

*Ant Farm*

by Deuce Black

With a whir, the world sprang to life. Lights turned on and hummed their dim, electric tune for him, as they always had, as they always would. Electrodes popped off of his forehead and arms. He would have rolled over and begged for five more minutes if he hadn't known what would happen.

"I'm up," he called, groggily.

"Good morning, *Student-dash-D-three-five-seven-one-zero-five*," the disturbingly hopeful robotic voice answered. D357105 liked to imagine, on the rare occasion that he used his leisure minutes, that the voice came from an excitable male tour guide. The tour guide would be showing him around some kind of factory as a guest, and they would be riding some type of indoor tram. For once, he wouldn't see anyone he knew working on the other side of the glass. "The time is currently *zero-six-hundred*. You have been in bed for *eight-point-zero-two* hours. You have overslept. You will be docked *zero-point-two* leisure minutes in accordance with—"

"Statute one one six, section B. Neither Students nor Citizens will oversleep their designated waking time," he repeated, as if by instinct, as his bed tilted forward to slide him onto the morning routine conveyor belt.

A somewhat-happy chime sounded just as his feet touched the cold steel. "*Good*. Via reward protocol *two*, you have been awarded *one* leisure minute for correctly citing the Statutes of Human Continuity."

"Too easy," he commented.

A second chime played, and this one sounded like the auditory embodiment of someone asking if you needed directions. "Sub-protocol *R-dash-two-point-one* activated."

"That's new."

Then, the machine spoke in a way that sounded like it was leading him into a trap. "You have also been awarded *one* celebratory statement. This credit expires in *one minute*. Would you like to celebrate?"

"Uh—yes?"

"Your *celebration* phrase will play any time you choose to *celebrate*. You may give up any *celebration* opportunity to re-record your *celebration* phrase in the future. Please *celebrate* after the following beep." D357105 wracked his brain for something, anything, that would funnily portray his stick-it-to-the-man (or rather, stick-it-to-the-machine) attitude without betraying to the robotic voice that he was actively trying to be coy. Unfortunately, he was out of time, and a toothbrush on a robotic arm had just been thrust into his mouth. He wasn't ready for the *beep*, but it was ready for him. In a muffled, unenthused voice, he said the only thing that came to mind, just as a buzzing electric shaving tool came spinning down upon his already-bald scalp.

"Uh... Wahoo. Boy, am I glad to be alive."

“*Celebration* phrase recorded.” He then heard his own voice, along with a party horn, play back to him over the speakers. He felt as if confetti should be dropping from the ceiling panels, but his best replacement was the speck of toothpaste that flew out of his mouth.

The conveyor belt carried him out of the front door of his living quarters and into a bustling flat plane of side-by-side conveyors at the exact same moment as most of his neighbors. He looked up and sighed, only able to see various mechanisms, bricks, and steel plating. He had heard of the sky, heard that it was beautiful and bluer than anything else in the world. Those reports came from people who had used their accumulated leisure minutes to take a daytrip to the Edge, though, so he didn’t have the luxury of knowing for himself.

D357105 braced himself for an upcoming sharp turn in the conveyor belt. Normally he didn’t have to pay attention consciously, as he’d been to Academy so many times that the corners became muscle memory; twenty years tends to meld a mind. Today, however, he was headed to the event center, which he had never been able to visit before. His graduation gown flowed in the synthetic wind as he rounded that corner, careful not to fall off for fear of being docked leisure minutes.

As he looked around, he noticed that most of the other people on the conveyors around him were dressed just as he was, and the increasing number of them worried him for the merge coming up. As they all left the Student housing zone and merged onto the outermost conveyor of the ground-level midway, D357105 found himself standing next to the closest thing to a friend that he really had. Two or three students did fall off of their conveyors onto the next one parallel to theirs, incurring buzzing leisure minute penalties.

“Morning, P,” he said, as nonchalantly as though he were telling an intern that the office was out of coffee.

She turned toward him, startled, like she hadn’t been with him on flat ground. “Oh, hey D,” she replied. Student P473514 flashed a quick smile before facing forward once more, resigned to her fate of graduation.

The two of them stood on their side-by-side conveyors, not speaking at all for a while. They were simply feeling the cool rush of air as it ruffled their gowns.

Several minutes passed, and by then they were only about two sharp turns away from the event center. P473514 spoke up and broke the silence. “Are you ready to receive your assignment?”

