Set Your Affect

She dashed down the steps of the apartment complex, sneakers thudding on the concrete. Her textbook-filled rucksack smacked repetitively against her hip once she landed and took off down the sidewalk, ducking past the crowd of toiling patrons and out into the hubbub of pedestrians.

Errant hands grasped at her arms as he barreled past them, but the crosswalks signaled to walk, and she managed to evade the strangers attempting to stop her for a few blocks. She wasn’t supposed to be running, and they knew it.

Her heart pumped powerfully in her chest, even in her ears, as she weaved through the coming and going sides of the pedestrian traffic. The tall, marble columns of the institute waited in the distance, the inscribed words across its arch, Salva Veritate, just visible to her.

Attention caught on her destination, she smacked into a man standing a few feet back from the edge of the crosswalk. He grabbed onto her by both arms, stopping her in her tracks. His hands nearly encircled her biceps and his grip dug bruising deep where he held on, keeping her from squirming away. He had already been facing her; must have been standing in wait.

“Woah, hey,” the stranger said, holding her still when she tried to push past. He was dressed in an impeccable gray suit—complete with a tie in a lighter shade and gleaming cufflinks—and wore his light hair slicked back, none of which had been unsettled by stopping her. “Where are you off to in such a hurry?”

“Work. I’m—”

“Well, you’ve put yourself in quite a state running around,” he interrupted. She was panting, probably red in the face, and sweating at the temples. He cocked a brow, looking down his nose at her. “I don’t think you’re doing yourself any good until you fix yourself up.”

“Please,” she said, voice rising. “I have to go.”

The man shook his head and did not drop his hands from keeping her in place. She stopped squirming with a huff, but there his hands stayed. His piercing eyes watched her, a deep blue, and crinkled at the corners when his thin mouth curled into an unsettling smile. “Just calm down, my dear. You’re going to get yourself in trouble.”
She gestured toward the crosswalk, which had turned green since she’d been stopped.

“But I have to–”

“Come on, I’ve already asked you once,” the man chided. She pressed her lips into a thin line, saying nothing, and his gaze darkened. Clear and severe, he said, “Set your affect.”

She opened her mouth to bemoan the command, but he stared her down with an unwavering scowl. She swallowed it all, the words burning as she forced them down. He’d only tell her that she should have set it before she left the house.

It was never good enough that she’d eventually do it. She always should have done it before. It was only a simple ask of women, wasn’t it? Every day, to wear a mandated wristband and spend their lives existing within a set range of affects. Only to make their lives simpler, less…emotional.

She extended her left wrist, and yanked up her sleeve to reveal the slim band of metal settled on her lower forearm. The man in the suit lowered his hands, but remained where he was in the middle of the sidewalk to watch her. She angled her arm to turn the rectangular screen on the band’s face toward her, tapping it once to power up the mechanism.

The screen lit up a pale blue as someone knocked into her shoulder from behind, sending her stumbling into the man’s torso again.

She scowled at the person as she righted, finding the narrowed eyes of her brother staring back at her.

“Sorry,” he said to the man, drawing his gaze from his sister. He had to look up to speak at the man, having not quite hit his growth spurt yet. He backed onto the crosswalk, and smiled cruelly at his sister. “Just excited to start my classes today.”

She bristled, but bit hard on the inside of her cheek. Her brother was fourteen and a nuisance about it. Not that she could ever say anything against him, though she was nearly twenty.

“Of course, my boy.” The man waved him off, voice light and pleasant. “Don’t want you to miss a minute.”
“Finn,” she called out to her brother before he turned away.

He could take her along with him without having to set Neutral; get her away from this man in the suit and keep others from stopping her.

He could, but why would he?

Finn eyed her forearm with a dismissive curl to his mouth. He shrugged, nodded to the man, and took off down the sidewalk. Finn’s shorter frame disappear into the crowd, dark curls bobbing as he jogged away.

The crosswalk had turned red after he’d crossed, and she met the gaze of another woman as she now waited to cross.

There was nothing to the woman’s face except the impassive look of Neutral. Waiting behind the men crowded in front of her, blinking slowly. She watched that woman and her hollow gaze—stuck in the monotony of being blank, mind in a haze until someone else deemed it necessary to change her affect setting.

Otherwise, she served as nothing more than décor, prettying up room corners.

