



GEORGE WRIGHT
PADGETT

SPINDOWN

Excerpts from George Wright Padgett's

SPINDOWN

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PROLOGUE

Dmitri Pasechnik adjusted his red ball cap and looked across the station's solarium at his son, Martin. He was still getting used to seeing the boy enjoy his newfound mobility. He watched Martin search the packing containers with an uncommon intensity for a seven-year-old boy.

"Where's it at?" fumed Martin in a panic. "He got sent with us, right, Dad?"

"Your companion bot is here somewhere, don't worry," answered Dmitri. "I'll help you find it after dinner, and we can activate it."

"I'm naming him Buck," Martin said.

"Like the one in the story?"

"Yes, and he's going to be better than a bio pet because he won't wear out and die like Pavel did." Martin paused. "At least, that's what Alina says."

"Your sister's right: if you do your maintenance on the machine, it could last indefinitely."

"That's like forever, right?"

"Yes." Dmitri chuckled slightly. "A very long time." He thought about how Martin's new teaching companion was nothing like any of the simu-pet bots back on Earth. *It looks more like a stumpy little filing cabinet to me, but if helps him make the adjustment here, then let him pretend it's a dog.*

He adjusted the cap on his head again. *Maybe when this tour here is finished, I'll have enough to buy them both a real mecho-pet back on Earth.*

Martin had returned to his search, a sly expression on his face. Dmitri watched the boy's eyes lock on to a plasta crate with Alina's name blinking on the identifier. Small fingers mischievously typed in the release code, and the container's top slid open.

"Martin, what are you doing?" asked Dmitri, though more out of duty than out of expecting an explanation.

The boy ignored the question as he rummaged through an assortment of Alina's personal items. "Ah," he exclaimed with satisfaction. "This'll work." He repeated the code sequence and the crate resealed. "She doesn't know that I know her code." He sounded proud.

"What do you have there?" asked Dmitri.

"Nothing much . . . just this." Martin extended his palm to show his prize, his sister's necklace. His smile was infectious, causing Dmitri to smile in return.

"Just be careful with that," Dmitri said.

"Why?" protested the boy. "It's not like it's real Orium V like they mine here. It's just the scum they scrape off the sludge on the top."

"I know, but it's important to her."

"Why?" asked Martin as he examined the hexagonal shape in the center.

"Mom gave it to her . . . before . . ." The words stuck in his throat and would not come. Dmitri was caught off guard as his mind began to conjure up memories against his will, memories both good and bad. It had been nearly nine months, and he still fought back the tears. Angry tears.

"Before the attack?" Martin's hand fell to his side. "Before what happened during

her orbit around Earth?”

Dmitri nodded, and Martin lowered his head. The silence thickened in the air between them. The boy’s face tightened into a grimace. Every line betrayed his guilt at invoking this. It was awkward for a minute, and Dmitri didn’t know how to close the gap. He was relieved when Martin did it for him.

The boy’s eyes beamed with excitement at the prospect of lightening the mood. “Look at me, what I can do.” His voice was boastful. His acto-boot braces responded to his mental command and extended him upward.

“Ah . . . you’ve been practicing,” said Dmitri, finding a smile again.

Martin continued his ascent, still holding the necklace. He spread his hands wide and spoke in the lowest register his voice could muster. “I’m taller than you, Dad. Now you have to do what I say.” Martin aimed an authoritative index finger while commanding, “Dad, it’s time for bed! No more vidi-tablet games for you!”

“Yes, sir,” answered Dmitri in his most obedient tone.

Alina strolled into the room. She glanced at Martin but didn’t acknowledge that he was now nearly twice her height. “What’s going on in here?”

“Your brother’s showing me what his acto-boots can do.”

Alina pointed at the jewelry that spilled out of his small fist. “Hey! What are you doing with that? It’s mine. Give it back!”

Martin smiled defiantly as he placed the necklace atop the highest crate. “Come get it. It’s right up here.” He retracted the titanium braces strapped to his legs and rapidly came back down to his original height.

“Dad!” shrieked Alina. “Make him get it!”

“It’s no big deal,” said Martin.

“Dad, are you going to help me?” she asked in disgust.

“Martin, give it back,” said Dmitri.

Martin grinned and pointed at the braces. “I can’t get my legs to work now.”

“Martin . . .” said Dmitri, exasperated.

“Yes, sir,” the boy said in a voice that trailed off. He extended back up to the necklace, then down again. “Here,” he said, shoving out two fists for Alina.

“Give it,” demanded the girl.

“You have to pick a—”

Alina shoved him backward. She swiftly stripped the necklace from his hand as the motorized brakes in Martin’s braces adjusted to keep him from falling.

“Alina!” scolded her father.

“But he’s such a sludgebot, Dad.”

“I know, I know, but he’s only seven, and you’re going to be twelve in five cycles. You know better.”

“Three,” Alina said. “You forgot the komatic sleep on the way here from Earth.” She somberly looked at the necklace in her hands.

“You’re right,” Dmitri said. “It’s three cycles.” He knelt down beside her and said, “I know this is all very different, being in a place like this, apart from your friends, and what happened to Mom’s station, but we’re going to make it through this. I promise.”

“I miss her, Dad.”

“I know. I do, too, very much, but we’re going to be OK. The three of us, OK?”

The girl nodded as he forced himself to smile.

“For now, though, I need you—I *really* need you—to get along with your brother.”

A scowl returned to Alina’s face. “I know, Dad, but ever since we got here, he’s been pestering me with those things.”

As if on cue, Martin began lifting on the leg frames behind her. As he did, the sound of the acto-boots’ gears gave him away.

Alina took a step backward into the metal frame that held Martin above them. The apparatus compensated too quickly as it tried to adjust to the boy’s subconscious commands to keep him from falling flat, and he nearly fell. Until he saw the boots stabilize, Dmitri felt the urge to run over and catch him.

Alina loudly spelled out, “P-E-S-T-E-R-I-N-G!”

“I can spell, too, you know,” answered Martin, towering over her. A confident smirk showed that he had regained his mechanical equilibrium again.

Dmitri ignored their bickering. “It’s just new to him, having all this mobility. It’ll wear off soon.” Standing up, he smiled knowingly. “My older brothers did things ten times worse to me than putting something out of my reach.”

“Don’t give the little compost-eater any ideas. If he’s this big an annoyance with the acto-boots, how much more of a pain will he be after the surgery? I wonder if coming here is worth it after all.”

Before Dmitri could chasten her, Alina bolted out and around the corner. *She made her point*, he thought.

Martin slowly lowered back down to his normal height. “What’s her problem, anyway?” scoffed the boy.

“Well, you have been kinda rough on her since you got your acto-boots. She’s gotta have time to adjust to the idea that you don’t have Titov’s Syndrome anymore. Or, at least, that you won’t soon. She’s so used to caring for you, bringing you things, doing things for you. This is an adjustment for her, too.”

“But I do have T.S. I still have it.”

Dmitri put down the manifest screen and returned to Martin. “Son, we agreed as a family to come here for your legs, even before Mom . . .” He paused as he caught himself. “It’s not your fault you were born with T.S. It happens to many babies whose mother spends a lot of time in weightlessness before they’re born. When Mom was pregnant with you, doctors didn’t know what they know now.”

“But other kids are able to fix themselves by exercising.”

Dmitri gave him an empathetic nod. “Sometimes. Some kids are able to teach their legs to work after a few years of therapy.”

“Not me,” answered Martin with a dejected expression. “My legs are stupid!”

“They’re not stupid. They just don’t have enough . . . well, the technical term is ‘nerves,’ but enough leg parts on the inside to train them how to walk. That’s why you need leg transplants.”

Martin’s eyes were fixed on the ground before him. “Son,” said Dmitri as he crouched to the boy’s level. He removed his red ball cap and placed it on the boy’s head.

“Martin, look at me.”

“What, Dad?” asked Martin as he adjusted the over-sized hat.

“Listen, my tour”—Dmitri corrected himself—“*our* tour here is over in five standard years. After that, we’ll have enough for the transplants.”

“Yeah . . .” Martin started hesitantly, “the surgery . . . it won’t hurt too much, right?” Apprehension had flooded his face.

“I’m not going to lie, it’ll hurt some, but that’s after you wake up. And the surgery isn’t scheduled for a long, long time from now. By then, you’ll be older than your sister is now.” He checked the boy’s face to see if his words were gaining any traction. “The hard part will be the work you’ll do after the surgery, to train your new legs.”

“Why can’t I just keep these boots?” Martin’s mental command made the rollers on the base of the harnesses scissor in opposite directions a few times. “You said they’d grow with me as I get taller. And I’m getting better at controlling them with my brain.”

“Yeah, they’ll adjust as you grow, but those aren’t ours. They’re on loan from the company. Besides, I want you to have *real* legs. After you reach fifteen standard years, the transplant won’t take. You’d forever be trapped in something like that. It might seem wonderful now, but trust me, it doesn’t compare to the real thing. Walking barefoot on the wet morning grass, or digging your toes in the sand at the beach, or slow dancing at midnight.”

Martin looked quizzically at Dmitri, who was swept away by another memory.

“You’re talking about Mom and you.”

Dmitri’s raised eyebrows and tight smile confirmed it. “Whatever,” said Martin as he playfully shook his head in disgust. Dmitri, satisfied that he had steered Martin’s emotions into a better place, decided to solidify the deal. “Hey, I want to show you something.”

He moved to the wall and touched a button in the recessed panel as the boy watched with curiosity. The lights dimmed as the ceiling encasement retracted to reveal the sky. Through the treated Cranis glass, a blaze of light flooded the room.

The sky filled with milky swirls of tan, grey, and white overlapping each other. Jupiter stood at attention above them—a swirling magnificent red spot of an eye blazing as if on fire from the far corner of the sky. Judging by his wide eyes and open mouth, Martin was astounded by the sight.

“Do you like it?” asked Dmitri. “The Greeks and Romans worshiped this as Zeus, Jove, the mighty Jupiter, ‘King of the Planets.’ This solarium was designed to impress Ganymede’s visitors, and I think the company accomplished that. Don’t you?”

