

A Novel Experience: How Writing my Own Novel Prepared Me for a Job in Publishing

Amber Mason

Prof. Larry Carr (Department of English)

SUNY New Paltz

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**Abstract:** In order to understand the editing process more intimately, I decided to write a speculative/dystopian novel under the guidance of Professor Carr, whose extensive experience in the publishing industry makes him the perfect mentor for this project. We moved through every stage of the writing process from idea conception to outlining to chapter drafting. During individual meetings, we discussed how to edit the piece; I paid special attention to the kinds of feedbacks and suggestions that an editor needs to be equipped to give. In the end, I will understand the process of getting a book published from both sides of the equation—the writer and the editor.

**Keywords:** English, Creative Writing, Novel, Science Fiction, Speculative Fiction, Dystopia, Writing Process, Editing, Publishing

## **World-Building Notes:**

*World War III* or, “The Old Age’s War” was a global war (with a little nuclear flare here and there) fought between The West and The Far East Alliance in the first third of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. It ended in a ceasefire, mostly because both sides were too devastated to keep going. However, The Order firmly believes that they need to be prepared for anything, as no truce has been formally signed. They’re preparing for Phase II, to be started at any time now. The World remains damaged as a result. Important results include the introduction of *Mutations*, feral, altered lifeforms that exist now in the wild. Their senses are hypersensitive and they’re generally faster, stronger, and really just want to be left alone. If humans get too close, they attack.

*The Order* is the government sect that performed a coup d’état during WWII and rebuilt western (American) civilization during the ceasefire. They remain in power today. They consist of a President and a Senate. They are an authoritarian regime disguised as a democracy with checks and balances, similar to, but rebranded, the former American government. They focused on streamlining and equalizing everyday life. Under their regime, significant personal freedoms have been suspended in the favor of equal, fair treatment and technological advances. They eliminated much of prior culture, branding it dangerous because it caused division amongst the people. Pre-War, The Order had a fascination on trying to make humans more adaptable to a possible Nuclear Winter—and authorized secret human experiments to create such humans. These experiments led to the creation of viable Newmans, short for “New Human”. They are a fairly new species and there are some kinks to be worked out—they are infertile and lifespan varies wildly. To set them apart from other humans, early Analysts adjusted their genes to have unnatural eye colors, a smaller build, and slightly pointed ears. They also wanted to create the perfect soldier to win WW3, and many versions of The Berserker Soldier project were born. The

first (but unknown) successful experiment occurred barely a year before the novel's start. The lab caught fire and it was assumed that all experiments and staff were dead—until Søren Ackert returns to The City.

*The ONUS*<sub>2</sub> or The Order's New United State, is the country that The Order restored following World War III, in the West. It spans several hundreds of miles in formerly, the Northeast, USA. It borders *The Wastes* to the south, which starts around the former, D.C., which is an area seemingly uninhabitable still. It is barren and desert-like due to fire damage and climate change in the past few decades. Few Hunters are even authorized to go down there with the best gear currently available.

*The City*: the capital city of The ONUS. This is where most of the population resides and home to the Congressional District, or the major place of operations for the government. It is where most commerce and industry and just civilization in general is. Originally, it was the entire ONUS; but, as more and more of the land was inhabitable again, the ONUS spread into *Sectors*. First, it outsourced farming, and then other industries as well. The City is also home to The Academy, or the original, and most prestigious, training facility for The Factions.

*The Factions* are three divisions of specialized government workforces: Hunters, Analysts, and Officials. Hunters are the men and women that are qualified to venture out into *The Wilds* and even *The Wastes* to retrieve information and artifacts from the pre-war world. They also chart the state of the outside world—if things are improving or not. Other duties include border control, Sector patrol and other army services. The Analyst faction is the smallest faction. They make up highly ranked scientists that work with artifacts brought back by Hunters, on medical advances and technological advances. One Analyst is usually assigned to each Hunter Outpost; an Analyst also oversees the surveillance teams, hospitals, etc. The Official faction is

the largest faction. Officials serve many different roles in society, from bureaucratic positions to curfew patrol to state-sanctioned entertainment. They directly uphold The Order's laws and wishes. Occasionally, The Order authorizes faction hybrids—most notably through The Academy's Analyst-Hunter program.

*The Wilds:* the inhabitable, "safe" lands between Sectors, Outposts, and other locations under The Order's jurisdiction. While it is safe for humans to exist, it is also safe for other forms of wildlife, both radioactive and benign. A lot of it is forest and nature has retaken much of human civilization. Nuclear climate change greatly affected many areas, but nature has rebounded pretty well. Hunter Outposts and Outlander settlements dot the landscape. Trams connect The City to Sectors and Outposts. The Order is continually building new tram stations further and further into The Wilds.

*Outlanders* are the people who managed to escape the collapsing United States and thrive without The Order's help. They are seen as enemies of the state, but, often, Hunters let them live. Sometimes, The Order even makes deals with them—secretly. Outlanders have valuable resources that The Order wants, and vice versa. Outlanders settle in The Wilds as well as The Wastes, or so rumors say.

*Outpost: Vigilance,* is the first outpost that Søren Ackert was trained at. It is pretty far from The City, but is not one of the fringe outposts. It has been understaffed as of late. Major operations include excavation of ruins and Outlander patrol. They kill mutations as needed, but leave unaffected animals alone, aside from hunting them for food. Edna St. Clare, a famous Newman Hunter is currently acting general.

*Outpost: Forge* is one of a few designated training outposts that are part of secondary Hunter training. They simulate what Hunter life at a real Outpost is like. Hunters from all over

the ONUS are introduced to each other here. All the Mentors take part in training the students, and students learn what it's like to be in a Section, or on a team, with their peers. Training is also a competition—the better a student does, the higher-ranked Section they will be assigned to.

## Major Characters

*Nova Baskov*: an eighteen-year-old Newman who just recently graduated from the Academy in The City. She is training under Søren Ackert to become a Hunter. She is short and plump with light-colored hair, shaggy bangs, and red eyes. All she wants is to prove everyone who told her she wouldn't make it as a Hunter wrong and make her father proud.

