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Dystopian Literature and the Novella Form as Illustrated Through Side Effects, an Original Novella

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DYSTOPIAN LITERATURE AND THE NOVELLA FORM

AS ILLUSTRATED THROUGH *SIDE EFFECTS*,

AN ORIGINAL NOVELLA

by

Bryan W. Johnson

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

English

Approved:

Jennifer A. Sinor Major Professor	Michael Sowder Committee Member
Scott C. Bates Committee Member	Mark R. McLellan Vice President for Research and Dean of the School of Graduate Studies

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah

2012

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ABSTRACT

Dystopian Literature and the Novella Form as Illustrated Through

Side Effects, an Original Novella

by

Bryan W. Johnson, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2012

Major Professor: Jennifer A. Sinor
Department: English

This master's degree thesis exists in two parts: a critical introduction and an original novella entitled *Side Effects*. The critical introduction introduces and explains the theories on, literature surrounding, and literary uses of dystopian fiction, the novella format, and drug-based psychotherapy. Current opinion on dystopian fiction sees it characterized by a seemingly perfect societal setting that ultimately contains hidden or suppressed moral flaws. The ultimate purpose of dystopian fiction is commentary on contemporary society through a defamiliarized setting. The novella format is shown to exist in a middle-ground state between the short story and the novel, yet the format manages to maintain positive literary elements of both. Finally, a discussion on drug-based psychotherapy illustrates the use of chemical compounds to treat or cure psychological conditions, a topic of much debate amongst current psychology practitioners. The section on drug-based psychotherapy focuses largely on memoirs for purposes of first-hand experience and character creation for the original novella.

The novella, entitled *Side Effects*, follows the character Edward, a middle-aged man who creates and tests serums that suppress by mandate the emotions that his society deems toxic to the human condition. Edward remains ignorant of any life outside the symmetry and order of the Company, the corporation responsible for the maintenance of the society. That is, until a chance encounter with a young woman named Gabrielle causes Edward to explore a world outside the confines of his carefully crafted city and lifestyle. She introduces him to a community of people who reject the mandates of the Company and exist as the extreme opposition to its ideals. As Edward spends more time with this group, known as Splicers, he must confront his long-held standards and finally choose for himself what life he will live.

(94 pages)

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Dystopian Literature and the Novella Form as Illustrated Through

Side Effects, an Original Novella

by Bryan W. Johnson

This master's degree thesis exists in two parts: a critical introduction and an original novella, entitled *Side Effects*. The critical introduction introduces and explains the theories on, literature surrounding, and literary uses of dystopian fiction, the novella format, and drug-based psychotherapy. Current opinion on dystopian fiction sees it characterized by a seemingly perfect societal setting that ultimately contains hidden or suppressed moral flaws. The ultimate purpose of dystopian fiction is commentary on contemporary society through an unfamiliar setting. The novella format is shown to exist in a middle-ground state between the short story and the novel, yet the format manages to maintain positive literary elements of both. Finally, a discussion on drug-based psychotherapy illustrates the use of chemical compounds to treat or cure psychological conditions, a topic of much debate amongst current psychology practitioners. The section on drug-based psychotherapy focuses largely on memoirs for purposes of first-hand experience and character creation for the original novella.

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Bryan W. Johnson

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Dystopian Fiction and the Novella Form

This creative thesis project represents my sincerest attempt to engage in the literary genre of dystopian fiction, both creatively and academically. I have created an original novella of roughly 15,000 words that operates as a piece of dystopian literature, to be defined and explored later in this introduction. The novella addresses the issues of drug-based psychotherapy and the altering of mood and mental states through pharmacological means in as much as these issues pertain to societal control and concepts of correct and incorrect behavior, thought, and mood. The narrative incorporates the primary elements of dystopian fiction—namely social critique, defamiliarization, and utopian pessimism—and also follows the conventions of the novella format both in length and literary techniques. These elements of dystopian fiction and conventions of the novella form will be further discussed later in this introduction along with examples of other fiction narratives that operate in the dystopian genre and/or address issues of drug-based modification of mental and emotional states of being.

The novella, entitled *Side Effects*, follows the character Edward, a middle-aged man who creates and tests serums that suppress by mandate the emotions that his society deems toxic to the human condition. Edward remains ignorant of any life outside the symmetry and order of the Company, the corporation responsible for the maintenance of the society. That is, until a chance encounter with a young woman named Gabrielle causes Edward to explore a world outside the confines of his carefully crafted city and

lifestyle. She introduces him to a community of people who reject the mandates of the Company and exist as the extreme opposition to its ideals. As Edward spends more time with this group, known as Splicers, he must confront his long-held standards and finally choose for himself what life he will live.

Dystopian Literature

The dystopian setting for this narrative allows the confrontation of socially-accepted ideas of right and wrong states of being. There exists a long and rich tradition of dystopian literature that this novella functions within, adding to a line of works that date back at least 2300 years. The exploration and critique of drug-based alterations of the self and society's views on these practices also maintains a longstanding tradition within literature, both within dystopian fiction and outside of it. My thesis narrative adds to these well-established traditions of literature and builds on their principles by means of an original contribution.

In order to understand the roots of dystopian literature—also referred to as anti-utopian or pseudo-utopian literature—one must understand utopian literature. The word "Utopia" is a Greek word first used by Sir Thomas More in 1516 in his book of the same name to describe the ideal society. Etymologically, the word itself is argued to be a combination of the Greek words for "no place" and "good place," and this combination definition has helped spawn the idea of a utopian society being one that is nonexistent but also superior to its real-world counterparts. Utopian literature's origins go as far back as Plato's *Republic*, and it seeks to imagine new ways of defining a society (Booker, *Dystopian Literature* 60).

Dystopian literature exists as a response to utopian literature. Whereas utopian works attempt to represent the ideal society for the purpose of exploring alternatives to contemporary life, dystopian works function as social criticism in illustrating the negative aspects of contemporary society in a false or pseudo-utopian culture. M. Keith Booker, an English professor at the University of Arkansas and author of many critically acclaimed texts on science fiction and dystopian literature, defines dystopian works as literature that critically examines "both existing conditions and the potential abuses that might result from the institution of supposedly utopian alternatives" (Booker, *Dystopian Literature* 3). This critical examination allows dystopian literature to critique existing social conditions or political systems through a dialogue of utopian idealism.

While often the genre of dystopian literature is categorized as a subgenre of science fiction, due mostly to the large overlap of works that fall in the context of both genres, Booker asserts that "dystopian fiction differs from science fiction in its attention to social and political critique" (4). American science fiction writer Robert A Heinlein asserts that the focus of science fiction when placed in a futuristic setting is the "realistic speculation about possible future events, based solidly on adequate knowledge of the real world, past and present, and on a thorough understanding of the nature and significance of the scientific method" (qtd. Knight 9). He further asserts that to adapt that definition to all science fiction, one would simply remove the word "future" (9).

The difference, then, between science fiction and dystopian fiction lies in its focus: science fiction's main focus is its basis in empirical progression and its links to real-world research and result processes, whereas the primary focus of dystopian literature is the social and political critique. Science fiction also makes an attempt,

according to *Twilight Zone* creator Rod Serling, to present improbability as possibility ("The Fugitive"). Dystopian literature is not necessarily bound by this notion of the probability of events nor by the process of constructing their transition into the realm of possibility. The overlap that occurs between science fiction and dystopian fiction is usually a result of social and political critique made apparent through an examination of possible events with an empirical undertone, thus resulting in several works of dystopian science fiction. This hybridization, although common, is not required, and the two genres can maintain themselves independent of the other.

Another defining characteristic of dystopian literature is defamiliarization: the process of creating "imaginatively distant settings" in which to focus the work's social criticism (Booker, *Dystopian Literature* 4). By removing the reader in place or time from familiar surroundings, social practices that might otherwise be seen as commonplace are presented in a fresh manner so they can be more closely examined in a separate context. It is for this reason that many dystopian literary works take place in the future or in societies completely removed from our own. This allows readers to envision a world in which attributes of society may be exaggerated variations of those faced contemporarily.

In contemporary literature, utopian ideals are viewed by many as backwards-thinking, what Robert Scholes and Eric Rabkin described as a nostalgic desire to return to an earlier, better time, or as "atavistic urges to escape" (174). Gary Saul Morson suggests in *The Boundaries of Genre* that "utopias describe an escape *from* history, [whereas] these anti-utopias describe an escape, or attempted escape, *to* history, which is to say, to the world of contingency, conflict, and uncertainty" (128). Booker argues that contemporary society has a harder time accepting the idea of a utopia, and notes this as

the reason for a "modern turn from utopia to dystopia" in literature (*The Dystopian Impulse* 5).

Mark Hillegas suggests that the dystopian trend in modern writing has come about because it reflects "the anxieties of our age" (3). Indeed, skepticism on the possibility of a utopian society reflects the works of modern social critics like Nietzche and Freud. As a race, humankind has become pessimistic in its faith of the ideal system coming to fruition. Commenting on utopian fiction, Robert C. Elliot said that a belief in utopian society requires human beings to believe that, by power of reason, mankind can improve their social condition, and that "to believe in utopia one must have faith of a kind that our history has made nearly inaccessible" (87).

The Novella

The concept of the novella as a form of fiction remains in a state of perpetual confusion and controversy. Most often, the novella is defined by what it is not: too long to be a short story, not long enough to be a novel. Even a formal definition of length changes from source to source. In the *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada*, Warren Cariou proposes that a novella is 15,000 to 50,000 words long (qtd. Fetherling). The Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers of America (SFWA), in determining the rules for their Nebula Awards, limit a novella to "at least 17,500 words but less than 40,000 words" ("Nebula Rules"). Still others suggest between 50 and 150 pages (Kercheval). This disparity has led to numerous names for pieces that may be considered novellas, including novelettes (used mostly in the 1940s and 50s), nivolas, and even "short novels."

Publishers themselves are often reluctant to accept novellas or even use the term when publishing works of fiction that fall within these length boundaries (Fetherling).

Although there exist a small number of contests dedicated to the publication of novellas (such as the annual *Quarterly West* novella competition, currently on hiatus, or the Miami University Press biannual novella contest), the length of a novella does not lend itself well to convenient publication in a periodical nor as a stand-alone work (like a novel). Because fiction publishing is mostly concerned with short stories and novels, less mainstream forms—including flash fiction, short-shorts, novel-in-stories, and novellas—rely on the conventions of short stories and novels as points of definition.

In comparison to a short story, the conflict of a novella is either more complicated or requires a longer time to establish (Kercheval 168). Conflicts in the novella have more time to be developed and can have more highs and lows throughout. The novella can give a more complete sense of life for the characters and conflicts within. A novella's ending, unlike that of the short story, must also have a more complete sense of resolution as a result. Rather than ending on a moment of "comes-to-realize or fails-to-realize" as a short story might, a novella must "leave room for readers to come to terms with what has happened to [the] characters,… falling action and resolution,…an ending that resembles a novel's more than it does a short story's" (171).

The novella differs from the novel primarily by its scope and the intensity of its effect. While a novel will have several sets of conflicts in which one is resolved and the next begun, a novella tends to maintain a single set of conflicts leading to one overarching resolution. The narrative structure of a novella is continuous, allowing for

the "intensity of effect" present in a short story while being able to address a topic that would be too complex to express in a short story's length (172).

What purpose, then, does the novella serve in the literary world? It combines singleness of effect with greater character and plot development (168). Cariou suggests that the novella "is most often concerned with personal and psychological development rather than the larger social sphere [and] generally retains something of the unity of the short story [but also] the more highly developed characterization and more luxuriant description" present in novels (qtd. Fetherling).

This focus on the psychological, rather than the larger social strata, allows for the novella format to accommodate social critiques, like those made in dystopian literature, from a personal perspective within the society. Several dystopian narratives have employed the novella form to create a greater sense of defamiliarization from an overly-explained setting (as in a novel) while addressing social issues that could not be adequately characterized in the confines of a short story. Examples of dystopian novellas include Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*, H.G. Well's *The Time Machine*, and Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*. In each of these, readers are allowed personal characterization of one or more individuals within a dystopian society, facilitating social critique through the eyes and minds of individuals.

Drug-based Psychotherapy

The main focus of my narrative is the issue of drug-based psychotherapies. A large point of controversy and conflict within the psychology community is that of pharmacological treatment of psychological disorders. Generally, medicinal treatments

are viewed as a positive tool to be used in conjunction with psychotherapy, but the extent to which society relies on drug-based therapy remains in question, as does the meaning of this reliance. One thing seems fairly clear: the medical and public communities appear to be more comfortable with drug-based therapies than they are with the more interpersonal means of treatment of mental and emotional disorders.

Leighton C. Whitaker, PhD, and Arthur J. Deikman, MD, discuss this dependence on drug-based therapies in a case study that attempted to decrease a mental health ward's dependence on psychotropic medication for treatment of patients in favor of developing interpersonal abilities and strengths through direct emotional engagement. "Thus, we rejected the assumption that schizophrenia and psychotic depression were biochemically based disease entities requiring medical treatment in the form of drugs" (52). Although this approach proved successful in producing "superior results for interpersonal forms of caring," the policy was never adopted, and the results of the study were met with distrust and defiance from the medical community (51).

Peter D. Kramer, MD, commented on this socially constructed notion that mental and emotional disorders are purely biologically-based diseases in *Listening to Prozac*, stating that "our culture is caught in a frenzy of biological materialism" (xiii). Kramer realized in his own practice of psychiatry that he began "to see inborn, biologically determined temperament where before [he] had seen slowly acquired, history-laden character" (xv). The practice of drug-based psychological treatment changed the way he saw individuals, using the predefined formulas of what constituted a mental or emotional "disease" in order to prescribe a "fix" for that psychological problem:

> Already, it seems to me, psychiatric diagnosis had been subject to a sort of "diagnostic bracket creep"—the expansion of categories to match the scope of relevant medications.
>
> How large a sphere of human problems we choose to define as medical is an important social decision. But words like "choose" and "decision" perhaps misstate the process. It is easy to imagine that our role will be passive, that as a society we will in effect permit the material technology, medications, to define what is health and what is illness. (15-16)

While there are a large number of clinical studies concerning the effectiveness of drug-based psychological treatments as well as many opinion pieces on the issues, I have chosen to limit the scope of my research to the personal experiences of patients and psychiatrists. Kramer's *Listening to Prozac* gives an accounting of numerous patients that he treated, his use of drug-based therapy, and his changing ideas on the effect that pharmacological psychotherapy has on patients, doctors, and society as a whole. *Prozac Nation* is a memoir of author Elizabeth Wurtzel's struggles with depression, therapy, and use of medication. Finally, *An Unquiet Mind* offers a bridge between the two. Kay Redfield Jamison, author of this memoir, is a professor of psychiatry at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine and suffers from manic depression, commonly known as bipolar disorder.

