

Comparagen

I looked out the window into the blue sky. How odd was it that the world was so peaceful when every man, woman, and child lived in such fear? It seemed surreal, like the moments of chilling stillness before the clap of thunder and the strike of lightning. Needles stabbed at my spine, and I gasped in pain, beads of sweat accumulating on my forehead. I fell into darkness.

It wasn't long ago that the disease had gripped Orion. It had come unexpectedly, striking the elderly first. Grief weighed on the people of the city, but it did not stop there. As the city council scrambled to support the hospitals and old age centers, the disease spread to the offices, the homes, and the lives of every person. As the first city of bots, the Orion city council needed to have control, to do better, but nothing was working. With no information, it was a losing battle.

Then it came, the first breakthrough in weeks of insecurity. It was a news report from Bridgeham University, finding the fault in the gene of darker hair types. From then on, the bots became programmed to separate everything: workplaces, schools, even homes.

That's how I got here. Away from the orphanage, from my previous life: in this prison. The city had given a decree asking for permission to conduct clinical trials on many of the dark-haired. The orphanage, as city property, must have been forced to agree.

Medibots had come strolling in as soon as I got here, pulling me under as they poked a health tracker into my calves, and drowsing me as they injected a strand of that virus into my arm.

I glanced at the holoprojector still running from the last medibot visit.

Patient 5932:

weight: 115 lb

genetic marker: Positive

disease: teleti-90

allergy: none

symptoms: chills, cough, shaking, breathing difficulty

trial medicine: comparagen

The needles came back as I read through the page. I hacked and looked up at the ceiling. The fainting spells were catching up to me again, and I slowly slipped back into the waves.

"I hope you rested well, patient 5932." I rubbed my eyes against the invading lights, noticing a misplaced pain in my head. Where was I? The room's brilliance hurt my eyes. The minimal colors and decor were nothing like my holding cell. "We will be testing the trial medicine in a few days, the tracker chip will keep us up to date." Trial Medicine. The words rung in my ears. Without missing a beat, the medibot kept speaking. "Would you like a briefing of the trial medicine?" Silence fell over us.

I looked at the ceiling. Did I want to know the details? Not only the inevitable death but also the way to it. I looked back at the medibot.

"No," my breathing hitched. I gasped, no breath. Air, I needed air.

"Excuse me, please relax. Your breathing rate is fluctuating rapidly. Please lay-" I fell through the darkness once again.

"Do you think he is awake?" A woman's voice floated through my head, bringing with it pain and consciousness.

"No, but I did want to show you what we were planning for him," another voice shifted through the murkiness.

"Really?"

"Yup. It's a new technology, something you wear on your wrist. It's a long term regimen."

"Why don't you give him a one time shot? Isn't that what the rest of the meds aim for?"

"That is what the other trials are aiming for, but I think Dr. Britchet's recent findings are going to change that."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll break it down. The virus has undergone multiple mutations; depending on the strand, the impact on the person differs. It's all different combinations!"

"That means-" the woman started.

"Ya, no one solution will work. By giving the patients the wrist band with the chip in their leg, we can control and watch the medicines taking effect. Real-time data and real-time treatment! It can even help prevent the disease if it works."

"This could change everything! It could let the patients go back! It could let us leave!"

"I know, I know. I think the boy is waking up. His bpm is going up; we should go."

"Alright, I'll send the medibot." I heard the women say before footsteps clicked to the doorway and the soft click of the door sounded. I opened my eyes; a headache set in my head as the light filtered through my vision. I missed my window. The artificial lights kept blinding me as I stared at the ceiling.

"I hope you rested well, patient 5932," the medibot drolled. "Do you feel any pain?"

"Yes," I wheezed, my head pounding out the syllables.

"We will administer the pain medication in a moment. Would you like to hear the briefing on your assigned clinical trial?" My head kept pulsing at every monotonous letter that came out of its speakers. I tried to clear the muck in my head and focus on the medibot's words.

"No."

"Do you have any other requests or questions?" A memory floated through: a brown-haired girl.

"Lithia. Do you know Lithia Marcus?"

"I am sorry, patient confidentiality restricts me from answering."

"Then, the date. Tell me the date."

"Today is February 4th, 2054." 2054? A year had gone by. The hammer in my head stopped me from asking anything more though.

"Ugh, medication-" I gasped. "For the pain."

"We will get that for you shortly." The medibot headed to the wall to the side. I looked at the ceiling. What were those people saying earlier? The medibot rolled back, medications in hand. "Your scheduled appointment for the beginning of your trial period will be tomorrow." The needle pinched at my skin, drowsing me from answering.

"Hello, patient 5932," a familiar voice called through the water. I broke the surface of the water desperately. Lythia, it was Lythia! I bolted straight off my bed. Pinpricks dotted my spine; breath left my lungs; coughs scratched my throat. I fell back onto the bed. "Easy now, you still have teleti." I gasped for air, finally catching my breath.

"Alright, so we will get started. I have to give you the right one. Here, try this." My bed rose. Now that I could see, I looked at the man. He wore a blue shirt with a tie covered with a lab coat. He had a clean face with strikes of gray in his-black hair?

I grunted as he tied a wrist band across my wrist. Little needles on its underside pricked at my skin, drawing spots of red.

"Yup, you are all good! Any questions?"

"What- what is this thing?"

"Didn't you get briefed on it?" I shook my head. "Well, that's a change. Teleti is relentless, and cases of re-infection are possible. The wrist band's AI will give you meds according to your medical condition and genetics, as well as other treatments. That's about everything." I tried to make sense of everything through the pain, but I started moving. I watched

as my computerized bed rolled through the doorway and out of the office. A line of patients waited in their beds. I watched them go past; their names and numbers at the base of their beds.

6742- Madie Carnegie

6745- Madiline Brink

6844- Marcus Flinn

Like alphabetical-

I woke up back in my room, hair pasted to my forehead. My head didn't hurt as much, though. I blinked at the ceiling. No pain. No anything. I slowly flexed my wrist; the wrist band was still there. But no other pain and clean breathing. I got up from my bed.

My legs shook as I lunged for the bed frame. Common on, I needed to get to Lythia. I pushed on the handle and pulled on the door, and the door clicked open. I threw myself into the hallway, my body heaving from the exertion. Lythia. I dragged my legs to the next door, and the next, and the next. Finally, to "6023-Lythia Marcus". I pushed the door with all my weight, stumbling in when the door was wide enough. Needles started up my spine, but a pinprick at my wrist saved me from the pain. There lay Lythia, my sister, my only friend.

"Lythia?"

"Lucas?" She shifted in her bed. I couldn't go closer. "You're here!" She lunged off her bed.

"No. Stop! I have it!" She froze. "But I'll get better; I'll be with you. Promise. They have found a way to fix us all up. We can go back soon. Soon, it'll be all over." Tears started rolling down her cheeks, and she smiled.

"I can't wait to go home."