*Søren Ackert*: a twenty-six-year-old famous Hunter who was missing for several months and presumed dead. A few short weeks ago, he stumbled back into The City, not remembering a thing. He was one of five people who unknowingly survived the "Berserker Project", which amplified his senses, put him under a constant state of adrenaline, among other side-effects. He suffers severe PTSD from this event and cannot remember much of it outside of the occasional nightmare. All he wants is to go back to work as an S-ranked officer and find out where the rest of his Section is.

*Ky Collett*: a twenty-three-year-old Analyst-Hunter hybrid, son of President Deon. Dark, curly hair pulled over one eye, pale, blue-eyed, medium build. He was kept from the spotlight most of his childhood but was forced into the Hunter's faction because of his father's expectations. He went on the hybrid tract so he can keep up his scientific interests. All he wants is to not live under Søren's shadow any more – his father paid much more attention to the famous Hunter than his son growing up, and now, after Søren's return, Ky feels invisible. He is one of the ranking officers of the Resistance movement.

*Seth Hyland*: an eighteen-year-old Analyst-Hunter hybrid in training and also Nova's best friend. Scrawny, blonde, generally foolish but a clever computer hacker. He accidentally got involved in the Resistance movement and is essentially a pawn—he doesn't truly know what

their endgame is, but is having a good time helping it get there. He is mentoring under Ky, who got him involved after hearing about his primary school hacking stunt.

### **(Major) Minor Characters**

*President Deon Collett:* the first and only President of The ONUS. Mid-fifties, darkly handsome but mildly creepy. He helped establish many of harsh laws in order to rebuild society amidst a war that he isn't aware is very much over. If everyone is the same, then how can there be conflict? He instated the Berserker Project to get ready, because at any time, all hell could break loose again. All he wants is stability and equality, at any cost. He grew up in the advent of WW3 and lost a lot to its planning and subsequent devastation.

*Davin Ackert:* an early-fifties man in charge of the Resistance movement. He appears to be a more rugged Søren, blind in one eye. He genuinely believes that the people of THE ONUS need another clean slate. Faked his death ten years ago in order to devote himself to the cause. Deon's foil.

*Edna St Clare:* a mid-forties Newman Hunter, one of the most famous Newmen of all time. She was Søren's Mentor and currently oversees the Outpost, Vigilance. She takes a special interest in Nova and helps her follow in her footsteps.

*Greggor Bonde:* an early-thirties Hunter, Edna's second-in-command. He doesn't like working under a Newman and is planning to sabotage her.

*Georg Baskov:* a late-forties explosives engineer, Nova's father. He is highly supportive of his daughter and worried about the toll the Hunter life will have on her.

*Rosalie Vierra:* a twenty-five-year-old Outlander; she took over as the town's main jack-of-all-trades after her father, Hoth, was killed by Søren in a berserker fit about a year ago.

*Anders "Astral" Marshall:* a twenty-two-year-old Outlander who takes care of all their animals, especially their hunting wolf-dogs. He is never seen without a puppy or a pack following him around.

## **Story Structure: Nova's plotline**

*Inciting Incident:* Nova goes to bed after her graduation ceremony; her father comments how strange it was that Seth left without saying anything. Just before dawn, Nova awakens to sirens. Someone broke curfew. Then she sees her window open, and a figure plop in. She is eye-to-eye with Seth, who is dirty and carrying a black duffel bag. He puts his fingers to his lips and she freaks out, but lets him hide in her closet until morning. He's gone before she wakes up, and she finds a bunch of crumbled papers in her garbage can

*Plot Point 1:* Søren gets them booted from formal training, and in a fit of despair, she reaches out to Seth to do something stupid and reckless like he always does because she sees her future as a Hunter officially over; he takes her to a Demonstration, introduces her to his Mentor, and it is overrun with the cops. She is saved from being arrested by the Mentor, Ky, who turns out to be the President's son.

*Midpoint:* After informally being informally trained at Outpost: Vigilance, Søren leaves, citing family business. There is a shift in power in Vigilance, Edna is sent away, and Nova has to put up with the abuse of being the only Newman on the team. She tries to save some of Edna's contraband, especially her books, especially because she has since learned the value of them.

*Plot Point 2:* Nova gets integrated into the Resistance after she was reassigned to be Ky's trainee; she assists with a major Demonstration and Ky begins to trust her with trade secrets; she uses her privileges to find out *Order* secrets and uncovers The Berserker Project, among other horrors, and runs away, now knowing where to find Søren and tell him what she learned.

*Crisis:* Nova and Søren are both captured at the Berserker Facility before finding each other there; Nova is interrogated by Ky; Søren is put directly in a holding cell.

*Climax:* After escaping, they reconvene and meet up at the Outlander settlement that Søren spent some time at. They quickly catch each other up, but the Settlement is overrun with Order men and they have to escape and put an end to all this madness.

*Resolution:* Søren vs Ky; ambiguous ending to the fight. The final scene has miscellaneous secondary characters leading an oligarchy, a true Senate, and discussing the end of the Great War—an old, intercepted surrender radio signal coming from The Far East Alliance.

## **Possible Story Structure 1: Søren's plotline**

*Inciting incident:* Søren is reassigned from being an S-Rank General to being a Mentor; he meets his student and desperately wants out of this job. He is confused and disoriented with a major bout of memory loss. Søren brings Nova to Outpost: Vigilance and under stress, berserks, revealing the after-effects of the Berserker Project.

*Plot point 1:* Disatisfied by the way that formal training is being run, Søren mouths off to the General and gets him and Nova dismissed from the program. Before he leaves, Søren defends a peculiar student from an attack by Officials and a warrant is put out for his arrest. He attempts to make things right with Nova and to avoid arrest, Søren reaches out to his old Mentor at Vigilance for help in filing a deferral.

*Midpoint:* Several weeks into informal training at Vigilance, Søren gets word that his mother died and he has to go handle her affairs. His father, who died when he was a kid, appears at their former home, alive and well, taunts him, and then hands him a tablet full of information about the Berserker Project, including coordinates to the Facility; Søren has no idea what to trust and decides to investigate on his own.

*Plot point 2:* Søren, looking for the Facility, is captured by Outlanders, and is brought to their Settlement; a woman named Rosalie is in charge of making sure he pays his dues to the Settlement because he murdered one of their councilmen in a berserked state right after the experiment was performed. One of their duties is to infiltrate an Outpost, where they learn of the Resistance's movement and their true purpose: destroy The ONUS entirely. Rosalie breaks down and tells him everything about the Project.