In constructing a novella concerning drug-based psychological treatment, these texts are far more useful than case studies or opinion articles. Because the novella is concerned with psychological and personal experience, these texts supply the information needed to construct complex, true-to-life characters who are acting in the psychiatric roles of healer, healed, both, and neither. The memoir format gives intimate insight into the emotional and mental states of the authors, from which to model characters in my novella. In particular, the experiences of Wurtzel and Jamison as females afflicted with

psychological disorders shaped the character of Gabrielle (Gabby) in the novella, a young woman who suffers from multiple mental and emotional problems. Similarly, Jamison's experiences as a psychological practitioner, as well as those of Kramer, informed the construction of the character Doc, a man who has rejected the established practices of drug-based psychological treatments.

The growing social problem of drug-based psychological treatments and the potential process of societal acceptance of these problems make this issue well suited for presentation in the defamiliarized setting of dystopian literature, allowing for the critique of current practices and viewpoints that society maintains are natural or commonplace. The novella form facilitates the presentation of this material in a personal, psychologically-based manner, keeping the reader engaged in a singular overarching conflict while providing insight into the minds of the individuals who would exist in a society based on medicating emotional states.

An example of a novella that deals with the maintenance and alteration of mood and behavior by the consumption of a created substance is *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson. Dr. Jekyll, seeking to separate his negative and positive characteristics, creates and self-administers a "potion" that transforms him into the grotesque and brutal Mr. Hyde. An aspect of this narrative that is often misrepresented in adaptations and summaries is the fact that the savage Mr. Hyde must also consume a similar concoction to return to the Dr. Jekyll persona. In this way, Jekyll uses his potion to unleash his darker, socially unacceptable behaviors, emotions, and thoughts; while Hyde enlists a comparable process to suppress those behaviors, emotions,

and thoughts completely. In a similar fashion, my novella sees individuals using mood-altering drugs to both suppress and exploit the negative aspects of their inner selves.

The case could also be made for why *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* might be considered dystopian in its approach to societal critique and utopian pessimism. The Jekyll-Hyde character itself is a form of societal critique, representing late-Victorian Europe, a supposedly advanced and civilized culture that also ruthlessly sought the destruction of other nations. The quest of these nations to carve up the world into empires caused a pessimistic attitude among their respective populations, and the supposedly Utopian-moving society that had flourished with the technological advances of the earlier years of the Victorian era seemed doomed. The third condition of dystopian literature, defamiliarization, can also be seen in Stevenson's novella in small ways. While the general time and place of the narrative's events may have been familiar to readers, the representation of a cultural and societal issue in a single character gave the issue itself a form of defamiliarization. Also, the fact that the serum used to enact transformations is referred to as a "potion" suggests a wish to distance that aspect from familiar and probable ideas.

In conclusion, the novella form has acted as the vehicle for delivering many dystopian narratives. As stated above, Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*, and even H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine* could all be considered dystopian in nature. Even Thomas More's *Utopia*, from which utopian and by extension dystopian works get their names, may be considered a novella at 134 pages and could be said to operate both as a utopian and dystopian text. A more contemporary author who addresses issues of emotion-altering drug use in what could be considered a dystopian

setting is *New York Times* bestselling American writer George Saunders. His recent story, "Escape from Spiderhead," follows Jeff, a man who takes part in futuristic clinical trials for pharmacological compounds that create and remove emotions. Participants are made to fall in and out of love, to disregard shame, and even to become intensely depressed and hopeless all through the administration of certain chemical compounds. The dystopian setting allows Saunders to not only address issues of drug-based therapies for mood adjustment and regulation, but to do so in a way in which the defamiliarization creates a clearer understanding on the part of the reader of themes prevalent in the narrative, such as love versus lust, responsibility to others, and basic human kindness.

My novella is a new addition to this longstanding tradition of dystopian literature and the novella form. The function of dystopian fiction is to critique pertinent societal problems, and this work explores the social problems surrounding drug-based psychotherapy—issues that people may be ignorant of—presented by means of defamiliarization.

SIDE EFFECTS

First

The swift sting of the needle entering Edward's forearm passed almost as quickly as it had come. Pain reduction and injection accuracy had increased in the Mark 7 diagnosis booth nearly fifteen percent according to recent advertisements. Edward recalled using the Mark 4s as a child, how the slow optical targeting in the machine led to long, drawn-out stabs to the arm. Sticking his arm into the metal cuff that rammed the metal pin into his skin had always seemed ominous. On his first use of the booth, Edward had jerked away and torn a gash down the side of his left arm. After that, he became a right-arm tester exclusively. For the next six or so tests, Edward's mother secured his right arm into place with strength uncommon to her age, gripping his wrist and elbow like shackles. Until the Mark 5 rolled out well into Edward's preteen years, the woman contorted her frame in the tiny Mark 4 meant for a single individual, her body filling in the small spaces around her son.

The retraction of the needle seemed more like a pinch than a sting. Whereas the entrance into his body caused the sensation of pain, the mild discomfort of departure was not unlike a mosquito's bite. Edward used his thumb to wipe away the small crimson bead collecting at the place his forearm had been pierced and instinctually placed the digit into his mouth. The metallic taste his blood had as a child now had an off-putting chemical quality to it, like the lingering taste that stuck in the air after the use of aerosol cleaners. Edward flicked his tongue in distaste. He should know by now not to do that.

An advertisement for the newest CT flashed along the bottom of the diagnosis booth screen. *Dispassion: The Only Corrective Treatment Licensed for Battling Lasciviousness*. Edward grinned. He, along with his research partner Stephens, had been part of the team to develop Dispassion. Stephens had advocated for the name "Cold Shower," citing an archaic practice for battling the behavior, but ultimately the focus group decided that a single-word label had a stronger impact with the populace. Easier to remember, more natural to bring up in conversation. Besides, each CT previously developed had been given a one-word name. The company had only recently hired Stephens, but even so, he should have known better.

"Good afternoon, Mister Edward." The round, bearded face of a middle-aged man appeared on the screen. The circular lenses of the man's spectacles and his Freudian facial hair immediately relayed a sense of expertise and confidence—exactly as intended. The edges of the man's mouth curled slightly upward, showing optimistic sincerity.

"Apologies," Edward replied, "but I requested a male consultant by accident. I much prefer a female. And Edward is my first name. I must have entered my information into the wrong field again."

The half-grin on the bearded man's face did not falter. "Apologies, Mister Edward. At this juncture, no additional parameters can be accepted. Do you wish to restart the examination?"

"No, thank you." Edward did not relish the idea of enduring the injection process a second time, no matter how brief the pain. These new virtual consultants definitely improved upon the Mark 6's image and text display and touch screen interface, but the boys downstairs in Diagnostic R&D obviously needed to overhaul the AI's ability to

interact with patients. Most notably, the interface still used the overly formal "Mister" and "Miss" prefixes, dated titles that Edward hadn't heard in normal conversations for over ten years. Edward made a mental note to discuss the matter with Williamson when next the two ate lunch together.

"Very well," the machine continued. "Mister Edward, it seems your present CT concentration is eighty-six point seven percent. The chemical composition indicates your current treatment as *Euphoria*." Edward noted the change in inflection when the AI said the name of his CT, remembering how Williamson had told him that the R&D department had programmed each treatment's name independent of the AI's main script. *Hoping to integrate the two in the Mark 8*, Williamson had said.

"Yes, Euphoria. I would like to request a breakdown of my toxicity levels, please."

"Certainly, Mister Edward. Please wait while the list is compiled." The virtual consultant continued staring at Edward through its programmed spectacles, the pixels comprising his mouth arranged into the same static grin it had originally appeared with on the screen. The advertisement for Dispassion along the bottom of the screen changed to an advert for a designer CT pump, a dual compartment model that held twice as much CT and commanded three times the price of the basic unit—clearly a luxury reserved for wealthy business bigwigs and their children. Edward could never afford such an extravagance with his modest technician's salary.

"Apologies for the delay. Your toxicity report has been compiled. Do you wish to hear an oral accounting of the data?"

"Yes, please."

"Toxicity report follows. Anxiety, fifty-six point eight percent. Depression, fifty-five percent. Hopelessness, thirty-two point nine percent. Stress, twenty-two point two percent. Rage, sixteen percent. Mania, nine point one percent. Covetousness, seven point one percent. Lasciviousness, six percent. Trace amounts of fear, remorse, melancholy, pride, apathy, and gluttony. Would you like a printed report for your records, Mister Edward?"

"Please."

A piece of paper ejected from below the screen, roughly twice the length of Edward's identity card and listing his toxin levels in black letters almost too small to read. He folded it in half, top to bottom, and placed it in his wallet.

"Based on your most recent toxicity report, this diagnostic station recommends a new CT regiment of *Calm*." Again, the inflection strayed with the name. "A report has been filed with central processing, informing them of your new prescription. As per law, you are allowed seventy-two hours to begin your new CT. Would you like this station to schedule an appointment with the nearest extraction facility for the removal of your current CT?"

"No, I'd like to make the appointment with the facility near my home. I'm at work now."

"Apologies, Mister Edward, but the location 'my home' was unrecognized. At this juncture, no additional parameters can be accepted. Do you wish to restart the examination?"

"No, thank you. I will make my appointment in person."

"Very well, Mister Edward. Thank you for using this diagnostic station. Please vacate the booth."

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Stephens twirled his hand in the air as he continued explaining his new idea to Edward.

"They're already making the dual compartment models downstairs, right, so all I'm saying Mister Winston—"

"Just Winston," said Edward as he moved a volumetric flask from one side of the work table to the other. Edward and Stephens worked on opposite sides of the lab station. Three two-inch-thick glass walls separated their cozy lab area from the other science stations on the company building's 47th floor, the transparent cube set against a white wall shared with the work spaces to either side. For the most part, technicians worked in these stations as pairs, unless an odd number of employees forced a threesome.

"Right, sorry Mist—er, Winston." Stephens smacked the side of his head, a gesture he repeated each time he made a mistake, as if the physical pain could relieve his sense of idiocy. The skin surrounding his left temple flushed. He had made several mistakes today. The red even showed around the strands of Stephens' crew-cut hair, the same sandy-blonde color Edward's had been twenty-or-so years ago, before the flicks of grey had grown around his ears. "I'm just saying that we could maximize toxicity reduction if we marketed a pump that could push out two different CTs. Not at the same time, obviously, but alternating as needed, you know? Treat the top two at once!"

Stephens held two test tubes in front of his face. One contained the light-blue Euphoria, the other a neon-orange liquid currently under development, project name *Speculative Chemical Corrective Treatment C57D*, or C57D for conversational purposes.

Stephens had already suggested they name the final product Serenity, and Edward had taken to calling it by this name in private discourse with the man. C57D sounded cold and without purpose. If C57D would ever replace Tranquility as the primary CT for rage, then it would need a strong name like Serenity.

"Let's say a citizen has high toxicity levels of both depression and rage, so high on both counts that they're considered for Relocation. Well if we could pump in both Euphoria—" He shook the blue vial slightly. "—and then Serenity—"

"Pending trials."

"Apologies, of course, but both together could keep that citizen from Relocation by treating dual high-level toxins! We have the technology!" Edward did his best not to laugh. The young man had gotten so worked up about this supposedly brilliant idea that he'd looked past the finer details and possible ramifications.

"All right," said Edward, half smiling, "Let's think this through. First, let's think about a normal, single pump treatment for the typical citizen. Let's say this is the citizen—" Edward grabbed an empty beaker nearby and set it in front of him. "—and they've been prescribed Euphoria." Edward picked up a container of bleach and poured enough into the beaker to fill it halfway. "What happens when the diagnostic booth suggests they be moved over to Serenity—pending trials?" Edward lifted a small jug of ammonia into the air to represent the experimental CT.

"Well," said Stephens, "they go to the extraction center, have the Euphoria purged, and the Serenity—pending trials—is put into their pump."

"Exactly. They'd wash out all the bleach here, sterilize the container, and then fill it ammonia. But with your two-pump system, you're removing extraction centers from

that middle position. And so even though you're getting rid of the majority of this Euphoria—" Edward poured the bleach from the beaker into the drain of the workstation's sink and returned it to the table without rinsing it. "—would you be okay adding in the Serenity—pending trials—without that sterilization?"

Edward handed the jug of ammonia to Stephens and held his hands out, inviting Stephens to pour it into the bleach-coated beaker. Stephens looked at Edward, and then set the jug down.

"Splicing is illegal for a reason, Stephens," Edward said. "The interaction of multiple CTs has deadly consequences. How soon after your Euphoria dose can this pump safely push out Serenity—pending trials—without killing you? Are you planning to fit an entire extraction center into the pump, as well?"

Stephens' arms drooped in disappointment, nearly spilling the liquid-filled test tubes. As Euphoria and C57D approached the rims of their respective vials, the man regained his composure and set them in the holes of a nearby plastic rack. He smacked himself twice, once for the idea, then again for nearly spilling the compounds.

"If it wasn't for you, Mister Winston, I'm sure I'd be Relocated within a week," said Stephens, chuckling a bit. Edward pointed to a poster on the wall of the lab and Stephens read the text aloud—"*Build Camaraderie – Last Names Only*"—and smacked himself a third time.

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The efficient metal tables and benches of the building's massive cafeteria glistened like a newly-sterilized laboratory, as if the employees shuffling around with their food trays and tin coffee cups only came to this room as part of yet another company experiment.

