

## ***FILE INTRODUCTION***

The following report represents a summary of the incident involving the abandoned microgravity holiday destination, Ailuros Unit Twenty-Three, and the crew of the Salvagers Guild Three ship, The Orca. The report is comprised primarily of the official transcripts of both the aforementioned events on board the unit and my interview with Guild Director, Sarah Walker. The final entry consists of my summarizing thoughts on the case. As is often the case in investigations such as this, in the end, Ailuror itself is as much the key to understanding the events as the people involved are. Circumstances as well as personal choices are important, after all. Please note, as per standard practises, transcriber names have been redacted.

**Case Reference:** 437509190815211204142008012205

**Additional Materials Reference:** 437503011212050408091302212009

**Investigative Officer:** Mark Tyler

**UNID Staff Number:** 121519202008050609070820

**FILE NAME: EXPLORATORY INTERVIEW (I)**

**FILE REFERENCE: 437512210325912700336100295940**

**TRANSCRIBED BY: [REDACTED] [REDACTED]**

<sup>1</sup> Dear Josh. I'm sorry. It feels strange saying that now. There's a part of me that feels like I shouldn't apologize at all, all things considered. But there it is. I drugged your tea. I know you opted out of Neg-Vacs, and on medical advice at that, but I was desperate. The thing is, I saw you. With him. And no matter how much I tried to hint at knowing it, you just wouldn't open up. I needed you to be willing to open up unprompted. Or that's what I thought at the time. After seeing what I did, I skipped my own Neg-Vac. I didn't want it all suppressed. I wanted to feel the full force of it. But it didn't happen. You didn't bite. So, I took my Neg-Vac and used it to drug your tea, then put you in my Alleviation Sim. Yes, I'm aware that there are dangers with that; the mix is custom built for each person, based on their physiology. The way the whole system works is, I guess. That would be why 'Ailuros' came up as 'Ailuror' in the introduction. The AI was trying to reconcile words based on my brain, not yours. I wouldn't be surprised if that isn't the only one it gets wrong.

Like I said, I was desperate. I suppose that doesn't really excuse it though, does it? I essentially risked your life because I allowed myself to feel jealous. And angry. The worst thing is, that's not even where it ends. After I got back on the Neg-Vac, I stole this report—technically it was addressed to me but being about you makes it yours—and took it to a friend of mine that works freelance in Waking Dream Analysis. I won't give you their name, but I will say that they've been used by a couple of companies before now when crime has been suspected. Basically, they know what they're doing. They reviewed your Alleviation Sim. You'll recognize their notes because they'll be shown <like this>. The rest of the stuff you'll read is mine. So, you know what? I do owe you an apology. I'm sorry. For screwing up and nearly killing you, and for showing your private data to someone else. But I needed to know. I needed to know if any part of you was sorry, too, or if there's any chance that we can salvage something from this. Anyway. Read on. I'm writing in order as I read, so I don't know what I'll find.

<sup>2</sup> I recognized this wording straight away. You said the same thing about the Neg-Vac/ Alleviation Sim system during our first date. I always thought you just didn't like the way the Government controls how we experience 'recognized negative emotions.' Even with the evidence that the system works—violent crime is down 86% after all—some push back is natural. Still though, 'a trial.' Maybe you were always a little scared about what would come out if someone put you in a Sim.

**MARK TYLER:** My<sup>1</sup> name is Mark Tyler, acting legal representative for the UNID in the case of Ailuros Unit Twenty-Three. My interview subject today is Sarah Walker, current Director of Salvagers Guild Three. Sarah, do you give consent for the recording, both audio and video, of our conversation?

**SARAH WALKER:** I do.

**MARK TYLER:** And do you consent to the verbatim transcription of this conversation to be provided to the necessary legal bodies including, where appropriate, my own notes and assessment?

**SARAH WALKER:** I do.

**MARK TYLER:** Finally, do you consent to the use of standard UNID monitors, designed with the intent to indicate, but not legally confirm, potential falsehoods in statements made by yourself.

**SARAH WALKER:** I do.

**MARK TYLER:** Okay, good. Thank you. A copy of all evidence within the case file will, of course, be provided to you upon compilation. Now, are you fine with me calling you Sarah, or would you prefer Miss Walker?

**SARAH WALKER:** Sarah is fine.

**MARK TYLER:** You seem very defensive, Sarah.

**SARAH WALKER:** What do you expect? This is for all intents and purposes the first stages of a trial,<sup>2</sup> isn't it?

