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take your breath away.”

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BESTSELLING AUTHOR
OF *NIGHTSHADE*

GLITCH

HEATHER ANASTASIU

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HEATHER ANASTASIU

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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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For Cherie Haggard, my fourth grade teacher. You read

some of my first scribbled novel and, even though I was

just eleven, said I could be a published writer one day.

You helped me believe it, and all these years later, here

it is. This one's for you.

Ac know ledg ments

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Secrets were strictly forbidden in the Community. Of course, it had never been a problem before, because we weren't supposed to be capable of secrets. It was secrets that started the wars and almost destroyed the planet. Secrets and lies and destructive passions. But we were saved from all that. We were logical. Orderly.

Secrets were wrong. Keeping one was wrong. But I had more than one now, dangerous secrets, piling up like the lies I had to tell to keep them hidden.

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Chapter 1

I felt it coming this time. I shoved my drawings into the hidden slit I'd made in the back of my mattress, then grabbed the metal bed frame to steady myself as my brain suddenly jolted back into connection with the Link.

The retina display flickered into view and scrolled a chatter of data at the edges of my field of vision. Auditory inputs clicked back online too, a slight hum in the background.

One by one, each of my senses dimmed, replacing my connection to the physical world with the connection to the Link. In a blink, the small bit of color in my room seeped away to a monotone gray. I inhaled deeply and tried to hold on to the smell of my small concrete quarters— antiseptic and dust— but they, too, were lost by my next breath.

Panic gripped my chest as I drowned in the Link's rising tide, but I concealed it behind my perfectly still mask. I was lucky it happened while I was alone here in my quarters, where I was safe. I could use the practice. I focused, carefully relaxing each of my facial muscles into perfect, expressionless stillness, betraying nothing of the turmoil inside.

I'd glitched for a little over an hour. Precious silence in my head. Sometimes I could fight the creeping dullness of

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the Link, but I didn't have any time to waste this morning.

The glitching woke me an hour before my internal Link

alarm, but if I didn't get moving, I'd be late.

Still, I allowed myself to pause at the door to my quarters and smile defiantly for one last, fleeting moment before the Link made me forget what smiling was. I reached back to make sure my hair was secure, and my fingers brushed against the input port at the base of my neck. My smile dimmed. It was the same port we all had implanted at birth: slim, less than half an inch long, and only millimeters wide. I knew from looking at other people's ports that thin subcutaneous wires with tiny lighted microfilaments swirled out in rectangular patterns on both sides, glowing visibly through the skin. The port connected straight into the V-chip at the base of the brain, enabling the Link connection.

I ran my fingers over the port, tracing the ridges nervously. What if there was something different about it?

There was no way for me to get a good look at it, since we had no need of mirrors in the Community. Maybe the light filaments surrounding my neck port had stopped glowing, or changed color, or the port itself was noticeably damaged somehow. Something had to explain why I was different, why the glitches were happening to me. I hurriedly tugged on my long loose curls, arranging them carefully down the back of my neck and over the port, just in case.

I opened my door mechanically and walked five paces

down the hallway to the largest room in our unit. The retina

display readouts bounced at the edges of my vision, unnecessarily showing the schematics for the room: ten- by- ten- foot

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area, concrete walls, a simple table and four chairs, room enough to prepare food, eat, and at night pull down the wall equipment to exercise. *A healthy body means a healthy Community.* The phrase from the Community Creed sounded over the Link and seemed to ping around my skull.

Father was in the room, his back to me as he prepared breakfast. I lifted a hand to tuck a loose wisp of black hair behind my ear. Orderly.

“Greetings, Father.”

“Greetings, Zoel. Materials Allotment duty this morning, correct?” He didn’t look up from the protein patties he was taking out of the thermal unit. He dished the patties and equal portions of hard bread onto four white plates.