Nearly twenty floors' worth of individuals shared the strictly regulated period of time set aside for the midday meal. In helping Stephens to secure their experiments, Edward had arrived two minutes late, and his normal seat next to Williamson of Diagnostic R&D on the end of the first row of tables had been filled by some man in a dusty blue jumpsuit. *Manual laborer, no doubt*, thought Edward. Williamson caught Edward's gaze and shrugged. Edward raised his tin coffee mug to the man in salute, and Williamson returned the gesture.

Company policy encouraged employees to fill in the gaps on benches to capacity to avoid unnecessary cleaning expenses for tables that could potentially be left unused. The benches of the northwest corner, closest to the lunch line's exit, filled up first. The filling of tables then spread from there. Today, however, a table in the far corner of the room housed a singular individual, surrounded by the room's only empty tables.

"She's going to be cited again if she keeps that up," Stephens said, motioning to the lone employee before leaving Edward to find a seat near the room's northwest corner. Edward also recognized the individual—Greggors, an administrative assistant from the department of records whose girth took up enough bench space for two of Edward. He'd seen Greggors on several occasions in passing, coming into work or riding the elevator. As part of a mandated company fitness program, Edward made sure to comment on the woman's weight each time they passed. The polite reminders of her condition helped her to combat her illness by recognizing how others saw her and prompting a desire for a more acceptable social image. With his normal seat taken, Edward used the opportunity to fellowship the troubled Greggors. He took the room in several swift strides and set his tray down across from the woman.

"Afternoon, Greggors. Lost weight recently?"

"Half a stone," she replied, her smile forced and unsteady.

"Congratulations. Won't be long before you're eating like the rest of us—egg salad, whole milk, chocolate even!" As Edward sat, he made a special point of listing these items with optimistic enthusiasm. In truth, Edward cared little for chocolate, but ate his bit first, before his lunch, being sure that Greggors observed each bite. The items of his lunch stood in stark contrast to Greggors' dull steamed greens and water glass. As other company workers filled in the table, they too made a point of speaking to Greggors.

"Lost weight, have we Greggors?"

"Cheesecake today, Greggors. Sure looks good!"

"Don't hog the bench, Greggors! Apologies—only joking."

"Hey Greggors, a bit lighter today?"

Polite reminders, per company policy.

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Public transportation carried employees home from the company, the high-speed transit capsules speeding through the massive city to the various residential sectors. With his apartment complex on the city's outer ring, Edward could not avoid travelling by capsule, a twenty minute ride in the oversized bullet bus covering the same distance it would take him over ten hours to walk at a brisk pace. Walking was, for the most part, considered inconvenient and ineffective.

Edward intentionally boarded capsule E13 each day after work, despite the fact that its route ended on the far end of his home's residential sector. He could, of course, take capsule H14 and exit half a block from his apartment, but Edward enjoyed the time

he spent alone, moving between the city buildings. The buildings here, like everywhere else in the city, were a pristine, windowless white. Regulations on outer ring buildings kept them under three stories high, with building height increasing the closer one got to the city's center, the monolithic company building where Edward worked. Though Edward had never gone higher than his laboratory on the 47th floor, the panel of numbered buttons in the elevator went all the way to 176.

A few blocks from his living complex, Edward paused outside the local barber's building. Barbers, like medical facilities, were one of the few establishments allowed by city aesthetic committees to have colored symbols on their doorways. A spiraling red and white rod identified the establishment, thought to represent the striped candy sold in these stores in the years before the wars. As a child, before the mandated aptitude and career placement examinations, Edward had believed he would be a barber. Even then, he noticed hair before anything else, identified others by the tops of their head. The first layer on the way to the brain, a built-in heat regulator for the biological supercomputer. In antiquity, he mother had told him, the heart had been regarded as containing a person's essence. That made no sense. The heart kept nothing, stored nothing. Blood moved in, blood moved out. No, the brain housed the person. And the hair kept that person warm.

Edward began walking home once more, but stopped and considered smacking himself as Stephens often did. The extraction! He had nearly forgotten altogether. Edward pulled his timepiece from the pocket of his jacket. He only had fifteen minutes until the facility closed. Replacing his timepiece, Edward wheeled around and sprinted back the way he'd come. He turned down alleyways and moved across streets directly,

bypassing the elevated crosswalk platforms and hoping not to get smashed by the blur of a passing capsule. Everything seemed hazy.

Edward attempted to remember the last time he had run like this. Primary school, perhaps, as part of an elective physical education course. Had his chest been this tight then? No, not like this. His breath came in uneven spurts, each inhale heavy and labored. His hands felt shaky, his fingers tingled.

The white brick extraction center and its grounds, though smaller than those further downtown, occupied most of the city block. Edward paused near the stairs leading to the building's entrance, his hands on his knees. He felt like the heat had been sapped from him, his shirt stuck to his skin by a clammy sweat.

"The line is back there!" a voice exclaimed behind him. Edward stood and realized that he had mistakenly paused near the extraction center's diagnostic booth.

"Apologies," Edward gasped, waving his hand submissively, "I'm not here… for the booth… for the…" He shook his head, and pointed rapidly at the brick building. He began climbing the small flight of stairs that led to the center's main entrance, gripping the railing tightly as he did so. He was a trim individual, fit even in middle age, but felt as if he had been kicked in the chest, as if a metal hand had gripped him by the lungs and begun squeezing. At the eleventh step, Edward's vision started to swirl, his grip loosen on the railing, and he fell backwards.

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Edward awoke to a bright light. Squinting, he attempted to lift his arm to block his vision, but his arm would not rise. He lifted his head and squinted to see four leather straps holding him to a metal gurney. A plastic nurse's buzzer sat within reach of

Edward's left hand, and he grasped it tightly, pressing the button repeatedly. Almost immediately, he heard what sounded like an opening door.

"Ah, Winston, is it? I see you've stopped seizing. That's excellent. Let's get this thing out of your eyes." The bright light swung away and out of Edwards vision, replaced by comparative darkness. As Edward's eyes came back into focus, the room slowly brightened, revealing a dark-skinned man in a white lab coat leaning over the gurney. A technician, like himself? Edward had several lab coats just like this one at work. However, as the dark man leaned over the gurney to free the leather straps, Edward noticed the staff and serpent insignia on the right breast of the coat.

"Medical?" Edward's voice was dry, groggy. He rubbed his eyes with the tips of his fingers.

"You're in the extraction center, Winston. I'm Doctor Qassem. You fell on the stairs, just outside. Do you remember falling, Winston?"

Edward remembered very little about the incident. "I think," he began, "I think I must have blacked out. From the running. There was a hand in my chest, I think. That's not right, is it?"

"Apologies, but not quite." Doctor Qassem took a clipboard from the end of Edward's gurney, flipped through a couple pages. "We pulled your most recent diagnostic from the network. It looks like your current CT is Euphoria, is that correct?"

Edward nodded. The action felt strange, like his reactions were delayed by a split second. The movement caused an ache in Edward's right temple, which he attempted to massage away in small, circular movements.

"And you are aware of the side effects of that particular CT, are you not?"

"I made that one… I mean, I helped make that one, the CT, I helped made it. I helped… to make… the CT. I work there, for the company. I'm in CT development."

"Then I shouldn't have to tell you strenuous physical exercise is not recommended while using Euphoria. Otherwise, well, you know. At least you do now." Doctor Qassem replaced the clipboard on the end of the gurney. "You're very lucky that there was no permanent cardiopulmonary damage. We're going to have you rest here for a while before we extract the rest of your CT and start you on your new one. Normally, we're closed by now, but I've convinced a couple of nurses to stay overtime until we can get you out of here."

Doctor Qassem's voice sounded hollow to Edward, like he spoke from the bottom of an elevator shaft.

"Of course, we will send the invoice to the company's insurance department for financial compensation for afterhours treatment. I'm sure you understand. I'm going to start you on a regiment of Calm. I would normally recommend Tranquility for anxiety levels like yours, but with the cost of myself and the nurses, I doubt you'd be able to afford it."

Edward attempted to nod, lowering his chin. Before he could lift it again, the room darkened once more as his eyelids closed.

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Outside the extraction center, Edward pulled his timepiece from the plastic bag containing his belongings as a janitor closed the door and locked it behind him. Half past seven. He placed the timepiece back in the bag along with the remnants of his jacket. Doctor Qassem had explained that Edward's clothing had been keeping the staff from

performing their duty and had, subsequently, been cut off. Edward wondered why it needed to be sliced into so many pieces, but the nurse who handed him the bag had no explanation.

Edward lifted the right side of his shirt to examine his CT pump. The apparatus, grafted into his side four years ago when he updated his model, remained silent and opaque. The benefit of this model was its "hands-off" approach to CT delivery. While doctor-operated dials jutted off the surface of older models, bulking a person's appearance, Edward's pump boasted a slim, smooth structure. Of course, this made manual operation of the device nearly impossible unless opened. Extraction facilities made certain that the special keys needed to do so did not slip out to the public.

A single strip of transparent plastic showed how much CT the pump currently held and offered the only view of the interior. The unfamiliar lavender color of Calm showed through the small window where, only hours ago, the baby blue of Euphoria had been visible. Edward had been on Euphoria for nearly five years now, and its absence—even if only its visual absence—felt unnerving. Edward covered the pump by pulling his shirt back into place. As he made his way down the extraction center's stairs, he was sure to grip the railing firmly.

Still groggy from the incident and new CT, Edward did not immediately notice the young woman standing beside the diagnostic booth. The queue for the machine had gone, and the short-haired woman beside it seemed to be drawing on its outer walls. He had never seen hair like hers: a pixie-cut mess of dark auburn, a single stripe of bright pink on the side. Edward thought he saw it wave over the dusty blue jumpsuit of a laborer, but the woman's narrow frame seemed unsuited for the day-to-day drudgery of

crate loading and concrete mixing. The position of laborer, like every work position, was determined during childhood based on genetic aptitude and projected growth of employment sectors. Edward had been found to possess a genetic aptitude for science and mathematics, particularly in the areas of complex equations and compound formulas. Laborers typically had genetic aptitude for physical size and strength, as well as low intelligence.

The company tailored each uniform—whether it be the jumpsuit of a laborer or the lab coat of a technician or doctor—specifically for the employee it belonged to. Perhaps she suffered from an illness that had caused the weight loss. Had she come here seeking medical attention?

"Excuse me, miss," called out Edward. "Are you ill? Apologies for the assumption, but the suit you're wearing—" Before he could finish, the woman turned with a start and began yelling.

"What? You think I stole it or something? The fuck are you… I haven't stolen shit you fucking jacker! Why don't you mind your own business and leave me the fuck alone! Yeah go shoot up some more of your happy juice, you fucking tweaker! Fuck you, old man! I haven't done nothing!"

As the young woman screamed, the skin of her face, smooth and youthful, twisted with the intensity of her words, catching the shadows of the day's failing light. Small beads of spit leapt from her mouth each time she said "fuck"—whatever that meant—her saliva attempting to flee her frustrated anger. Edward, too, felt compelled to flee from such unbridled rage, the likes of which he had never seen. More than rage, though.

Edward found it curious and somehow strangely attractive. Something held him there, kept him from moving, kept him from responding to her tirade.

The woman's eyes widened, dared Edward to retaliate. When he didn't, the woman shook her head, exclaimed "Fuck" once more, and then ran past Edward. Her shoulder caught his, and he spun around at the impact, watching the dusty blue jumpsuit flap around her body as she sprinted down the street and disappeared around a corner. Edward glanced around quickly, hoping for another spectator, seeking another who could confirm this strange woman's existence. He found none.

Turning back to the diagnostic booth, Edward inspected what the pixie-haired woman had done. A hole in side of the booth revealed fractured internal machinery. The Mark 7 would need outright replacement. A strange phrase was written on the side of the booth. *FUCKING POISO.* Though he still did not understand "fuck," he guessed it to be something unpleasant. Edward recognized the second word as "poison," unfinished by his interruption, the woman's uncapped pen on the ground where she had dropped it. Edward wasn't quite sure what poison had to do with the diagnostic booth, but he picked up the pen and—after looking around to confirm he was alone—drew in the missing "N."

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"'Fuck. Stolen. The fuck are you.' This just doesn't make sense, Mister Winston. Why are you having me read this?" Edward had given up on correcting Stephens' inability to drop the "Mister" from his name. The young man held the paper on which Edward had spent nearly a week attempting to recreate the words of the mysterious pixie-haired woman. As Stephens read the script aloud, his voice calm and dry, Edward hardly recognized the words as being the same he had heard what seemed like so long ago. As

the two men stood there outside the company building's loading docks, Edward tried to imagine the sensation that had overcome him that night outside the extraction center. Perhaps he never could again. Perhaps the woman's explosive emotion, intense and heated, had burned him too deep, singed the receptors.

"Apologies, Stephens. I know they don't make sense. I'm just trying something. Keep going."

Stephens shook his head in confusion. "I have not stolen shit you—"

"Haven't."

"What?"

"It says haven't."

"But shouldn't it be written 'have not', Mister Winston? I was taught that contractions should be avoided in writing, that it's more correct to spell out the words."

"I know it's not correct, Stephens. Just read the words as they are."

"Apologies. Where was I… um, 'Fuck your old man. I haven't done nothing.' Now that's a double negative, Mister Winston. Obviously whoever said this is admitting to having done something, if they 'haven't done nothing'."

Edward ignored the question. What had he missed? These were the words; at least close as he could recall. So why didn't he feel the same way he had beside that gutted and defaced diagnostic booth?

"Trying yelling them at me," Edward said.

"Why would I yell at you? Can you not hear me? Apologies, I had just assumed that you could hear me."

"I can hear you fine, Stephens. Now please, yell the words."

Stephens raised the volume of his voice and read the words again.

"Louder," Edward instructed.

Stephens raised his volume again, again, again, until his voice began to scratch with hoarseness. He yelled louder than the pixie-haired woman had, and yet Edward could not coax up the feeling he hoped for.

"Can't you do it with more… I don't know, more… feelings?"

"What do you mean, Mister Winston?"