Martin looked straight up, nodding slowly. Finally, he said in a voice slightly louder than a whisper, “So close. It looks so close.”

“Actually, that’s about a million kilometers from us . . . that gives you an idea of how big it is. It’s the second biggest thing in the solar system, right after the sun.”

The seven-year-old did not need to be sold on it—he was speechless. Dmitri could not recall the last time his son had been quiet for so long while awake. The boy was planted in place, motionless as he beheld the object that hovered above them.

A few minutes later, Dmitri dialed the canopy closed and the lights of the receiving lobby returned to their normal setting.

Martin protested, “No, Dad. Open it again, Dad. Please?” Dmitri smiled. “Ah, I’ve found something you like.” “Come on, Dad—again,” said Martin as he rolled across the room. He reached to touch the wall panel, but he could not figure out the sequence.

“Later . . . after dinner,” said Dmitri.

“But, Daaaad,” whined Martin.

“After,” said Dmitri, shaking his head.

“Well, when can we go see all the clone people?” asked Martin, extending his arms out stiffly, imitating an old-world robot.

“We’re not allowed to,” answered Dmitri. “We have to stay here.”

Martin stopped his impersonation and dropped his arms. “Why? ‘Cause the company says so?”

“Yes, the company, and they are being very generous to me. A lot of credits just for playing host to their friends. That’s how we’ll pay for your legs.”

“Operations cost a lot, huh?” asked Martin as he pulled Dmitri’s ball cap off his head and studied it.

“Well, yours is a special one, and it costs more than your mom or I could’ve made on Earth or at one of the station orbits. That’s why we’re here.” Dmitri paused as the image of her flashed across his mind again.

“Alina said you won’t be the boss of the clones.”

“That’s true.” Dmitri anticipated the next question before it formed in his son’s head, but he waited for him to ask it anyway.

“Then who is?”

Dmitri smiled. “The clones are run by a big computer. We won’t have to do a thing. Not even give tours of the mines. Does that disappoint you?”

“Em . . . a little. It’d be fun to go to the mines and meet them and tell them what to

do.” Martin brandished an authoritative finger again and a face to match it.

“But they’re not like us.” Dmitri decided not to pursue the topic. “We just meet the V.I.P.s when they come around to see how the Orium V is loaded into freight vessels.”

“What are vee eye pees?” Martin’s boots lifted him a few centimeters, lowered him back down, then repeated the process again and again.

Dmitri tried to ignore the distraction. “V.I.P.s are the dignitaries, Gensiid company executives, or guild members that they’ll be sending up here.” He could tell the answer did not register. “Uh . . . *special friends* of the company that we are to play with and eat with. And be extra nice to.”

“Like ‘best manners?’”

“Yes, the very best manners.”

Martin returned the oversized cap to his head. His face stiffened into an intensely serious expression as if to ask another question.

Dmitri waited, but upon realizing that Martin’s thought had evaporated from the boy’s mind, he added, “Speaking of manners and eating, go clean up for mealtime.”

Martin looked up at the closed canopy one last time, then spun toward the doorway.

“And, Martin . . .”

A small screech chirped from the left acto-boot’s braking mechanism as he whirled around. “Yes, Dad?”

“*Please* try to be nicer to your sister.”

#

208 Orbits around Jupiter Later

There was no way for Alina to gauge how much time she had left.

Since their arrival four years ago, she had never been able to determine a pattern to the farm's irrigation cycle. The only thing she knew for certain was that she had to be out of here when it began. She had to be out of here or drown.

She kept a steady pace, the rubber soles of her shoes occasionally letting out short squeaks as they hit the slick metal grates of the flooring.

The air was damp and thick with the tangy stench of the vegetation that surrounded her. Seemingly endless rows of dark ochre-colored stalks towered above her head as if saluting allegiance to the high dome enclosure.

Of course, this was the first time she had ever seen the kelp-like forest from the ground level. It had always looked smaller from her vantage point above it, from their home above the swaying top of the forest.

This certainly was not the way that Alina had imagined spending her sixteenth birthday when they had first arrived here years ago. But she had to do something, and she had put this off as long as she could. She had to find a way to get them off the base, for Martin's sake, before his T.S. became irreversible.

As she navigated through the labyrinth of vegetation, she wondered how far it went. It seemed like she had already walked for half an hour or so. In truth, she had no way of knowing, since everything had begun to look the same to her—just endless rows of dripping stalks.

She wondered if the Prinox system knew she was down here in an unsanctioned area, away from home.

Her mind wandered to thoughts of the base's clones. Still never having met any, she tried to imagine what they were like. She knew that there were thousands of them on the other side somewhere. If she could just get to them, everything might be OK.

She kept moving. She had to keep moving.

It was a race against time, an impossibly rigged contest against the tick, tick, ticking of a merciless clock winding down somewhere.

Alina realized that her brisk walk had transformed into a trot when her wildly bouncing necklace nearly struck her in the face. She tucked it away into her shirt and resumed her pace, forcing her fatigued legs to move her forward another step, then one more, then another after that.

Moments later, she heard the faint sound of splashing water. To her horror, she realized that it was her feet sloshing in growing puddles of saltwater.

She looked down at her soaked shoes, feeling the chill of the icy water bite at her feet and toes. It seeped in from the slits in the floor, rising at an alarming rate.

It was too late. The farm irrigation cycle had begun. The ground trembled, the water bubbling and rising to her shins.

She frantically scanned for a way of escape. She reached for one of the oversized translucent leaves, hoping to climb one of the stalks, but the slimy vegetation disintegrated in her fist. Losing her balance, she fell hard to her knees. She gasped in shock as the cold water splashed onto her face.

The ground shuddered in concert with a roar that echoed through the cavernous area.

It's coming, she thought, her feet slipping as she tried to recover from the fall. She was consumed by a feeling of dread the likes of which she had never known, not even when she had been “reunited” with her father.

The last two things young Alina Pasechnik saw as she scrambled to her feet were the tops of the stalks swaying to bend toward her, followed by an eight-story-high white swell of seawater. *I'm too late. Sorry, Marty . . . I'm so sorry.*

A second later, the rushing wall of water crashed down upon Alina, and she was swept away.

#

CHAPTER ONE :THE INCIDENT

The plexigaine light above the bed softly came to life as it did every “morning.” starting with a faint glow. The ceiling of the small compartment grew brighter until the area filled with the warmth of faux sunlight from above.

A soft synthesized voice accompanied the light. *“Fowler 3085, report to Mag-Rail Station Port 24 in one half hour for Cardan cycle redeployment.”*

The figure on the mesh bed rolled to the opposite side of the wall speaker.

After a brief interval, the voice repeated the order. *“Report to Mag-Rail Station Port 24 in one half hour, Fowler 3085.”*

This time the man responded by draping his legs over the metal edge of the suspended titanium cot and sitting up. “Acknowledged,” said Fowler, yawning. Before the voice from the speaker could chastise him, he added, “Fowler 3085 reporting to M24.”

The voice affirmed, “*Cardan cycle reassignment confirmed for F3085 to 24.*”

Fowler stood on the cool metal floor. He stretched, and then discarded the crumpled brown blanket into a thin wall slit. A second yawn escaped him as he folded the bed frame back into the wall.

He twisted the injection nozzle to loosen the empty supplement pack from his arm and slid the silver rectangular packet into the canister in the wall. A small indicator light above the canister flashed, acknowledging the transaction.

He moved across the floor to the toilet. A few sleepy moments later, he stepped up to the small shower platform in the corner. He pulled the showerhead from its slot in the wall and pressed a green button on it.

As jets of soapy water hit his skin, the voice of the Prinox system said, “*Initiating bio-scan of subject F3085. Please remain on scanning platform.*” A warm red glow emitted from the base on the floor.

Within a few minutes, he had completed showering and begun suctioning the excess water from his skin with the vacuum attachment. He clicked another button on the device and the level of suction decreased. He ran the attachment through his auburn-colored hair. The device clicked and buzzed as it trimmed the worker’s hair for the day.

Prinox finished its assessment of the worker, and the system relayed its conclusions to him. “*Subject F3085, male, 31 Ganymede years/1620 cycles. Assessment: health qualified and ap-*

proved for extraction duties in Quadrant R-6. Prinox system alerting Mag-Rail 24/601-LA for dispatch of F3085 to QR-6.”

After a pause, the voice continued, *“Cardan cycle reassignment confirmed with MG24/601-LA to QR-6 in one quarter hour. Mag-rail transport duration of F3085 to QR-6 site 22.5 minutes by way of rail.”*

The voice became more rhythmic as it calculated aloud Fowler’s personalized mixture of intravenous nourishment and inhibitor drugs. *“Commencing synthesizing of Hemlo mixture for subject F3085.”*

Fowler’s mind wandered as the system rattled off various tweaks to the recipe, slightly augmenting levels of certain enzymes while decreasing other compounds.

The light above the wall canister acknowledged Prinox’s approval of the fowler for work detail by changing to a welcoming green light. He attached the newly filled rectangular pouch to his left arm. As he zipped up a fresh fowler uniform, he felt the coolness of Hemlo juices seeping from the pack into his eager body.

As he folded the seat down near the sealed doorway, he looked down at his extended arm. The chemicals raced through his veins like mag-rail train lines propelling workers to new worksites. He let out a barely audible “Ahhhhh . . .” and lowered his eyes. A few minutes later, the Hemlo-induced euphoria reached a crescendo. His gaze gradually rolled to the blinking red trim around the door. He was still alert enough to realize that a few moments from now, the pressurized door would unlock and slide open, starting his shift. He would be deployed to a bustling drill site for sixteen to seventeen hours. Then he would be shuffled off to a housing compartment miles away from this one to repeat the process. But

for now, this quiet moment was his.

Satisfied, he tilted his head back against the wall of the compartment. The red blinking from the doorway seemed to pulsate in rhythm to his heartbeat, though he knew it was an illusion.

Fowler waited silently, just as he had waited at this time each day, every day since leaving the Blide training sector of the moon base over twenty years ago.