“Correct, Father.” I picked up the plates and set them equidistant on our tiny square table, perfectly aligned in front of the four chairs. Markan, my sibling, was already sitting down, staring blankly at the wall, no doubt zoning out to the video and audio feed of the Link News playing in the million silent theaters of everyone’s heads.

I glanced cautiously at him. He was thirteen, four years

younger than me. He'd already set out silverware and napkins

folded into neat, orderly triangles. Order first, order always.

I studied his face, looking for a trace of the smile I'd been secretly drawing in my room this morning. We didn't look alike, but I could see bits and pieces of our parents' features in his face, features carefully selected and manufactured at the laboratory from the blend of perfect gene partners. He favored our father, with a wide nose and thin lips, but his round cheeks betrayed his youth.

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His expression was blank. Detached. No trace of a smile or any emotion. Watching him felt like looking at an empty room—the walls and furniture were all perfectly in place, but had no life.

Did I look like that when I was lost in the Link? The question was my own, a wisp of smoke snaking through the foggy cloud of the Link. After glitching, reconnecting with the Link was like a sliding door closing over my mind, severing my connection to my own thoughts. But if I focused intensely on a few specific details, it was possible to let just a sliver of myself slip through the crack. Sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't, but with enough practice I planned to eventually find a balance between myself and the Link. With that tiny inch of control, maybe one day I'd be able to

control when I glitched. I could keep the glitches to myself,

safe from witnesses. Safe from possible deactivation. This morning was my most successful practice yet. It had been ten minutes since I'd stopped glitching, and I could still hear the occasional whisper of my passing thoughts amid the constant din of the Link News.

My gaze settled back on my brother. My emotions were still almost completely dulled by the Link now, but I felt my stomach twist ever so slightly as I watched him. It was a strange mixture of feelings I couldn't sort out—sadness and pain and happiness all at the same time, blinking into sharp focus one moment and then slipping away into Link numbness the next.

The feelings had started only after I started glitching. The

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word *sibling* had begun to feel like more than just a word. I imagined looking at Markan and taking his hand, protecting him from harm. It was impossible, I knew. Just one more of the many things I couldn't change. But deep inside I clung to the hope that one day I might see his face light up with the same warmth, the same life, that I had drawn on his face this morning.

Market Corridor. The hub of our underground city. The subway train had stopped with a hiss of brakes, exchanging

passengers promptly every quarter hour. I breathed in and

looked around me. It was overcrowded as always, but subjects entered and exited the train in evenly spaced, perfect lines.

Order first, order always. Light green schematics and readouts laced the edges of my vision, analyzing measurements and quantities. I exited the subway, turned eighty degrees, and moved twenty paces toward the Bread Supplement Dispensary line.

The Corridor was an expansive tunnel with high, rounded gray ceilings that echoed with the methodical sound of shoes on pavement and the high trills of machinery. There was a muffled

hum as subjects carried on short, efficient conversa-

tions and waved their wrists over ID scanners. Dispensaries

lined both sides of the Corridor, providing everything a healthy subject could ever need— clothing, toiletries, protein supplements, hard bread, beans, rice, occasional allotments of fresh fruits and vegetables.

I'd let myself fade to gray for the ride here. Individual

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thoughts had grown hazy around the edges. Unique sights and smells were overcome by a block of unisensory experience. The sliding door of the Link had closed completely. It

always did, eventually.

I proceeded to the stack of lightweight collapsible carts and unfolded one, catching a glimpse of dull blue out of the corner of my eye. Several Regulators were stationed against the far wall of the platform. Their hulking forms kept silent watch wherever large numbers of subjects congregated, impossible to miss with their blue coveralls and intimidating bionic additions. For all regular subjects the inserted hardware was discreet, but the Regulators had large, glinting metal plating over their necks and arms for protection. Protection from what, I couldn't say.

I'd never given the Regulators much thought before, but now whenever I glitched I found them terrifying. Maybe it's because they were looking for anomalies, for things out of order. Things like me.