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### *Chapter 1: Nova*

Nova was too excited to go to bed. She groaned, and shuffled, and knew it was of little use. She stared at her ceiling and let herself get lost in thought. Her father got ready for bed a little while ago and she found herself listening for his familiar footsteps. The same routine and the same squeaky floorboard near his dresser. His alarm would go off exactly six hours from now, and he would do the entire process in reverse.

Civilian lives went on as normal, Nova knew, even though it felt like the world completely realigned itself after the Academy's graduation ceremony. Her heart was still thudding at an elevated rate, just at the very thought of it.

She remembered how nervous she was, waiting in line at the Civilian Center. The line moved slowly and the noise of the room—the clicking of heels, general chatter, and the occasional too-hard nervous laughter—seemed to echo back and forth, amplifying it even more. It was all-encompassing, swallowing the crowd whole.

Nova finally reached the table and handed over her ID, expecting the same exchange as she always got: some snarky comment how people like her were unfit for the Hunter's Faction. That is, until she saw the tiny points at the ends of the man's ears. The Newman smiled at her and handed her a small, sealed box from across the table. It was heavy, but she had to get used to it for she would be carrying the contents with her for life.

“Good luck,” he said, his small smile widening.

It was those words that carried the girl through the ceremony.

All recruits were ushered to the stage area shortly after convening with their Faction's representative. They were organized first by Faction, and then by surname. Nova found her seat,

and despite the heels adding some height, it took her a while to find her best friend's blond head in the crowd. Seth was several rows behind her, but waved frantically when he made eye contact with her. She smiled politely, and then sat towards the front. She was met by thousands of pairs of eyes.

Her breath hitched in her throat, and she carefully looked down at box stowed beneath her seat. *All this for some paperwork.* She wished the Academy Board could just mail it, but Graduation Day was a big deal, and everyone who was available came out to support her and her peers. Civilians, former Faction members, diplomats... the entire stadium was full. The Graduates' achievements were a national affair, and here on out, would continue to be.

The Anthem of the Order played over the speakers after the last of the Graduates filed into their seats. The melodic trumpet cued the crowd to turn around and salute the balcony. The silhouettes of the seated Senate could be seen behind sheer curtains, but the man standing in the center commanded all the attention.

President Deon stood with his arms outstretched, angled slightly towards his subordinates below, ready to accept them under his protection. His people recognized him, the one in the center, always in the center, as their savior.

The ceremony began with this blessing.

Nova shivered under her covers as she remembered the rest of the ceremony – how nervous she was crossing that stage to accept her certificate. She almost fell when she got up, but caught herself just in time. She managed to shake the director of the Academy's hand and not throw up.

When it was all over, her father swooped in and grabbed her from the procession of Graduates. They waited to see Seth emerge from the stadium to take some photos together, as they had for every other milestone the pair had gone through.

But he never did.

Nova tried not to think about that part. It was weird, sure, but he probably had something to go do. Technically, he hadn't graduated yet – his dual certification would take another few weeks to complete.

She reached over and grabbed the remote to the room conditioning system and gently dimmed the lights. Her eyes needed little adjustment before she kicked off her covers and went to seek out her graduation gift: the Hunter's box.

The girl tiptoed over the sparkling mess that was her gown, haphazardly deposited on the ground after such a long night, and reached her vanity. Her cosmetics, hairbrush, and other toiletries found new homes on the ground after she pushed them aside to make room for such an important box. She toed around these, too, careful not to break such expensive items. There was little room for luxuries in anyone's budget, so she was careful to take care of the few that she did have.

Without a second thought, she flipped the top of the box off and made her way back to her bed to search through the contents. She knew exactly what to expect but was vibrating with excitement with every piece she unpacked. The paperwork was on top, which she tossed aside, searching for the rest of her things. The uniform, tailored specifically to the measurements that were taken on the last day of class, was unpacked next and put in a heap beside her on the bed. She gently placed The Tech, a touch-screen arm guard that connected her to The Order's

networks, on top of the uniform, careful not to scratch the screen. It would look so bad if she damaged it before she even learned to turn it on.

Last, she grabbed the Saber, which sparked to life when she gripped the sensors on the handle. The blade glowed green with photon energy, little bits of light flicking off on all ends. She gasped, and then jumped to action, swinging it around like the practice swords during her stay at The Academy. The blade was hot, but she ignored it and she lunged outward, singeing the plush back of the chair laid out in front of her vanity.

Nova let out a little yelp and dropped the saber; the blade flickered away as soon as her grip weakened. It hit the floor with a thud and the handle rolled away from her.

Enough playing around, she decided, before she burned her house down. The girl settled back into her bed and carefully gathered up the paperwork. Maybe some light reading before bed would settle her restless thoughts. These faction documents would certainly knock her right out. She flipped through them, barely paying attention to much more than the bolded headings. A letter of acknowledgement, mass-produced, signed by both the President and the Senator representing the Hunters Faction was the first thing she saw. She rifled through various forms she would have to fill out and return to the Academy. She continued skimming them until she found an itinerary with tomorrow's date on it.

Tomorrow, she was to meet with her Mentor for the very first time.

Looking at the clock again, she decided she needed to get to bed. She turned the lights back off, and without pushing anything off of her bed, she went to sleep.

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It was exactly 2:26 AM when the alarms woke her. She saw the flashing lights outside her window and heard the drones whiz by periodically. One shined a light into her room. She

heard the tires of patrol vehicles next. She closed her eyes again once they passed. Her heart was racing, but she knew it was just because she heard them.

But it was unusual—her window was closed and was usually pretty soundproof.

When Nova opened her eyes again, she saw Seth staring back at her. Her lips parted to scream, but it was muffled against the glove on his hand, which he clamped over her mouth almost immediately. He knew her too well: she was completely, inherently startled.

And when Nova got scared, she screamed.

He had his finger pressed up against his lips and absolute desperation in his eyes. It was a foreign thing; Nova has never seen Seth scared before. He was always so foolhardy, ready to jump into the next adventure that was bound to get him hurt, arrested, or killed.