“How you’re just putting it off, my dear,” the man said, taking her wrist himself and forcing it awkwardly to face him. She’d spent too long, distracted by the sight of what awaited her once the man set her.

“Please…”

The word barely came out, falling to nothing in the air. The man scrolled with his index finger on the screen of her wristband, assuring her, “You’ll feel better in a moment, don’t worry.”

As he pressed his finger resolutely on the screen, she closed her eyes, and the wristband came to life. It grew cold as it expelled the chemical, the first hit of Neutral tingling as it seeped into her skin, into her veins and her blood.

Static settled over her bones at first, and then became a general weight inside her, a constant reminder of its presence. The haze overtook her mind—the action to open her eyes
again becoming a conscious choice—in the time the man pulled her sweater back over the
wristband and released her.

“There we are.” He reached out and brushed the flyaway strands of her dark hair from her
face. “No need to look so out of place, huh?”

The feeling of his hands grazing the sides of her face was distant. Nearly absent. Her
hands fell to her sides, and she nodded to the man’s question. The woman she’d noticed waiting
at the light turned away without a word, without a twitch to her face.

“Go on, have a good one,” the man said with a pleasant smile, herding her forward with a
gentle hand curled over her shoulder.

Given a direction, she walked toward the crosswalk and took a place at the back of the
group waiting for the light to change. Her eyes remained trained in front of her, her hand rested
on the strap of her bag. Men passed her, but she never passed them, walking a steady pace
toward her original destination once the light turned green.

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She was late to arrive at the workroom. Peter, her boss, and the other assistant, Jonah, had
already started, rounding a table covered in the splayed-out insides of a computer. Peter glanced
at her from behind his thin glasses and paused speaking until she took her spot beside Jonah.

“Good to see you this morning,” Peter remarked, eyes falling to her sleeve-covered arm.
“What are you set at currently?”

“Looks like she’s on Neutral,” Jonah answered, leaning forward to peer closely at her
face. He scrunched his big nose as he hummed and observed, holding a clipboard to his chest.
She looked over at him, a few seconds delayed because of the affect. The urge to frown at him
rose, but fizzled before it could form physically on her face—simply becoming another part of
the haze. She blinked instead.

“Well, Neutral’s no good for our work. Set it to Focus.”

The hesitancy from before did not cross her mind this time. As the say-so fell from
Peter’s lips, she slid her sleeve up and scrolled down her screen until it was lit with a bright
green.
She tapped the screen and dropped her arm.

Her eyes fixated on the empty space in front of her. A tightness traveled up her spine, expanding into her lungs. Her pupils dilated, a tingling traveling through her nerves as her attention caught on the scrape of Jonah’s pencil… then the squeak of Peter’s shoes… and the reflection of light off the table…

“Here.” Jonah passed his clipboard to her and strode to stand beside his mentor in matching white coats. She tracked his path, saying nothing. She’d never wear one of those coats, regulated to tracking their research and writing it down in clear handwriting.

The two men circled the table, picking up the scattered microchips and mechanical innards. They’d pick one up, discussing what could be done about the smallest fundamental parts of the device— what could make it run more efficiently, with more power.

They never asked her opinion. Never double-checked a decision before relaying it to her.

She listened quietly, jotting down their conclusions in the neatly arranged chart— partly because of the Focus and partly of her own interest.

The three of them worked until lunch, where Peter and Jonah went off together to the cafeteria and she was left in the workroom to reorganize the parts they’d left behind. The rough edges of the chips felt like the sharp end of a razor on her oversensitive skin.

Finished, she gathered her bag and went by herself to lunch. The food, prepackaged and chilled too cold, was hard to eat under the Focus. The texture overwhelmed any of the taste, and every time she crinkled the plastic, it grated in her ears.

There were only a few moments in a day when she, and other women, were supposed to touch their own wristbands: when they set them to Neutral in the morning, and when they took them off at night. Or when instructed to set a new affect.

Wholly dependent on the whims of the men around her.

If she could have heard her own thoughts over it all, she would have counted the minutes until her lunch break ended. When she would return to watching Peter and Jonah work with the
intense amplified senses given by the Focus or one of them would set her back to Neutral, and she’d no longer have to deal with it at all.