I looked away, my face as blank as those surrounding me. The Regulators scanned the crowd, their heads turning in methodical, measured movements. Their eyes did not follow me when I passed by.

Three rising tones sounded in my head, signaling the start of the Link News. For a few seconds, all subjects froze in place. People stopped midstep, the allotments workers paused with their arms outstretched, holding boxes of food and supplies. Total, hushed silence. The only movement was a fallen bean spinning at a man's feet.

Then, right after the three long tones ended, the move-

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ment began again as if it had never stopped. The Link News feed reeled out in mechanic monotone: *Flu 216 vaccinations available next week in local Sector Six dispensary. Continuing water shortages in Sector Three. Chancellor Supreme of Sector Five visits to discuss trade agreements. Beware anomalies: an anomaly observed is an anomaly reported. Order first, order always.*

Anomalies. They were talking about me. Glitching meant something was broken inside me. I'd remembered seeing other subjects behave anomalously before. One time at the Academy a girl had started screaming uncontrollably, leaking water from her eyes. The Regulators spotted her and dragged her away and she came back the next week in complete working order. Better than new. If I reported myself, they would just fix the anomaly. I should report myself and get fixed. I needed to be fixed.

But then again— another memory floated to the surface— there was the other boy, the one who'd been taken away several times for anomalous behavior. I could still see his face, see him screaming and running. The Regulators had chased him down, tackled him to the ground. They'd broken his nose and there was so much blood . . .

The memory came with a jolt of fear, bursting temporar-

ily through the solid Link barrier that kept my emotions si-

lenced. I almost gasped, only barely managing to suppress it at the last moment. This had never happened before. Normally once the Link had taken complete control, I felt and thought nothing until I glitched again days or weeks later. Inside I flailed in panic, trying desperately to keep every muscle twitch, every shift of my eyes completely under

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control as the fear pulsed through me. I didn't dare turn my head, but I looked around as discreetly as possible at the people near me in line. The small aluminum circle under the skin of my chest, my heart and vitals monitor, vibrated slightly in response to my increased heart rate.

The subjects nearby hadn't noticed the buzzing—

they

were too zoned out to the Link— but I knew that if I didn't get my panic under control immediately, the monitor would start a loud beeping alarm, alerting the huge crowds of Market Corridor that I was anomalous, possibly defective. The Regulators I had passed moments before would drag me away. Would I be like the girl, and come back all fixed and never glitch again? Or would I be like the boy, and never come back at all? The questions only made the panic rise higher.

The Link News had ended and another three rising tones

sounded to initiate the Community Creed. I took a deep breath and mentally repeated along with it: *The Community Link is peace. We are Humanity Sublime because we live in Community and favor above all else order, logic, and peace. Community first, Community always.*

I repeated the creed over and over again in my mind to lose myself in the soothing dullness of repetition. I blinked slowly and tried to slow my heartbeat to match. I'd practiced this. I could do this. My face remained still, though a bead of sweat started to slide down the side of my face.

If I triggered the monitor, it would be recorded at Central Systems. Individual anomalies were not usually cause for an

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immediate removal, since heart-monitor alarms were more often caused by pain than malfunctioning hardware. Pain was one thing we were still able to feel, because it was necessary to safety; otherwise alloy workers would burn their fingers off by touching a hot kiln and not feeling it. But repeated malfunctions, or a single clearly anomalous event, would have any subject taken away. A malfunction in such a public arena, where I was clearly not in pain, would definitely count as a single clearly anomalous event.

I repeated the mantra over and over, holding my breath

and focusing on relaxing my facial muscles as carefully as I

could without drawing attention. It seemed to take hours, but eventually I felt the vibration of my heart monitor slow, and then go still. Fear was replaced by relief. I didn't know how close I had gotten to setting off the alarm, and I didn't want to know. The sudden small crack that had opened in my mind with the rush of fear began to close, slowly shutting off sensation and returning me to the safe embrace of the Link.