Nova recoiled away from his touch and leaned over to grab the remote controls for her bedroom. She turned the lights on bright enough so that she could see him completely, rather than just by the moonlight coming from the window. The shadows that hung on his face created a sinister sort of illusion that she couldn't take. Her heart was still racing despite a more comfortable lighting. The lamps were dim enough that no one could see them through the blinds. If her father got up in the middle of the night, as he often did when "genius strikes", he wouldn't notice much of a difference in the light coming from the crack under her door. It wouldn't have surprised her if he was awake right now, tinkering away at the desk in his room, trying to ease his crowded mind.

But, of course, it was way beyond curfew. If her dad came in and saw Seth...

But more importantly, what was he doing out so late and what the hell was he doing in her bedroom?

Seth looked at her, silently pleading for her to stay quiet, to keep her cool, which seemed more and more like an absolute impossibility. Nothing about this made sense to her, especially after he just disappeared after graduation. Was this some kind of sick joke?

She felt the breeze filter in through the window, and the curtains danced, mocking her. Nova saw the prints from a dirty pair of shoes right where the carpet met the wall, right beneath the window. Even in the dim light, she could see the glistening of fresh mud. It would take so much time to get that out of the carpet. And, of course, he would leave her with “evidence cleanup”. He always did.

Nova slid out of bed and looked out the window. A small ladder lay on the ground, concealed by the bushes. It was old and rusted; her father must have left it there from this morning when he was pruning the branches. He got a notice that his greenery was getting too wild and he had to miss a morning of work to take care of it, else he would have gotten fined. Nova sighed; her father always forgot to put the ladder away afterwards. Seth must have pushed it away from the house when he got inside, to avoid suspicion. If the plants got hurt, her dad would kill him for sure.

The girl looked back to Seth with her mouth hanging open just slightly, absolute incredulity. Her eyes felt like they might fall right out of her head. The ladder was perfectly hidden, except from above. Has he done this before?

“Nova, I can explain,” He pleaded, just as she asked, “What the fuck?”

Seth was scared. Nova never, ever thought she would see the day.

He sat at the foot of the bed, cradling his bulky, black backpack to his chest. It was bumpier than normal, definitely not containing his usual laptop and headphones. His eyes had

dark circles lining them at the bottoms and his jaw was clenched. He wouldn't meet her eyes and it might have been her imagination, but she swore that he was shaking.

Her anger melted into concern; Nova reached out and grabbed his hand. He looked up at her then. There was an animalistic apprehension etched deep in his eyes. Nova sat down on the bed beside him, trying to keep herself calm. There had to be a rational, reasonable explanation for all of this.

“What happened?” She asked, trying to keep her tone gentle, though there was a slight shrill that she couldn't fight off. Seth rarely got caught doing stupid things, so maybe this was something really, really bad.

“I was walking home and the drones were circulating and I—”

“Why you were walking home this late?”

“Nova, I didn't have anywhere else I could go. You're the only person I know in this district, and—”

“Seth, why were you out past curfew this far from your house? You could've been arrested!”

“I—”

“Seth. What is going on?”

A silence that seemed to stretch for miles hung in the small space between them.

And then he finally spoke: “I... I can't tell you.”

The words knocked the wind right out of her. When did they start keeping secrets? Nova stared him down for a while, waiting for him to cave and change his mind.

Defeated, Nova sighed, letting herself nod in acceptance. Seth's eyes lit up at that, and she could tell the weight on his shoulders lifted just a little. But, of course, it couldn't have ended with her silence. He seemed to blurt out his next question without really thinking about it.

"Just, please, can I stay here? I can sleep in the closet or something. I just really—"

"My father can't see you," she said. One thing was for sure: if Georg saw Seth here this late, especially since she was leaving so early in the morning, he would absolutely lose his mind.

Seth nodded enthusiastically. "I know. I'll leave as soon as curfew lifts."

"How exactly are you planning on getting out, Seth?" Nova was laughing despite herself. "You'll have to go through my house, my dad, he—"

"I'll sit and wait and listen for the door. Your locks squeak."

Nova stared at Seth for a moment, not believing that this was actually a situation she found herself in. Instead of fighting him, she settled on saying, "I'll kill you if you aren't gone by morning."

"I know."

"Good," Nova said, crawling back into her bed.

Seth turned towards her closet and slid open the door as quietly as he could. It barely creaked. He put his laptop bag down in there first, and then crouched to crawl inside. Before he disappeared among her wardrobe, he turned back to her.

"Nova?"

She raised her eyebrows at him.

"Please don't die."

With that, he vanished, sliding the door closed in case her father came in before he left. Nova bit her lip and stared at the ceiling, willing sleep to come find her. Eventually, it did, but plagued her with restlessness.

And when she woke the next day, he was gone. Her alarm had been going off for ages. She was going to be late. Her window was closed, just the way she left it the night before. He even cleaned up his boot prints.

She opened her closet and it was empty again. Except for...

Looking closer, in Seth's place she found his bag, empty. It wasn't the bag he normally carried. He probably ripped it, she thought, unzipping the main compartment. He was always too rough with his things.

All that was in there were some crumbled up papers. She unraveled one. It was full of smeared text, a jumbled mess of numbers. She crumbled it back up and shoved it back in the bag. She tossed the bag haphazardly on the top shelf of her closet and ran out the door.

She couldn't be late for her very first Hunter assignment.

## Chapter 2: Søren

Søren Ackert sat at the breakfast island in his new, shiny chrome kitchen. The man held a ceramic coffee mug tightly with both hands, watching the veins flex behind his weathered skin. He could feel the warmth, but he could not shake the chill. He glanced around and puffed out a sigh, desperate to get out.

His apartment was empty, aside from the bare essentials given to him upon his return. The room conditioning system whirred in the background, occasionally thumping as it pumped stale air throughout the space. The refrigerator kicked on and off at regular intervals. The clock, high on the wall, sang its metronome song: *tic-toc, tic-toc, tic-toc, tic—*

He wanted to break it.

It was the same standard edition that he was stuck listening to a week prior while he sat behind a small wooden table, his hands bound behind the back of the chair with electrified cuffs. They shined a light in his eyes and it pierced through his skull, igniting the migraine he had for as long as he remembered. The interrogation room was kept dark except for the single light angled towards him; he knew others were present—he could hear their breathing, feel their glares—but could only see the Official standing at the far end of the room with her pressed pantsuit and her Senatorial pin. Which division she represented, he was unsure. There were a few others hidden by shadows, and others down the hall — he could hear the footsteps, the hushed voices, and the occasional warnings to keep it down, for he could be listening for them. After spending so much time in The Wilds, his hearing was extra receptive. While it was helpful out there to avoid danger, in here, it proved to him that he was in more danger than he could understand.