Edward couldn't explain it. He didn't know the correct way to say it. There may not even be a word for it. It hadn't been lasciviousness behind the woman's screams that night, nor had it been purely rage. At least, not as Edward understood it. There must be some formula to the way that woman had acted, some combination of toxins and actions and volume. There had to be an answer to the equation.

"Never mind, Stephens." Edward took back the paper, folded it in fourths, and stuck it in the front pocket of his lab coat.

"May I go now, Mister Winston? Lunch is nearly over, and I'd hate to have to sit next to Greggors. Being polite to that woman can be a real chore some days."

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Six weeks. Five weeks, six days, thirteen hours and twenty-two minutes, actually, but Edward liked to round up. A rounded six weeks since the pink-streaked pixie cut. A rounded six weeks of acclimating to Calm, of discarding the side effects of dizziness and shortness of breath and lightheadedness that accompanied Euphoria. Of course, Calm came with its own set of necessary undesirables. Tenderness in the joints. Sensitivity to

light. A haze that crept around Edward's field of vision like the steam that seeped around the manhole covers on the street outside his apartment complex.

Edward noticed the tenderness, sensitivity and eye fog much less at rounded week six than he had at week five. In forty-two years, Edward had changed CTs almost as many times as he'd had birthdays. Forty CT changes, rounded up. Sometimes it would be years between CT prescriptions, and sometimes the extraction center doctors would switch the prescription seven or eight times in a single year. Each time he changed, the side effects of his old CT slipped away as the new ones slipped in, and in the crossing, Edward noticed the small, negative ways in which the drugs affected him.

The in-between moments, the times after his body adjusted, the times when he walked to work and joked with Stephens and politely sat next to Greggors: in those times, Edward forgot all about the side effects. They didn't lessen or stop; they simply became more familiar, like a pet that you don't realize you've been feeding every day until it dies. A changed CT meant a changed self, a different self. In rounded week six, Edward had gotten used to the new him.

Standing in line for the street-side Alert station gave Edward more time to forget his old self. To forget the pink-streaked pixie cut. He leaned out of line to gauge how much longer it would be before he could get his daily dose of Alert. The attendants quicktested each man and woman for their toxicity, to determine if they could receive Alert and how much. In reducing his anxiety, Calm had allowed Edward a little more Alert than Euphoria had. He had once asked Williamson at lunch why consuming Alert wasn't illegal.

"Not really a CT, is it?" Williamson had said. "If it's not classified as a CT, then you're not technically Splicing, are ya?"

Edward stepped back into line and closed his eyes. Sleepiness. Lethargy. All part of the package when taking Calm. His eyeballs hurt around the edges.

"Excuse me!"

The thud of another person running into his chest caused his eyes to snap open. An individual wearing a dark hooded jacket had cut through the line and now walked away from Edward, toward the back of the line. Edward instinctively massaged the area of his torso where he'd been hit. He noticed immediately the absence of his timepiece's bulge in his lab coat pocket. Thinking that he may have dropped it, he looked to the ground.

"Hey!" Edward called out after the hooded figure. He stepped out of line and walked briskly after the individual, following them around the corner at the end of the street. When he caught up, Edward reached out and grabbed the shoulder of the jacket, turning the individual and pulling down the hood.

"Listen, I didn't… oh fuck me. Seriously? Out of all the fucking people…" The voice sounded like an echo, a reflection of something he'd heard. The pink stripe was neon green. The length was not the same. Longer. More sporty, less pixie.

"Well shit. Didn't figure a man from the outer ring to be working at the company building." The woman flicked the laminated security clearance badge clipped to the pocket of Edward's white lab coat. She no longer wore the dusty-blue jumpsuit. Instead, a form-fitting black dress hugged her body underneath the dark jacket. She was slim, just as Edward remembered, but not the shapeless stick her baggy attire had suggested that

night six weeks ago. Edward made a quick pass over her new form, passing a bit slower over her chest and waist.

"I—" began Edward, but the woman interrupted him with a quick push to the chest. "Hey old man, eyes up here. And don't try to deny it—I can hear that pump of yours working overtime," she said, pointing to Edward's gut. He placed a hand to the apparatus there. Like the side effects of CTs, Edward only noticed the sound his pump made when he got a new one, or when it didn't work correctly. With his mind focused on the device, Edward once again recognized the soft *puh-tsst* of the mechanical pumping taking place on his hip, the same way a person takes note of their breathing only after something calls it to their attention.

"My timepiece, you stole… or, apologies, I shouldn't accuse you without first—"

"But I *did* steal it." The words held no shame. In saying them, she smiled and narrowed her eyes. She produced the timepiece from a pocket inside the jacket, dangled it from its chain, and then placed it back into the jacket's interior. Edward glanced around quickly, looking for a witness. Sweat began to form in the pits of his arms. His pump *puh-tsst*'d in response.

The woman similarly looked around. The movement loosed a bundle of auburn hair which fell in front of her face. She brushed it back behind her ear. *Getting long*, thought Edward. *Ought to cut it.* He realized that her shorter hair had been the way he defined her, and now he yearned for that definition.

"Fuck this," the woman said. "You're not going to do shit. See you around, old man." She lifted the hood back over her head, then flicked her open hand in the air in a

half-salute, half-wave. She turned and sauntered away from Edward, her hips swaying with each step.

Say something! Say anything!

"I'm Edward!" he shouted after her.

"Gabrielle!" she shouted in turn, not stopping to turn around. Edward watched her sway down the sidewalk, across the street, and around the corner. He stood there, staring at the corner. He considered rejoining the queue for the Alert station, but instead hurried down the sidewalk, across the street, and around the corner.

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Even from a distance, Gabrielle's sway kept Edward transfixed. He watched her bump into others as she walked, admire the loot after a safe distance, stuff it into her jacket. He followed her onto and off of a capsule, making sure to board at the rear entrance of the vehicle. He became so transfixed by her movement that he didn't notice leaving the city limits, the turns and twists, back alleys and side streets, bridges and gates. Even her hair swayed. Maybe the extra length wasn't so bad.

Finally, Gabrielle stopped beside a tall chain-link fence that ran between two buildings. Edward stopped as well, still at a distance, standing in an alleyway across the street that Gabrielle had passed through. A piece of sheet metal leaned against the fence. Gabrielle shuffled it aside, revealing a large hole in the chain links. She glanced behind her, and Edward ducked behind a large metal box against the alley wall. His heart thudded in his chest. His breath came rapidly. He felt a tightness in his chest, but it was unlike the night he had collapsed on the stairs of the extraction center. It was exhilarating. His pump *puh-tsst*'d rapidly, sending out extra doses of Calm.

Edward's heart slowed and his breathing became more even. He began to take notice of his surroundings. The buildings weren't right. Cracks ran down the brick walls, unpainted and uneven. The metal box had rusted and… the *smell*. The smell of rot overwhelmed Edward. He gagged and stood up abruptly. Debris littered the ground, paper and food and other forms of refuse. Where were the street cleaners? The maintenance crews?

A decayed world.

Looking back to the where Gabrielle had stood, Edward saw that the sheet metal covering had been replaced. Lifting his arm, Edward masked his nose and walked toward the fence. The asphalt on the road had cracked like the buildings, and plants that Edward did not recognize grew from the fissures. Looking up, Edward saw what he assumed to be a sign hanging from the building to the left of the fence. It, like the metal box in the alley, had rusted, and the letters O-T-E-L were all that Edward could make out. The building itself seemed poised to collapse. With a sickening realization, Edward understood where he was.

Edward's mother had told him, like every parent had told their child, the bedtime story of Katy and Karl, the twins who stole things from stores, beat up other kids, and disobeyed their parents. One night, instead of coming home for city curfew, Katy and Karl ran away to the edge of the city, ignoring the signs, laughing and playing, thinking it fun.

"Then," Edward's mother had said, "came the Splicers, crawling in the dark from the sewers of Outland! They took Katy and Karl and gobbled them up, then picked their teeth with the pinky bones!"

Outland—the vast waste beyond the city, the place where the city exiled its worst criminals, the place where child-eating Splicers hid in the sewers and ruins of the world before the wars, before the company, sneaking into the city limits after curfew to steal from the wholesome citizens and company employees.

The muscles in Edward's legs tensed, prepared to carry him away from this place of childhood nightmares. He owed Gabrielle nothing, hadn't even known her name before today. He could buy a new timepiece. A rope of anxiety knotted in his gut and pulled at him to go back the way he'd come. Even so, curiosity drew him to the fence, loosened the knot just enough for him to get close. Peering through the links, Edward saw a dirt courtyard surrounded by a two story structure. Each story had numbered doors spaced along the walls, a metal staircase and walkway allowing access to those on the second floor. Wooden boards covered all but one of them, nailed into place long ago.

Gabrielle stood in the courtyard, lifting a small stick to her mouth and then exhaling a breath of dark smoke. Edward watched her do this three more times before she threw the stick to the ground and crushed it under her shoe. She walked toward the unboarded door. Beside it sat a tall black man, who stood as she approached. His chest was wide with muscle, arms as thick as his bald head. As Gabrielle approached the man, he held out his hand to stop her. He shook his head and said something to her. Gabrielle threw her arms up in a gesture of frustration, but the man shook his head with intensity.

"… the fucking password…" Edward heard Gabrielle scream. She moved closer to the man. She placed one hand on his chest and the other between his legs, gripping tightly. The man squirmed and pulled away. Gabrielle slinked past him and through the door. The man rubbed his crotch and spat on the ground.

Edward turned away from the fence and walked back through the alley. It opened up onto a long stretch of splintered asphalt. In the distance, he spotted the jutting outline of the company building stuck above the Outland ruins. Carefully, he began his way home along the broken road.

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"Because when a technician misses work, Winston, the work misses that technician." Keagan smiled politely as he recited to Edward the company reprimand. Keagan was an athletic man with a pencil moustache and meticulously parted hair, perfect "boss" material. In the many years that Edward had worked as a technician for the company, he had only spoken to Keagan on three occasions before today.

The first time, Keagan shook Edward's hand firmly and welcomed him to the lab facilities on floor 47 of the company building. The second time, Keagan introduced Edward to his new lab partner, Stephens, after Edward's previous partner had been moved to a different department. The third time, Keagan politely reprimanded Edward for improper training procedures when Stephens filed a lab report that listed Edward first in the "Name(s) of Technician(s)" field. All technicians, Keagan had reminded Edward, should be listed alphabetically by last name.

"Perhaps this might help in the future, Winston." Keagan handed Edward a paper pamphlet folded into thirds. The front flap featured a black-and-white photograph of a female technician between the pamphlet's title, "MAKING BETTER DECISIONS," and its subtitle, "Learning to Follow Procedures." Around the photograph and the lettering, the paper had been printed a dull gray. When Stephens had filed his report incorrectly and Keagan had reprimanded him, both he and Edward had received pamphlets identical

to this one, except those pamphlets had been in color. The woman's hair had been blonde, her clothing beneath the lab coat a pleasant green, and the paper itself the same bright orange as the C57D compound under development by Edward and Stephens.

"Apologies," Keagan said. "Printer trouble."

"Apologies again for my absence," replied Edward. "It will not happen again."

The two men shook hands and Keagan left through a door in the laboratory's glass wall. Edward watched Keagan walk along the hallway that ran between stations until he had turned a corner and disappeared behind one of the floor's few opaque partitions. Edward folded the pamphlet in half and stuck it in his lab coat pocket.

"Are you not going to read it?" asked Stephens.

"I've read it all before. It was just a mistake. I… I got lost."

"How did you get lost? Are you experiencing confusion? Mister Jenkins from three labs down is working on a new treatment for that. I mean, technically it's not a CT since confusion isn't considered a toxin, at least not yet. Jenkins says that they're almost done and that he's going to pitch it to Mister Keagan and see what it takes to classify a toxin. I suggested they call it Concentration, since it's—"

"Stop talking!" Edward slammed a fist on the lab table and then turned away from Stephens. The words scraped in Edwards ears. He did not need to be lectured by this boy, not after Outland, not after Keagan's false courtesy. The muscles in Edward's body tensed, like a predator about to pounce. "Maybe if you would stop talking for a minute, then we might be done with an *actual* CT instead of playing catch up to Jenkins!"

Edward turned back to Stephens. The young man had his head down, staring at the ground. He rubbed his hands together slowly and whispered a timid "Apologies."

"Apologies," Edward muttered, "I… I need to walk around or something… I'll be back." He pushed through the glass door and walked away from the lab, opposite the direction Keagan had gone.

As Edward roamed the hallways of the 47th floor, he replayed the outburst in his mind. He couldn't explain what had happened, why it had happened. Stephens talked a lot, sure, but he was a good kid. Edward had never snapped like that. It was almost like…

"Gabrielle."

This intensity was what those words had been lacking when reproduced by Stephens on the streets outside the company building. Edward's mind filled with questions. What new toxins now flowed through him? Hatred? Annoyance? Selfishness? Was this cocktail of toxicity the thing that caused Gabrielle to act the way she did the night Edward had caught her defiling the diagnostic booth? Did he cower before her as Stephens had cowered before him? The question caused Edward to pause outside the floor's storage room, as if the weight of the idea was too heavy for him to keep moving.

A woman. A *girl*. Gabrielle's influence may have been little more than a drop of ink in an otherwise flawless well of water, yet Edward was tainted nonetheless.

Edward recalled the company training video that all employees were required to view annually. A male and female employee demonstrated proper intergender practices and reviewed procedures for relationships. In normal situations of romantic pairing, company policy dictated rigorous daily screenings of both individuals to avoid toxins commonly associated with sexual attraction, including lasciviousness, covetousness,

jealousy, and in rare cases, rage. Floor managers needed to be appraised of their employee's dealings, including the details of all interactions, in order to monitor any negative effects on productivity.

Edward could only imagine Keagan's reaction. No, she's actually not an employee here, sir. A Splicer from Outland, sir. Instant Relocation.