"Subject," said a voice gently behind me, "move forward."

I looked up. The line had moved ahead but I'd stayed still, focusing on the Community Creed. I hurried forward, giving a glance backward at the boy who had spoken.

He seemed about my age, tall and lanky with skin the color of warm brown bread crust, but as the Link continued to dim my last slivers of sensation, it was his eyes that caught me with a jolt. They were a translucent aquamarine green and they looked vibrant and alive. Even with the mounting

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grayness of the Link, I could still *see*— see the uniqueness of the color flickering at the edges of his pupils. The next second, he looked away, gazing straight ahead like everyone else.

I turned around and faced forward, alarmed by the strange flush that was creeping up my neck. I wondered if the boy

behind me could see it. I wondered what it meant.

I was hopeless at understanding and controlling all of these new emotions. I'd looked them up in the history text archive and was working slowly to build a catalog. Most of the history texts described how each dangerous emotion had led to the nuclear destruction of the Surface, the Old World. So far, some of the emotions hadn't seemed as terrible as the texts described. Except maybe fear.

Fear was the first feeling I recognized, and eventually I could differentiate fear and not-fear, good feelings from bad ones. I also started dreaming. Almost every night I dreamt of that boy who kept glitching—his screams, the look on his face, the way his body crumpled to the ground; he haunted my nights. Sometimes in the dreams, he was screaming my name. He never came back to the Academy. He was deactivated. It wasn't meant to be scary, or a punishment. Subjects weren't supposed to be able to feel fear or guilt. It was just a fact. When something was too broken to fix, or too defective to contribute to the community, deactivation was the only logical solution.

My six-month hardware checkup was coming up in two weeks and they would run diagnostics on all my hardware and check my memory chip. All of my training and practice was leading up to that moment, and I needed to be able to

control myself and not glitch during a diagnostic exam. Part of me knew they would most likely discover my malfunctions anyway. It was only a matter of time before they scanned my memory stick and found the evidence of my glitching, the drawings, and the . . . *other* thing, the secret that was far too big, far too terrible, to hide.

“Greetings,” said the man behind the Bread Dispensary counter. I looked up, realizing I’d reached the front of the line.

“Greetings,” I said. “Bimonthly allotment.”

He nodded, pulling a box from the top of the stack behind him. He gestured at the small instrument at the side of the window. I lifted my hand and waved my wrist in front of it, hearing the small *beep* that meant I’d registered and the allotment would be subtracted from my family’s account in Central Records. I slid the three boxes over the counter and stacked them neatly in my cart.

I moved away, careful to keep my face blank. Later, when I glitched again, I would remember the paper they wrapped around the bread it was perfect for drawing. Three boxes of bread meant twelve pages. It was too risky drawing on my digi-tablet—every mark I made would be stored in memory. But the paper could be hidden. Paper could be secret. Like the stack tucked away in my mattress.

I pulled my cart behind me and headed over to the next

line, the Protein Dispensary. I gazed at the rich dark brown of the protein patties. Color. The first time I'd glitched was at the Academy when I noticed another student's bright orange-red hair. I'd frozen in place as the shocking color first broke

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through the interminable gray, bobbing brightly through the crowd of gray heads marching down the corridor. It had only lasted for a moment, thirty seconds at most, but it stirred something in me. Something new.

Then the glitches started happening more often and lasting longer. I'd notice the deep green of a spinach leaf, the smooth browns and creams of people's differing skin tones, hair, eyes . . . I inadvertently glanced backward in the direction I'd last seen the green-eyed boy, but he was gone. That was a completely new color to add to my short list.

Emotions were the next thing that came with the glitches, and they still made no sense to me. Like how, after an especially bad nightmare, I'd walk through the darkened housing unit and slide my brother's door open gently and watch him sleep, his face relaxed, his arm slung over his head. Watching him made this stinging sensation come from behind my eyes and my chest would tighten until I could barely breathe. It wasn't happiness and it wasn't sadness. I still didn't know what

to call it. It made me feel like I needed to make sure he was

safe.