“I have to be, don’t I? It’s not like we get any other choice,” he quipped.

“Hah. I suppose you’re right.” They rounded a corner, steadying themselves at an angle. “I’m surprised that all this time our training never differed. You’d think we’d have known our assignments years ago and been specifically trained for them, right?”

“To some extent, I guess. Some of that training was oddly specific, though, so I bet the System is just covering its bases and training everyone for everything, just in case someone has to switch assignments,” D357105 said, thoughtfully.

“Yeah, for real. Why do you think we need to know how to oxidize rocket fuel?”

“I, for one, have never even seen a rocket. I have also never had the luxury of doing laundry. Too much of that material felt entirely pointless over the years.” He tensed his legs as they approached another corner.

“Yeah, I completely agree. Maybe we’ll get lucky and we’ll get to see rockets at our jobs,” P473514 suggested.

“You say that as if we’ll end up in the same place.”

“I can dream, can’t I?”

With that, they both faced forward and ceased their chatter, as every word spoken past the door to the event center would be a leisure minute docked from their accumulations. The conveyor belts carried them apart, to their respective serialized seats; D357105 took his seat next to D357104 and D357106, who he had come to know quite well over the years but did not quite consider to be his friends. The three nodded to each other and awaited the start of the ceremony.

The ceremony was short and bittersweet. It consisted of a simple congratulations from the System on one large circular screen in the middle of the event center, followed by the awarding of the rest of the day in temporary leisure minutes that were set to expire at midnight. Using this opportunity, D357105 and P473514 met up at the gate to the Citizen housing where they would now be living.

“Good morning, Citizen P,” D357105 joked in a prim-and-proper voice.

“And to you, Citizen D,” P473514 mimicked.

They stood there, wordless, for some time. Many other now-Citizens had taken the day’s leisure minutes to throw some wild parties (or as wild as parties could get without exceeding a habitat’s occupant limit or making a mess that the System would have to clean up, anyway). These two, however, were a pair of outliers. They didn’t see how using these leisure minutes they had been given could cause anything but trouble. And so, there they stood.

D357105 waited for the wind to finish its thought before speaking. “I do wish they would just tell us our assignments at the ceremony. The anticipation is killing me.”

“Oh come on, let the stress build. The mystery is half the fun!”

“And the other half?”

“Uh... Sleeping?” P473514 beamed at her own suggestion.

“Now *that* I can get excited for.”

The two sighed and smiled into the distance, enjoying the whirl of the conveyors for what felt like the first time. Usually, such sounds were drowned out at best, or a reminder of their circumstance at worst. Now, though, it was a pleasant yet solemn reminder of how far they had come and how far they yet had left to go.

D357105 inhaled deeply. “Speaking of which, I think I’m gonna go turn in for the night.”

“Oh? Do you really need that many more leisure minutes?”

“No, not really. I’ve got more than enough to get to the Edge and back as it is, and I might take that trip soon. It’s just…”

P473514 nodded understandingly. “Leisure doesn’t feel worth it if it’s not earned, huh?”

“Yeah. Something like that.” He nodded to her in substitution of a goodbye, and she returned the gesture.

His walk home avoided all conveyors on purpose. He wanted to feel the ground under his feet in strides rather than all at once, for fear of it overwhelming him. The day had been heavy, and though walking would have him carrying the burden for longer, he preferred it nonetheless.

He awoke the next morning in darkness, with no robotic voice to jar him out of bed immediately. Then again, perhaps morning wasn’t quite the right word, as he’d gone to bed so early the previous day that the dim red digital clock on the wall of his new Citizen’s habitat informed him that it was barely two hours past midnight when he awoke. He lie there, motionless, for what felt like an eternity, but the same clock that told him about his out-of-whack sleep schedule also said that it had only been eight minutes since he woke when he finally decided to pull off the electrodes and get out of bed.

He made his way over to the pulsing-white circular button lit up on the wall next to the clock, probably only avoiding stubbing his toe out of sheer familiarity with the floorplan; the only difference between the Student habitat and the Citizen habitat was the color of the stripe near the ceiling. Students were represented by navy blue, while his new space was decorated with a single line of pale yellow. He wondered, not for the first time, what that color distinction could represent as he pressed the button.

“Good morning, *Citizen-dash-D-three-five-seven-one-zero-five*,” welcomed the voice. “The time is currently *zero-two-sixteen*. You were in bed for *ten-point-two-seven* hours. You are up early.”