After a few minutes, the pneumatic door let out a deep sigh of compressed air, signaling the end of the fowler's rest period. The first wave of time-release nutrients and drugs circulated through his body. It felt good. He folded the seat back into the wall and secured the cushion's latch.

As he moved through the open doorway, his eyes focused on an approaching figure. Equal in height and stature, the man was an identical version of Fowler, except younger by about six to seven Ganymede years. Fowler felt proud that it was one of his others.

The younger fowler spoke first, identifying the older one by the imprinted tag on his uniform. "Many days to you, 3085." His own ID number now flashed on the door marquee, reflecting his assignment to the housing compartment.

"Yes, and many days to you, 3211. Many days."

As the younger fowler entered the housing compartment, a familiar synthetic voice greeted him. "*Acknowledging receipt of Fowler 3211.*" The tone became rhythmic as it continued, "*Commencing synthesizing of dormant period Hemlo sleep compound mixture for F3211.*"

The heavy door sealed shut, followed by a pneumatic hiss. Fowler 3085 walked down the corridor, pleased that one of his others occupied the space. *Much better than a grisk*

driver or flane tech, he thought. Fowlers are strong, and fowlers are the ones who do the real work at a mining site.

His evenly spaced footsteps reverberated off the blank wall and ceiling of the curved corridor.

I doubt a flane tech could even lift the hoist suit I wear . . . much less lift the tromble pipes I carry to irrigate the mine shafts.

A sense of pride filled him. He was a fowler in his prime.

He passed the red-blinking doors of multiple housing compartments and rounded the corner to see a small hybri-vore cleaning bot.

The spinning machine simultaneously scrubbed and buffed the floor and wall. Without slowing from its task, it greeted the passing worker. *“Many days to you, Fowler 3085.”*

Out of reflex, Fowler began to answer, “Many da—” He stopped when he remembered that the salutation was lost on the device.

He continued a few meters down the dimly lit walkway, and then he paused and turned around. Something was not right. The whirling sound of the hybri-vore’s appendages had stopped.

Fowler returned to the cleaner. Even the perpetual buzz of the equipment’s servomotors had gone quiet. It was a curious thing: he had never known a hybri-vore to go into a dormant mode. Fowler felt his face contort with confusion.

As he slowly reached down to nudge the machine, everything went black. The unexpected darkness startled him and caused him to stumble. He fell, feeling the cold metal of the cleaner’s stumpy cylinder beneath him.

Panic set in. There was always some type of lighting in Marius 516. Darkness did not exist for the workers anywhere in the station. Even mining shafts had illumination by means of phosphorescent compounds and thymme lights.

Short staccato breaths echoed through the corridor, frightening him before he realized that the sounds were his own.

Fowler groped for the wall, but it was closer than he had expected it to be, and his hands crashed into it, adding to his disorientation. He pushed up on the wall and found the handrail. He slowly began to follow its contour, cautiously moving along the wall through the darkness. *It's so dark. What's happening here?*

He remained uncertain whether he headed in the direction of the station or back to the housing pods. Though his heart was still racing, he tried to regain control over himself with each calculated step in the blackness. He moved deliberately, step . . . by step . . . by step.

The familiar voice of Prinox came back online. Though he knew it was not addressing him, he welcomed the system's chatter. His steps through the darkness became more confident as the voice echoed through the complex. *"Prinox system returning to online status in 5 . . . 4 . . . 3 . . . 2 . . . Life-support and excavation routines reinstated."* After a pause, the system continued, *"Peripheral services returning to full operational modes."*

Fowler's grip on the handrail relaxed slightly as the lights flickered and then returned to the hallway. To his surprise, he had not traveled far down the corridor.

"Many days to you, Fowler 3085," said the reactivated cleaning bot as it resumed buffing the wall panel.

Fowler warily moved past the machine, then began to sprint the distance of the corridor, still not sure what had happened but knowing he might be late to catch his train. He rushed by the last bank of occupied housing compartments, rehearsing the dispatch bay number aloud to himself: “24/601-L4 . . . 24/601-L4 . . . 24/601 . . .”

A few minutes later, he reached his destination. Even before entering the depot, he recognized the familiar roar of the station. Dozens of corridors emptied into the station like the spokes of a wheel pointing to a hub. The top level of the dispatch platform overlooked an intricate network of magnetized rail lines below.

The six-passenger pod-cars jettisoned away from the receiving ports. The rhythmic swoosh of their pneumatic doors opening and closing punctuated the sound of workers bustling in and out of the crafts and taking their seats.

The only voices heard in the depot were the pre-recorded alerts that accompanied each arriving pod. “*Departing passengers please observe safety codes and stay off of mag-rail tracks. Remain within the designated departure zone indicated by the yellow box on the floor until the transport has come to a complete stop and transfer passengers have vacated the pod.*” This chorus reverberated throughout the cavernous bay, each beginning and ending at different intervals as trains reached their destinations. The result was hollow, overlapping waves of sound. Having heard the messages *ad nauseam*, Fowler was numb to them.

The architecture of the station isolated one departure area from another. Columns marked off the recessed enclosures that spiraled into dozens of passageways in the depot, with each bay tucked into a pocket. Fowler hastened down four levels of stairs to the dispatch bays marked 600-609. He spun around the corner to Bay 601 just as his assigned

mag-rail pod whisked past him. Frozen, he watched it disappear into a tunnel. He had missed it.

He didn't see any hybri-vores to report his tardiness to. He scanned the level beneath him, peering past support beams and workers shuffling in and out of pod-cars. He found it peculiar that there were no hybri-vores in the station. He started back up the stairs in hopes of finding the cleaning bot back in the housing district. Doubling back to the cleaner would take less time than waiting, perhaps for hours, for another pod.

Halfway up the stairs of Level 2, an unfamiliar sight caught his eye. Nearly forty meters down from the depot of Level 1, he saw a blue flickering light. Hoping the little dancing light was from some type of service bot, Fowler headed toward it.

As he moved closer, he realized that the brilliant blue flickering was on the wall across the mag-rail lane. It had a bright white center with orange sparks leaping from it and a soft cloud of blue-grey smoke around it. Other workers only glanced at the spectacle on the wall as they hurried to catch their trains. Fowler was the only one to move in for a closer look. His eyes fixed on the hypnotic light. The silent flicker moved up the wall at a slow, even pace. Fowler's eyes went dry from lack of blinking, and he compensated with three or four quick snaps of his eyelids, never shifting his focus from the tiny spot.

The light stopped and then began moving left in a horizontal line. It completed a long, uneven stroke and then began its descent. A bitter stench began to burn in Fowler's nostrils, triggering tears and making him aware of each breath he took. He squinted, but he was still too fascinated to turn away. The light left a smoldering red-orange trail where it had cut through the metal panel.

The station's lights went dark. Collective gasps from workers on all five levels of the mag-rail depot replaced the clamor of the pre-recorded safety alerts. Fowler did not make a sound. He was mesmerized. The glow appeared more intense with the station lights out. Several silhouetted figures of workers had begun congregating to the left of him, but he remained transfixed by the crude smoldering rectangle on the wall across the tracks.

The light shuddered and went out. The pungent cloud of smoke accompanying the flickering blue flash dissipated. The bright orange glow of the crudely etched rectangle on the wall turned to a deep red. A few seconds later, it changed to a darker reddish brown and continued to fade until he could barely see it. The shape was two and a half times the width of a compartment doorway and nearly as tall.

The familiar voice of Prinox reverberated throughout the darkness of the mag-rail station. "*Prinox system returning to online status in 5 . . . 4 . . . 3 . . .*"

A deafening thud rumbled from where the light had been. The thunderous sound of metal clanging followed. Fowler covered his ears with his hands as the ground shook. The clamor echoed throughout the cavernous station. Prinox continued unabated, "*Life-support and excavation routines reinstated.*" The station lights returned, just as Prinox had foretold.

"Peripheral services returning to full operational modes."

Once Fowler's eyes adjusted to the lights, he saw that the enormous metal slab had fallen on the ground in a broken heap. The meter-thick part of what was once the wall still smoldered, as well as the hole it had made.

From the other side, a form emerged. It had a bulky metal container on its back, making it appear taller than it really was. The figure, which wore a blue uniform, bent down

to shed the over-sized pack and its attached hose and metal apparatus. It gripped its helmet with gloved hands and struggled with the headgear as it crossed over the magnetic track platform. The intruder moved toward the crowd that had gathered.

Fowler tried to step backward, but the workers who had gathered behind him blocked his retreat.

The figure removed the helmet and paused a few meters from them. Her blue eyes widened and locked on to Fowler. Light brown hair streamed down the right side of her face, with defiant strands dangling in front of her right eye. She freed her hand from the thick welder's glove and carelessly pushed the wayward hair to the side. Fowler's stare traced the contours of her soft face until she demanded, "Where are we?"

The unexpected voice startled him out of his stupor, but before he could answer, she said again, "I need to know! Where are we?"

Fowler hadn't ever thought in terms of being a part of a collective before. The term 'we' was lost on him. The question stunned him. He opened his mouth to respond, but he was not quick enough for the woman.

She enunciated, "*Do-you-under-stand-my-lan-guage?*"

He finally replied, "Yes, I . . . I do, but . . ."

"Then tell me where this is." Her finger swirled in front of her, picking imaginary targets in the station.

"This is Mag-Rail Station 24." He pointed to the holographic signage. "This is Bay 105 on Level 1." The woman produced a device from her hip. In a single move, she clicked it on and slid it along the side of her face. "This is McAllister, over." She waited a

second, touched the small display screen, and then repeated, “This is McAllister . . . Sal, can you hear me? McAllister to Vacante . . . Captain, are you there?” She paused again until the radio hissed and crackled back a man’s voice.

“Go ahead, Mackie. What’s your location?”

She looked at Fowler. “One of the clones says that we’re at a railway hub, number . . . um . . .”

Fowler interjected quickly to redeem himself from his earlier delinquency. “Mag-Rail 24, Bay 105—Level 1.”

McAllister answered, “Station 24—Level 1. There are no signs of any interceptors or . . . *any* security for that matter, just workers.”

