to see you when I get back, understood?"

"Yes, Arthur. Thank you." The two watched a bit as the man circled around them and turned the corner down the hall, the bird's gaze lingering a bit longer as if he knew... This would be the last time he seen this place. That strange foreboding feeling made his feathers puff out as he felt a tug from the harness.

Obedying it and moving down the hall further towards a doorway, much like the one in the lab. Feeling Allen undo the harness and letting it slip off the large one's body, all those cyan eyes could do was watch in both... Sorrow and question. As his caretaker's gaze was that of more sadness but hopeful. "Okay... 4-9-5." The good words... "This... This is where we'll part ways. You'll have to go it alone from here, so I need you to listen to me, okay?" A shaky nod from the griffon. "It is cold out there. Stupid cold. The first thing you need to do is get off this mountain, get as far away from here as possible. Look for green plantlife and head there. That's your best chance at survival."

The large one looked at the door with worry. "Don't trust anymore people like us. Humans." Those ears perked. "They... The ones out there are not friends. They are not family. But... I feel like you could possibly find your own out there in the world; your own family. Or at the very least, a better life than being endlessly recycled here." Those bright blue eyes moved back towards Allen's face, hidden in the shadows. "I'm... Sorry for not making you better. I'm sorry for-" He choked, but the large one moved closer and once again embraced him tightly.

It eased the man's heart, getting him to hold the fluffy bird tightly. It was a scary thought to let him out into the wild, but at the same time... Something within Allen told him it was the right idea. The right move. That 4-9-5 understood and would be okay. "...Thank you, friend. I've never been more proud of you." For a few moments they just held each other before the caretaker shifted his way out. Holding that large head for another moment and getting the bird to purr.

Allen moved towards the door, opening the large valve the best he could, but the griffon

approached. Aiding him by offering the large one's strength and pulling the thing open- instantly getting a harsh cold and a freezing wind. Making the black one attempt to shelter his caretaker with wings. "Go. Go live a life the best you can." One last small hug before the griffon squeezed through the doorway into the frozen desert.

The slam of the door echoed when Allen threw all his weight into it to close it. Locking it back up and hoping no one would notice, but... He honestly planned everything up to this point. Picking up the harness and finding a stray feather that stuck into it, keeping it in his coat before heading back to his room. Turning the corner in the hallway- "The thought of you trying something like this..." A man's voice came from the darkest part of the hallway, startling the caretaker and making him hold his chest for a moment. "Occurred to me. But I didn't believe you would actually do it, Allen."

"V-Victor...!?" He whispered, barely spotting the outline of him leaning up against the wall. Stepping on one of the lights built into the floor's pathing to further hide him.

"But the more I thought about it..." The man pondered out loud. "I used to watch a lot of anime as a kid, Allen. I've been hit with the whole 'Power Of Friendship' or 'Love' constantly, and like you, I tried. I tried to do it your way, but saying Goodbye to them when they turn out to be failures is..." A noise in disapproval by Victor, still leaving the caretaker nearly whimpering. "I found it wasn't worth it."

"However..." The man got up, slowly walking towards Allen. "The idea still interests me, you see. Impractical and difficult to deal with as it is, it would be foolish of me to dismiss it entirely."

"S-so...?"

"...You're a good scientist with good ideas. I'm not going to fire you or 'get rid of you' Allen for setting your subject free. I'll state that up front. But you are going to owe me something. Something big too." Despite him being shorter, Victor intimidated the man when he stopped just in front of him. "Go get some rest. You've had a long day. I'll be in touch when things are closer to being ready." A faint noise in question as the smaller man waved to dismiss the caretaker. Hearing his pace quicken as soon as Allen passed his boss, leaving Victor lost in thought for a moment.

"Sir?" A voice came over his earpiece. "Farlock reporting. A test subject as escaped-"

"Yes. I know." Victor replied, surprisingly optimistic about the news.

"Our team is ready to engage, but I wanted to double check with you about orders."

"Good." A short pause. "Put a tracker on it."

"Sir?"

"Engage to force it away, but put a tracker on it. Try not to harm it past that, I want to see how far it gets."

"Understood."

The griffon sheltered his head with wings against the harsh winds as the door shut loudly behind him. Grabbing the attention of those cyan eyes not only of the door and its dark black metal, but the large building itself. Like a giant cube tower on the top of a summit, overlooking almost everything the islands had to offer.

4-9-5 did spot some beige in the distance, instantly recognizing it as a sandy desert of sorts. The knowledge coming to him as a heated climate, further confusing the bird of where such knowledge came from. Another scan around and a much larger mountain was spotted. Snowy, much like the one he was on, but his mind warning him of an even colder death if he moved towards that.

Circling around the square building, spotting a massive tree in the distance. A lot of green on it... And no knowledge of it. Unlike everything else, the tree was blank in his mind aside from what it looked like: a tree. However, it seemed much farther away than anything else, so he scanned past it.