“No one knows what’s up with that guy,” a cautious, young-sounding voice said once, somewhere down the hall, on a patrol. His voice lowered, “I mean, he was gone, and I heard, there was this project...”

The migraine screamed and Søren could hear only his pulse in his ears.

“You’re out of your mind. The Order wouldn’t do that with our men.”

Inside the interrogation room, The Official was turned away from Søren and cupped the earpiece she wore, straining to listen to instructions coming from another room. It was kept so low. Exasperated, she cursed under her breath before returning to the table.

She tried again, sitting down in the chair across from him, folding her hands on the table. Søren looked at her, straining against the light. Her hair was tied in a neat bun at the base of her skull, but a few curled tendrils framed her face, falling about her shoulders.

“Søren, you come stumbling into the Borderhouses, dirty and afraid—you must remember *something*, right? What happened? Why didn’t you take the tram? Where are your teammates?”

Søren was silent. He could not be broken; he locked eyes with her in defiance. He knew what he knew which was that he knew absolutely nothing. He racked his brain for hours and hours but he couldn’t recall a damn thing. They knew this. How could they not know this?

A few voices in the room, and perhaps beyond the thin walls, spoke in hushed tones. A pen scratched a notepad. A man sighed.

“Where *are* they?” The Official repeated.

“I don’t know,” Søren repeated for the fifth time. Then he dared, “Shouldn’t you?” He struggled against his restraints, feeling the current start to gather. He felt the sparks threatening to come alive. “It was a mission, right? Shouldn’t you all fucking know what happened to us?!”

And for the fifth time, he writhed in pain as the cuffs sent a current through his veins. He would not break; he would take it. This is how things were. But usually, he would be on the other end of the table, interrogating an Outlander, or a Deserter, as an S-Rank Hunter.

Why was this happening? He did not know.

“Bullshit!” she shrieked, slamming her hands down on the table. “You know something and you aren’t telling us. Tell me. Where have you been, Søren?!”

“Enough,” a voice, distorted by crackling speakers, interrupted them. A hush fell over the room, and the peripheral rooms. Everything stopped. Søren knew that voice.

Everyone knew that voice.

“Give him an incentive to remember,” it said. “Leave him.”

“Sir--?” The woman said, looking for the camera. But the static disappeared, the order was given.

With a flare of blinding pain, everything went black.

Then, Søren woke up here, in this apartment, with specific orders to await reassignment. He tore his apartment apart, searching for bugs, for cameras, for anything, but found nothing. It was identical to the apartment he was given upon Graduation, with the same floor plan, the same doorless rooms, the same everything. And that night, when the *Nightly News* appeared on the television, the headlines read, *Hero Returns: Søren Ackert is Back in Action! Borderhouse Miracle: Section 7 Hero Uncovered!*

Søren scoffed, muting the television. Of course, the subtitles appeared. The *Nightly News* was a mandated program; every citizen was subjected to it, whether they wanted to be or not.

Televisions had a self-timer to come to life when it was broadcasted. Sinking into the couch,

Søren shook. He reached for a pack of cigarettes he picked up from an old connection and chain-smoked through the entire thing.

The same stories were repeated, reprinted, and restated with the same mission—to tell half-truths. Is that what happened? He was captured immediately and thrown into a cell like criminal, restrained and beaten down.

Was it a precaution?

But why? He was a good Hunter. He was the best of the best, hand-selected by the President again and again for S-rank missions.

Unable to trust his own head, Søren tried to shake off the suspicion. He didn't know what was real anymore. There were gaps in his head that he knew weren't always there, and thought himself to death trying to uncover it, but uncovering nothing.

The next day, he received a package with replacement equipment, some clothes and basic necessities. Upon powering up his Tech, his status changed: Graduate Mentor. He went to cycle through the different applications on the touch screen, but there was nothing else there. The watch-like computer seemed to mock him with its unchanging screen.

It must be a joke, he thought, a mistake, a misprint. Søren was of the renowned Section 7, The ONUS's heroes. They were the youngest group of Hunters to ever achieve S-Rank. They went on more dangerous missions and charted more of The Wastes than any other team. They witnessed things, dangerous things, mutated things, destructive things, that they weren't allowed to talk about, and couldn't talk about even if they wanted to. Their lives were the things of others' nightmares.

And he loved every minute of it.

Surely, there was a mistake. And so, Søren checked his status profile constantly, refreshing the device, waiting for his next assignment. Anything, even grunt work would be fine by him. He was itching to get back into the thick of things—to go back out there into the Wilds, among the trees, under the true sky...

After a few days, Søren chucked the Tech against a wall in frustration. But, of course, the tempered glass remained intact, the status message remaining the same. A few hours later, he scooped the device up and strapped it to his wrist, getting reacquainted to the feeling.

And this morning, things stayed the same. He woke up, grabbed a cup of coffee and sat at the table, waiting, waiting, waiting...

Eventually, he got up, and dragged himself outside. He had a small balcony attached to his apartment with a metal-wire chair and a glass table. The Hunter stared out at the city, watching a few people get an early start on the morning commute, buzzing by on their Solarbikes. Few cars remained on the roads these days, but he did see the patrol of a surveillance van round the block once, twice, thrice...

Putting down his coffee, he lit a cigarette and took a drag. He wondered when they would make their morning trek up his stairs and pound on his door, remind him of whatever paperwork or appointments he should have fulfilled already, and leave, but not without pissing him off some. He lived in The City for about a decade now — he knew the procedures. Even so, they came about three times a day to check up on him, right in the middle of his meals.

He didn't have anything to hide.

The van turned into the parking lot below him. He only had a few more moments of peace. Søren watched the smoke vacate his lungs in gentle wisps, assimilating into the too-blue sky, wishing to disappear with it.

He had to get out of here.

But how? He took another drag, watching the amber tip flicker to life. They would have him shot at the borders if he dared try to leave. He exhaled. Deserters were given worse treatment than he had been given, if caught, if left alive. But if he gets reassigned, during a mission, he could always just...