“Bring ‘em on, gimme those leisure minutes.”

“Your scheduled waking time is *three hours and forty-four minutes* from now. Via reward protocol *one*, you will be awarded *one point seven two* leisure minutes.”

“What?” The conveyor began to slide him into the bathroom.

A chime sounded that seemed as if the System was stumped as to why he would be questioning it. “Complaint detected. Explanation necessary. No leisure minutes will be docked.”

“Yeah, they’d better not be.”

“*Explanation:* Citizens accrue bonus leisure minutes at half the rate that Students do.”

“That’s some bullshit right there.”

It sounded like D357105 had just gotten an answer wrong on a game show. “*Foul language* detected. You will be docked *five* leisure minutes.”

“Oh, come on!”

“*Continuing previous explanation.* Citizens are compensated leisure minutes regularly for their duties which Students do not perform. Therefore, bonus leisure minute accrual is reduced.”

“System, how much is the leisure minute compensation?”

That stumped chime again. “*Question* detected. Starting leisure minute compensation is *two* leisure minutes per *one* hour of work.”

“Ugh, I can make so much more than that just answering questions correctly at the academy.”

“*Morning routine* resuming.”

As his teeth were being brushed, D357105 began to wonder if being a Citizen was really all it was cracked up to be. Students were never allowed to talk to Citizens, so the tales of how much better life would be on the other side of graduation were always pure speculation. Perhaps it was unwise for them all to so strongly hold onto the hope that anything would truly change, though perhaps that hope was all that ever held their sanity together. Then again, seeing Citizens that had graduated just before them in previous years show up drowsy and drained on their conveyors to their assignments each morning probably should have been a sign.

After the System had finished preparing D357105 for his day, including donning him in the Citizen uniform of a steel-gray jumpsuit with pale yellow stripes adorning the shoulders, it promptly ushered him out the door. He could have spent several hours in the darkness of his quarters doing a whole lot of nothing, but he had elected to attend to his duties early to rack up some more bonus credits, seeing as his gain rates had suddenly slowed so significantly.

As with the day before, he had to be unusually aware of his transportation since he was being escorted along a brand new route. He hoped that over the next few years, his subconscious would become attuned to the commute and he could once again absorb himself in his own thoughts as he would be mindlessly ushered to his post.

The conveyors were empty at this time of night, except for the few leisure hour farmers that would regularly get up as early as D357105 had that day to earn bonus leisure hours. He didn’t see how his body and mind could ever get accustomed to so little sleep himself, but he applauded the efforts of the tireless few nonetheless. People like that could probably take trips to the Edge multiple times a year if they so chose. That didn’t seem worth it to D357105, though –

what more did the Edge have to offer a person once they had seen it for the first time? He hoped to find out for himself soon.

His transportation slowed at what must have only been about a quarter to three in the morning as it came up to what appeared to be a large warehouse. It appeared that his least-wanted job had floated to the grimy surface just for him: he was to be a simple assembly line worker. *Such is life*, he thought. The conveyor carried him to his post and he halted, completely unaware of his silent surroundings, or at least too absorbed in his frustration to notice.

In front of D357105 stood a massive panel of buttons, levers, and lights, with one large screen in the middle. On that screen was a flashing button that read *WELCOME*. He pressed it and a long memo appeared. He began to scroll through it without hesitation. At first, he was slow and methodical about it, careful to read every term, but eventually he realized that it was saying the same thing over and over again. Something about instructions, then something about following said instructions. Something about a list of commands, then something about executing said list of commands. It was all eerily familiar, yet he had no relevant prior experience to base that familiarity on.

After roughly ten minutes of meticulous reading, he gave up on paying one hundred percent attention. He began to skim the first sentence of each paragraph rather than actually consuming any of the content. When, after another five or so minutes of that, he realized he still had about half of the document to go, he decided to just keep scrolling and occasionally check a word or two to make sure he wasn't missing anything different or important. For each paragraph or two that he continued seeing the words *instruction* or *command*, he scrolled even further.

When he was finally nine paragraphs from the bottom, a word caught his eye: *green*. Such an innocent word probably should have held no agency in his decision to continue scrolling, but the problem was that it was different. All of the previous bits had been so vague, and never specified any specific levers, buttons, or codes to press. He assumed that was because those instructions would, as he read at the beginning of the document, come down the pipeline for him later. This line, though, it was completely differently from the rest of the document: "If the assigned Citizen has thoroughly read this far in the training document, they will, unless otherwise instructed, press the third green button from the right on their panel before accepting this agreement or risk immediate termination."