Turning the corner he met another heavy gust of wind, causing him to take shelter with the building's walls until it stopped and he moved forwards. Needing to climb some of the snowy hills to look over it and spot... Green. Nearby green along the base of the mountain. There he would be safe from the cold, the griffon just needed to down to it safely-

Only to suddenly get a sting in the back of his shoulder! Something boring into his pelt and causing tremendous pain! Shots of the guns echoed from the building's higher decks as they barely missed the bird and burrowed into the snow. Causing his body to suddenly gear into fleeing away, downhill from the laboratory but the snow was hard to grip! Causing him to slide

down almost uncontrollably, attempting to jump so he could fly but instead falling face-first into a tumble.

Several more bursts of hi-tech rifle shots echoed from above, causing splashes with the snow before getting the entire sheet of it to start to slide. Hearing many of them curse through the bird's tumble before he hit the bottom, feeling his body ache and become stiff from the pain. Nearly deaf to the rumble approaching him, looking up at the small avalanche just before it hit his vision and everything went dark.

"What even is it?"

"It is not Pal."

"It isn't dead, that's what it is. And I'm not leaving it." The voices were distant, as if 4-9-5 were trapped under a thin ice. Yet, a comforting warmth was felt near his core, thawing him out like his bed during those very cold nights. Causing his body to move and shift to bring it closer, grabbing something fluffy and hearing a small yelp.

"Kit!" Something yip loudly "Help him-!" The griffon grabbed hold of the source of the heat, gasping and panting loudly as his subconscious broke through the ice. Its warmth making it much easier as it moved through his entire body, making it somewhat relaxed save for his black talons. Desperately holding onto the furred form with a glowing warmth. "Kit, no...!"

"I-I'm fine. They're just... A bit stronger and sharper than I expected." The warm one shyly whined over the heavy breaths of the bird, feeling the feathered one shaking with every heave. "Can you hear me?"

"Can it even...?" Some larger steps forwards made something else whimper as 4-9-5

tried to open his eyes. The bright blue flames seemed to cover the white fluff of the one he was holding, but he focused on the large creature beyond it. A form like his; quadruped, wings. But face of a... Horse? With a tiara made of ice. Red eyes studying his own, stoic and almost stern. Not minding the heavy chill of the wind that made her light-navy mane flow.

"Who are...?" The griffon attempted to speak, getting a rather intense stare from the pegasus. Feeling her look over the black bird still half buried in the snow.

"I could ask you the same thing." Her voice was more thick than curious, as if still undecided if she was willing to spare the feathered one. Causing the two to lock eyes for several moments, allowing the griffon to recover. "Ease your grip."

"W-what?"

"Now." Their stare wasn't broken until something shimmered above her; a stake formed out of ice rotating. One of three; aimed at 4-9-5. Making him swallow loudly as he slowly let go of the fluffy one keeping him warm. Lifting those black paws in surrender as the large white and blue fox adjusted himself. Though still staying around the bird, giving him that needed heat. After a moment, the missiles of ice were tossed aside with the pony's motion.

"You can... Understand me?" Another strong gaze until some movement around her legs caught his eyes. That of a smaller... Light blue weasel-like creature with very curious eyes. Hiding behind her like a protective mother. "No one else could."

"Who else." More of a demand than a question, making the griffon a little afraid to answer, feeling some tension building up.

"The people... They were..."

"Human?" The tension increased with the horse's tone, eventually making the bird nod. Watching her close those red eyes for a moment and exhale through her muzzle. A small cloud of heat expelling from her muzzle and drifting away from the wind as the other two looked quite frightful. "I told you. It is not Pal."

"But that doesn't mean he doesn't deserve help." The fox nearly grumbled, now getting the stare from those stern eyes. Instantly making him whimper and lower his head, but still staying in place. "And I can't abandon someone in need, even if requested by a-"

"That is a good way to get caught." The mare stated thickly, getting another whine from the canid but still didn't budge. Though flinching when he felt the griffon's paw touch his white coat. Instantly getting their attentions as 4-9-5 looked the fox over.

"You are... A Kitsun." The black bird said under his breath, sheltering his eyes from

another harsh breeze of cold as a small pain hit his inner head. "You... Provide protection from the elements for those who are near you." A semi-surprised look from those yellow eyes, following the griffon's sky blue ones as it moved towards a blue salamander creature behind the horse. Once again getting that pain in his head, making him grunt as a pair of long ears perked above the thick weasel's head. "Chillet?"

"Y-yes..." It nervously responded.

"You... curl into a ball and Roll downhill for fun and to escape from predators?" As concerning as it was the back one had such knowledge of such a thing, how confused 4-9-5 was while stating it made the snow ferret giggle. Only for those eyes to move to the pegasus. "You..." Those red eyes nearly became angry. "...I don't know. I don't know what you are." A near visible confusion was seen cracking her mental stonewall.

"That's Frostallion! She's-" The weasel chirped, instantly igniting the fire behind the mare's red eyes and getting an intense glare from her. Causing the Chillet to yelp, dive, and hide in the snow. Attempting to peek out of it didn't really help either.

"Frostallion...?" The bird repeated, getting her attention once again as 4-9-5 stared into space, shaking his head before returning his gaze to meet hers, angry or not. "No, nothing." There was that slight confusion again within the red discs, but also... A comfort? Releasing a small breath through her muzzle and walking away, leaving the three alone.