No, that wouldn't work at all.

He kept the cigarette bitten between his teeth as he glanced around for his ashtray. Of course, it was missing; this was not his apartment. His old one was surely ripped apart, his things destroyed, upon his disappearance, to make room for the new occupant. They should have known, he thought, that he was no Deserter. He would have returned, eventually.

Søren got up and ashed over the railing, watching the soot in free-fall until it was ripped apart by the gentle breeze. He pinched out the tip of it and put the cigarette back in the small, metal case he carried them in. He tossed it onto the table and returned inside to grab a plate to use instead; next time he visited a Sector, he would be sure to bring back a ceramic ashtray to try and replace the one that had been his father's.

When that would happen, he did not know. At this rate, he felt as if he would never be able to leave this apartment again.

Søren passed through the glass doors that led to his balcony and into the meager living room. It had two rough couches angled towards the massive flatscreen built into the wall on the far end by the hallway that led to his bedroom, bathroom, and closet-sized office. Along the wall next to these sliding doors were tall windows, divided into quadrants by wooden sills. On one of the sills was a small potted plant he came home to. He walked over to it and smelled it; it was

real and starting to wilt. He suddenly felt a small tinge of guilt for not watering it. He had assumed that it was fake like most else in this city.

He filled up a glass with some water and dumped it in the plant. He pushed open the window a few inches — all that it would allow, as he was on the fifth floor of the building — and urged it to grow, to thrive.

A knock at his door brought him out of his thoughts. He looked at it apprehensively, considering pretending not to be home. He went back to his plant, plucking a dead leaf off of its stem.

Another knock, harder this time, convinced him to go to the door.

Søren opened it to an Official, in her sleeveless-top, pressed pants uniform. She was the same one that came every morning. Today, she had her shoulder-length curls coifed up in buns on either side of her head. His heart started to race with irritation before she had a chance to open her mouth. An earpiece relayed the current news stream in her ear; Søren felt nauseous at the near-constant mention of his name.

“You’re late,” she said flatly, looking him up and down. He was still only in his sleep-pants. She smirked, checking something off on the clipboard he never saw her without.

“What?” He grunted, already tired of the conversation.

“You have Orientation,” she said, tapping her foot in irritation.

“Excuse me?” The edge in his voice was warning enough for her to cease the noise.

“Your new job calls for it.” She stabbed a manicured finger against the near-microscopic print on the clipboard in her hands. Søren reached out to grab it, and she pulled it away from him. With a taunting smile, she said, “You get a student today.”

“I can read,” he murmured, moving to shut the door. “Good day.”

The Official moved her foot just in time before it was caught in the doorjamb.

Søren let out an audible groan as he walked back to his balcony to at least finish his coffee. He grimaced as he finished it in one swig— it got cold. He locked the sliding doors behind him, left the dirty mug on the breakfast island, and stomped to his bedroom to get dressed for the day.

At least he got to leave his damn apartment.

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Søren put out his cigarette in a potted plant outside of the café he was supposed to be meeting his student at. The bustling streets of the Commercial District already got on his nerves. He was all keyed up and overstimulated from the noise and people around him. He kept himself as out of the way as possible, watching each person as they walked by, hoping none of them get too close. He was vaguely recognized by some, but others stopped in their tracks and stared for a moment. He was used to that: kids with their autograph books, adults thanking him for his service, or the occasional over-excited fangirl.

But now, no one wanted his autograph, and no one said a word to him.

He let out a sigh and looked up at the too-blue sky, with its inorganically painted clouds. The man felt as if they were drifting closer and closer to the ground, ready to crush the city below. He glanced to the edge of the skyline and watched the sky warp and ripple at the walls that encased The City. It was at the borderhouses that the Field protecting them from the outside was produced. It was strongest here, distorting the image it created. Though he would never admit it, part of him wished the Field would disengage and allow real sunlight to filter through.

He pushed off the small stone wall he was leaning against and headed towards the entrance. Søren pushed through the glass door, a small bell chiming after it banged against the

top panel of it. The building was seemingly empty except for a young-looking Newman at a booth, staring aimlessly out the window, and an old man at the counter.

The old man, likely in his seventies, looked up from the tablet he was reading from. He leaned over a tower of coffee mugs to get a better look at the intruder. He had a damp mug in one hand and a towel in the other, polishing it. A half-smile protruded through his discomfort at seeing the Hunter, and he waved him over.

“What can I get for ya, Mr. Ackert?”

Søren contemplated the menu for a moment and ordered something hot to drink. He tapped on his Tech and produced his ID, which the old man took and scanned. He poured the remainder of the coffee pot heated behind him—the burnt bits, Søren lamented—into a mug and *tsked* at the empty pot.

Before he disappeared to brew a new pot, Søren said, “I hate to ask, but has a Graduate come by today looking for me?”

The man thought for a moment and shrugged. But then he gestured to the young woman in the corner booth and told him she’s been there all morning. Other than her, it was only his regular customers who stopped by. It’s been quiet.

Thankless, Søren turned away from the counter and started towards the booth. He stopped a few paces away to appraise the girl. Her posture was limp and her body was a bit wide, but not unpleasant to the eye. Yet, how she managed to pass all the physical exams was beyond him. Her hair was snow-white and her eyes were closed, the mug in front of her half-empty and the wrapper of a muffin haphazardly discarded beside it.

But she wore the uniform of a Graduate, her proud, shiny boots not even touching the ground. Newmen were difficult Hunters to begin with—their bodies were weaker, but their

minds were strong, originally produced to make good Analysts—but he was given an absolute hopeless case.

“Sir, your coffee!” the old man’s voice echoed through the room, and the Newman woke up, locking eyes with Søren’s disgruntled gaze. She swallowed uncomfortably and sat upright, brushing a couple crumbs from her face. She looked like a deer in the headlights, frozen with curious fear.

Søren returned to the counter and grabbed the mug, grunting a brief thank-you.

“Th-This must be a mistake,” the girl squeaked upon him approaching her table. Her eyes were wide, and she seized her lower lip with her teeth.

“You’re tellin’ me,” he muttered, sliding into the seat across from her, keeping both hands on his coffee to assure it doesn’t spill. She shirked away from him a little bit, not meeting his eyes after that. The girl didn’t dare reach for her coffee, let alone breathe even slightly heavier than necessary for survival.