The squeal of the chair across the floor nearly made her flinch. She dropped the rest of her food in front of her, and was met with the grin of a man taking a seat on the other side of the table with his own meal.

“Hey,” he greeted, swiping messy, black hair from his face.

“Hi, Derrick,” she said, trying to return a smile to her boyfriend. But she could only rub her temple from all the noise.

He frowned, tilting his head. His eyes tracked across her face, but she was unable to meet his gaze, even when he reached out his hand and interlocked their fingers.

“What’s wrong, babe?”

“It’s loud in here. With the Focus.”

“Well here, I’ll fix that.” Sliding his hand from hers, Derrick turned her arm over. He rucked up her sleeve and scrolled through her wristband until it glowed a reddish-purple. With a tap, he released her arm and re-intertwined their hands.

Her eyes fluttered as the heightened awareness of Focus muddled and was replaced with a pleasant warmth blanketing her body. The ambient noise of the cafeteria softened as her heartbeat rose in its place. She found her gaze drawn to Derrick—how nicely his hair curled at the ends and how, even in the fluorescents of the cafeteria, his eyes were such a nice shade of green.

There was a bit of relaxation in her muscles now, but something heavy still sat at the bottom of her stomach. Being set to Affection was always a bit too sudden. But Derrick always preferred being with her on that affect.

“Better?” Derrick winked at her.

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Her mother and Finn weren’t around when she finished the workday—the apartment dark and quiet as she stepped inside. She set her bag down by the front door and tiptoed up the stairs into her bedroom.

It was cozy, bed piled with blankets and nature posters tacked up on the walls. Enough moonlight streamed in through the window she didn’t switch on the light before toeing off her shoes and changing for bed.

The last thing she removed was the wristband from her arm, placing it on a matching steel station to charge. She rubbed the heel of her hand into her eyes while the Neutral haze lifted, moaning softly in the back of her throat. Her muscles ached, exhaustion weighing her down.

Sleep was the only release from Neutral and Focus, and all the rest.

Before sliding under the covers, however, she knelt at the side of her bed. She blindly slid a hand along the white, shag rug and under the bedframe, pulling out a shoebox.

She brought it with her onto the bed, sitting cross-legged in her pajamas with the shoebox placed in front of her, ragged at the edges and cardboard soft to the touch.

After setting the top aside, she tipped the box’s contents out onto the comforter—a collection of metal bits and pieces, some alone, but others already put together in small mechanisms. She ran her fingers over gears, screws, half-pieces of things she’d swiped and hidden away.

She picked up one of the pieces, some of the gears already screwed onto a rod in the middle of it. She held it up at eye-level, inspecting the join she’d made to connect the pieces. She never did this kind of work at the institute, stuck watching while Peter and Jonah created new tech. Stuck in Focus to watch every little thing they did, and remember it, but never do it herself.

But in the darkness of her bedroom, she could.

Picking out another piece, she went to work.
Finn hadn’t left the house when she came downstairs the next morning, chowing down on the egg and toast breakfast their mother had prepared. She joined him at the table, thanking her mother when she placed a plate in front of her.

Her mother smiled, cradling her daughter’s chin in a thin hand. Her hair had started to grey at the temples, but her eyes shined.

She could see the edge of her mother’s wristband underneath her sweater sleeve, identical to the one on her daughter’s wrist. It disappeared from view as her mother stepped away.

“What’s your affect going to be today?” Finn asked with a mouth full of eggs.

She blinked, taking a second to register her brother’s question. It confused her hazed-over mind—since Neutral served as the baseline until told otherwise. What else would she set to?

Finn groaned, and reached over his sister to grab at her left arm and yank it toward him. She said nothing against it, watching quietly until Finn decided he was finished.

But her mother put out a hand, laying it atop Finn’s. He turned a furious glare on her as she pulled his fingers away, saying quietly, “Don’t grab at your sister.”

“Why not? She didn’t set it yesterday,” Finn grumbled, stabbing his fork into his eggs. Their mother returned to the stove, saying nothing more.

He shoveled another bite into his mouth and then pointed the prongs toward her. “And what about you, Mom? Do I have to tell you, too?”

Their mother brushed her hands down her front, looked down at the pan of food on the stove. Finn stared at her, chomping his food while he waited for an answer. She didn’t say anything to her brother or her mother, slowly peering back and forth between them. Just a spectator.