Termination was a word that terrified D357105 to his very core. He was already to earn so many fewer bonus leisure minutes as a Citizen than he had before, he couldn't possibly risk losing the seemingly guaranteed compensational leisure minutes bestowed upon him, even if it was less than he'd hoped. Plus, he was certain that termination from his assignment on his first day would result in an endless number of leisure minutes being deducted from his total. So there he sat, bewildered at the fact that the System would try to trick new Citizens on their first day like that, and newly determined to go back and carefully read the entire training document.

He did find one more command buried about three fifths of the way through the document: "If the assigned Citizen thoroughly reads this training document, they will find their first command buried in its text. They are to disregard that command, and instead flip the lever just below the button indicated in that command before accepting this agreement or risk immediate termination." Reading this line filled him with dread. He truly began to hope for the

safety and security of Citizen P473514, when she inevitably reached a similar challenge at her own new assignment.

When he finished scouring the document for more instructions (finding none), the glowing red digital clock on the wall read 05:43:41. He had just spent the first two hours of his first day on the job reading training documentation, and found that ridiculous, but figured it must be standard and comforted himself in the fact that in just upwards of an hour he would see a few of his classmates come in and struggle in the same way. And yet, he also feared for them, as he knew that if he were to offer assistance both parties would be docked leisure minutes. All he could do was hope for them.

He tentatively flipped the lever below the third green button from the right on his console and began to hear a mechanical whir fill the factory. Satisfied with this response, he slowly tapped the “I Agree” button at the bottom of the training document, wary of the so-called “immediate termination” – but nothing came, so he decided to begin his work.

A single instruction lit up his screen. He completed it. A single instruction lit up his screen. He completed it. A single instruction lit up his screen. He completed it. A pair of instructions appeared together, and already he was starting to feel like a zombie. His screen currently displayed the text “flip the blue lever with the cube-shaped handle, then press the button with a caution tape pattern.” He did just that, and a piece of him hoped that from then on the job would be more interesting, or that perhaps when more than one instruction came to him at a time he would receive bonus leisure minutes for completing them. Unfortunately neither was true, as he quickly found out firsthand when his next instruction was simply to “press the red button labeled ‘3’.”

Every once in a while in the background of the ever-droning generic factory noises, he would hear a more defined sound. A sort of *ka-chunk* that sounded like a tough material was being cut. There didn’t seem to be any sort of regular interval these happened in at first, so he chalked it up to someone else having joined him a little early in the factory and continued on. But then, a while later, a slightly more regular pattern emerged. He received three duplicate instructions each two instructions apart from the last.

Press the purple button. Pull the third green lever. Press the button coded in a caution tape pattern.

*Ka-chunk.* Press the purple button. Press the rightmost red button. Tap the numbers on screen in nondecreasing order.

*Ka-chunk.* Press the purple button.

Having paid so much attention to the sound before, he accidentally caught onto this pattern. Perhaps it was subconscious at first, but then he began to want to actively test his theory. It was another twenty minutes or so before the next “press the purple button” instruction came across his screen, but he was satisfied to discover that after two more instructions, there was a *ka-chunk* in the distance. A grin came across his face as he considered a possibility: perhaps solving the puzzle had been his real job all along.

He wanted to further test his theory, but after forty-two minutes of tense concentration without another purple button instruction, he began to wonder if he had simply gotten incredibly

lucky with three of them so close together just an hour ago. He decided the next time one came across his dash, he would attempt an extra layer of testing, even if it may cost him a few leisure minutes.

The day continued to pass, as individual instructions came across his screen. He was so intrigued by the purple button mystery that he noticed nothing else about his surroundings for hours. Finally, around two in the afternoon, another purple button instruction graced his presence. He pressed the purple button. Another instruction came onto his screen: “flip the lever with the pyramid-shaped handle.” He ignored it and pushed the purple button again.

A notification came across the screen informing him that he had just been docked one leisure minute for incorrectly inputting an instruction. He weighed his options, then instead of pressing the button marked with a yellow “5” as the screen told him to, he pressed the purple button a third time, at the cost of two further leisure minutes. Sure enough, he heard a *ka-chunk* in the distance, and was docked two leisure minutes this time. He followed the next instruction. *Ka-chunk*. And the next. *Ka-chunk*. And the next.