“Yeah, we haven’t seen any bots in this area we’re in now, either, but . . .” The crackle paused.

McAllister’s body stiffened. “What? But what?” she asked.

“I’m sorry, Mackie . . . Julian got spun by those interceptors.”

Her countenance dropped as she seemed to struggle to keep the radio to her face.

The voice on the radio continued, “Did you hear me, Mackie? They killed Julian! After we got separated, we had to come through the communications tower to get back in. Anas and Cadell tried to hack the Prinox AI but couldn’t override it without shutting the entire station’s life support systems down. Then we got ambushed by five or six of those spinners in the control room. I guess they followed us back in from the outside.” The man on the radio hesitated for a moment. “I’m so sorry, Mackie. I really am. We weren’t prepared for this. The intel we intercepted did not mention any security to this degree. We

were completely caught off guard. Me, Julian, and Langill were trying to head back to the meeting point, and they got Julian. I'm sorry.”

Though much of what he heard went over Fowler's head, he could tell that something was wrong—dreadfully wrong. He watched McAllister angle her head back and aim her closed eyes upward. After a moment, she said, “Yeah, I'm sorry, too.” Small streams of water glistened down her face.

The radio continued, “Before they found us, Langill used the system to run a bio-scan of the base. He estimates there are over three thousand workers here, and that doesn't even count those in the hatcheries. But get this—as crude as the scan was, it found someone in the superintendent's quadrant.”

“There can't be anyone there,” scoffed McAllister. “That would mean—”

“I know. The data we scraped together said this place has been vacant for nearly a century. I mean . . . empty except for the clones.

“There's something else . . . Cooper and Kimball had to abandon the ship. And by now, I'm sure those nasty little spinners have ripped the craft to shreds. So, looks like we're gonna be here longer than we expected—a lot longer.”

Fowler studied McAllister with curiosity.

“What happened to Coop and Kimball?” she asked.

“Don't know,” the voice answered. “Cooper radioed me that they were under attack, and then her radio went dead. I haven't heard anything since. That was 'bout thirty minutes ago.”

“So where are you and Langill now?”

The voice sounded cheerful to relay good news. “Langill’s a little roughed up, but we’re following your trail now. Give us a few minutes, and we’ll be there with you . . . My goodness, girl, is there anything in this place that you didn’t torch?”

McAllister sniffled and then an unexpected laugh burst from her. “All in a day’s work. Right, boss?”

The radio crackled back. “We’re almost there. Gather as many of the clones for us to talk to as you can. We need to find out how much or how little they know about that superintendent sector. And if whoever’s there is going to be welcoming to us or not.”

McAllister wiped her eyes with the back of her wrist. “Aye, McAllister out.”

She swiveled around to address the cluster of eight or nine workers timidly assembled in front of her. In a commanding tone, she began, “OK, everyone, listen up. We’re here to help you. Some friends of mine are on the way, and they have something *really* important to talk to you about. So, I want everyone to move in closer to listen.”

The words deflected off the crowd. Several of the workers began to break off from the group, headed to their respective mag-rail bays. Fowler, not having a port, stayed and watched the woman in the blue suit.

“Wait!” pleaded McAllister. “We’re here to free you from all of this!” She faced Fowler. “Help me.”

“Are you from Prinox?”

McAllister’s face formed a scowl. “What? No, we’re here to liberate you *from* the Prinox.” She paused a moment and then added, “All right, yeah . . . OK!” She raced back toward the hole she had cut through the wall and grabbed the metal container. As she re-

turned to Fowler, she aimed the metal end of the hose toward the ceiling and squeezed the trigger four times. Each time, a bright red-orange flame leapt upward from the end of the nozzle and rolled off the metal awning, accompanied by a loud crackling sound. She had their attention again.

She enthusiastically shouted, “Workers of Marius 516, my leader”—she corrected herself, adjusting to the vernacular of the workers—“my *mine* is due to arrive here to give you updated assignments from the Prinox system. You are required to wait for this . . . er . . . *mine* to arrive.”

The workers obediently responded and began to congregate in a circle around her. McAllister said, with a nod to Fowler, “Well, Mr. 3085, we just might pull this off after all.”

#

Moments later, two more blue jumpsuits emerged through the opening in the wall. With arms interlocked on each other’s shoulders, the two men staggered over the slab of metal toward the crowd. The smaller of the two winced with every step. The larger man’s size and facial hair intrigued Fowler.

The man called out as he approached. “Hey, Mackie, help me here a minute.” Fowler recognized the voice as the man from McAllister’s radio. The larger man transferred the limping man to McAllister’s care. Then, when he’d caught his breath, he asked, “How are we doing here? Did they give you any trouble?”

“No,” McAllister answered. “Quite the opposite. It’s like they’re sleep-walking or something.” Fowler studied her as she slowly lowered the injured man to the floor. “How ya doing, Langill?”

He grunted on his way down to a resting position. Fowler stepped back to make room for the man's legs.

"What's wrong with them?" asked McAllister, looking at the group of bewildered workers.

As the man on the floor struggled to get comfortable, he answered, "The corporation set up the system to drug the clones. The chemicals cloud their thinking, making them 'numb and dumb.' They didn't want them thinking, or doing anything other than the specific tasks they were produced for." He stared up at Fowler and the others and then continued his assessment. "I doubt they can even comprehend what we're saying now." The statement tapered off into another long groan.

Judging from the looks of the other two blue suits, Fowler suspected that the man on the floor was speaking about him. McAllister confirmed his suspicions when she pointed in his direction and said, "This one seems pretty alert, though he's not much for conversation."

The man with the beard moved closer to Fowler as if to examine him. "They don't talk unless they need to. The Gensiid Company didn't want 'em to mix too much with each other." He removed his thick gloves and tucked them into a pocket in the calf of his jumpsuit. He tugged at the end of his grey-speckled beard before addressing Fowler directly. "Prinox systematically shuffles all of you from worksite to worksite to reduce the risk of any of you establishing relationships with each other, right?"

Fowler acknowledged the first half of his statement. "Yes, Prinox dispatches me to where I am to spend my Cardan cycle." The surreal nature of the situation struck Fowler.

He was having a discourse with workers that he had never encountered before. In some way, the exchange was exhilarating. He wondered, *Are they from Prinox?*

Then the stout stranger began to circle Fowler as if he were studying him. Now he spoke to McAllister as she knelt to help the man on the floor. “Any relationship, regardless of how insignificant, was deemed to be counter-productive to M516’s mining directive”—he returned to the spot where he had started—“and therefore completely prohibited.” He slid the zipper of his jumpsuit down to the middle of his chest, partially exposing a darker blue shirt beneath.

McAllister returned to her feet. “So, what . . . they’re kept away from each other?”

“Pretty much. I suspect they’re locked in their rooms until they’re needed. Tucked away like tools in a toolbox. I seriously doubt if any of these poor bastards have ever participated in a real conversation.”

“Well, then, it looks like you’ve got your work cut out for you, boss,” said McAllister.

The man straightened up, took a deep breath, and began to speak in a booming voice. “My name is Salvatore Vacante. I imagine that we must be a pretty strange sight to you all, but I want you to know, we are your *friends*.” He paused and offered a warm, confident look to his listeners.

“I don’t have a lot of time, so I’ll be as brief as I can. We’re here to liberate you from your slavery.” Vacante and Fowler locked eyes. After an expectant pause, he moved on. “You should know that *all* of you are more than just tools conceived in birthing bubbles. There’s more to life than being manufactured to work, only to be put under when you

get hurt or too old to do your job. Or, as you say, go dormant—dormant forever!”

Vacante let his words linger for a reaction from his audience that never came. Undeterred, he bellowed to the crowd, “And life . . . life is never disposable, even if you’re a clone. The spark of the Divine is in you.”

McAllister came alive and responded with a fierce, “Hell, yeah!”

Other than her acknowledgement, Vacante found himself standing in a circle of blank stares. He anxiously stroked the long, broken wrinkles of his forehead with an index finger. “Look, I know a lot of this doesn’t make any sense to you right now, but we need you to help us get to the launch site that the ore is sent from. We have to go to the superintendent’s station near there to—“

The whirr of hybrivores buzzing through the opening in the wall cut Vacante’s words short, and he shouted, “Spinners! Mackie, look out, they’ve found us!” Vacante pushed through the circle as McAllister pulled Langill along close behind.

The hybrivores glided over the metal slab that McAllister had carved from the wall, now lying across the Mag-Rail track. Fowler counted five machines crossing the makeshift bridge. They droned and churned in unison.

He immediately realized that these were not like the bulky loader hybrivores at drill sites. These machines were sleek and elegant. Two fitted concentric silver rings whirled atop a translucent dome that was a meter tall, the flairim-coated cylinder base slightly taller than that. They glided half a meter above the ground. As the machines advanced, several light-emitting diodes signaled patterns of white and blue through the clear top. Three of the machines were tethered together with a long grey cable that disappeared into the under-

side of the machinery. This trio hovered in place as the other two maneuvered into position horizontally in front of them, forming a V configuration.

The host interceptor in the rear squawked an alert. Prinox's command followed. "*Roon 4901, Punth Operator 4912, Grisk 2916, Vocax 5122, Grisk 4329, Flane Tech 3846, Drenatol Processor 5952, Fowler 3085, Prall 4167, be seated on the ground until Prinox protocols BN-00148 and HS-21500 are fulfilled.*" The workers subserviently dropped to the floor as the interceptors whooshed by.

The spinners clenched like a fist around the strangers. As they closed in, each interceptor extended a set of four tentacle-like blades. The steel spun at such a high rate of speed that it appeared to Fowler as if the blades were a single sheet of metal. A high whistling sound came from them as they sliced through the air mere centimeters from their companion units.

They pinned Vacante as he attempted to shield McAllister and Langill. The attack flung Vacante's blood in all directions. "Aaaaaaaarrghhh . . . Mackie . . .!" was all he got out before the spinner sliced through his flesh, splitting the bones of his rib cage. He collapsed to his knees in a crimson pool of his blood. His right hand instinctively rose to push his metal executioner away, and three severed fingers flew across the depot as his torso toppled forward, making a wet thud.