“You’re right, dear,” she said.

Her mother offered another smile, but she couldn’t return it. The attempt to rose up, but was stopped by the barricade of haziness in her mind. She watched as the lines of her mother’s face relaxed, smile drifting away and her mother’s eyes looked at her, but no longer saw.
Had she ever seen her mother any different? Barely shining through the grey fog of Neutral that her mother seemed to exist in perpetually—never going anywhere, other than on minor errands. And Finn never deigned to change their mother’s affect.

She could only think that, at one point, her mother must have been set to something else. But not in moments that she remembered. She had never really known her mother without Neutral numbing her out to a placating shell that existed to serve her son and be an example to her daughter.

The woman her mother might have been was a stranger she would never meet.

“Good,” Finn said happily, shoving his plate toward his mother and sliding out of his chair. He shouldered his bag and jogged out the front door without a goodbye.

She finished her breakfast in silence as her mother cleaned up, slowly clearing away Finn’s leftovers and then the cooking pans. They didn’t speak to each other, her mother clearing the counter of their breakfast.

She left for work in silence and with a steady pace.

As she neared the crosswalk from the previous day, she waited for the man in the suit to appear again. The one that had set her and sent her on her way. She wouldn’t have been surprised if he, like Finn, would double-check that she’d set her affect.

If he was there, she didn’t see him.

She waited patiently and crossed with the crowd. A shrill horn sounded from down the street, and she thought nothing of it. She probably had only registered the sound a second or two after it had been made.

Someone grabbed tight onto her arm and yanked her back out of the street. As she tumbled back, she heard the horn’s shrill honk again and the screech of rubber on pavement. Her reactions were slow, near non-existent. Her body smacked on the sidewalk, arm taking the brunt of the impact.

People shouted, a siren whooped and a sharp pain radiated up her arm. She turned and leaned back on her elbows, watching through bleary eyes as a crowd gathered around a car with
its front crushed into a light pole. They should have been distant, muffled to her ears—but everything had become clear as day.

It was almost like Focus.

But she wasn’t stuck experiencing every little thing with the dial turned up to eleven. The whole scene played out in front of her, and she could take it all in. The car central to the accident, now half up on the curb and crushed against the light pole. How close she’d come to being hit.

Panic rose in her chest and she blinked up at the sky, gasping. The sounds of the accident were overpowered by the loud thumping of her heart; the ends of her fingers tingled and the stench of burnt rubber filled her nose and traveled down her throat—a lot more than she was used to feeling. Too much.

She could fix it. She had to fix it.

Yanking up her sleeve, she put her arm into her lap, groaning at the dull ache. A bright red scrape marred the palm of her hand, but she must have escaped anything worse. She tilted her arm and frowned at the sight of her wristband.

The screen was dark.

She tapped at it.

Nothing.

She hit it over and over, but the wristband was completely unresponsive. Nothing made it light up or send a blanket of haze to overtake the burning panic rising in her chest and up into her throat. She shook her arm, and smacked the side of the wristband with the heel of her hand.

The only thing she succeeded in doing was knocking the screen askew, revealing cracks in the structure underneath. She scrambled to force it back in place, before the chaos of the accident faded and someone else finally noticed her.

The screen managed to fit back into its original space, if a bit looser than before, and she yanked her sleeve back down after the wristband. Rising to her feet, one hand curled tightly around her sleeve at the wrist, she glanced at the lingering bystanders.
Had one of them seen the broken wristband?

She hadn’t meant to. They’d have to believe her…

She kept her arm tucked close against her side, striding into the institute and up to the workroom. The crash hadn’t delayed her as much as the day before, but there wasn’t time to duck off to the bathroom without being late two days in a row.

She arrived as Peter was setting up the day’s experiments on the table, glasses half off his nose, her throat dry and gritty as if it was filled with sand and her heartbeat still pounding in her ears. A chill ran down her spine as Peter looked up to greet her, and she took a dry, painful swallow.

Would he notice? He saw her nearly every day, surely, he’d realize she wasn’t under an affect.

Her blood rushed through every part of her body, like live static in her veins and the only reason she wasn’t shaking was the lingering shock of the whole situation.

But he only glanced over for a second, mumbling a hello before ducking his head and returning to his work.