Edward opened the door to the store room, entered, and closed the door behind him. Inside, four rows of shelves held liquid samples: CTs, speculative treatments, and even the liquid toxin extracts that technicians used to create new formulas. Edward searched through the shelves until he found the maroon-filled vials marked "Dispassion." If affection toward Gabrielle caused this change in attitude, Dispassion would certainly cure it. He carefully removed four sealed vials and slipped them into his lab coat pocket. Turning to leave, Edward stopped.

"Gabrielle."

He plucked out two or three vials of various CTs. The baby-blue Euphoria, the pink-purple Tranquility, even the bright orange C57D made its way into his lab coat. Edward made his way back to the laboratory office where Stephens had already resumed work. Stephens raised a hand in a half-greeting, half-apologizing wave. Edward responded with a similar half-and-half gesture.

"Stephens?"

"Yes, Mister Winston?"

"What do you know about Outland?"

"Only what I've been told."

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The aerial map that Stephens coaxed from Greggors in the records department of the 18th floor showed only a crude representation of the area outside the city. The map depicted a far more detailed description of the city's interior than the basic maps displayed in the city educational facilities. The perfectly circular circumference of the city measured exactly three hundred and sixty miles with thirty-six perimeter sentry towers, each spaced ten miles along the border and each exactly fifty-seven miles from the company building sitting in the city's exact center. Each building from center to perimeter had been meticulously labeled. Outside the city's edge, however, only red diagonal lines marked the terrain, along with the words "OUTLAND: RESTRICTED."

Edward did his best to draw out the route he had taken home after following Gabrielle, which capsule he'd taken to which edge of the city, where he'd turned left in the Outland ruins instead of right. Attempting to follow that route back to the rotted alley and covered fence, nevertheless, proved difficult. Edward travelled slowly through the rubble, his head swinging back and forth, looking for something familiar. He tripped over a broken piece of asphalt and fell to the ground. A vial fell from his lab coat pocket and shattered into neon pink puddles and shards. As he stood, Edward cursed himself for not paying better attention the first time he came out here.

The long shadows of early evening comforted Edward slightly as he searched for some recognizable sight, and he realized that the distorted landscape would be unfamiliar even if he had taken photographs of every twist and turn taken. Several alleys seemed very much like the one in his memory: the same metal box, slightly more or less rusted, the same smell of rot and refuse, slightly more or less pungent.

Each building stood different from the others that surrounded it, as if the city planning committee for this area had no consideration for aesthetic uniformity. Edward found a residential structure with several interconnected rooms of inefficiently various sizes. Two streets over, a market in a similarly-sized brick building housed dusty metal shelves and broken glass. Back on the streets, Edward reluctantly decided to abandon his search and looked to the map. He had veered too far off course to simply retrace his steps.

Edward reoriented himself by finding the company building in the distance and started home. He skulked through one of the alleyways, passing yet another large metal box, smelling the decomposing garbage littering the ground. He stopped at the end of the alley, stunned by what he saw. That same fence, the piece of sheet metal that rested against the chain link, the broken sign that read "OTEL." Edward removed the company security pass clipped to his coat and placed it in his pocket along with the map, the vials, and the pamphlet Keagan had given him earlier that day.

It took Edward much more effort to heft the large panel of sheet metal than he had thought it would. He set it aside, revealing the large hole in the chain link. Jagged, unrusted edges suggested it had only been cut recently. Edward stepped through the hole, careful to lift his lab coat so it would not snag. Reaching back through the hole, he shuffled the metal sheet back into place. The back of his right hand caught an uneven point on the fence which scraped a shallow gash. Edward winced and stuck the back of his hand to his mouth. The suction curbed the pain and kept him from calling out. Despite the chemical taste, he held hand there for several minutes, waiting against the

fence for the bleeding to slow. A red circle from the suction surrounded his wound. A crooked line ran along his skin like the cracks in Outland's buildings and roads.

Small patches of grass grew in the courtyard dirt. It was unlike the bright green, neatly trimmed grass of the city. This was yellow-brown, uneven and wild. Edward tucked his right hand behind his back as he walked toward the large black man seated at the other end of the courtyard. The man stood as Edward approached, smoothing his shirt with his massive hands. He seemed taller now than Edward remembered. He scowled at Edward.

"I… um, I'm here to see Gabrielle," stammered Edward.

The man remained silent

"I need to talk to her, so if you could just… just move out of the way…" Edward attempted to sidestep around the monolith of a man, who leaned slightly to block Edward's path.

"Password," the man said. The word resonated deep in the air, dark and heavy.

"Now… now listen here, you f-fuck jacker. Let me in or I'll fuck you!"

The dark man's chuckle bellowed from inside his massive frame. Edward's pump *puh-tsst*'d. Beads of sweat coalesced on his forehead and in his hair, a salty dew of anxiety. He used the back of his right hand to wipe his brow and cringed as the wound there reopened. Panicked and in pain, Edward placed his hand on the man's crotch and squeezed.

The force of the man's punch pitched plumes of dirt into the air as Edward collided with the ground. The black man ambled to Edward's side, and the last thing Edward saw before blacking out was the tip of the man's boot coming toward his face.

Third

Edward awoke to the steady pumping from his hip. It sounded faster than normal. He opened his eyes slowly; the throbbing in his head kept him doing so too quickly. The air felt moist, smelled stale. His right eye would not open all the way, swollen from the black man's strike. A soft orange light licked the ceiling above Edward. It swayed and flickered on what looked like a dirt surface, as if Edward himself lay stuck to a ceiling and looked down on the earthen surface where he belonged.

Edward propped himself up with some effort. He clutched his chest with a start, attempting to hold in the pain that shot from the left side of his ribcage, no doubt a parting gift from the large Splicer doorman given after Edward had passed out from the blow to his face. A glass lantern sat on a wooden table in the corner of what appeared be a room of dirt—dirt floor, dirt walls, and what was, in fact, a dirt ceiling. Apart from the table, the room contained only a squat, three-legged stool and the bed in which Edward now rested. A single wooden door with a barred window marked the room's exit, the only opening in this dirt box.

Edward lifted the blanket that covered him and examined a large bruise on the side of his shirtless torso. His lab coat, shirt, and shoes had all been removed, and Edward could not see them anywhere in the room. He attempted to sit up further, and the pain radiated from his side like a bolt of lightning that branched throughout his body. A spike of that lightning reached into Edward's head and his vision became fuzzy. He felt hollow and nauseous.

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"Doc says you've probably got a few broken ribs." Gabrielle's voice roused Edward from a groggy sleep. "He ramped up your pump distribution rate in order to keep you under. We don't exactly have an abundance of pain meds down here. And don't worry, I made sure to knee Marcel in the groin for what he did. Kicking a man when he's down is one thing, kicking an unconscious man is even worse, but kicking an *old* unconscious man, well that's just being a fucking dick."

Edward turned in the bed to face her. He lifted the sheet again to view his side. The bruise had yellowed. The pain was uncomfortable, but not unbearable.

"I'm not that old. How long…"

"A while," she answered.

"Where…"

"Safe."

Edward sat, wincing. Gabrielle set his folded shirt on the table next to the lantern, then placed his shoes on top. She no longer wore the black dress, but a pair of loose slacks and a button-down blouse. She picked up the stool and set it next to the bed. She had to crouch to sit, the stool only half the height of her knees, so that she was lower than Edward and had to look up at him while she spoke.

"Doc says you have your clothes back, though I still think we should burn them. We're going to hold on to that fancy lab coat of yours though, at least for now."

"Right," Edward said. "Wouldn't want me having that."

"So, old man," she spoke, shifting on the stool, "when are the cops coming?"

"Cops?"

"Cops, you know—police? Shit, what do you jackers call them… the people who stop the bad people from doing bad things to the good people." She spoke to Edward like a child.

"Relocation Agents?"

"Sure. Whatever. When are they coming for us? Did they follow you to the motel?"

"*M*otel. *Mmmm*otel." He let the *Mmm* sound drag, like a student learning the letter for the first time. "No. I came to the motel alone. I don't even know any Agents. I'm just a—"

"Technician. Yeah, we know." Gabrielle pulled Edward's laminated security pass from her back pocket. "Problem is that we don't get many technicians poking around out here."

She replaced the pass, exchanging it for a slim syringe of neon green. "Doc took the liberty of cooking up this shit. Since you jackers love to name your poisons, let's call this one 'Truth'. As much as I would love to take your word, I'd rather make sure. Arm or ass?"

"Arm or ass?"

She uncapped the syringe and held it in the air, her gaze alternating between Edward's arm and below his waist. Edward grimaced briefly before extending his arm. A slight burning followed the familiar prick of the needle in his skin. Gabrielle removed the needle and rubbed Edward's arm to ease the pain, smearing the small bead of blood on his skin.

"Sorry," she said, wiping her hand on her slacks.

"That's going to stain," said Edward. He felt a slight numbness in his fingertips. He pressed his thumb against the pointer, middle, ring and pinky fingers, then back again, testing the sensation. The muscles in his arm relaxed, and the whole thing went slack. The loose feeling worked its way into his back, then his hips and legs, until his whole body felt heavy. He propped himself against the dirt wall beside his bed.

"Okay, looks like it's working." Gabrielle took out a paper and the stub of a pencil. "Let's start simple—what's your name?"

"Edward Winston."

"All right, and how old are you?"

"Forty-eight."

"Really? Wow. I mean, sorry. Okay." She scrawled down the number on her paper. "Where do you work?"

"I'm a technician."

"No, not what do you do for work. Where do you work?"

"In the city."

"For who?"

"The company."

"What is the name of the company? Who runs it?"

Edward furrowed his brow. The question made him uncomfortable. He squirmed against the dirt wall, his skin tingling, like tiny needle pricks all over his body. His breathing increased, and the *puh-tsst* of his pump quickened.

"I…" he started, "…I don't know."

"Is anybody coming to the motel?" Gabrielle stood up and moved to Edward. She sat on the side of his bed and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Any Relocation Agents?"

"I don't know," he said.

"Were you followed?'

"I don't know."

"Why did you come out here?"

"I don't know…" Edward's eyes fluttered for a moment before closing. When he awoke, a wrinkled man with white hair and nimble movements was examining the fading bruise on Edward's side. He wore an off-white lab coat and thick spectacles with lenses that were yellow along the edges. His head moved slowly up and down, side-to-side as he examined his patient, his mouth slightly open, his tongue perched on his lower lip.

"Well," the older man said, returning his tongue to his mouth and smacking his lips, "I think it's time we get you out of this bed. Oh, and we should probably turn this down." The man removed a small toolkit from his coat pocket and reached over to Edward's pump. Choosing what looked like a small screwdriver, he opened the outer casing, revealing machinery that took Edward by surprise. Edward had assumed that the key to open his pump would have been small and gold, like the keys that opened desk drawers. The man turned a small dial within the pump, and the *puh-tsst* slowed. A glass orb within the machine contained lavender liquid, two-thirds gone. A second orb contained a filthy golden liquid, the toxin that the pump removed and replaced with his CT. This was the first time Edward had seen his own anxiety—a sickening dark blonde.

"Where did she go?" Edward's tongue stuck in his mouth, slowing his speech.

"Who, Gabby? She hasn't been in here for… oh… three days? Perhaps five? Something like that. Apologies. I didn't know you'd been so out of it. Perhaps another day in bed isn't such a bad idea."

"What are you… with my…"

"You're running low. We'll have to get you a refill soon. I bet you never expected you'd need one after only a week and a half." The older man closed up the pump and turned to leave.

"Who…?"

"Apologies," said the man. "My name is Henry, but the people here call me Doc, so that might as well be what you call me, too. Let's see about getting you out of this cell tomorrow night. I don't think you're going to be a danger to these people, so we'll get you in with one of the families until you decide whether or not to stay."

"Does that mean… I can leave?"

"Of course. That's always your choice."

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"It is said that this was once what they called a *mine*," explained Doc, leading Edward through the winding dirt tunnels, "assumingly given that name due to the greed with which men dug out these halls in search of precious materials—gold mostly—before the wars."

"Why gold?" asked Edward. "It is a versatile metal, of course, but I fail to see its precious nature. Why was it considered precious?"

"Apparently," Doc said, "it was once used as a form of currency and given value to barter for goods and services."

"Strange."

"Indeed."

"Are we very far from the motel?"

"Very much so. The motel lies at the far end of one of the longest tunnels. Hmm, *that* way I believe." Doc thumbed over his left shoulder.

"Why can I not just remain in the cell? I do not wish to inconvenience this family."

"The people here do not value being alone. They feel it is unnatural. Single persons live with other single persons, or a family if they'll take them. Husband and wife sleep in the same bed, with children typically in a single room with siblings. Very few exceptions are made. In fact, I can only think of one individual who resides alone."

"Who's that?"

"Gabby. Maybe we should've moved you in with her. I'm sure she'd love that."

"Why does she live alone?"

"Ah, here we are." Doc stopped outside one of the doors wedged in the dirt hallway. "The Poole residence. Kind family. Now to avoid any awkwardness, you should know that Mrs. Poole is a widow. Husband lost in a scavenging run roughly three years ago. You'll see—the kids take after the father. The title 'Missus' is a gesture of kindness. You must always call her Mrs. Poole. While persons in the city find Mister and Missus overly formal, they are a signal of respect down here."

"Tell me something," Edward said. "What exactly is your role here? Gabrielle refers to you as if you were the leader here, but you are very obviously from the city. You speak like me, you wear a technician's coat. At times you refer to the people here as

‘these people’ but use the word ‘we’ at other times. Are you one of these people—a Splicer?”

Doc scratched his head.

“I guess you might say I’ve been adopted here. And you,” he said, pointing a finger at Edward, “ought to be more careful about using that word. It’s quite offensive.” He said no more, but knocked on Mrs. Poole’s door.

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Edward could not remember the last time he had seen children up close. Little Danny Poole stared at Edward from across the table, a mess of thick brown hair obscuring his inquisitive eight-year-old eyes. His small hands maneuvered the soup spoon to his mouth and back to the bowl without the aid of sight, his gaze stuck to the new man at the Poole table. His younger sister Lacy sat beside him, her similarly dark hair arranged into hurried pigtails. She avoided looking at Edward and had cried the first time her mother, Mrs. Poole, had made her shake this stranger’s hand only a few hours ago. The table itself seemed like those in the company cafeteria—long, with a bench on either side—except this was made of wood and had several carvings in it, mostly of letters that seemed to be grouped in twos or threes.