"Nooooooooooooo!" screamed McAllister. She scrambled on her hands and knees for her blast welder and fastened it back on. Langill continued to scurry backward on the floor while McAllister ignited the torch with trembling hands. The interceptors paused for a moment, hovering like floating gears in the air. Fowler watched the oscillating blades whip

at the air as if each rotation sharpened them. He glanced over at Vacante, who lay face-down and motionless.

The spinners encircled McAllister. She crouched and slowly turned counter-clockwise, punctuating each pivot with a bright red-orange blast from the apparatus. The bursts of flame only rolled off the machines like vapor, doing no harm.

All of this began to overwhelm Fowler, but he did not move. He watched in silence as McAllister slowly slid her left arm out of the blast pack harness and let the metal container rest on the floor in front of her. She stood and took in a deep breath, wiped the sweat from her forehead, and ignited the welding torch. She dropped to one knee to focus a concentrated stream of fire at the cable connecting the spinners. A shower of sparks flew. Fowler shielded his eyes from the blinding light. The familiar bitter burning smell returned to the depot bay. After a few intense seconds, the cable snapped like the snipping of a metal ribbon.

McAllister shifted her position and aimed at the tether on the right.

The hybri-vores closed in behind her, the rhythmic sound of their blades slicing through the air growing louder. She turned and lunged toward the disconnected spinner, heaving the alloy rod of the blast welder into the blades with all her might. The force of the impact pushed the bot backward far enough for her to pass as it began to chew through the pipe with its blades.

A terrible, ear-splitting screech pierced Fowler's ears. Shards of mangled steel and sparks spewed in all directions. A chunk of shrapnel lodged into McAllister's shoulder as she dove under the blades, landing a few meters outside the circle of spinners. She scam-

-bled to her feet, clutching her wound, and ran for the opening in the wall.

Behind her, the coil attaching the rod to the blast pack container entangled in the still-whirling “limbs” of the disabled bot. Fowler watched in disbelief as the large metal canister began to somersault as the rest of the coil wrapped around the blades. Each clanking spin hurled the battered blast pack into the ground. Soon, the container cracked. The elements inside mixed with the oxygen in the air and erupted into a blinding ball of red-orange heat.

The temperature of the bay instantly flashed up ten to fifteen degrees hotter. The air was scarce and difficult to breathe. The blast knocked the sitting workers backward and pinned McAllister to the floor. Fowler waddled on his knees back to his original sitting position. Looking across the depot, he saw Langill’s charred body smoldering from the explosion. His ears still rang from the explosion. Everything sounded muffled and far away.

The other workers beside him also readjusted their positions, each of them silently watching.

The interceptors regrouped from the blast.

McAllister ran back to the clones sitting on the ground. “What the hell is wrong with you people? Why do you just sit there . . . waiting? What are you waiting for?” She yanked the punth operator up by the her brown jumpsuit and screamed in her face, “*Why do you not run?!*”

The punth operator looked quizzically back into the stranger’s face and asked, “Run? Run to what?” Two spinners descended upon McAllister and sliced through the

back of her blue uniform. As the interceptor blades eviscerated her body, they pushed her forward into the punth operator. McAllister's blood spackled the woman's face and jumpsuit. She tried to ask again as crimson globs spewed from her mouth with every syllable, "Why . . . why do you . . . do you just sit here?"

The interceptors finished their task and retracted their blades inward with a resolute click. McAllister's body collapsed. Dark red bits of flesh littered the floor near the corpse that lay directly in front of Fowler.

#

CHAPTER TWO: THE RESCUE

McAllister's blue eyes remained frozen on Fowler. Her stare was different, somehow, from when she had looked at him before. He had never seen any of this before, but her look was the strangest and most disturbing of it all.

The two spinners hovered at attention behind her, as if awaiting instruction from the host unit across the bay. Fowler ignored his better judgment and moved closer to the woman. He leaned forward to touch the crisscrossed lines of red that streamed across her face to the dark puddle under her head. It was warm and sticky to the touch. Fowler nudged her forehead curiously. Her head moved with the pressure and then slowly rocked back into place. He quickly pulled back.

The smell of her corpse was a foul mixture of sweat, urine, and other secretions that he did not recognize. In the relatively sterile environment of the station, the repugnant stench of death distressed Fowler. *Something is wrong here. This is not right*, he thought.

The other workers cautiously moved in. “What is it?” asked the punth operator, wiping McAllister’s blood from her face with her sleeve.

“I . . . don’t . . .” Fowler shook his head, unable to present an answer. He matched the angle of the head on the floor to get a better look.

“The eyes . . . the eyes don’t move,” said Prall 4167, leaning in for a closer inspection. His voice was flat and cold.

Fowler was not sure how this answered anything, but he and the other workers nodded. He prodded her forehead again, hoping to get a response.

The return of the host interceptor interrupted Fowler’s examination. A jaggedly cut cable dangled a meter or so behind it, scraping the ground and serving as a reminder of McAllister’s final act of defiance against her attackers. The right side of the host remained connected to the secondary spinner, its blades still spinning.

The four remaining hybri-vores hovered, inert, as an acknowledgement through the Prinox system came from the host interceptor: “*Protocols HS-21500 and BN-00148 fulfilled.*”

Prinox continued with its summation. “*Subjects R4901, PO4912, G2916, V5122, G4329, FT3846, DP5952, F3085, and P4167 reclassified as contaminated.*” The voice from the hybri-vore paused as if contemplating a course of action. “*Performing analysis: cost projection of clone termination versus confirmed risk factor of reintroducing contaminates in M516 populace.*” The interceptor paused even longer this time. “*Conclusion: standard clone reduction procedures superseded by protocol BN-00105. Commence with motorized reduction of subjects R4901, PO4912, G2916, V5122, G4329, FT3846, DP5952, F3085, and P4167.*” As was often the case, much of the meaning of the system’s pronouncement was lost on him. Even so, Fowler felt a twinge of

uneasiness when he heard the term *motorized reduction* as Prinox declared him to be *contaminated*. He caught Prall looking at him. The two exchanged perplexed looks as to what Prinox meant.

The stand-alone spinners re-engaged their blades and took up their positions between the host and the workers. “*Roon 4901, approach. Punth Operator 4912, approach. Grisk 2916, approach.*”

The workers stood and obediently presented themselves.

In unison, the spinners hovered in closer and began to shred the worker’s bodies, which convulsed and twitched as the metal spun their insides. The floor was soon drenched with blood, and the foul odor made Fowler’s stomach rebel against him in an unfamiliar queasiness. As the clones doubled over, chunks of flesh fell from their chests and splattered onto the ground. Then the spinners retracted their blades, leaving the lifeless bodies to fall to the floor like wrinkled cloth.

The machines advanced to their next subjects. “*Vocax 5122, approach. Grisk 4329, approach. Flane Tech 3846, approach.*”

“Something is not right here,” said Prall.

“No!” yelled Fowler. “Don’t do it!”

The workers rose, uneasily looking at each other and then back at Fowler, who was now standing.

“Something is wrong. Grisk, do not advance! Sit down!” he said.

The command was strange coming from a lowly fowler, and confusion showed on the face of the young grisk operator.

Fowler grabbed the sleeve of the man's burgundy uniform to stop him. "Those things are going to cut you," he said. "Something is wrong here."

The host spinner commanded, "*Fowler 3085, halt where you are. Do not move. Be seated, F3085.*"

Prall left McAllister's body and joined Fowler. "Something *is* wrong here. Fowler is right, those hybri-vores—" Prall stopped mid-sentence as the grisk turned to follow the vocax and flane to the spinners. Their blades still dripped with the blood from the first set of clones.

Fowler watched the interceptors repeat the slaughter. He knew they were next.

"No . . ." he breathed, and then his voice swelled to a primeval crescendo. "No! No! NO! NOOOOOOOO!"

The spinners took notice and abandoned the dying victims to move toward Fowler. Prall slumped to the floor in a subservient posture as Fowler slowly stepped backward from the spinners. The machines methodically moved to encircle him.

Fowler recognized this formation as the same pattern the machines had used when attacking the blue suits moments before. McAllister's final words echoed in his mind. "*Why do you just sit there?*" His heart thrashed in his chest as if it were about to explode. His muscles tightened, and then his legs propelled his body past his would-be executioners even before he realized that he was running.

The host spinner repeated, "*Fowler 3085, halt where you are. Do not move. Be seated, F3085.*"

He bolted toward the mag-rail tracks, but the spinners tightened into a semicircle around

him, preventing him from escaping. His heart pounded in his ears. The only way out was through the hole in the wall, but what would he find on the other side? He scaled the fallen section like it was a ramp and scrambled for the opening. He turned and saw the interceptors following him.

He ran through the makeshift doorway, looking over his shoulder at his pursuers. He turned around in time to see a large figure rapidly approaching from the other side. It was too late to stop, and the two collided with a thud. The impact bowled Fowler to the ground, his face pressed painfully downward onto the cold floor. The stranger he had run into grunted as he pushed himself up off Fowler's back. The man exclaimed, "They're behind me! We gotta get outta here!"

Fowler's skull ached from the collision. He gasped, fighting to refill his lungs with air. He struggled to lift himself off the ground.

"Come on!" said the man. He grabbed the back of Fowler's grey jumpsuit in his fists and heaved upward.

Fowler landed on his feet, his ears still ringing. He turned to see sweat rolling down the burly man's forehead and cheeks into a thick dark beard. The blue uniform of the stranger matched the others who had come through the wall. His rolled-up sleeves revealed a forest of dark matted arm hair, also drenched with sweat.

Fowler looked past the man to the spinners in the station bay. He turned to run the opposite way until the stranger extended an arm to block him.

"Whoooooa, wait a minute! You can't go that way, friend. Spinners from outside are following me. They'll be in this area any minute!"

“Yes, but back there!” Fowler motioned behind him to the hybrid-vores that were cautiously navigating around the fallen metal on the track.