Jonah came in, tossing his bag aside and nearly hitting her as he greeted their supervisor. She flinched as the swung near her, but neither man noticed the obviously un-dulled reaction—Jonah’s back was turned and Peter had stopped what he was doing to give Jonah a handshake hello and guide him over to their work for the day, prattling on excitedly.

She never realized how little attention was paid her, without Neutral’s haze.

Both men had gone to work, leaving her standing at the far side of the room without instruction. Sometimes that happened, but she’d never been able to watch normally. Peter, enthralled completely by their work, talked without pause and pushed his glasses up repeatedly. But Jonah…

With Peter distracted, he took the opportunity to turn toward her, eyes slowly looking up and down and a lecherous grin curling across his face.
Fire licked up her gut, fast and sudden. It blazed a path up her throat, and lit the rest of her nerves like dry tinder. The *creep*. How long had he stared at her like that? How long had she not noticed, dazed and Neutral or hyper-Focused on the wrong things?

Her shoulders tensed, lips pulling down and brows trying to form a scowl. She knew the feeling of *wanting* to show those things, but so long had passed since she’d been allowed.

Jonah noticed.

His lecherous eyes narrowed as he stood straight beside Peter. He opened his thin, little mouth and raised his hand toward her, preparing to point her out.

She ducked her head as heat flashed up on her cheeks, pushing up her sleeve and tapping at the dark screen of her wristband. Scrolled as she would if it still really worked, and then covered it quickly before he could notice the absence of any light coming from it.

When she finished, laying her arms by her sides, Jonah still watched.

She clenched her teeth and dug her nails hard into her palm, hoping she had forced her face enough into the stare of Neutral to fool him.


He stared, intently inspecting, as if challenging her will to keep it together.

She wanted to hit him.

The only thing that stopped her was Peter laying his hand on Jonah’s shoulder. He turned Jonah away, asking, “What are you looking at her for? We have work to do.”

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She trailed her finger across the tablecloth, creating paths of bunched up red fabric near her silverware. Soft music trilled among the low conversation of the other patrons, leaned over soft candlelight.

Derrick babbled on across from her, waving his fork as he recounted a particularly complicated game of rugby he participated in after work. She’d seen a few before, but never managed to pick up the rules.
She watched her hand making fabric paths, with her chin perched on her other fist.

Derrick could usually keep her attention, bring something akin to a smirk to her lips with his stories.

But her mind was muddled, a dark cloud rolling that made her pull at the hem of her sleeve to make sure it covered the broken wristband from anyone’s view.

Somehow no one had noticed. Exhaustion dragged her down after hours of consciously keeping her face from ever reacting. Neither Peter or Jonah had made her switch to Focus, so most of the day was spent trailing them like a mannequin on wheels.

Turned out Peter was kind of funny. Jonah was definitely a suck-up.

As she watched Derrick, talking so much with his hands, a knot tightened in the bottom of her stomach. He was excited and dressed up nicely for dinner, but he looked...just like any other guy in the restaurant.

Except his girl wasn’t hanging on his every word—warm and happy and pleasant.

How long had she looked at him, under Affection, and thought the uptick of her heart was her own? That the stomach flutters when he held her hand or called her pretty were real?

He was kind, without the haze.

He’d still asked her to set her affect when she sat down. Wouldn’t have hesitated to do it himself.

She put her hands in her lap to keep them out of sight and to force herself to pay attention to Derrick’s story. She made sure to smile at the obvious jokes or when he’d pause to throw a line at her to show he still liked her.

Because after dinner, he’d want to kiss her goodnight.

So, she stood at her front door to receive his kiss, though it didn’t send butterflies through her stomach or make her heart beat any faster.

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Her mother sent her out the door on her day off with an average shopping list. A longer walk than to the institute, but she could sleep in and leave after morning foot-traffic thinned out.

There and back. There and back.

Never deviating; calmly walking to the store and returning home to finish chores before Finn came back for dinner.

A park had always strayed in and out of her Neutral haze when she went out on this particular chore. Lush trees and manicured shrubbery, a green scene trying to be a distraction until it went out of view when she turned the corner.

She came upon that corner as she always did—a right turn to head toward the grocery store. There was no crosswalk for it, just continuation of the sidewalk, and a few other women were on their way.

Turning left, however, was the park. Its crosswalk hadn’t activated yet.

