

The engine sighed with relief as the man shifted into park. It was an older model—they all were—but it started when needed and it handled well-enough on the unkempt streets leading to the city outskirts. With the engine off, the cold began to set in and the man gathered his pack, keys, and ID badge.

The thud of the car door echoed quickly off the walls of the parking garage. Even though there were no other vehicles in sight, he always parked at the rear of the lot. I suppose he enjoyed the brisk walk to the tram that would take him into the city. The car ride was only a few minutes, but the tram took at least twenty. The man didn't mind however, he liked to look out from the cabin hanging high above the withered city and silently wonder what it must have looked like in its prime.

The tram reached the next station, steadied itself, and slid its doors open. A mechanical voice calmly identified the next station and the estimated arrival time as the vessel shuddered and picked up speed. The man didn't bother to look around as he was always the only person onboard, this time was no different.

Through frosted windows the man could see his destination. A massive, chiefly concrete structure that spanned multiple blocks and sat squarely in the center of the city. No windows, lights, or life could be seen. Just some water vapor from a few scattered vents on the roof.

The doors opened, the man exited, and the tram retracted itself from the building's station and continued its lonely itinerary. In a few seconds, the man covered the length of what was called "The Gate". It was a small cutout on the corner of the enormous building with metal shutters that opened and closed when a tram approached, but otherwise sat idle, just filtering the dim morning light onto the polished concrete floor. Faded yellow lines used to usher employees to the correct entrance, or to the guard station if they were a visitor.

That station was little more than a small room with a square window, a thin slot for handling paperwork, and a narrow door, all tucked into the wall next to one of the entrances. The man assumed the door was locked, although he never actually bothered to check. Through the dark window he could, however, see a desk, two chairs, a camera monitor, and a pile of visitor badges. The black anti-fatigue mat sits a few feet from the door, slightly chewed by rodents and faded by the checkered sunlight that fills this small landing in the evening.

The man tapped his ID badge to the black square on the wall, a little red light turned green, and his entrance opened with a burst of slightly-warmer air. Dim yellow lights lined the hallway but turned a brilliant white as he passed beneath them. The man walked his usual route to his post and he felt the darkness creep behind him as the lights dimmed once more.

The man's job wasn't complicated, but it did require a fair amount of skill and a keen eye. He had never met his employer and didn't seem to have any coworkers. The man received an offer through a blank envelope slipped under his door just hours after reporting his recent furlough to the local employment office. He was expecting notice of a job opening of some kind, but these communications are typically delivered via phone or electronic mail.

The envelope contained a single piece of stationary listing an address, tram number, a date, a list of duties, and a more-than-reasonable salary. The man only had the weekend to contemplate the offer. Monday came, he followed the directions to the tram, then to "The Gate", then to his office. That was years ago now.

Through his scrupulous saving and frugal living, the man was able to afford a slightly nicer apartment a few minutes closer to the tram station after only a few months' work. This afforded him the

rare luxury of getting home a little earlier and sleeping in a little later. He felt this extra time was well spent.

The man approached his office door and once-again tapped his ID to the black square next to the door. After the short beep and familiar click the man heard from within the wall, the door was unlocked and he made his way inside the dark room.

A sensor picked up his presence and the lights rose to full power over a few seconds. The man placed his pack in a locker, trading it for a plastic suit that covered him head-to-toe, a full-faced respirator, and an exposure monitor. Now within his expected dress-code, the man approached his station and began to draw a pale red liquid from one of a dozen taps along the rearmost wall.

Once a sample has been collected, it is analyzed for contaminants and clarity. Light red was the desired hue, free from any inconsistencies or impurities. The man held the vial up to a bright inspection light, rotating it slowly. Satisfied, he placed the sample in a small pneumatic tube, pressing a button to send it off into the depths of the facility, or perhaps even further.

The rest of his shift continued in much the same way. Tap, fill, inspect, send. Occasionally, his exposure monitor would beep, indicating a stray particle had reached unsafe levels, but the air filtration system would quickly whir to life, clearing the contamination before it could pose any real danger.

He had long since stopped wondering where the liquid came from or where it was going. Early on, curiosity had gnawed at him—what exactly was his role in this grand machine? The closest thing to an answer had been the day he found a scrap of paper wedged into a vent near his station. On it, a few smudged words stood out: "Keep the balance."

At first, he thought it might have been a note from a previous worker, but the paper was too clean, the ink too fresh. He had looked around then, half expecting someone to be watching from the dim corners of the facility. But, as always, he was alone.

The end of his shift came as it always did—with a sharp, mechanical chime. The man returned his equipment, checked his exposure levels, and left his office. The hallway remained as empty and silent as when he arrived. His footsteps echoed softly against the smooth floor, the lights brightening only long enough to escort him out.

When he reached "The Gate", he hesitated. Outside, the night had fully settled over the city, casting long, cold shadows between the skeletal remains of old buildings. The tram station sat empty, waiting for its single passenger.

Something felt different tonight.

He turned his head slightly, his breath catching in his throat. For the first time in years, there was another set of footprints in the dust outside the guard station. Fresh, distinct.

And they weren't his.