“It’s OK. I’ve got an idea.” The man shoved Fowler back through the opening into Bay 105 and then stopped when he saw the carnage-filled room. His eyes locked on the tattered blue uniforms of his slain companions. “Dead . . . all dead,” the man said, frozen, as he breathed out a long sigh. “All of them are dead.”

After a moment, he shook his head forcefully and came back to life. “Listen, I’m pretty sure that if we can make it down to those magnetic tracks, the spinners won’t be able to follow us, because their polarity is different from the rails.”

Fowler’s face gave away his confusion. Everything was happening too fast to process.

The man aimed a thick index finger at one of the long tunnels that extended from the bay. “Let’s try and make it over there. I don’t know why, but something about the different magnetic displacement disorients them. Messes them up. That could give us enough time to get past ‘em.”

Fowler was still in a state of shock.

The man shook him. “Do you understand?”

Fowler answered, “Yes. Yes, I’m ready.”

The stranger scanned the room and then pushed Fowler forward. “Go now. Go!”

Another surge of adrenaline blasted through Fowler’s veins. The shove carried him farther than he had expected. He was within striking distance of the host spinner. His footing gave way as he leapt across the metal slab, causing him to slip and tumble to the

ground. *"Fowler 3085, stop. Remain where you are, F3085."* The interceptor moved in to attack.

Fowler scooted backward from the whirling blades, but the chunk of metal pinned him in.

The hybri-vore moved in.

A loud metal clang echoed through the bay as the host spinner shifted sharply to the side. Behind the machine, Fowler saw a metal beam in the grip of the stranger. The husky figure cursed the spinner as he swung to strike it again. When the interceptor turned to face its attacker, the man jammed the metal between the thrashing blades. A hideous screeching followed.

The companion spinner attached to the host zeroed in on the intruder.

"Run for it!" yelled the stranger.

Fowler froze instead. He knew what would happen to the man next. He turned his head away, not wanting to see, and something caught his eye. Dangling on the ground near Fowler's feet was the connecting tether that McAllister had severed from the secondary interceptor. The cable, still connected to the host spinner like a metal tail, scraped across the floor behind it. Fowler grabbed the coil in both hands and pulled with all his might just as the interceptor drilled its blades into the other man.

The hybri-vore resisted the strain on the line and continued to pull in the direction of its target. The cable ran through Fowler's palms, slicing his skin along the way. It pulled him forward half a meter or so, until Fowler got his footing. He tightened his grip and heaved at the line again. His hands felt as if they were on fire, but he did not dare let go.

This time, the host spinner turned its focus back to Fowler and deployed its remaining companion on the right.

Fowler leaned back, pulling the spinners toward him. The interceptors clanged up against each other as he dodged to the left of them. Sparks lit the area as the machines fought to free themselves from one another's blades. Ear-piercing sounds reverberated through the bay as metal shredded metal.

Fowler planted his feet and hurled the bots around to the other side. He continued to twist the bots around in a slingshot motion, inadvertently striking the two other spinners. All four hybrid-vores collided headlong into the wall, making a deafening sound.

The shock of the impact was more than Fowler could handle, and the cable slipped through his aching fists like water. The sudden release caused him to fall flat. The tethered units ricocheted hard off the wall and flew over the stranger's collapsed body on the ground. They bounced and bobbed uncontrollably as they plunged toward the mag-rail line. The other two spinners flew in the other direction.

While on the floor, he watched the host and companion spinner bobble around, attempting to stabilize above the mag-rail track. The stranger had been right about the mag-rail's effect on them.

Fowler forced his body to stand back up. His head still throbbed from his collision with the man, but that pain was a distant second to that from the gashes in his hands.

The spinners bobbed forward, then back, and then forward again, unable to navigate. Fowler rushed over to where the large man lay on the ground. He dropped to his knees in a puddle of the stranger's blood and struggled to roll the man onto his back.

The stranger let out a low moan of agony. He had suffered bad wounds. The front of his uniform was drenched in blood, turning the dark blue material to a deep burgundy. He breathed in short, uncertain gasps. “You gotta . . . get me outta here!” Crimson fluid spewed from his mouth with each word.

“Yes . . . yes, I will.” Fowler attempted to hoist the man up by his arms. The stranger’s thick wrists, slippery with blood, slid through Fowler’s grasp and dropped in the small red puddle collecting on his chest. The man objected with a moan as he rolled himself up on his left elbow. His right hand curled around Fowler’s ankle like a vise. “To . . . to the . . . rail. Polarity—the . . . pol . . . polarity!”

Fowler looked back at the spinners suspended on the track. Desperate, he called out to the two remaining workers, the drenatol worker and the prall. “Help me with him.”

The plea went unanswered.

Surprised by his own assertiveness, he ordered, “Drenatol, get up and come here!”

The man eyed Fowler suspiciously and then glanced back at the prall beside him.

Pralls, not fowlers, were leaders.

“Come on,” exclaimed Fowler. “This man came through the wall and knows what’s happening here. He knows what to do. Help me!”

This time, Prall nudged Drenatol, and both rose guardedly to their feet. As they approached, Fowler shot a quick glance around for any more spinners and then said, “Help me lift him up.”

“The fowler might be correct,” said Prall to Drenatol, which gave permission for the other worker to obey. “This blue suit worker might know what’s happening here.”

The three men propped the injured man up and tried to find their balance. After a moment, they began to trudge across the floor. Their steps were uncoordinated, causing the man to groan with each bump and weight shift.

Suddenly, Drenatol accidentally let down the right side of the stranger, shifting the entire weight to Prall and Fowler.

“Drenatol!” barked Prall.

There was no response. The drenatol processor was frozen, staring at the opening in the wall.

Fowler turned to see what he was looking at. “*Spinners!*” he shouted.

“Told ya they were coming,” said the stranger.

“Put him down!” Drenatol begged.

“No, move to the tracks like the blue-suit said,” Prall ordered.

The threesome resumed their positions around the man. They clumsily dragged him forward. Streaks of blood and footprints dyed the path they took. They lugged him a meter or so before they heard the familiar pre-recorded message start: “*Departing passengers, please observe safety codes and stay off of mag-rail tracks. Remain within the designated departure zone . . .*”

“The mag-rail is coming!” Prall said in between cumbersome steps.

“Wait for . . .” Fowler watched the second squadron of interceptors begin to cross the metal slab. The host unit of this new set of machines began to hover across with its two secondary units in tow.

The arrival of the Mag-Rail pod interrupted the descent of the machines. The pod streaked into Depot Bay 105 at full speed, slamming the immobile spinners up against the

huge slab of metal for a second time. The momentum of the carrier shoved the debris a few meters down the tracks before the back of the pod-car lifted and came crashing back down. A thunderous sound resonated off the ceiling and walls.

The pod rested precariously against the opening in the wall, blocking the latest wave of interceptors that tried to defend the host unit.

Voices from inside the craft yelled, “Help! Is there anyone there? Help!”

Fowler signaled to Prall and Drenatol to lower the stranger. “Put him down here.”

The stranger rested on his knees, doubled over, with his face toward the ground. Between fits of coughing, he said, “We gotta get outta here! That’ll slow those spinners down, but they’ll find a way to go around and come after us.”

Fowler motioned to Drenatol and Prall to follow as he raced to the crumpled pod. The grapheme shell around the pod had fractured into large overlapping shards that were beginning to slip.

“Help! Someone help!” came voices from within.

The top of the retractable door had crumpled in from the stress of the crash. Prall and Fowler tried to lift it up, but it would not budge. “Try to open it from the inside!” Prall commanded the unseen passengers.

“I am, but the emergency release knobs won’t move! It’s stuck! Help!” answered a female voice. The pod began to vibrate as the sound of the lead spinner slicing through metal came from the other side of the tram.

“What’s happening?” yelled a man’s voice from inside. There was no time to explain about the interceptors. The whirr of spinners grew as the metal appendages ate through the

frame of the vehicle. Fowler looked to Prall for his nod before yelling, “Lift your side of the door on three! Can you hear me?” His throat was already raw from screaming over the noise. “Lift the door on the count of three!”

The pod rocked back and forth violently.

“Hurry!” pleaded a woman’s voice from inside.

Prall and Fowler searched for handholds on the pod’s doorframe while Drenatol braced the back of the pod.

Fowler screamed, “One . . . two . . .” He looked at Prall for confirmation, then back at the door. “Thhhhrreeeeee!” There was a chorus of grunts from the three men. The door opened by a few centimeters. The cuts on Fowler’s hands ached as the grapheme panel split the skin even more.

“Again! Do it again!” Fowler’s voice cracked.

“Something’s happening in here!” shrieked the woman’s voice. “Something’s coming in the other side!”

Prall took over the counting. “One . . . twoooo . . . thhrreeeeee!” The men opened the door another few centimeters.

“Do it again! One . . . two . . .”

The noise and the shaking stopped.

Fowler gasped, “What’s going on in the— ”

The cold voice of the host spinner came from inside the pod. “*Tromble Plotter 3819, Vocax 4291, and Sholve 0214, be seated and do not move.*” A muted rumble shook the pod. Fowler felt a chill shoot down his spine. “Come on!” he said as he returned to pushing

upward on the door. The opening grew to allow the feet of one of the workers through.

“Drenatol Processor, come here!” ordered Prall.

The worker moved next to Fowler’s spot and pushed upward on the door with Prall.

“Hurry! Something’s in here! It’s done something to the vocax—it’s cut him bad!” pleaded a man’s voice from inside. Fowler grabbed the legs of a black jumpsuit and pulled.

“I’m stuck!” the woman said. “Please help me . . . please, please . . .”

“*Sholve 0214, be seated. Do not move, S0214,*” commanded the interceptor from inside.

“I’ve got you! I’ve got you!” Fowler yelled.

Prall and Drenatol strained upward as Fowler made a final, swift jerk, freeing the sholve from the pod. She lay on her back in a daze. Fowler grabbed her shoulders and slid her to the side. “Just sit here,” he said, breathing heavily. “You’re all right now.”

Prall yelled to the worker through the small crevice, “Put your legs through!”

A set of bright yellow pants legs emerged in response. “Quickly!” pleaded the voice from inside.