She paused at the corner, facing neither right nor left. One way she’d always gone, and one that she never would.

Not with the wristband, when it wasn’t a dead piece of metal on her arm.

But if she didn’t draw attention…it wasn’t like people around there knew her.

She’d get back later than usual. She didn’t expect her mother to give her up out of spite, but Finn could always come back earlier. He knew what time she was supposed to home, and he would never miss the chance to question her about it. He’d figure out something happened to her wristband.

He’d never let her go back to the park. Or ever let her go at all.

She turned left.

Keeping pace with a woman leading her toddler across the street, she walked toward the park. It was almost agonizing, inching toward what was only across the street, but forced to keep with the speed of people who weren’t allowed to be in a rush.
She clenched her fist so tightly her nails dug into her palms, as she forced each of her steps to be small, slow, steady. Draw no attention. Don’t stand out.

When she finally passed through the entrance, she stopped.

A breeze passed over, blowing strands of hair over her face and through the branches of the trees that lined that boundary of the park. She breathed in, cut grass—wet and fresh—filling her nose until her lungs were full and she couldn’t take in anymore.

The center of the park was taken up by a brightly tri-colored playground, the women there watching over their children. Sitting, spaced out on the benches or the grass, and only watching.

She walked slowly away from the playground, conspicuously by herself, though none of the women turned to see her.

One of them wore shorter sleeves, Focus’ orange light glowing on her exposed wristband. Their gazes were unwavering, intense. Not loving—not a smile to be found on their faces—each woman fixed on their own child, following each little movement.

One of the boys picked up a fistful of dirt and mulch and chucked it straight at one of the girls, neither much older than four. The little girl shrieked as it flew into her eyes and the larger clumps smacked hard onto her torso, tears streaming down her cheeks. She spun to the boy, shouting for him to stop. He shoved her in retaliation, sticking out his tongue and mocking her cries. The little girl screamed at him again.

“Don’t snap at your brother,” one of the mothers called out to the two children. Both looked at the woman, whose Focused gaze only saw the little girl. The mother said to her daughter, “Keep that under control.”

The mother waved her son back off to the playground, and he left his sister with a derisive ‘ha!’ and a sneer. The little girl bowed her head to her chest, wiping roughly at tears that left tracks down her cheeks. She slumped onto the ground on her knees, face pulled together with the difficult effort to listen to her mother’s instruction: not to defend herself. Not to show how much it hurt.

Forced to self-regulate, being too young for a wristband.
Though not for long.

She passed by the group of mothers, keeping a calm pace so as not to draw their attention. There was a little area of bushes near the boundary walls, far enough away from the playground the entrance. Keeping eye on the mothers, she lowered herself to her knees and then into a sitting position until they were completely out of view.

The grass must have been watered recently, a bit of dampness seeping into her jeans, but she didn’t mind it. Peering down, she ran her hand through the grass, blades sliding between her fingers, cold and spindly, but soft.

It was nice. Not too much.

Leaning forward as far as she could, she dragged her hands through the grass so the blades slid against her palm, a bit rough as she cleared some of the wet away and they caught on her dry skin.

She curled her fingers and pulled up a fistful, bringing them back and inspecting them in her palm. They’d left something sticky on her skin from where she’d torn them. She brought her other hand up and laid it over the other, rolling the grass blades between her palms and then let them fall back onto the ground.

She leaned back on both hands, scrunching and fiddling with the grass under her touch. Tipping her chin up, she looked at a few of the clouds, round and fat and coasting across the sky so peacefully.

Shifting, she dropped back onto her elbows—damp grass seeping into her sleeves—and then onto her back. She laid her hands on her stomach, and blinked up at the clouds.

Hidden away, she laid there.

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Three days wearing a broken wristband, and she ruined it with three words.

“Shut up, Finn.”

Her brother turned on his heel, mouth already curled into a sneer from the vitriol he’d been spouting at their mother about the state of his bedroom, and came at her almost
immediately. He grabbed at her arm and pulled like he always had, expecting her blind obedience, her apologies and remorse.

She was never supposed to fight back. Never had and never would.

“Get off.”

She used her other hand and the weight of her body to shove Finn so hard he stumbled and fell on his ass, splayed out on the floor.