“So, you’re...” Søren let go of his coffee and tapped on the screen of his Tech, opening one of several unread messages spanning from last night to this morning. “Baskov?”

She nodded hesitantly, as if she was unsure of that herself.

“What the hell kind of name is Nova, anyway? Is your dad an astronomer or something?” He raised an eyebrow. The Newman seemed to shrink even more inward.

Okay, not funny. He decided on another approach.

“What made you want to get into Hunter work?”

Nova finally met his eyes then, and he smirked at their color. Red-eyed, white-haired, like a mouse. Perfect.

“Um,” She started, thumbing a loose piece of straight hair. “I always found it to be the most interesting. You get to go see the world, and learn about the past.” A shy smile crept across her crimson lips. “And we get paid decently.”

“That’s the pitch, yeah? ‘What if I told you, you could see the world? Just carry this gun—you’ll even get paid.’” Søren recalled the words the soldiers told him and his friends back home. He was one of the few to get selected to attend the Capitol’s Academy, instead of attending a lesser school in a Sector. It was the greatest honor. His parents, however, weren’t convinced.

“My dad was nervous,” Nova admitted, finally feeling secure enough in her shaking hands to dare reach for her mug. “But he came ‘round after Year One, when he realized I knew what I was doing.”

Søren scoffed, but swallowed any comments—her? Knowing what she was getting into?

Instead, he asked, “What about your mom?”

Nova did not speak.

Søren eyed her for a moment, but decided not to press the subject. Newmen babies were given to families to raise instead of biological children under certain circumstances, with a stipend. There was a whole process involved that he was unsure of, but he knew about family angst. Whatever happened here was not his business, not that he cared much anyway.

“So,” He tried again, trying to wrench his brain for anything else to say. “Any questions?”

The girl reached under the seat and pulled out a box. It was ornate and had the Senatorial Seal of Hunters printed on the top. He would recognize that anywhere—it’s the graduation gift from The Order that was given to all Hunters upon graduation.

“I, uh,” She fumbled with the top and eventually pulled out a brand-new tech. It was a little longer than the one he used, but was suitable enough. “I have no idea how to work this thing.”

“Right,” Søren said, scratching his beard a little. He gestured for it. “Give it here.”

Nova handed the device to him, careful not to touch his hands in the process. The man turned it on its side, peeling the protective film off the glass. He watched it glint in the white lights and then flipped it over. He pulled a small rubber cover off an even smaller compartment and pulled out a wire. He put her Tech on the table and pulled his own off. He plugged the cord into his own and manually booted it. They would be linked together this way, Mentor and Student.

Edna had done this with him, he remembered.

A screen popped up with five empty squares. He watched Nova’s expression go from intrigue to disappointment.

“Is it—“

“You just need to use your fingerprints, that way the device is bound to you,” Søren sighed. It was as if this girl knew even less than he thought. Didn’t her father have one of these?

He held the device out for her. She nervously pushed her fingers gently against the glass, but a sharp beep sounded. She recoiled, retracted her hand, and frowned slightly.

“You didn’t line it up right—here,” Søren reached out and grabbed her hand, rolling each finger onto the sensors. It beeped delightfully then, accepting the prints. Søren did the same with her other hand, and then helped her strap the device to her forearm. It resembled what he knew to be a bracer of yesteryear, though shiny and electronic, with different ports and buttons along the edges, away from the screen.

An undeterred smile stretched across her face as she scrolled through the different icons, tapping on some, fumbling to close out of the applications, and then opening others. She held her free hand over the screen and watched it adjust to the new light, and then brighten again once she retracted it.

Søren felt himself smiling a little at the sight. Neither of his parents were important enough to get a Tech, especially being citizens of a Sector. He never had an opportunity to play around with one until he graduated. He resonated with her excitement, but reluctantly so. He had no idea how to proceed. There was not much by way of itinerary for this. He was sure that fulltime Mentors were given some kind of training, but he got a whole lotta nothing. Maybe they wanted him to fail.

And maybe, just maybe, that would be his way out.

A thousand questions danced behind those anxious eyes, but Nova shook her head, for fear of being rude.

“Look, how about we get out of here?” Søren asked, getting up from his seat. He hadn’t touched his drink. “I have an idea.”

“Uh, okay—

Søren was already heading out the door by the time Nova scooted out of the booth. She hurried to catch up with him as he waited on the corner, glancing in either direction. It was as if he didn’t know where he was going.

“So?” She asked, unsure of what to make of this. “Where are we going?”

“The Borderhouses,” he murmured, tapping on the GPS application of his Tech. It took just a moment to calculate his position and ask him where he wanted to go. He had it display all

of the Underground stops within a four-block radius. He found two and turned towards the nearest one without another word to Nova.

Flustered and disoriented, Nova hurried to follow him down the block, around the corner, and down the stairs to the station on uncertain feet and with uncertain resolve.

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At the subway entrance, she swiped her ID card, as Søren told her to. The turnstile unlocked and she was able to go through for the very first time. She stared in awe of all of the sleek chrome and streamlined trains. She had never been down here before; the fares were too expensive for her family and they never had reason to anywhere that they couldn't walk to. All she knew of the City Underground was what she read, or heard about; her dad sometimes talked about how his dynamite was used to clear out new tunnels.

She was taught in school that The City Underground was the fastest mode of transportation in all of the ONUS; it was one of The Order's pride and joys. Electromagnetic subway trains ran underneath all of The City, from the Borderhouses along the cement walls on all sides of the city, through the Farmlands, under all of The Lesser Districts, and finally to the Senatorial District. Every couple of blocks was an entrance down to the Underground; Hunters and other Faction members had access to the Underground for free. All other professions had to pay a fee—or walk—to get to their destinations.

Nova gawked at the sleek silver trains as they wizzed past her at regular intervals. Søren made sure to keep her from the edge—the dumb girl walked past the red line in awe and almost got swept up in the currents blowing off of the high-speed trains. He plucked her away just in time and scolded her.

“How fast do they go?” Nova asked, wide-eyed and bushy tailed.