The man’s legs were much larger than the sholve’s. Fowler knew that the man was a tromble plotter due to the bright color of his jumpsuit. *Tromble plotters are big*, he thought.

The door must go higher. “Lift it higher! There’s not enough clearance!”

Prall grunted. “I can’t raise it any more! It’s stuck on something! I think it’s bent in too much.”

Fowler heaved at the bright yellow legs. The man connected to the legs grunted and tried to inch downward. He cried out, “It’s coming! I can’t get—”

“Come on!” Fowler pleaded as he tugged vehemently.

“It’s like Prall said. It won’t budge!” Drenatol said.

The man inside went motionless for a few seconds and then began to convulse.

Fowler recognized the vile smell of butchered flesh from moments before. Seconds later, he felt his hands and arms become wet. The bright yellow pants turned red with blood. He yanked his hands away. “Go! Go! GO!”

Drenatol was still pushing upward.

“Get out of here! *Don’t open it!*” Fowler shoved Drenatol off the door to keep it closed. His hands marked the processor’s jumpsuit with two reddish handprints. Fowler turned to Prall and shouted, “Go! Run!”

Sholve 0214, still lying on the floor, said, “That machine, the hybrivore . . . it cut him. It cut the vocax!”

The spinner’s blades chewed through the inside of the mag-rail pod. “Just run!” Fowler shouted.

Small curls of metal and plastic sprinkled down the side of the crumpled car, bouncing on the floor beneath.

The sholve followed the three men as they returned to the stranger. They propped him back up and then scooted him across the floor. As they slid the man out of the bay, Fowler heard the noise of the spinner cutting through the external shell of the pod-car. The sound of the grapheme-encased door collapsing to the floor jolted the clones as they fled to the nearby bay of Depot 103.

A Mag-Rail pod had just arrived to 103, and a young roon and a müne had already taken

their seats when the four stumbled into the car, lugging the semi-conscious stranger. Prall and Drenatol laid the big man on the floor on his back.

A pre-recorded alert from inside the pod-car sounded. *“Departing passengers, please observe safety codes. The mag-rail pod will not depart if the pod door is obstructed.”*

Fowler and Sholve noticed at the same time that the blue-uniformed man’s feet were sticking out of the pod. They scrambled to bend the man’s knees inward to clear the door.

“We don’t know where this is this going,” Drenatol said as he panted.

“Away from here,” Prall answered. “That’s all that matters.”

The pneumatic pod door started sliding closed from the top. As it did, Fowler caught a glimpse of the spinners emerging from the demolished Mag-Rail pod, seeking their prey, while other workers dutifully shuffled to their destinations. He clasped his injured hands, thinking that nothing would ever be the same.

As the windowless pod door sealed shut and the train started moving, the mune in the car spoke up in a disapproving tone. “This transport delivers to the M19 station.”

The train whisked them away.

#

CHAPTER THREE:THE DEBATE

The crowded pod-car sped down the line to deliver its two original passengers to their assignment details. “Who *is* that?” asked Roon 1893, who was just a teenager, as she pulled her feet further in, away from the body of the stranger.

“He came through the wall,” said Drenatol. “Another worker made a hole in the wall of 105, and he came through it with some hybri-vores and some other . . . *blue suits*.”

Sholve said, “I’ve never seen a hybri-vore like that. It cut into the vocax.”

Fowler said, “They came with the blue suits. They called them spinners, and they make you go dormant.”

The müne interjected sourly, “Dormant? Like Hemlo dormant at the end of a shift?”

“No, it’s different—like . . . *blue suit dormant*,” Fowler explained.

“*Blue* what?”

“Dormant? They make you go *dead*!” grumbled the man on the floor as he regained consciousness. He coughed and then ordered, “Help me sit up.”

Prall and Fowler each lifted a shoulder of the man and sat him with his back against the cabin wall. The stranger groaned and looked down at his chest.

Drenatol asked in rapid succession, “Who are you? Are there more like you? Are your others in the walls?”

The man chuckled and then coughed up a little more blood. “No, you don’t have to worry about anyone else bustin’ through the walls. Unfortunately, I’m afraid I’m the last.” He looked around at the three workers spackled with blood. “Thanks for that back there.”

Fowler quizzically looked back at him.

The stranger wiped strands of blood from his mouth and took in a deep breath. “I am Kimball . . . Terrence Kimball, navigation officer of a non-military barge called the *Ariadne*.” He paused to swallow, and then bitterly said, “Though it’s probably all scrap now.

Picked apart by those interceptor bots.”

After a series of violent coughs, he continued, “All but a few planetary governments have been overthrown. It’s a mess out there. We found out about this place on our way to the outer rim, trying to get away from all the chaos.” Kimball winced and his face contorted in pain. He clamped his teeth tightly together and fell silent as if waiting for the pain to subside.

“We came here from far away to . . . to help you, so you all could be free. We had planned to load some of the Orium V on the barge as . . . payment for our good deed. Let you all live here without having to be slaves, and we would be on our way, was the plan. We . . .” Another round of coughing overtook him. His speaking was erratic. “We didn’t know about the spinners, and . . . well, you saw what happened with all of that.” Kimball directed the last comment to Fowler, who looked back in acknowledgement.

“I couldn’t land the *Ariadne* on the space pad like a normal transport because of massively fortified barriers.” Another coughing spell overtook him, this one more violently than before. “Barriers . . . to protect against poachers, I guess. But if we can make it to the superintendent’s station . . . there should be a secondary way to override Prinox without . . . without shutting down the life-support systems.”

Kimball paused as if he contemplated some dark secret. “That’s if we can ‘convince’ the superintendent staff there to help us.”

He closed his eyes tightly. It was apparent that Kimball was waiting for another sharp pain to pass. Fowler waited for the man’s eyes to reopen, and then carefully asked, “Kimball—”

The man interrupted, “I’m off in a bad way here. There’s no way I’m gonna make it without some medical. I need to go to a triage station, med-bots, or something.”

The statement hung in the air. The workers exchanged blank stares, and then looked at Kimball again.

“I need help fast! Come on! A hospital, a medical bay, something!”

“I don’t . . . know what that is,” Sholve said as she looked to Müne for affirmation.

Kimball mashed the back of his hand into his forehead. “OK, I saw a diagram of a small sick bay within the superintendent’s quarters. Take me there so I can get stitched up and get some Anomoxoline.”

In a defiant tone that chilled the air, Müne said, “There’s not a place like that.”

Prall asked, “What is the sector number of the place?”

“I don’t know your numbers for places, but it’s at the end of the line. The eastern-most part of this base. I saw it on a scan map.”

Fowler stared blankly back at Kimball.

The man’s frustration was obvious. “The place where your ore is launched from to be sent to the . . .” Another cough ripped through the man. “The hub frame orbiting Jupiter.” Kimball closed his eyes again. This time, the wait was longer before he spoke again.

“Look, we just head eastward. We go to the east.”

“East?” Fowler said, grasping for an explanation.

“Yeah, you know . . . *east*. Well, you probably don’t know. Wait . . .”

Kimball moaned as he produced a hand-held tool from a pocket near the calf of his leg. A small view screen blinked on with a soft blue glow. His thick fingers forced a series

of chirps from the device's touch screen. The workers leaned in slightly to get a better look at the gadget. The shape was similar to shower heads in the housing compartments, but smaller.

After the device emitted a single long tone, Kimball seemed satisfied. He grunted as he thrust it at Fowler. "Here, take it for me. You'll need to carry it for us when we get outta this shuttle."

Fowler gripped the tool. It was remarkably lighter than he had expected. The handle contoured to his palm, though his cuts prevented him from gripping too tightly.

"OK, so pay attention. That's a D.R.A.A.D. light. I've got the screen set to display as a compass." Kimball swallowed hard and gasped. After a few seconds, he continued, "We want to head east, so keep it where the 'E' is showing."

Fowler looked down at the device but did not recognize the symbol.

Prall reached for the device, but Fowler drew it in before he could grab it.

"Keep it on the letter 'E.' 'E' for 'East.'"

The workers just looked at him.

"You guys probably can't read." He extended his hand for the device and Fowler handed it back. "Betcha don't even know what reading is." He pointed it. "You see . . . see this shape?" Kimball pointed to the large letter 'E' displayed on the screen. "That's the direction we wanna go. Which . . . is the exact opposite from where this train is taking us now," he finished sourly.

As he returned the device to Fowler, brilliant amber light flooded the pod. It took Fowler a moment to recognize that the beam shot from the front of the compass light.

“Push the green arrow on the side,” Kimball instructed.

Fowler did and the light disappeared. After Fowler’s eyes readjusted to the pod-car’s cabin lights, Kimball said sarcastically, “It’s also a light.”

Fowler carefully examined the device in his hand, making sure to avoid touching the green button.

“What is this route’s duration? How long . . . until the next depot?” Kimball gasped.

There was an awkward pause.

Sliding her feet away from the puddle of blood that was pooling near her, Roon finally answered, “Prinox said 16.5 minutes from Station 24 to Station 19.”

Kimball replied with a *hmpb*. “I know I’m not the best traveling companion right now, eh . . . but alert me when we make it to the next stop. We’ll . . .” He flinched. “We’ll get another train headed eastbound from there and hopscotch the trains ‘till we get to the superintendent’s station. That’s where we’ll get the help we need—all of us—do you understand? The superintendent’s station!” Kimball’s eyes shut again and he groaned.

The mag-rail pod zipped along toward the M19 station. The car was quiet except for Kimball’s coughing, punctuated with occasional moans and gasps for air. The six of them watched him struggle on the floor.

The pod began to slow.

“It’s too soon. This can’t be Depot 19,” Sholve remarked. “It hasn’t been time enough to get to 19.”

The speaker in the ceiling of the pod interrupted. This time, the message wasn’t one of the pre-recorded loops. “*Cardan cycles for Roon 1893 and Müne 0197 suspended due to intruder/*

outsider contamination. Emergency admission protocols for Sector 20104-16. Standard clone reduction procedures superseded by protocol BN-00105. Workers R1893 and M0197 reassigned to Reduction Center complex 20104.”