**MARK TYLER:** To an extent. As such though, you should be well aware that the more information you can provide, the better. Neither I nor the UNID are your enemies, Sarah. However, in the spirit of honesty, I will say this. This is not a case of whether charges can be raised, but rather, *which* charges can be raised. And against whom. The events aboard

Ailuros Unit Twenty Three have ramifications, some of them far reaching, and not just for Salvagers Guild Three.

<sup>3</sup> It isn't how I expected it to go either. I'll be honest, now that I'm thinking clearly again, doing this feels dirty. Then, I remember why I'm doing it. Even with the medication suppression, the pain is still there. I guess that makes it one of those 'high stress anomalies' the guides talk about, doesn't it? It doesn't make it easier, just more justifiable. At least to me.

<sup>4</sup> <An indication that the subject's unconscious mind is aware that something has happened and is trying to figure out the cause.>  
The fact is, no matter what else is in play here, you made a choice to sleep with him. So, it's you Josh. You are to blame, even if not entirely.

<sup>5</sup> <It is too soon to be certain, but this opening section seems to be indicative of an attempt at self-study. It is clear that there will be multiple characters in the Sim. Each will be representative of a part of the subject, whether it be a personality trait, or simply the embodiment of an event. Mark and Sarah discussing the events is an attempt to bring it all together into a cohesive whole.>

I read up a little on this way back when I was put in the Neg-Vac system. Suppressing negative emotions and traits usually leads to everything being condensed in the Sim. You relive a direct event or something easily linkable, and it's always from your own point of view. That yours isn't here is part of the reason for you being medically cleared to avoid the injections. To be clear, I'm not saying you're broken. I'm saying you're complicated. So many things affect you. And giving you my Neg-Vac probably made that worse.

**SARAH WALKER:** [Sighs] I understand that. This isn't exactly how I expected things to go, you know?<sup>3</sup>

**MARK TYLER:** [Nods] I can imagine. Nevertheless, we do need to get to the bottom of what exactly happened.

**SARAH WALKER:** And who's to blame?<sup>4</sup>

**MARK TYLER:** That too. Now, the way this works is we're going to review the relevant files in order. As we do so, I will be asking you questions regarding different points. You are free to ask any questions you wish to, of course, and if I can answer them, I will.<sup>5</sup> Each conversation we have will be stored as a separate file for the purposes of the overall case file, but as the recording itself is continuous, there won't be a need to repeat consent.

**SARAH WALKER:** Sounds fine to me. I run internal reviews the same way.

**MARK TYLER:** Glad to hear it. Well then. We'll begin with some background files.

**FILE NAME: RECORDING ONE – THE WANDERER INTERNAL MONITORING SYSTEM, REC ROOM**

**FILE REFERENCE: 437500290615192005183000412798**

**TRANSCRIBED BY: [REDACTED] - [REDACTED]**

<sup>6</sup> <Reading ahead slightly, I noted that the subject has placed themselves and their partner in the lead roles. While not the first to appear in the Sim, they are the first to appear in the 'events' the Sim is covering. When you consider the fractured nature of the scenario, this demonstrates that he is aware that the negative emotions he is dealing with relates directly to both him and his partner.>

This is good. It means we're dealing with the right stuff. If this had gone another way, it would be a waste. That sounds bad, actually. I mean a waste in terms of what I want to achieve. Which is selfish. Which is a recognized negative emotion. I guess I'm still in that run on you get when you come off then go back on the Neg-Vacs.

<sup>7</sup> The 'throwback' mentioned here is, in reality, your habit of focusing on the past. You always talked about relationships that failed. And you were also sad when you did. It hurt knowing that you had as much time, if not more, for past lovers as you did for me. I buried my feelings about it because it was all a part of you. Maybe that was my mistake. If I'd spoken to you about it, perhaps this could have prevented. Or maybe you would have kept it all in more and it would have been worse? Who knew being a wailing wall could hurt so much, eh? Still. I wonder if what I've done will be something you speak about with your next lover.