Standing over her brother, she barely breathed. Her heart pounded and her lungs burned, as though everything in her had gone into pushing Finn away. Her body started to vibrate from the inside out, starting at her fingers and emanating up her arms until she finally took in a gasp of air.

Finn groaned, slow-moving while he sat up and leaned on one hand. His hair had gone wild, curls all in his face, and his eyes searched the room for an explanation. He even turned back toward their mother with his brows furrowed together, as though she could give him an answer.

And he hadn’t looked so much like a child for a long time. The one who’d cry when his older sister didn’t want to play with him.

But he turned, and that child was gone.

“You’re not set,” he sneered, scrambling to his feet. He kept the space between them, hands in fists at his side. “Do it. Right now.”

The answer was quick off her tongue.

“No.”

Finn sucked his teeth at her and slid his phone from the back pocket of his jeans. He said, “You won’t get away with this.” and sprinted up the stairs.

She watched him, until his stomping feet were out of view and he’d retreated behind a slammed door. He’d be reporting her, no doubt.
Their mother hadn’t moved since her children had faced off. She had dropped a cleaning rag and plate onto the floor, shattered ceramic scattered at her feet.

Her eyes were trained on her daughter, who swallowed under the intense gaze. What she’d done could come back against them both, especially if they believed her mother had known. But, as they stood there, her mother’s hand lifted to hover over the light blue screen of her own wristband.

It stayed there, for a moment.

But Finn’s footsteps stomped back down the stairs, voice angry and sharp as he spoke into his phone. Their mother put her hand back at her side and knelt slowly to begin cleaning up the broken plate from the floor.

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She held her bare arm in her lap while the engineer used his rolling table of tools to fix the wires that powered her wristband. He’d had to cut out the screen to get to them with a blowtorch, but the rest of his tools were almost tiny.

The wristband was set in a vice on his workbench, and she leaned to the side to try and watch, absentmindedly running her fingers along the bare skin of her forearm. She’d never seen the inner workings of a wristband before, even while her own was broken; too worried that fiddling would turn it back on.

Her stomach curled up in squirming knots and a cold fog settled in her chest at the thought of what the engineer would set her to once he’d fixed it.

People had strolled in and out of the room while she waited and the man worked. The door to the workroom wasn’t locked, and she glanced at it over her shoulder. There’d be a bit of surprise on her side, maybe she could run home.

Where Finn would just turn her in again.

She hadn’t struggled since being discovered. The whole process had been oddly systematic: Finn called the number. A man with graying hair, a clipboard and a beige car showed up an hour later. He checked her name and then, finally, her wristband.
His response:

“You should have reported the damage when it happened, young lady.”

He thanked Finn for calling and then escorted her out to his car. He ignored her on the drive over to the institute, leading her by a forceful hand on her back to an upper floor she’d never been to.

She snapped back to attention as the engineer yanked her hand out of her lap, perfunctorily extended her arm straight out and slipping the wristband back into place. She held her shoulders tight, trying to etch the memory of grass and sky and even the fearful beat of her heart in that moment into her mind before he tapped the screen.

He dropped her arm and picked up the stark red file with her case.

“Stay here,” he said, setting his glasses beside his tools. “Someone needs to walk you out.”

And he left.

Without setting her.

She waited, holding her breath, in case he turned right back around to fix his mistake. Somehow, he didn’t and she still had a few moments before someone else would come and definitely do it.

She held up her arm, twisting back and forth to see if she could tell what he’d done, what he’d fixed. But it had been sealed up tight, the screen returned to its place.

The only change was a thick scar of soldered metal marring the wristband where it once had been smooth. She ran her nail across it, catching on the bumps and rough edges. Her nail made no impression when she pressed down.

It didn’t look very strong, like the fold you’d make in paper so it’d be easier to tear. A weaker point in otherwise durable construction. Peter and Jonah talked about them before: chains being weakest where they were fused together.

She tapped the line of mollified metal, gaze wandering about the room.
Nothing on the engineer’s table she could safely use was any bigger than her palm, but a tool cabinet stood on the far side of room, set up with an abundance of drawers at her disposal.

Bracing her hands on the edge of the worktable, she slid down onto the balls of her feet and darted toward the cabinet. Her boot squeaked on the tile floor, sending her stomach up into her throat, but she didn’t stop until she reached the tool cabinet.