"Best to..." The Kitsun started. "Not talk about it." As curious as the griffon was, he nodded in understanding. Starting to get up from under the snow, attempting to shake things off of his body. A violent shiver passing through him just as a harsh wind came through, forcing the larger black beast to once again huddle next to the firefox. "The climate here is quite dangerous if you're unprepared. Especially at night."

"Y-yes... I was told to search for greens and head in that direction, but..." He trailed off, even seeing the blue ferret peek out in curiosity. "I was attacked by their weapons. Guns, if the term is correct."

"And that caused the snow to fall." The canine concluded, getting the black one to nod. "What are you?" The bird had to think for a moment.

"4-9-5."

"Fourninefive?" The Chillet started to come out of his burrow, waddling a little closer. "I don't think I've ever heard of anything like that before."

"Wait... The numbers?" Numbers... The Good Words. They were numbers the entire

time. The harsh realization was shown in those cyan discs as Kit attempted to comfort the large griffon. Not even noticing the weasel wiggle towards him. Still a bit frightened of the unknown but both of their blue eyes met; one pair darker than the other.

"You're..." The ferret started. "You're really not that scary up close." That made the bird faintly smile, though become a tad uncomfortable when the snow-noodle bunted into the griffon's chest and curled up in front of both him and the fox. Adding to the warmth and offering his flexible body as a pillow for the two.

They rested for a few moments before signs of dawn began to show in the night sky. Making the Kitsun nudge the Chillet for his attention. "It's becoming daybreak. I want to take shelter before the light returns." He then turned to the griffon. "I'm afraid I do not have enough time to escort you down the mountain into a safer climate."

"That's... Fine." 4-9-5 stated, getting up but hugging the fox tightly again. Causing a yelp in surprise. "Thank you for rescuing me, Kit. And... Sorry for scaring you." Those bright cyan eyes moved to the weasel too. "Scaring both of you."

"It's okay. You'd be surprised how often it happens." A soft chuckle from the fox, feeling the Chillet squeeze himself into the hug as well.

"You owe me, Four-nine." The statement made the other two laugh a little.

"I'll... Try to remember that."

"You're certain you will be okay?" The griffon took a deep breath but nodded. Releasing the embrace and letting the two go off. "Alright, little one. Let's get you back to your... What is a group of Chillets called?"

"A Sneak." A chuckle the canine as it made 4-9-5 smile, moving off in the other direction even though the cold was really noticeable away from Kit. In the distance though, he spotted the mare at the edge of a cliffside, laying down and watching where the sun would rise.

The griffon moved towards her, approaching a bit loudly as to not to spook the pegasus but not attempting to threaten the horse somehow larger than him. Resting beside Frostallion and looking over the vista for a few silent moments. "...I'm dying." He admitted, looking away from the red gaze as he attempted to collect himself, fearing those words immensely. "My body is falling apart. That's... Why I'm here."

"You escaped."

"I was... Let free by my caretaker."

"A human." A slow nod from the bird. "And so they threw you out like their garbage?"

"No. I was meant to be..." A breath to harden himself. "Recycled. But my caretaker... Allen. He had a heart. He was nice to me, and he..." The bird barely noticed the stallion look away as well. "That's why I'm here. Maybe I'm not Pal, as you said. Maybe I'm not anything, but I'm... I'm afraid." A shaky breath as silence fell over them.

"But that means you're alive." She stated, getting the attention of the griffon. "You're not a tool for them to use or... Whatever they were trying to make from you." Their gazes met, and just like before, the black one could read something else within those fortified red eyes. Empathy. "If this... Allen of yours set you free, he has given you the gift of another life."

"A better one..." A long silence between the two.

"I'm not certain if you will find that here."

"But I won't find it in there..." He didn't have to gesture towards the lab on the peak far behind them.

"What did they call you." Another near demand, leaving the griffon stunned due to the reaction of the previous two. "Whatever it was, it is best to abandon it with that place. Search for a new name along with your new life." A nod from the black one.

"...Where will you go?"

"Farther north, where the temperatures are even more frigid." It made him sad to hear that. "Humans have a hard time living there, as do you. So I would suggest going elsewhere. Somewhere warmer."

"Somewhere greener." A slow nod as the pegasus got up, leaving the bird to take a breath and do the same. Only for another chilly breeze to make him shutter. "Definitely somewhere warmer." He grumbled, getting a very faint smile from the white one.

"I hope you find it." That made the griffon smile too. "But some advice..."

"Stay away from humans?" A nod from the mare.

"Not just them, but... The devils here are vast and plenty. These islands are not a perfect paradise." His gaze fell, hearing the larger horse exhale and nudge his neck with her snout. "But that doesn't mean you can't make a good life here with whatever time you have. Like the humans... Your life is limited. The best you can hope for is to leave it in a better place than when you started."

"...And Life Starts Now." A noise in confirmation from the pegasus, looking off into the distance before feeling the griffon hug around her neck. Instantly making her tense up and very faintly whimper, not expecting it. "Thank you, Frostallion."

"You're... Welcome, Not-Pal." She attempted to hug him back. "Now Go."

"Life's Waiting To Begin."