...Silence, aside from the background hum of what he had assumed was the rest of the factory. He was completely convinced that the purple button was either the only tool on his dashboard that made a tangible change in his environment or one of a select few. Only then did he look around and realize that, despite it being two in the afternoon, he was surprisingly still the only one in the factory.

He awoke the next morning a few minutes before six, when the System was scheduled to wake him up. With just a few minutes to spare, he decided to let the silence flow over him this time. No one else had shown up to his factory by the time he left the night before.

After his assignment the previous day, he had tried to use a leisure minute or two to explore the factory and see if he could find out the source of the *ka-chunk* noise. The System had other plans for him, though, and did not allow him to use leisure minutes within the factory premises. The mystery had grown too strong, and he decided he had to know at the cost of any number of leisure minutes what his job really was. His first idea was something so drastic that it just might work.

He allowed the System to get him ready for the day. His teeth were brushed, his hair was buzzed. The System dressed him and booted him out the door as usual. All he hoped for to test his theory was to run into P473514 as the conveyors carried him to work, seeing as it would be a more standard time today.

As luck would have it, they ended up on parallel conveyors right outside of the Citizen housing zone just as they had been on their normal commute to the academy. He greeted her with a wave and much brighter, more animated eyes than normal, which she more than noticed. In a tired, distraught voice, she greeted him back. “Oh hey, D. Didn’t see you yesterday, I figured we might have ended up on different transport routes after graduation. Good to see you.”



“Yeah! You too. Hey, listen, if you’re willing to lose a minute or two, I’ve got an out-of-bounds question for you.”

P473514 glared down at him. “D, I’m saving. Is it important?”

“I’d say so, for sure.”

She sighed. “Alright. Shoot.”

“What did you end up doing at work yesterday?” A tone of incorrectness rang in D357105’s ears, as the System informed him he would be docked one leisure minute for a detected *inappropriate question*.

P473514 looked surprised at his question, but to some extent intrigued. Her eyebrows raised a little. “It was so weird,” she started as the System buzzed at her as well. “Tons of buttons and switches, and seemingly inconsequential instructions sent my way. And the training document had hidden messages, I’m glad I read it thoroughly. And no one else showed up.” For this information, she was docked three leisure minutes.

That decided it for D357105 – he was abandoning his post for today, even if it cost him a whole day’s worth of leisure minutes or more. Even if he got terminated. He stepped sideways off of his conveyor and onto hers behind her, wincing as he did so. He figured a crowd would tackle him for bonus leisure minutes in helping subdue a deviant. He figured he’d hear a buzzer like he was being electrocuted or a siren, followed by the docking of a hundred leisure minutes and the threat of more if he did not step back onto his own conveyor. Instead, as he cautiously opened his eyes, all he saw was a wide-mouthed P473514, who had turned around and made as if to catch him when he fell. All he heard was the continued whir of the conveyors. And most importantly, he was not notified of any changes to his leisure minutes.

“Are you *insane*?” P473514 asked, panicked, as a wide grin sprouted across the face of D357105. He started to laugh, and she only looked back at him questioningly.

“Yeah, maybe a little bit, maybe I am. Listen. I’m coming with you to your assignment today. I’m not going to mine. I have to see something, and this is the only way I think I can do it.

She seemed to think for a long while, her eyes darkening and glazing over. After only coming up with the obvious fact that neither of them had just been docked leisure minutes for his conveyor crossing and that she would still be doing her job all day, she nodded slowly. “Okay. I guess. But you’re going to owe me like crazy, and it’ll never happen again.”

He simply beamed at her. He was more excited to test his theory than anything else. “Okay, yeah, of course! All I’m going to be doing is wandering around your factory a bit and having you signal to me somehow when you come across a specific instruction.”

She began to smile lightly back at him, though she still had sadness in her eyes. But he knew that for once, he was actually going to have fun today. He would be enthralled in the mechanisms of the System.

They arrived shortly thereafter at P473514’s factory, each a few leisure minutes lighter as they had continued discussing their duties and confusions. “Alright,” began D357105, “I’m going to hang around you for a while, and throughout the day all you’re going to do is tell me

when you come across an instruction telling you to push a purple button. Just do everything like you did yesterday. I'm going to look around for something each time."

For just over an hour, they stood there in silence. Every five minutes on the dot, D357105 was informed of being docked five leisure minutes. Each time, he caught a judicious look from P473514 and proceeded to ignore it. Finally, a purple button instruction came through.