“What is J-R-H-M-4-E-V-A?” asked Edward, reading a group of letters surrounded by what appeared to be an upside-down teardrop. It reminded him of a speculative chemical treatment name, only it was four letters too long.

“I’m not sure. These markings were here when we received the table. All but that large X—that’s Danny’s work. Which marking are you talking about?” Mrs. Poole leaned over to examine the area of table to which Edward had referred. Her ponytail of

fire-orange hair fell over her shoulder as she did so. The skin on her face was youthful, pale and freckled, a contrast from the olive-tinted skin of her children.

"I'm not sure what that is. Sorry."

"I was only curious. Gratitude, again, for the meal," said Edward, lifting his empty bowl in thanks.

"Would you like some more stew? I still have some here." Moving back to her seat, she lifted her own bowl as if to pour it into Edward's. He held up his hand to stop her.

"No, please, I'm quite satisfied."

"I want summore!" Lacy's high voice startled Edward slightly, and he laughed.

"So you do speak," he said, grinning at the young girl. Lacy promptly buried her face into folded arms and let out a soft whimper, as if she were about to cry once more.

"Apologies," said Edward. "I did not mean to frighten her."

"It's fine," said Mrs. Poole, reaching across the table to pat Lacy gently on her pigtailed head. "She needs to finish what she's got, anyway."

"If you don't mind," Edward said, standing from the table, "I think I will retire for the evening."

"Of course," replied Mrs. Poole. "Here, take this." She stood and moved to the room's lantern—slightly larger than the one that had lit Edward's cell—and opened the front pane, revealing a squirming flame. She took a candle from a nearby stack and lit it using the lantern, then attached it to a metal base and handed it to Edward. Edward made his way out of the large eating area and into one of the two smaller, connected rooms. The whole domicile had been etched into the earth just as Edward's cell had been. Mrs.

Poole has brought her children with her into the larger of the two rooms in order to give Edward a room of his own.

Later in the night, the muffled sobbing of Mrs. Poole could be heard winding its way through the home. In the moments between sleep, Edward thought he heard the small voices of Lacy and Danny attempting to comfort their crying mother. How hard it must have been for her to sleep in that empty room alone after her husband vanished. He wondered what kept Gabrielle alone in this place. Had she had a husband who disappeared? He found the thought unnerving.

He remembered when, as a young child, he had been afflicted by nightmares of Outland. His childhood home, as with all domiciles for adults raising children, had the child's bedroom situated on the opposite end of the living space as his mother's. The design facilitated independence and individualism, taught children to rely on their parents less. After the first nightmare, Edward asked to sleep with his mother. Instead, she locked his bedroom door from the outside every night until the nightmares stopped. In the dark of night, pressed up against the cold metal of his locked door and wrapped in a mass of white bed sheets, Edward learned to fall asleep despite his sobbing.

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Gabrielle showed up early one morning to collect Edward. She had come by several times to check on Edward and the Pooles in the six-or-so weeks he had stayed with the family. She wore a sunny yellow dress that hung to her knees. Her hair was pulled back, a small bun collected at the rear of her head. Edward had just finished dressing.

"Why are you in a dress?" he asked, his eyebrows furrowing at the sight.

"I'm in the fucking mood, that's why. Speaking of dresses." She tossed a bundle of white cloth at Edward. He unfolded it to discover his lab coat, covered in a thin layer of dirt and crinkled from being wadded up. He swung the coat over his shoulders and brushed down the sides, smoothing the wrinkles as best he could.

"Well don't you look precious as fuck. C'mon, time for your new medicine." Gabrielle grasped Edward by the hand and led him out of the Pooles' home and through the complex series of caverns. To Edward, each junction of two tunnels looked the same, but Gabrielle pulled him around corners and down passageways without hesitation, without bothering to stop and examine where she was before whisking Edward forward. Eventually they arrived at a wooden door with the word "DOC" etched into its surface. Gabrielle knocked rapidly three times at the center of the door, paused, and then knocked twice high on the wooden entrance. A metal latch could be heard unlocking, and the door swung inward, revealing Doc in his dirty lab coat.

"Hey," he said, pointing back and forth between himself and Edward. "Don't we look handsome."

Gabrielle and Edward stepped inside, then Doc pushed the door closed and locked it again. "Follow me," he said and shuffled past them and though a small corridor. The corridor opened into a large room four or five times larger than the Poole's entire home. Within, tables had been set up along the walls and in rows in the center. A small area of the room had what looked like a hospital gurney next to a mixed collection of medical supplies. Beakers, broken CT pumps, and other scientific equipment littered the table surfaces. The ceiling angled upwards toward the center, where a round beam of sunlight came through a hole no larger than a man's head. Edward stood underneath the hole,

looking up through a long tube of earth that led to the surface. He saw a small circle of blue at the other end—the first time he had seen the sky in nearly two months.

"That vent was quite an undertaking," said Doc, motioning to where Edward stood. "Took them nearly four months to drill it out from the top. Had to be done though, to keep me from choking to death from the fumes."

Edward roamed through Doc's lab, looking at each piece of glassware and machinery the old man had collected. He reached a series of shelves that housed vials of colored liquids.

"CTs," said Edward, and Doc nodded.

The set-up was similar to the storage room of the company building's 47th floor, except many of the vials were only partially filled and most of the labels had worn with age.

"So," Doc said, "why don't we go ahead and get you filled up again."

"I don't think you can," said Edward, looking through the shelves for lavender. He could not find any. "You don't seem to have any Calm here."

"No," responded Doc, "but I did have a bit of Tranquility, as well as a new substance I've been working on. I've whipped you up a little cocktail of CTs based on the toxicity report that was in your jacket when you came in. This should help you with the majority of your, um, 'toxins'."

"You mean you want me to Splice?"

Gabrielle scoffed at the term. Doc held up a hand to her, waving it downward in an attempt to calm her.

"What do you know, Edward, about the practice you refer to as Splicing? Or any of the illegal CT practices?"

"Well," began Edward, "Splicing is the willing mixture of two or more CTs, outlawed because drug interactions can cause potentially fatal side effects or toxin insanity."

"If done by an amateur," said Doc. "But continue, what are the others?"

"Looping is the willing introduction of a toxin into the bloodstream in the place of a CT. Toxins are, by definition, toxic, and willing ingestion can poison the user or lead to toxin insanity. Blanking is the willing, outright abstinence from Corrective Treatments of any kind. Failure to use CTs can result in a toxin build-up, leading to death or toxin insanity."

Gabrielle clapped slowly.

"Yes," said Doc, "Very good. Well, let me assure you that what we do here is in no way similar to the horror stories you've heard about the dreaded Splicers from Outland. I have tested and retested all compounds used here."

"But why not just use the Tranquility that I brought in with me?"

"Apologies—" Doc shook his head, confused. "—but I'm afraid I don't know what you mean. Brought with you?"

"The vials in my lab coat," Edward said. "There were ten or twelve I think. They weren't in the pocket when I received the coat back, so I just assumed they had been taken."

"Gabrielle brought you in but didn't mention you having CTs with you. Gabrielle, did you notice any vials in this man's—"

"No," said Gabrielle, quickly interrupting Doc. "There was a bunch of liquid on the ground when I found the old man. Must have broken when Marcel was fucking him up."

"Well," said Doc, "No matter. I've got something more comprehensive for you, Edward. Don't worry—perfectly safe. I've been mixing these long enough to know what I'm doing. I even invented a good number of the original CTs, so I know how to avoid those nasty side effects that crude—er, Splicing—will get you."

Doc held up a glass orb identical to one inside Edward's pump. The orb was filled with a murky brown liquid, like muddy water.

"They originally made the CTs clear, you know," said Doc. "Colored them to more easily identify mixed compounds."

"Very interesting, Doc," said Gabrielle.

"Are you sure there isn't a single substitute you could use?" asked Edward, looking through the shelves once more.

"Quite sure. Positive, in fact."

Edward stood for a moment, his hands rested on his hips, looking at the dirt floor.

"All right," he said.

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With the new orb installed in his pump, Edward walked with Gabrielle along the tunnel back to the Poole home. Doc had said that he'd mixed the compound in a way that the side effects should cancel each other out, but the resulting competition of sensations was unlike anything Edward had experienced. Hot flash chills. Nauseous appetite increase. Focused confusion.

"Nothing thirty-six hours of sleep can't cure," Doc had said.

The pair rounded a corner, and Edward recognized an upcoming doorway as the Poole residence.

"Gabrielle, there's something I've been meaning to ask you."

"Oh yeah? What's that, old man?"

"Back there—well and before, but back there to be specific—you said that the vials had broken when Marcel was fucking me."

Gabrielle laughed. "No," she said, "I said he was *fucking you up*. Big difference."

Edward stopped walking, turned to her. "What is the difference? What is *fucking* anyway? I don't understand."

"Oh, so you want to know what fucking is?" Gabrielle looked at Edward with her head drawn back and cocked sideways. Her right eyebrow raised slightly. She lifted her pointer finger in the air and with it drew a curving line down Edward's chest. When her hand reached his stomach, she balled it into a fist and popped him in the gut.

Edward coughed and sputtered, wrapping his arms around his midsection.

"You know, old man, I've heard some pretty smooth lines in my day, but *that* was about as terrible as they get. Still though—" She rose up on her toes and kissed Edward on the cheek. "—points for trying."

<u>Fourth</u>

The intersection of two dirt tunnels lay ahead, and Edward slowed to inspect the wooden beams that framed it. Three notched in the wood going left, one notch going forward,

three going right. The Splicer community's method of tunnel navigation seemed overly complicated and, at time, highly illogical.

"Three for me, one you're done…" He could remember the rhyming hints Gabrielle had given him—just not their significance. Was he done as in finished, or done as in dead? Best to go with the odds. He turned right.

"You're fucking dead!" Gabrielle came up behind him and caught him before he moved any further. She had him step back and then prodded the dirt with a metal rod. *SNAP!* The iron jaws of a spring trap clamped together on what could have been Edward's leg.

"So I should have chosen 'one you're done'?"

"Normally, yes, but…" she prodded the dirt straight ahead and again an iron trap closed around the metal rod. "You passed three ones in a row. Ones in three, go with me."

"Apologies, but this is insane. Just take me back to the main cavern, please."

"Oh, poor old man can't find he way through the wittle caves." She pouted and spoke like a toddler, poking the metal rod into Edward's stomach.

"You can't talk to me like that—"

"Oh I think we've made it pretty clear that I can talk to you however… the fuck… I want…." With each pause, she took a step closer to Edward, eventually grasping him by the hair on the side of his head. She pulled him down to her height, growled at him through gritted teeth, then kissed him passionately. When she finished, she threw his head back against the dirt wall.

"If you keep doing that, you're going to get us caught."

"So they fucking catch us. So what. Fuck 'em. C'mon, old man, let's get you back to the main cavern." She grasped Edward's hand in her own, pulling him through tunnels, left and right around corners so fast that she couldn't possibly be checking the markings thoroughly. Of course, the sense of danger added to the thrill, urged Edward to keep pace. The woman was most definitely unstable.

After a particularly quick right turn, Gabrielle came to a quick halt in the newly entered tunnel, seized Edward by his lab coat, and pushed him against the wall.

"There are easier ways to command my attention," he said.

"Quiet. Listen. I think you should come over tonight. After dinner with the family, of course. I'm a lover—not a baker."

"Come over for what?"

"You really are fucking stupid, you know that?" She punched Edward lightly in the gut, swayed over to the next intersection, and turned left, leaving him behind.

"Wait!" he called out, but Gabrielle had gone. He walked cautiously up to the intersection and peeked around the corner. To his relief, the main cavern lied straight ahead.

The main cavern was the centralized location for the Splicer community, a natural formed opening with a high domed ceiling and crystalline walls. Doc referred to the main cavern as a "stadium-sized geode," and many in the community used the area to conduct trade and social gatherings. The main cavern also housed the community's aquifer outlet, the place where naturally filtered ground water flowed as a source of continuous, pure hydration. Edward found Doc by the aquifer, collecting a bucket of water.

"May I assist?" Edward took the weight of the bucket for the older gentleman.

"Gratitude," Doc replied, stretching his arms behind his back. "The bucket grows in weight as I grow in years."

"I assume the liquid is for your CT research?"

"Yes, it is the main ingredient in my custom CTs, but on a more basic level, there are many members of the community who receive diluted versions of the standard CT."

"What reason would you have to dilute the CT? Why not simply lower the treatment's disbursement rate?" Edward set the full bucket aside.

"Because most members of this community do not wish or cannot afford to have a CT pump and therefore receive their treatment via the original method: syringe. Please, follow me back to my lab with that, will you? Gratitude." Doc pointed to the bucket as he shuffled past Edward. Edward lifted the bucket and followed the old man.

"And Gabrielle," inquired Edward. "Which method does she use?"

"I typically don't discuss patients, but Gabby is fairly vocal about it… none at all."

"You mean she Blanks?"

"You could say that. I wouldn't say it around her if you'd like to continue your secret dirt-tunnel kissing adventures, but you could say that."

"How is it that you know about that?"

"Apologies. Little Danny Poole saw you two just outside his home one night. Danny is known to invent fantastic fictions on a regular basis, but you seem to have just confirmed the validity of his claims."

"It is quite the conundrum, then. I cannot have the boy punished for eavesdropping unless I confess my rendezvous to his mother."

"Oh, she knows. When Danny knows, we all know sooner than later."

The two reached the lab, and Doc unlocked the door. Edward went first, setting the large bucket of water on a nearby table. Behind him, Doc closed and locked the door. He motioned for Edward to sit, then pulled up a lab stool to set himself across from Edward.