Opening the first couple of drawers she realized the engineer was obviously organized—each one only filled with a single type of tool, or screw, or bolt—but she had no idea how the organization worked.

Continuing to search blind, she moved on to the lower drawers, starting with the one level with her knees. It slid open with a soft creak and a dozen screwdrivers shifted into sight, scraping against the metal drawer.

That could work.

She grabbed the first one in reach—with a blue handle that fit snugly in the palm of her hand. She checked once more over her shoulder, but there was still no footsteps or voices coming her way.

Even if there was, she didn’t have much time left.

She eased the drawer closed, and knelt onto one knee to shove the tool into her boot, handle first. She pushed it down, angled beside the length of her foot making sure that it didn’t poke out the side when she stood up.

Satisfied, she darted back to the table and returned to her seat.

She clenched her hands together in her lap, heart pounding in her chest. She resisted the urge to check the door by pressing hard on her knuckles until heavy footsteps echoed down the hall.

Her breath held tight in her chest, she forced herself to stare at her feet as the door opened behind her. She recognized the beat-up sneakers of the engineer, but not those of the man who accompanied her. They both came to a stop in front of her.
“It’s not pretty work, but we really don’t expect her to be messing with it.” He reached out and lifted up her arm to show off his work the other man, twisting it gently side to side. “She’s had a little fun, but should be back to normal soon.”

Another hand took her by the wrist, pulling so she had to lean forward on the edge of the metal table. She looked up—after a few days, too used to being able to glare—and finally recognized him, the man with graying hair that had brought her to the institute.

“Did you ask her when it happened?” he asked, ignoring her.

“Not my department.” The engineer slid his hands into the front pockets of his jeans and shrugged. “You going to punish her?”

“Possibly. It doesn’t happen much anymore, but higher ups might think about assigning her a babysitter until she learns better. Some poor Junior Cadet, just breaking in his boots, most likely.” The graying man turned her arm over to better access the repaired screen on her wristband. He scrolled through each setting and resolutely tapped it when it glowed light blue.

As he dropped her arm, he remarked, “Without Neutral, she was helpless to control herself. Who knows how all those raging hormones affected her decision-making.”

The haze clouded her head. She opened her mouth to plead, but the affect was faster and face relaxed before she could utter the first syllable. Wither her now quiet and passive, the engineer reached out his hand to help her down off the table. He handed her off to the man with graying hair, returning to his other work as though he’d never see her again.

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Her mother wouldn’t look at her when she returned home. Finn sneered at her from his lounging position on the couch.

She stared at him, face impassive from the Neutral seeping through from the wristband. She couldn’t curl her lip or curse at him, but there was still a spark of glee rising in her chest from the urge that hadn’t been wiped away from being set.

“What,” he snapped.

She stared at him a second more and said, “Nothing.”
Finn sucked his teeth at her, but she walked off without another word and ascended the stairs to her bedroom. The lump of the screwdriver in her boot ached with each step, but she left it there until she closed her door.

She leaned back against it and ripped the wristband from her arm, gasping as the affect was suddenly cut off. She set the thing on top of her dresser and pulled it in front of the door, heart starting to pound in her ears and nerves alighting with sweet adrenaline.

She paused by the door, listening for the rushed footsteps of her brother coming after her.

There was only the TV, a loud, angry show floating up to the second floor.

Satisfied Finn wouldn’t come looking, she picked up the wristband and took it over to the bed. She clamored atop the blankets and yanked off her boot, screwdriver tumbling out onto the mattress.

In one hand, she took the screwdriver. In the other, the wristband.

She flipped the wristband over so that the marred soldering scar on it faced her. She curled her hand around the blue resin handle of the screwdriver.

A few days without an affect had left something in her chest, slowly being buried under every minute that she had to spend again under the influence of her wristband. Soon she would forget just how it felt to be…free. A distant time she would only be allowed to refer to as a mistake.

She could break the wristband once more. And if they reported her, gave her a brand-new wristband, she could break it again.

Fighting what was most likely a losing battle in a losing war—a meager army of one. Perhaps it was simply better to give up her rebellion, fade into the perpetual hazes of Neutral like her mother or standing at the side of man like Derrick, only loving him because of Affection.

The ease of subservient chemical dependency or the uphill independence of free choice.

Slowly, she rested the blunt end on the jagged line of fused metal.