Two instructions later, like clockwork, D357105 caught a *ka-chunk* from the same direction as it had come from in his factory. He searched in that direction everywhere that he could think. He looked under tables, climbed on things that probably weren't meant to be climbed on. He scoured the metallic hell for something, anything, that would go *ka-chunk*.

Over the next few hours, they received two more purple button instructions, each with its own *ka-chunk*. He felt lost, but like he would happen across something any moment. As it happened, just eleven instructions after the third purple button came yet another. He walked past a gap between a cold steel wall and what seemed like a dangerous humming machine, and definitively from within that gap came the loudest *ka-chunk* yet. He was close.

"I think I found something," he called.

"What is it?"

He shrugged, even though she couldn't see him from her station, and began squeezing into the tight space. He shimmied along the wall and eventually came to a still conveyor belt about as high as his waist; it was the only possibly-moving part he had actually *seen* in the entire factory. Lying on the conveyor belt was a seemingly endless sheet of shiny brown metal, an outlier from the generally gray color scheme of their society. Looking to his left, back toward P473514 and into the chamber from which the conveyor belt emerged, he saw a chute coming from below with an endless amount of that shiny brown metal descending down into it. To his right into the other side of the chamber, he could see a clean-cut line on the brown metal, and just after that was what looked like a large, simple metallic bowl with some sort of engraving on it that he couldn't read from his angle.

He sat there craning his neck for upwards of forty-five minutes, just waiting on another purple button to come so he could verify that he had found the source of the *ka-chunks*. Finally, he heard a muffled yell from P473514 and inferred that she was informing him of the command's arrival. Moments later, the conveyor belt whirred to life and carried the metal out of the chute and into the chamber on his right. It shut off after only a moment, and shortly thereafter, he saw a huge blade come down and *ka-chunk* its way right through the metal sheet. When it retracted, on the other side was another bowl, molded from some shape he couldn't see from behind the blade.

He hurried back to P473514. "P," he called. "P, I definitely found it."

When she got off from her assignment for the day, they finally spoke freely about what D357105 had found, P473514 wincing at every docked minute. He explained everything to her,

about how there were no moving parts in the factory aside from that conveyor belt, and the only thing coming out of the factory seemed to be a slow but steady series of brownish metal bowls.

“What could that possibly mean...?” P473514 asked, trailing off but with slightly brighter eyes than earlier that morning.

D357105 shrugged. “I have one theory, but it’s expensive to test.”

“Hit me.”

“I thought you said you were saving?”

“Screw saving, I’m in pretty much as deep as you now. I want to know what’s up too.”

“Alright. We have to go to the Edge. We have to do it now.”

Citizen P473514 was silent for several seconds. She shifted her gaze downward toward the conveyor in front of them. Quietly, just over the drone of the conveyors, she spoke. “D, wait, I know you said expensive, but—”

“Do you have enough?”

“I mean, maybe—”

“Seriously. Think about it. I have to test this now, I’m going with or without you.”

P473514 said nothing for a moment, simply feeling the rumble of the conveyor belt below them. She broke her trance with a focused look, but what might have been a tear in one of her eyes. “Alright. I have to just trust you on this... I have to know.”

He beamed at her in response. “System, I’d like to spend leisure minutes. Requesting transport to the Edge.”

A happy chime played. “Route confirmed: *Edge*. Existing company, please speak your intention,” recited the robotic voice.

P473514 nervously inhaled. “I’d like to accompany Citizen D357105 to the Edge.”

Another happy chime. “Company confirmed. Route changed. Arrival to *Edge*: *one* hour and *fifty-three* minutes.” Their conveyor belts merged onto another one next to them and they began on their eastward venture.

“Do you really have enough minutes for this?” P473514 asked nervously.

“I’ve only ever spent up to five at a time, and even that’s rare. I’ve been saving since I was little. I’ve got more than enough.” He smiled comfortingly. “Do you, though? You said you were—”

“I know what I said,” P473514 interrupted. “I’ve got enough. I was hoping to stay out there longer some day, that’s all.”

“Okay. Thanks for joining me.”

“Of course.”