“I dunno, fast?” Søren replied from his seat on a bench. His hands were shoved deep in his pockets. All of her excitement was starting to wear at his nerves. His fingers twitched for a cigarette, but he couldn’t do it here. An Official would get here in an instant, confiscate his pack, and surely he would get a visit from his case worker and get a slap on the wrist for breaking the vice laws.

“But how fast?”

“Fast,” Søren sighed. “We’ll get to the Borderhouses in five minutes.”

“What? Seriously?” Nova looked at him in disbelief. “That’s like, a two hour walk.”

Side-eyeing her, Søren reiterated, with hand gestures: “Fast.”

Just as the train in front of them departed, the destination sign above the track blinked twice and then loaded the next train’s destination: Borderhouse S, arrives in two minutes.

“That’ll be us,” the Hunter said, rising from his seat. He cracked his neck and started to approach the landing. A few other Hunters milled about with hardened faces and large packs on their backs. Three of them stood in a huddle, whispering. They stopped speaking as Søren approached and stared.

He turned to them and made a wide-eyed, sinister face. He smirked when he saw their expressions turn sour. They turned away and walked down the platform a ways before resuming their conversation.

Nova rolled from her heels to her toes and back as she waited, unable to keep still. She was unsure if this anxiety was excitement or nerves, or a mixture of them both. She tried to keep to herself, but couldn’t help but to wonder why Søren had to be such an ass. She got it—he’s tired of people staring. But he spent his entire career being stared at. She, like all the other

Academy students, grew up watching him and his team on the *Nightly News*, reading tabloids about them, saving interviews from the paper...

The train slowed to a stop in front of them and the violent gust of air rippling off it blew the thoughts from her mind.

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The pair was deposited a short walk away from the entrance to Borderhouse S. Behind them in the distance was the glinting metal of the heart of the City; all around them was the barren Farmlands, long since abandoned as the land grew barren during the early decades of the ONUS. Old houses and broken down buildings still litter the area, but many different activities still take place out here. The Academy used some of these lands as training grounds for Hunter classes; other professions did work out here as well. The land was used, just not for the purpose it was originally intended. Certain sections of the Farmlands were still desolate, but the Order decided to keep it as a memory of its beginnings.

The Borderhouses were the lowest points of the tall cement walls surrounding the entirety of the City. Nova noticed the Field warping at the tops of these for the very first time. Through the glitches, she could see cloudy skies; in The City, it never rained. She stopped walking for a moment and stared, but forced herself to keep going.

Søren swallowed his nerves. There was a huge chance that this could go very, very wrong, but he needed to try. He needed to show this girl exactly what she was getting into, and if he was lucky, it would be enough for her to reconsider. This life wasn't one he would wish on just anybody, and being a Mentor is something he never would wish upon himself. He craved The Wilds—the trees, the true sky, the real, fresh air—and even the terrible things—the daemons, The Wastes—were calling to him.

He just needed to get out there, and he knew exactly where they could go.

Two Hunters looked down at them from their guard posts, their rifles gripped in their hands. No one was allowed to leave without authorization. There were tales of Deserters scaling the walls to try and escape, and they were shot down immediately. Søren kept his head down as he pushed open the door; he forgot to hold it for his Graduate, who struggled to keep his pace.

Stale, cold air rushed to meet them as the doors *whooshed* open without a sound. They closed behind them as quickly as they opened. The Borderhouse was dimly lit, with white-washed walls and sterile tile. The room had a few couches in a small waiting area and a desk on the far end with turnstile gates on either side of it. An Official sat, bored, at his post. He was seated at a desk with a computer screen and scanner in front of him, shielded by glass. He had a tablet in one hand, a donut in the other. He swiped periodically at the tablet, probably reading the morning's Post.

When the pair approached, the Official choked on his donut, his face turning pale white.

Coughing, he exclaimed, "Søren Ackert?"

"The very one," he said through gritted teeth.

"No way—" the man got up from his chair, released the Exit turnstile, and pushed through it. "I read the newspapers, but I... Wow."

"Yup. Can you just—" Søren gestured to the entrance turnstile with an impatient hand. "We have somewhere we need to be."

The Official looked around Søren at the nervous Newman behind him. He appraised her with glassy eyes, as if he really wasn't seeing her.

"Uh, yeah," The man scanned his ID at the gate and stumbled through it. Søren approached the window and went to give his ID over for scanning. Instead, the Official started

tapping on different keys. Søren held his breath, waiting for alarms to go off. But instead, the light above the Entrance blinked green and the gears unhinged.

“Good luck out there,” the Official called to them as the pair pushed through the turnstile. “I doubt you’ll need it, Mr. Ackert!”

Søren didn’t bother to respond to him, simply kept moving until he was through the door on the other side. If he was caught now...

The door revealed a staircase that led both up and down. Søren stood between the two different sets, squinting at a guide posted on the wall. The upper levels, he read, led to different Sectors. The bottom levels led to different Outposts. He went over the list of available Outposts and was thankful that the one he desired was there.

Vigilance, the place he spent most of his training. Vigilance, the place he served much of his Outpost requirement.

Vigilance, the place where he last saw Edna St. Clair.

He took off down the stairs without a single word to Nova. She gulped and with uneasy feet, rushed down them, afraid to be left behind.

She skidded to a halt behind Søren, careful not to plow right into him. He stood in front of the door leading to the different trams. His eyes were closed and his expression pensive while he gripped something through his thick t-shirt. Nova’s presence seemed to break him of his trance and he turned to face her.

“We’re going to an Outpost called Vigilance,” He told her with the most emotion in his voice she’s heard so far. “Are you ready?”

“Søren, I don’t think—”

“Don’t you want to see what it’s really like?” Something wicked glinted in his mismatched eyes. “No other Graduate is getting this opportunity today.”

Nova wasn’t sure if she wanted it. She shoved her hands into the pockets of her pants, her eyes looking at the shiny linoleum floor. Søren took that as consent and pushed through the door. It led to a hallway that ascended to different platforms. Above each entrance was a sign lit up with the name of the Outpost. Søren searched for Vigilance’s name, and once he found it, he darted up the stairs without another word.

The Newman took a breath, staring up at the red word. Vigilance. That was something she lacked, something she needed in order to get through the day. She hadn’t time to register her house in her Tech and wouldn’t be able to contact her dad to make sure he knew that she was OK. She told him she would be home for dinner.

Something told her that wasn’t going to happen.