<sup>8</sup> This was random but I did recognize the title. It's one of your favourites. The study of the secret communications between an online political activist and the UK PM, and the cryptography used to crack their systems. You're a little prone to paranoia, I think, especially when it comes to the Government. You were obsessed with the idea that there was something more nefarious going on and that you needed to hide things from the powers that be. At least on your bad days. You know, before I knew that it was something that hurt you, I used to like how you had hidden codes in your record keeping and social media posts. It was a cute quirk. Or that's what I thought. I grew to appreciate how consuming paranoia can be through living with you. You helped me grow a little like that. It seemed unfair really that all I could do was watch and listen, rather than help you grow past it.

<sup>9</sup> <Deities often appear in these Sims as having a direct link to judgement. It's symptomatic of how much religion has been used to justify judgement over the years. The use of a deity as part of the place that the characters are aiming to reach, and the earlier mention of 'a trial' confirms this, which would make the Ailuros unit somewhere where the subject's 'sins' will be played out and laid bare. I am unfamiliar with the Goddess' lore though, so cannot confirm if the name holds any relevance beyond being known to the subject.>

The name here is actually slightly wrong. Ailuros was the Greek name for the Egyptian Goddess, Bast. Her Greek equivalent would be Artemis, I think. It is interesting though. Bast was a cat-headed deity, and I refer to you as 'Puss-Puss' in the Sim. That she was a Goddess of protection and cats might mean you were hoping for divine intervention?

Josh Byrne<sup>6</sup> floated gently in the middle of The Wanderer's rec room. He'd insisted on it being set up to mimic a twenty-first century London living room when he first moved into the ship. There was just something about that aesthetic that he loved. Even the way the room lights were humming had a charm to it.

But then, he'd always been a retro-tech throwback.<sup>7</sup> Some things were unavoidable of course, such as the mandated Skin Suits. Designed to allow people to wear projections of whatever clothing they wanted, they certainly had advantages. Projection routines were far cheaper to buy than real clothing, for example, which all but eliminated certain types of bullying.

Plus, Alex got that vintage "little black dress projection" that they both loved, albeit for slightly different reasons.

Josh flipped a page on his well-worn copy of KeepTalking//PieceByPiece's *The Toby Garvin Regime: Lost Interviews with the Prime Minister*,<sup>8</sup> and took in the scent of the paper. He sighed.

"Hey Puss-Puss. Found your catnip again?"

Josh smiled and glanced up at the video screen on the wall. "Still far better than the synthesized scent the eBooks use."

Alex Holden chuckled, and continued, "You'll never guess what I found on the scanner."

Josh flipped another page. "A derelict?"

Alex tutted and stuck their tongue out. "You know, it's no fun if you don't play along. I mean, you could have said anything. A new planet. Alien life. A decent off-world coffee."

"Okay, okay," Josh laughed. "So, what have we found?"

"You ever hear of Ailuros?"

"Microgravity Ibiza, right? The holiday station named after the Greek goddess of dance and beauty."<sup>9</sup>

"Amongst other things. Anyway, two and a half years ago, they ejected one of their holiday units. We just happen to have found it."

Josh stopped reading and frowned. "That's potentially a pretty big haul. We should get onto the guild."

"Oh, I already called it in," Alex replied, relaxing their arms behind their

<sup>10</sup>For what it's worth, I blushed at that. I always did appreciate it when you complimented me. The same applied to the little black dress comment. And by the way, you were only partially right on us liking it for different reasons. Yes, it does make me feel more comfortable on female-leaning days, and it is more of a sex thing for you. I do enjoy the physical side too though. Between the way the projection makes it hang and how much you enjoy it, how could I not feel sexy? This helps, actually. Remembering the ways we're good for each other reminds me why I want to save what we have. I just hope you see it the same way when you see what I've done.

head and smiling widely. "We're on our way to see Sarah right now. ETA three hours."

"In that case," Josh replied, pressing a bookmark against his page, "I'll grab the coffee. A decent off-world one, right?"

"Best make mine a water for now; I'm due a treadmill session," Alex replied, then added, in a low purr, "I trust that means you'll be with me shortly?"

Josh blushed and made no attempt to hide it. "Best view out there.<sup>10</sup> See you in five."

The speaker clicked off, and Josh folded a magnetized band around the book. He looked over at the bookshelf, took aim, and pushed the book, letting it float freely. He grabbed one of the floor bars and pulled himself forward, using the microgravity to travel alongside the old paperback.

The book slid gently into place between two others, making a satisfying click as the band was drawn against the magnetic strip at the back of the shelf. Josh threw his arms up in celebration, grabbed the doorway, and slipped into the hall.