They arrived to the Edge at precisely a quarter to seven, according to the System. For some reason the view was completely obstructed by a flat, matte steel wall except for a tiny glass panel on a heavy-looking metal door marked in massive warning signage: *WARNING – DO NOT PROCEED WITHOUT CONSULTING LEISURE MINUTE LOG.*

D357105 confidently pushed forward, walking himself right off the end of the conveyor when it reached its terminus. P473514 was not too far behind, though she stepped off a little more timidly.

He turned to face her. “You’ve not been before, right?”

She shook her head. “I’ve meant to come out so many times, but most of the time an hour of leisure here or there seems more appealing than a whole day. I just haven’t gotten around to it.”

“I know what you mean,” he replied with a light smile. He turned away slowly and tried to look through the small glass window, but it seemed to be permanently frosted over and he could only see a spectrum of a faded blue to a deep silver. He twisted the handle and pulled the door open, completely ignoring the warning sign, faintly hearing the end of a distant clanging sound that cooperated with his theory about the bowls.

On the other side was that blue he had only been able to dream of. A flat line lay as far away as he could see where the blue met the gray, and from there upward there was nothing but vibrant cerulean. It was the most fantastic color he had ever seen, and it was only disturbed by the biting chill, two small puffs of what looked like white smoke, and a single perfectly circular moon staring them down from just above the horizon. What interested him more, surprisingly enough, was the gray. He slowly walked forward, marveling at the sheer force of the unprecedented color, until he reached a guardrail that surrounded the whole platform on all sides. He could go no farther, but he could see down below them from there well enough. Hundreds of feet down, he saw a whole lot of barren quicksilver nothingness except for a pile of small brown objects directly underneath them. From where he was, it appeared no more than an inch wide, but with how far down it was, it very well could have been several miles across. Gray powder covered the ground radiating outward from there. The occasional decayed log was strewn about breaking up the visual texture a bit, but where once had been a strong oaken brown was now a sapped, lifeless charcoal. His amazement at the blue drained away into a sort of forsaken look as he looked at what the blue was trying to hide.

P473514 broke the silence with a deep, hiccupped sigh. “The top part is pretty enough, but this is less than I was expecting. I have to say I’m a little disappointed,” she commented.

“P, look down. Look.” She joined him, gazing disdainfully downward at the monochromatic desert below. A light breeze, the first real one either of them had experienced, tickled their noses.

Her next words were not so rushed as D357105 expected them to be, but rather sorrowful, tragic. “D, I... I have to leave.”

“Where do you need to be?” He didn’t look back at her then, but continued considering the scenery.

She waited for the wind to hush. “Down.”

He whipped toward her. “P, wait, no.”

“I’m out. I’m fresh out of leisure minutes.”

He was now more angry than anything else. “You said you had enough!”

“I know, but... This was the goal anyway. We’ll never know anything other than the System.”

“Goal? This isn’t a goal! That’s insanity!”

“You know what will happen when the System detects me out of obligations without leisure minutes.”

“You’ll be fine,” he said hopefully, but with a twinge and a voice crack, knowing he was lying even to himself.

She chuckled lightly, but without true humor. “You know this is a better option. I’d rather fall off the Edge than be confined.”

“That’s not a joke...”

“No. It’s not.” She turned slowly to face the horizon and leaned forward against the guardrail, looking down. He wanted so badly to reach out, to grab her and pull her back, to force her into confinement just so she’d be that much farther away from the Edge. But deep down, under his view of the azure sky, he knew that someday he’d likely end up in the same scenario. There and then, he decided he’d eventually rather die under the real atmosphere than be compressed inside a fake one. And he understood.

His vision blurred as P473514 hoisted herself up on top of the guardrail. He recognized that his vision was blurry from tears only as they began streaming down his face. Balancing against the breeze, she turned to face him one last time, face coated in her own tears but sporting a soft, sympathetic smile. Before any further words could stumble out of his dry mouth, she was leaning backward over the rail. Only then able to force his legs to move, he rushed, finally, to grab her, the hem of her jumpsuit, her fingertips, anything, but he was too late.

He gaped woefully over the guardrail as her figure shrank down into a speck in the brown splotch below the platform, and just above her, his theory was being confirmed: a fresh batch of meaningless metallic trinkets made by none other than the Citizen worker ants tumbled, clanging against each other as they fell, out of some disposal tube below the platform. The bronze bowls covering his view of P473514’s tumbling form forced him into the realization that P473514 was not the first to have departed from the Edge. He now noticed a forest of half-buried limbs among the mound below, and as the purpose disappeared from his life, so too did the life from her eyes.