But safe from what? The Community was the safest place that ever existed. The only danger in this world was *me*. The guilt of glitching was like a shadow, following me everywhere.

I stepped forward in line as the subject ahead of me moved.

The barbaric Old World was once full of people like me.

There was a whole race of humanity full of all the emotions and desires that I felt, people who almost destroyed the Earth with greed and anger and hate and indifference. They warred

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until the clouds rained toxic ash, the chemicals making people's eyes boil in their sockets and their skin peel off like cooked potato skins. So much toxic material that we could never go back. Our history texts showed detailed pictures of the process, a detailed reminder of the horrors of the Old World.

Those who had foreseen had begun the tunneling down, the orderly planning of humanity's future. Only a small percentage survived. We were a logical, orderly race—the descendants of survivors who had seen the worst of human emotion and destruction. We had learned the lessons of the past and finally scrubbed out the animal in man. We pro-

tected ourselves, blotted out the things that made us danger-

ous, and rebuilt. The First Chancellor called us Humanity Sublime. We lived by order and logic alone. We lived in Community.

And here I was, a traitor tucked secretly within the safe walls of the Community. A single person cultivating the same emotions that destroyed the Surface forever. I was like a ticking bomb, and it was just a matter of time before the evilness of human emotion took control. How much would I destroy before they caught and stopped me? I should go report myself.

Right now.

Right this instant.

I looked around. The Regulators were only ten paces away, rotating slowly and efficiently as they patrolled the crowds in their thick metal boots. Just a few words and I'd be free of all the secrets and lies.

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It would be easy. It was the right thing to do. I'd be free from these weighty secrets. I could become a functioning member of the Community again.

My hands dropped from the cart handle. My legs took a few steps toward the closest Regulator, mechanically, almost

as if they had been waiting for this moment to finally arrive.

But, wait. I couldn't.

There was a reason I didn't want to. A very important reason. I blinked several times until I remembered. There was *the thing*—the one thing they couldn't find out about, or else they would destroy me, deactivate me.

But the Community always comes first. . . .

I was an anomaly, a danger to the Community. I needed to be repaired. I turned again toward the Regulators, waiting to catch their attention and report myself. There was a murmur of dissent in the back of my mind, but it was too quiet compared to the strong clear stream of information flowing through the Link.

A Regulator had reached the end of a dispensary line and was turning slowly back to head in my direction. In a few paces, his head would sweep in my direction. I would calmly catch his attention and report myself for diagnostics. Just a few paces more.

But suddenly the quiet voice inside my mind was screaming. And then, like being underwater and then breaking to the surface, I was suddenly glitching.

The retina display flickered and disappeared from view, and the sound echoing through my mind stopped, mid-stream, and I was left in silence. I could breathe again. I felt

myself expand in the same moment, color and sound and sense flooding back in, overwhelming me with a rush of smells and sounds.

Beside me, I heard a loud crash.

I turned in surprise and saw that two full carts nearby had toppled over sideways, knocking into an aisle of stacked boxes. A stack tipped over, the boxes breaking open and spilling rice all over a nearby subject's shoes. He looked down for a moment before moving out of the way dispassionately.

No one else registered surprise. They weren't capable of it. But I was, and I felt every inch of surprise and dread and terror. Emotions flooded in. It was all too fast and I couldn't tell if I was masking one emotion before the next rose up.

One thing was sure—

I was malfunctioning way too much for such a public place. Someone was bound to notice and report me. I had to get out of here. *Now*. I didn't care that I hadn't gotten all of our allotments. I felt too frantic to stay crowded in this flood of gray-suited bodies, watching them placidly kneel down to clean up the spill while I was choking inside. I tightened my grip on my cart to hide the tremor of fear in my hands.

The Regulator had made his way over to investigate the spill. He scanned the crowd, but most of the subjects had al-

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