"There is something you need to know about Gabby if you plan to take this farther. I've looked after Gabby for many years, and I dare say I'm the closest thing she has to a living relative. Now if you are planning to—"

"Apologies, I don't mean to interrupt, but I believe you might be mistaken in thinking—"

"No, please, hear me fully. Things down here aren't they way they were up there. There are no policy books, no training videos, no daily toxin checks and supervisor approval. Things have a way of just happening in this place, much faster, and especially with Gabby. She can be quite… impulsive at times. I've given up on controlling her and so should you. It can't be done. But this is all unimportant, really. As a technician, I'm sure you're aware of a triple ninety?"

"It's an impossibility, a theoretical child supposedly genetically predisposed to develop three or more major toxins—hostility, lasciviousness, rage, things of that nature—of a constant consistency of over ninety percent. In theory, this impossible child would represent an incurable, untreatable citizen that posed too high a risk to itself and the city and subject to summary Relocation or termination. It's a theory every technician

learns in second year training, meant to test a technicians reaction to impossible, theoretical situations."

"It's only theoretical," said Doc, "because the company does not like to advertise the euthanasia of thousands of triple nineties each year. It's not something any of us like to admit to." His voice strained and cracked as he spoke. "I worked at the facility. Gabby's mother came to me, asked me not to kill her child. Up to that point, I'd been working only with embryos, fetuses… I had only been transferred to juvenile diagnostics and processing a few weeks before. And when I met Gabby for the first time and saw that the chart I carried recommended termination, I told Gabby's mother to find this place, these people. And that should have been where I stopped. Relocation to a place like this. But I couldn't just stop. I had to do something. Had to fix things."

Doc wrung his hand around his wrist and looked away from Edward.

"I figured I was smart, that I could *actually* cure this little girl. And so I left, too, and we came here, and I told that woman that I could cure her child if I could just get the right combination of chemicals, just the right mixture of CTs." He stopped, cleared his throat, dabbed the sleeve of his lab coat against the corner of his eye.

"You tested your first Splicing compound on a little girl?"

"I was young, and confident, and stupid enough to do that. But no. Even though I swore to the safety of that formula, swore that Gabby would be fine, swore the Splicing propaganda was just propaganda, Gabby's mother wouldn't let me inject her daughter until she was *absolutely* sure. And so I took my perfectly safe compound, the one that would never kill a child, let alone a full grown woman, and I stuck that needle in her arm, and she…"

Doc turned away from Edward completely, trying to keep another man from witnessing his emotion.

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Edward knocked three times on the wooden door. When it opened, Gabrielle stood in the frame wearing Edward's white lab coat.

"You know, I was looking for that earlier."

"And now you've found it."

"Listen, Gabby, I—"

"Excuse me? I don't think I ever gave you permission to call me Gabby. That name is reserved for family and only by my strict fucking permission." She stood with her arms crossed, lips pursed, head cocked to one side.

"Apologies, Gabrielle, I—"

"Fuck your apologies, old man," she said, grabbing him by his shirt collar. "Call me Gabby." She pulled him into her home and slammed the door.

Final

Edward woke early. At least, he considered it early. Underground, without sunlight dictating when a person slept or rose from bed, day and night became a matter of choice. The compound had various holes that led to the surface for air, but each living space was lit by candle or lantern, so the light could be extinguished at will, free from the natural order of the world. Edward slipped out of bed as stealthily as possible, trying not to wake Gabrielle. He relit the bedroom lantern and then reinserted himself under the blanket, repositioning himself alongside his bedmate. She lay on her side, her face turned away

from him, and he propped himself up on one elbow beside her, his chest against her bare back.

Gabrielle's hair had grown to shoulder length, and the once-pink, once-green stripe in her hair was now a golden yellow. Edward carefully lifted the blonde locks with his forefinger and thumb and tucked them behind the sleeping woman's ear. Gabrielle always tied her hair back before sleep, but movement during the night always caused a few stray strands to wisp around her head. Upon waking and in an uncharacteristically girlish fashion, Gabrielle would instruct Edward to look away until she had combed the stragglers into submission. Edward picked out each flyaway and set them in place.

A low, whining sigh signified Gabrielle's awakening. She gritted her teeth together and growled as she turned to face Edward, continuing her half-sincere, half-exaggerated protest of waking.

"You going in to the laaaaawwweeeeaaaw?" Gabrielle's question ended with a yawn, extending her final word into a humorous and unintelligible fit of breath and stretching.

"The lab?" guessed Edward.

"Yep," she said, then kissed Edward quickly.

"Yep," Edward answered, then kissed Gabrielle's cheek.

Edward rose for the second and final time and dressed in the room. Gabrielle watched Edward silently as he put on his pants, shirt, and shoes. He left the bedroom and made his way to the door out of the home. Gabrielle called out after him from the bedroom, coming to the open bedroom doorway.

"You forgot something!" She had wrapped herself in Edward's labcoat, her only clothing. She grasped the flaps of the coat in her hands and started to pull them apart, teasing Edward with the promise of what lay underneath. "C'mon, let's stay in today."

"We stayed in yesterday, and I've got things to do in the lab. Doc needs my help today, especially since I skipped out on him yesterday."

"He did just fine by himself before you got here."

"You really don't need to remind me how great things were before I got here."

"Oh fuck you, Ed, you know that's not what I meant. Go on, fucking go." She turned around and disappeared back into the bedroom.

"And what about you?" he called after her. "Thinking about going out today? You haven't set foot outside this place in nearly a week. And if we're on the topic of how things were before I got her, when is the last time you've gone out of the tunnels? You're turning into a shut-in, Gabby."

"I'll leave when I fucking feel like it, *Edward*. Have a good day, *Edward*. Don't forget your fucking coat, *Edward*."

"Looks better on you, anyway," he yelled out to the bedroom before leaving the home, slamming the door behind him.

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"How is the new treatment working for you?" Doc asked the question without turning away from his work. He lifted various beakers and vials, pouring liquid into and out of them, mixing and diluting. Nearby, Edward was cataloguing the CT supply.

"Peachy," Edward replied, continuing to count, measure, and record the colored liquids. Over the past few weeks, Edward had started familiarizing himself with all of

the duties Doc performed. Since Doc functioned as the community's one-and-only resource for Corrective Treatment, Edward had suggested that having a "second Doc" might not be a bad idea, to which Doc had reluctantly agreed despite a long-standing plan to live forever. Today, Doc had asked Edward for help with the experimental CT mixtures, but Edward turned down the offer each time, citing an aversion to help others Splice. "Save that one for last," Edward had said.

"Any lingering side effects?"

"Some headaches," Edward said, "Of course those might not be from the treatment."

"Trouble with Gabby?"

"Yeah. Well, no. I don't know. She's been running hot and cold recently. It's been hard to find stable ground."

"That's Gabby for ya… always in a… milliliter…." Doc's voice trailed off as he lost his train of thought concentrating on his experiment.

Edward finished counting the CT stores, marking the numbers on a clipboard he carried. He tapped a pencil to each line of numbers, adding them as he went down the sheet.

"It looks like we might be a little short, Doc."

"Huh?" Doc looked up from his work and, seeing Edward look down the list, set down his equipment and walked briskly toward his new lab mate.

"You're probably just adding it wrong. Here, let me give it another check," Doc said, extending his hand as he stopped in front of Edward.

"Nonsense. I might as well calculate the totals if I'm recording the numbers. It looks like we might be coming up short compared to what you had listed for last week. On Tranquility vials alone, we're down to seventeen."

"Hmm? That's strange… seventeen… that doesn't make sense. I mean, losses like that in the past were usually the result of theft, but that was before I beefed up the door's lock. I mean, the only people who even come in here are me and you and…" Doc's voice trailed off.

"And..?"

"What? Oh, no, sorry, my mind was… no, just me and you, so it can't be theft. Oh, well, yes I have a tendency these days to estimate amounts before actually beginning experimentation. Like that, the Tranquility. I ended up doing that experiment three times before it worked, used three times as much. Apologies. I'll have to be more careful from now on."

Doc continued to hold his hand outstretched, waiting for the list. Edward handed the clipboard to him. Doc stuck it under his arm, sauntered back to his equipment, and set the clipboard on the table next to the beakers and vials, with which he resumed his work.

"Why don't you go ahead and leave a little early today," suggested Doc, "Spend some time with Gabby? Patch things up a bit." As before, his eyes stayed fixed to the work in front of him.

When Edward arrived home, he found it empty.

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When Gabrielle reappeared in the doorway of their home, she once again wore the laborer's dusty blue jumpsuit and had cut her hair into the same pixie style Edward had first seen her with. Even the pink stripe had reappeared.

"Where have you been?"

"Out. Isn't that what you wanted?"

"For three days? Out where?"

"The city."

"Why would you go to the city?"

Gabrielle reached into the deep pockets on either side of the jumpsuit and produced several CTs in various colors. Vials poked through the fingers of her clenched hands. She held them in the air for a moment before stuffing them back into the jumpsuit.

"Boosted them a from a transport capsule."

"But…" Edward stuttered and shook his head. There were too many things he wanted to shout at her for all at once. Her recent erratic behavior. This juvenile reaction to their argument. Her fickle attitude toward her appearance, the danger of stealing from a transport capsule, the crushing anxiety he felt when she had left three days ago without so much as a word. "I don't understand why—"

"Doc's supply was getting low. Like you said, I haven't been on a run the entire time you've been here. Figured it was my turn. I used to run out all the time before—"

"And the suit?"

"Easy cover."

"No, it's terrible, because you look ridicu… listen, I…" started Edward. He stood and began pacing around the room while Gabrielle continued to stand in the doorway, her arms folded across her chest. "You hate those things. You called me a fucking jacker the first time we met."

"You were. You were sold into that system completely."

"What changed?!" Edward lifted his shirt and pointed to his pump. "I'm still 'jacked in,' aren't I? Still have CTs pumping through my system. I'm regulated! I'm in control! You think you're so special since you're the resident Blanker, but I *know* the story, all right? I know about your mom—Doc filled me in. It was an accident, okay? Your mother saved your life by taking that compound, and it kills Doc just to think about it, and meanwhile you're walking around all tough and proud that you're so messed up when really you're just too scared to let him fix you because then you'd have to admit that you're broken. Well guess what, Gabby, you're about as broken as they fucking come."

Gabrielle stood silent in the doorway.

"If anybody is going out for CTs," Edward said, pulling the shirt back over his pump, "it's me."

Edward stormed into the bedroom and began tearing through a pile of clothing by throwing individual pieces into the air, a flurry of shirts and socks and pants. Upon reaching the bottom of the pile, he picked up the last few garments and then threw them to the ground in frustration. He stomped back into the main room. Gabrielle still stood in the doorway.

"Where are my things? Where is my labcoat? Did you steal it again? The way you stole that jumpsuit? The way you stole those CTs? Is that your job here? Resident thief?" Edward's chest heaved and his eyes flared. He hoped the deliberate gestures would excite an apology from Gabrielle. Already, the anger had waxed more into a display of pride. He would not lose this argument. Gabrielle did not move, keeping her arms crossed.

"Feel better?" she asked.

"Where's the coat?"

"In the fucking lab."

"Wanna get out of my way so I can I leave now?"

"Old man, you can leave any time you want," Gabrielle said. "That was always your choice." She pressed herself against one side of the doorway, her arms still crossed. Edward squeezed past her and turned toward Doc's lab.

"Sorry," he muffled under his breath, and walked away.

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Small swirls of dust extended from the sidewalk's edge, evidence of the city's daily street sweeping. Edward squatted down near the gutter and marveled at the narrow line of dirt in the corner where the curb met the asphalt. The soil that shaped the walls of his new home had been pushed here into the crevices of a meticulously cleaned roadway. He ran a finger along the earthen remains. The grains felt too smooth. Unnatural.

Edward stood. A man walked past him with a puzzled look. Edward dusted his hands and continued further into the city. He found his way to the depot where the E13 capsule had dropped him off from work so often before and then headed toward his

former apartment. The white walls of each building reflected the already bright sunlight. Edward's eyes hurt, and he cupped a hand across his brow to shield them as he walked. Walking through an alleyway running between two buildings, Edward stopped to examine the space. The cement walkway had been swept clean, no refuse-filled metal depository to be found, an open and empty urban hallway. He listened for the sounds of children, or animals, or insects. Nothing. No sound, no scent. Sterile.

The door to his old residence was unlocked, strange only because his daily routine now consisted of locking and unlocking Doc's laboratory door as he moved in and out of the underground workspace. Inside, the living space had been stripped of its items in preparation for a new resident. Edward went from bare room to bare room, flicking lights on and off, searching for some sign that he had once lived in this place, that he had once been the man who lived her, perhaps something the cleaners had missed. Like the alleyway, the residence was immaculate.

In the bathroom, Edward lifted the light switch and confronted a full length mirror. The man inside the glass had a dingy gray and blonde beard. Edward moved his hands to his face, running his fingers through the mass of coarse facial flecked in gray. He had felt the beard before, knew it was there, but it had existed primarily as a tactile memory, his only reflections skewed on the side of metal objects and Doc's glass beakers. Now he saw himself clearly.

The pristine white walls of the bathroom revealed by contrast a dingy tan labcoat draped on Edward's skeletal body. His pants, once tight around his waist, hung slack from a belt, patched in dirt. He brushed at his clothing, slapping the dirt into a dusty ring on the tile floor. He torqued the handles of the sink. The stream sputtered as water

returned through them, bursting all at once from the faucet and spraying in every direction. Edward pushed his face into the sink and began to scrub. The water slipped through his greasy hair and ran brown down the drain.

Edward turned off the water and reviewed himself in the mirror. Beads of moisture gleamed in his beard and a wide bib of wet fabric hung around his neck. The remaining dirt and water streaked down his face as the drips created spots on the dusty floor. A broad grin revealed yellowing teeth separated by grime. He stopped grinning. Reaching behind him, Edward flicked off the light.

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The laminate security badge slid through the magstrip reader with a grainy resistance. Still, a small green light appeared on the device and the elevator doors opened. With the clip broken, Edward stuck the badge into the pocket of his coat. He shuffled inside the elevator and pressed into the rounded 47 button, illuminating the white space behind the numerals. The doors closed and the elevator shuddered as it began its ascent, steadying itself as it gained momentum. Edward watched the number above the door increase and began to count to himself as the metal box flew past each floor.

The numbers' progression slowed at the twenty-six, the sequence flickering three more times before the elevator stopped on the 29th floor, Diagnostic R&D. The doors opened with a soft chime, revealing a man with tidy hair and a laminate badge clipped to his labcoat that read Alfred Williamson. Edward's eyes widened at the sight of his former lunchtime compatriot, and he started to lift his hand in greeting when Williamson walked into the elevator and turned toward the door, standing beside Edward without acknowledgement. Williamson reached out and pushed the button for the 38th floor.

Edward lowered his hand and stared at the floor. The doors closed and the elevator resumed its climb with a small jolt.

"Wonderful weather we've had," said Williamson, continuing to face the door. "Say it may rain this week. We sure do need the moisture."

"Yes," squeaked Edward. He cleared his throat. "Sure to help."

"Always nice to have a change, of course."

"Always nice."

"Heading to forty-seven?"

"Yes, forty-seven."

"Up there with the lab rats, then? Work up there?"

"No. No just collecting something from them."

"Well they're good people up on forty-seven. Friends with a few of them."

Edward felt a slight sense of weightlessness in his stomach as the elevator slowed near its destination. He looked to the numbers above the door as they reached thirty-eight. The doors opened with a chime. Williamson stepped off the elevator. He turned around after a few steps.

"Apologies," he said to Edward. "My name is Williamson."

The elevator closed, shook, and continued.

"Nice to meet you."

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Edward stared out the window of Keagan's office, the only portal to the outside from the 47th floor. For all the glass walls that separated lab stations, the floor was essentially a long, flat, opaque box that sat atop forty-six similarly flat boxes and, for all he knew,

underneath a hundred and twenty-nine more just like it. The small rectangle of glass was roughly the size of a man's torso, and Edward couldn't even see out over the city limits, where the white buildings melted neatly into the visible horizon. The sky reflected the cityscape, a mass of white clouds gathering for Williamson's predicted rainfall, beginning to turn gray.

"Excuse me," a voice called out from the doorway behind Edward, "but nobody is allowed in Mister Keagan's office without him."

Edward turned to see a young man with a sandy-blonde crew cut clutching more CT vials than he could comfortably carry, cradling them against his chest.

"Mister Winston?"

"Hello, Stephens."

Stephens' lips parted slowly. He took a single slow step toward Edward, then another. He shook his head.

"Apologies. Mister Keagan said you had been—" Stephens glanced behind him quickly and then hushed his voice. "—*Relocated*." Edward smiled.

"No, nothing so drastic. Working elsewhere is all. A treatment center."

Stephens sighed deeply. He looked down at his feet and, realizing he had stepped inside Keagan's office, took two quick steps back into the doorway.

"You left so quickly, and then Mister Keagan came and took all your personal effects out in a box. They stuck me down with Mister Jenkins working on that new confusion CT that he got approved. I still think they should have called it Concentration but Jenkins said that the name would be too—hey, what are you doing *here*?"

Edward narrowed his eyes in jest. "Accusing me of something, Stephens?"

Stephens jumped a bit and shook his head. “Apologies! Of course not, Mister Winston, I simply meant that—I mean Mister Keagan said—and you’re no longer working here and so I—”

Edward laughed.

“I’m just here to collect a special order of new CTs for the treatment center. I was putting the requisition form in Keagan’s inbox. Do you guys still store the CTs in the same place?”

“Yes, but they’ve restricted access to senior lab partners after there was a break-in. I can go drop these off at my station and borrow Mister Jenkins’ security card. Oh and we have these new transport containers with a handle so that you don’t have to carry around an armful of vials like I am. They’re very convenient as long as you’re transporting less than thirty vials—thirty per container, that is—and I’m on my way to put these into one. I could get you one if you’d like. Would you like me to get you one?”

“Well I’ll need two—the order was for fifty—but why don’t I just come with you.”

“Of course, Mister Winston.”

“Oh and Stephens?”

“Yes, Mister Winston?”

“Why don’t you just call me Edward.”

Stephens looked puzzled.

“Okay, Mister Winston.”

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The elevator doors opened and Edward stepped in, a CT travel container in either hand. Reaching for the rounded "1" button, he stopped. He remembered the exchange he'd had with Gabrielle, grinned, and pushed 176. As the hundred and twenty-nine floors ticked by, he imagined what would be up there, up on the mythical 176th story. The owner of the company? An indoor swimming pool? Or perhaps the elevator would just let him out at 175, proof that 176 didn't even exist. This hypothesis was proven incorrect, however, when the number about the door flicked past 175 to 176 and the doors opened.

An atrium. The entire 176th floor, save for the elevator shaft, was little more than an empty glass box set atop a white marble floor. Edward walked slowly along the outer wall, looking out over the city. He strained his eyes to see past the city limits—surely he could see Outland from this height. But he ran the numbers—176 stories, 12.5 feet per story, 2200 feet high. From this height, the visible horizon was roughly 57 miles, or the exact distance from this tower to the edge of the city.

The perfect enclosed system. A strange wave of claustrophobia swept over him, and suddenly he longed for the cramped, underground tunnels of the Splicer community. Mostly he longed to be with Gabrielle.

The decreasing numbers above the elevator door seemed to progress slightly faster than they had increased on the ride up, as if the decline was somehow easier. Edward stood rigid, a box of CT vials in either hand. Passing 47, he realized that Stephens would most likely be punished for his unwitting assistance. Edward had considered stopping the elevator before this point, rushing the CTs back to Stephens before the young man's involvement was discovered. But Edward imagined Keagan

would more than likely just give Stephens a lecture and pamphlet containing company policies on handing out CTs to dirty ex-employees.

The elevator slowed and stopped at the 18th floor, and the familiar chime accompanied the doors opening. Greggors, a cardboard box of items in her rounded arms, waddled in beside Edward and slowly turned to the door. He stepped aside to accommodate her. The doors closed and a feeling of weightlessness signified the elevator's continued journey.

Edward observed how Greggors' chest pumped in and out rapidly, her inhale sometimes coming in bursts. Her face was flush, the areas around her eyes red and puffy. Her golden hair had been wrapped into an elaborate bun that sat atop her head, held in place with two clips and a small, powder-blue flower tucked in the side of the bun. It was meticulously shaped, each strand moving in the same direction and all tucked obediently into the elaborate hairdo.

"Your hair looks very nice," Edward said.

"My position was dissipated," Greggors responded. She sniffled, and the elevator slowed to a stop at the lobby. "I failed to pass the new fitness standards." What could he say? He wanted to say *something*, but what use was a company suggested comment on weight at a time when efforts of her coworkers had clearly failed her? But they weren't the ones whose tears were in that box. The doors chimed and opened, and Greggors stepped out, hefting the cardboard box of items in her arms.

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Edward relished each moment of the capsule ride from the company building to the city's outer edge. An irreverent pride beamed at this tipping point, the moment he became the

scraggly Splicer stealing from the naïve city dwellers, an underground menace to the establishment. He was only a single child-consumption-and-pinky-bone-tooth-picking away from becoming the character he'd feared so much as a small boy, and that sense of power excited him. He almost wished somebody would question who he was or what he was doing with all those CTs this far out from the company building. He mentally recited the verbal thrashing he'd give the unsuspecting do-gooder, practiced where he'd put the 'fuck's.

He couldn't wait to share the experience with Gabrielle. He couldn't have known that night at the diagnostic booth that he'd one day be as radical and unbridled as the pink-striped pixie-cut.

Outside the motel entrance, Edward showcased his spoils to Marcel.

"Now this, this is that Serenity stuff I was telling you about," Edward said, handing Marcel a vial of neon orange. "I was working on this stuff right before I left, so I'm pretty familiar with its formula. I'm thinking I could mix it with a bit of Doc's Tranquility, a little Dispassion. Should help keep the blood pressure low by keeping that rage in check, *without* those nasty side effects you've had with the Calm cocktail."

"Well," said Marcel, his voice deep and smooth, "I'm sure the wife is going to be happy to hear that. Starting a family is pretty difficult when you can't get even get things started, if you know what I mean." His rumbling belly laugh made Edward smile.

"I hear from good authority that those are rain clouds," Edward said. "Perhaps you could keep watch from one of the empty rooms. I doubt the owner would even charge you."

Marcel laughed again, and Edward moved past him and into the tunnel that descended into the underground community.

"Say hi to Gabrielle for me," Marcel called out after Edward.

Following the earthen tunnels back to the compound's main chamber, Edward navigated the twists and turns with ease, noting the small marks etched in the corners of each intersection as Gabrielle had taught him.

Doc stood in the main cavern with the Poole family and a few other residents. He waved to Edward from near the aquifer where he seemed to be conducting yet another test. Edward lifted the two containers of CTs into the air. Doc smiled. Edward walked the CTs to the lab and set them on the table nearest the door. He should have organized them onto the shelves, but he had more pressing concerns at home.

The front door stuck when Edward attempted to open it. He pushed it open with some effort, using his shoulder to force the wooden board to gradually swing in bit by bit until it burst open with a sudden, violent swing. On the floor lay a small piece of wood—perhaps from a desk, or chair—that had seemingly been wedged into space between the door and its frame. The only light came with Edward through the door, and even the lantern in the main room was dark. Edward relit the lantern from a torch in the tunnel and then went back inside, closing the door once more behind him.

Looking into the bedroom, Edward saw Gabrielle in the blue jumpsuit, lying on the bed, her face turned away from him. Not wanting to disturb her sleep, he slowly removed his coat, folded it carefully, and put on the small eating table.

Edward stepped into the room and took a blanket from the foot of bed. He silently unfurled it in the air and swooped it over Gabrielle's body, laying it from her feet

to her shoulders. He pulled the top edge up carefully to her neck. The back of his hand brushed her skin.

Edward's hand snapped away and he stumbled against the wall. Just as quickly, he moved back to the bed and ripped off the blanket. He put his hand to her neck again, then her face. Her skin was cold.

"Gabby?" Edward shook her shoulder in an attempt to rouse her. He sprinted into the main room, retrieved the lantern, and returned in long, quick strides. He held the lantern above the bed. He shook her again. Her entire body rocked with each motion of Edward's hand.

Ten empty vials were strewn on the bed beside Gabrielle. The sleeve of her jumpsuit had been rolled to the shoulder of the arm she laid on, a rubber tourniquet beneath her upper arm and one of Doc's needles stuck into her forearm. Edward grasped her shoulder and attempted to turn her toward him. The rigidity of her body caused the extended arm to lift into the air, and the needle tore from her skin and fell to the bed.

"C'mon, Gabby! Wake up!"

With his thumb and forefinger, he pried open the eyelid of Gabrielle's right eye. A cloudy film covered the iris. When Edward pulled away his hand, the eyelid remained open, her one milky eye staring out at him. He stood quickly and attempted to escape its gaze, stumbling backward and falling off the bed, dropping the lantern to the floor. He pushed his way along the floor, away from her body, out of the bedroom and up into the fair corner of the home's main area.

He sat there, his leg outstretched from the final heave into the corner, his hand propping him up with palms pressed firmly into the dirt floor, his eyes wide and fixed to

the back of Gabrielle's body. Shadows moved around the lantern that lay between Edward and Gabrielle.

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Relocation Agents in white uniforms escorted hooded prisoners out of the motel door and into the courtyard. A large black man lay dead and bloody beside the doorway, a knife loose in his hand.

Stephens stood at one end of the courtyard, watching as more hooded individuals filled the dusty outdoor space. A supervising Agent wearing a long white trench coat approached him and extended his hand in greeting. Stephens accepted, grasped, shook. The Agent's hands were slender, his knuckled scabbed. Two Agents wearing rubberized safety suites approached the supervisor to report.

"Gassing complete, sir. All canisters deployed."

"And the air holes? Did you have any trouble finding them?"

"No, sir. They were right where we thought they'd be. Anybody left in those tunnels will wish they had come quietly."

"You hear that?" the supervisor asked Stephens. "Looks like we'll get you off the hook."

"That's great Mister um… Mister… Apologies, but I've forgotten…."

"Just Agent, kid."

From the motel door, a scraggly bearded man stumbled into the courtyard.

"Looks like we've got our first gas rat," the supervisor said, elbowing Stephens in the side. "They always come up for air. Look at this guy's eyes—already completely bloodshot."

"That's… that's Mister Winston, er… Edward Winston, my former lab partner."

"The one who took those CTs? Well that's going to do wonders for you, kid. Hey! Hey Edward! We need you lie down on the ground, face down, hands behind you! Edward? Edward Winston?"

Edward made no sound or movement to acknowledge what the supervisor had said. Instead, he walked through the hooded individuals toward Marcel's body. He stooped down and plucked up the knife in his right hand. Stephens and the Agents watched as Edward grasped chunks of his beard and haphazardly sawed through them. The blade didn't discriminate between hair and flesh, cutting through whatever Edward pressed it against. After four or five slices with the knife, tufts of facial hair on stood on the former technicians's chin, lip, and much of the right side of his face. On the left side of his face, however, the hair was matted in blood, pressed against his skin and into the wounds.

Edward pulled his shirt up and over his head. He examined the slim pump on his side and, before anyone could act, began to hack at the device's edge with the bloody beard knife.

"Somebody stop him!" It didn't matter who yelled it, because by the time the nearest Agent got close—one of the gassing Agents in the rubberized suit—Edward had sliced around the edge of his pump and was attempting to wrench it from his side. Two plastic tubes still ran from the nearly extracted device into Edward. The gassing Agent wrestled the knife away from Edward, but the distraught man simply wrapped the tube around his hand and yanked with all his remaining strength. The pump extracted with a sickening slick sound. Edward vomited and passed out, face down in the dirt.

"Medical!"

Stephens ran to Edward and rolled him onto his back. The man's face was caked with blood and dirt and vomit, a single eye open. Overhead, the clouds began to dissipate. Stephens removed his labcoat and wrapped it around Edward.

Edward's eye flittered and opened wide, but the dark crept into his vision, trapping him. The cold, hard surface pressed against Edward's back like a locked bedroom door, and he grasped at the mass of white fabric around his body.

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