After a pause, Prinox continued, *“Emergency admission protocols for sector 20104-16 granted for subjects S0214, DP5952, F3085, and P4167 for applied reduction of subjects. Escort hybrid-vores dispatched to Sector 20104-16 to fulfill protocol BN-00105 for subjects S0214, DP5952, F3085, P4167, R1893, and M0197. Escort hybrid-vores dispatched to sector 20104-16 to fulfill protocols BN-00148 and HS-21500 for unlisted subject/intruder.”*

The pod slowed to a complete stop. The workers exchanged baffled looks, and then returned their focus to Kimball hemorrhaging on the floor. He phased into consciousness long enough to ask, “Are we . . . there?” He whimpered and passed out again before anyone could offer an answer.

The cabin lights of the pod dimmed slightly as the car began to accelerate. The pod moved in the opposite direction now, and at a speed faster than Fowler was accustomed to. Prinox’s final command followed: *“Redirecting pod-car to reduction sector. Transport due to arrive to destination 20104-16 in 26.725 minutes for applied reduction.”* The speaker crackled and went silent.

“What is at a Reduction Center?” asked Fowler. “And has anyone ever been to 20104-16?”

“I have not, but perhaps it’s a new work site,” answered Müne. The man folded his arms, indicating that the conversation should be over.

“Müne, I’m a sholve, a teacher, and—”

“I know what a sholve does,” the müne interrupted sharply.

Sholve continued, ignoring the supervisor’s condescension. “I remember long ago, hybri-vores came into the Blide school. The bots escorted out some of the children that Prinnox had deemed unproductive.” She stared unblinking, as if in a trance that took her back. “I remember the phrase ‘Reduction Center’ because none of the sholves at any level knew the meaning of the words. The children left and did not return for that session or the day after. When my Cardan cycle shift ended, I redeployed to another Blide. Still, I’ve wondered what ‘Reduction Center’ meant. Where the younglings were sent.” She paused, and then flatly said, “The term ‘Reduction Center’ is not registered in training vidi-tablets.”

The müne took the conversation back. “You explained that hybri-vores led children away who were not productive.”

“Yes.”

“That was children, not workers. And workers *are* productive. At least *I* am, anyway.”

Fowler tried to accept this reasoning. After all, the man was a müne, trained to know Prinnox procedures and protocols.

Müne went on, “Whatever a Reduction Center is or is not, it’s likely for the worker on the floor here.”

“But he said he was not from here,” Fowler protested.

“It’s true. One of the other blue suits said he was from far away,” Prall added.

Müne unfolded his arms and raised them in the air. “He was away from what? Everyone is from here.”

“But the kimball said the blue suits were from outside,” Fowler said.

“What outside, Fowler? What is there to be outside of?”

“I . . . don’t know,” conceded Fowler, shaking his head. He and the other workers were no match for his logic. After all, he was a müne.

Kimball’s unconscious coughing became more rhythmic with each passing kilometer.

“Müne 0197?” Prall respectfully addressed him by his full ID.

“Yes, Prall?” The müne stretched out his words, making it clear to all that he was ready for another round of debate.

“Where *do* you think he’s from? He looks different from other worker types, and the blue suits with him looked different from other types, too. They were not his others.” Prall paused. When Müne did not rebuke him, he pointed to Kimball’s burly left arm.

“And look . . . he has no supplement pack! He doesn’t even have an injection nozzle for a packet!” The clones gasped in horrified disgust.

Müne shook his head. “I don’t know what happened to his supplement packet, but it’s clear this worker got into something that injured him.”

The other workers looked at him doubtfully.

Müne paused for a moment and then continued. “I once saw a worker, a crent-lift operator, who had slipped down the side of a new mine. When the other workers pulled him back up from the hole, his arm was cut and scraped so badly that his pack had fallen off. Prinox released the crent-lift operator early to go to something called a ‘triage compartment’ or something. The same as what this worker asked for. A triage—you heard him

say it . . . didn't you, Roon?"

The girl obediently nodded, avoiding making eye contact with anyone in the pod-car.

Fowler shook his head. He said, "I saw hybri-vores cut workers, after announcing 'motorized reduction' procedures."

Müne scoffed, "Fowler, *why* would Prinox use hybri-vores to cut workers?"

"That is what I saw!"

"Fowler!" Prall said. "He's a müne, and you'd better watch how you—"

"Look!" exclaimed Sholve, who until now had been silently watching Kimball squirm. "It stopped!"

"It what?" the müne demanded.

"The noise, it . . . he stopped," Roon answered.

"Has the kimball gone . . . *dead*?" Sholve softly asked.

Fowler crouched and examined the man, thinking of how he had done the same with the blue suit woman at the station less than half an hour ago. He carefully rolled the man's head side to side. The lack of response in Kimball's eyes was all too familiar. "Yes, I think he has gone dead."

Drenatol strained for a closer look. "What happens . . . when he goes dormant *dead*?" He delivered the new word awkwardly.

"I'm not sure. The others stopped moving for a long time," Fowler said.

"It's not productive?" Roon asked.

"I think to go dead is not a productive thing," Fowler answered.

Müne looked satisfied. “He’s not productive, and that is why the worker will go to Reduction Center . . . to be productive again.”

“He’s not a worker . . . he’s something else,” Fowler snapped. “And he did not fall in a mine or on a machine!” He stood up to confront Müne. “I saw hybri-vores do this.” His grip on the handle of the compass light tightened, reminding him of the cuts on his hands. He did not care. He pointed it at himself for emphasis. “Hybri-vores . . . *spinners*, did this, and they tried to do it to me, too!”

Müne shrank in his seat. “I have never been addressed in this way by a worker, least alone a fowler!”

In an obvious attempt to refocus the group, Sholve said, “Will the spinners make workers in this pod go the dormant dead, like back at Station 24?”

“If you are caught by the spinners, you go the dormant dead. You must run from spinners or go dead and not be productive,” Prall explained to Müne.

“But I’m not productive if I’m not at a worksite, going to a worksite, or in a housing compartment,” Müne said.

A contemplative silence fell over the group.

“Do you mean that if you aren’t productive, the spinners *should* make you go dead?” challenged Fowler. It didn’t sound right to him, but then Müne hadn’t seen what had happened at the depot.

“Yes, if a worker is not productive, they should be made this dormant dead.” There was no disguising that Müne was pleased to use Fowler’s new term against him. He added, “When this pod arrives at 20104-16, Prinox will redeploy me to a new worksite to be productive.”

“But I saw Prinox use hybri-vore spinners to make *productive* workers go dormant dead.” Fowler turned to Sholve. “What do you think happened to the younglings that went to the Reduction Center?”

She slowly shook her head. “I can’t say. I don’t know.”

“Do you think Prinox made them like this?” Fowler pointed down at Kimball’s body, but his eyes stayed fixed on her face.

“No,” Sholve blurted out, but her face showed dismay. “No, no. Why would Prinox do . . . *this* to younglings?”

“I don’t know.” Seeing the distress on her face, Fowler said, “Maybe it didn’t. I don’t know, but Prinox is sending us and the kimball there now, and I’ve seen what it did at the station, and I’m not going back . . . at least, not until all of this is fixed.”

“Then where will you go?” asked Sholve.

“The kimball said to follow this symbol to the place named Super-inten-dent. I will go there.”

Drenatol’s face revealed his confusion. “What is Super-inten-dent?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t been there.”

Roon leaned forward. “Are blue suits there?”

“Is that where blue suits and spinners come from?” Sholve asked.

The questions came quickly at Fowler. “I don’t think so, since the kimball said he hadn’t been there.”

“Is Hemlo at Superintendent?” asked Roon.

“I don’t . . . well, yes. I . . . think so. I think there would have to be if workers are there.”

Müne protested, “How is going there productive?”

“I’m not sure it *is* productive. But that’s where the kimball said we would find help.”

An anxious mood filled the pod-car.

Sholve stood. “I will go to Superintendent.”

“And I will go, too,” said Drenatol. He looked at Müne.

“I will go to this Reduction Center in Sector 20104-16 as instructed and receive a new Cardan cycle assignment,” said Müne as he folded his arms and shifted in his seat.

“I will also go to 20104-16,” volunteered Roon.

Müne glared defiantly at Fowler.

The clones turned to Prall. His eyes shifted to the other workers. “I will go to Superintendent until I understand what’s happening here.”

“Then this train must be stopped before reaching 20104-16, in case there are spinners waiting there.” Fowler reached for the emergency door release above the right side of the door. “Here, hold this,” he said as he handed the compass light to Roon. Fowler twisted at the knob counter-clockwise with little result. The bursts of pain returned to his palms.

After Fowler made a few desperate attempts, Müne said mockingly, “You’re going to 20104-16 after all, Fowler 3085.”

Fowler ignored the remark and motioned to Prall. “Twist the one on your side.”

Prall looked at Fowler for a moment as if insulted by the order. Finally, he stood and moved to the door, carefully avoiding Kimball's body. He grabbed the corresponding knob handle and began to twist it.

"The emergency release won't open if the train is moving," Müne said.

"Don't listen to him, Prall. Just turn it with me." Fowler shifted his weight to get a better grip.

After a few seconds of grunting, Prall reported, "This one doesn't turn. I think he's right. The train must be stopped for the door to open."

"Opening this door up *will* stop the train," Fowler said, trying to sound authoritative. In truth, it was all a bluff, but he felt that they had to do something. They could not wait in the pod-car. They'd be trapped like the tromble plotter had been. "Try it again!" he ordered.

The two struggled with the knobs, clutching them until Fowler's knuckles turned white. The cuts on his palms burned, but he did not stop. "Turn it!"

A high-pitched squeal of air blowing in from the outside sounded their success.

"It's working," shouted Roon.

The door lifted a few centimeters.

"Keep on turning," said Fowler. "It's opening!"

The speaker crackled again, but this time instead of Prinox, an automated alert from the pod-car itself sounded, in a different voice. "*Warning: sensors have detected a variance in the craft's integrity. Please remain seated for your safety for the remainder of transit.*" The cabin lights turned red.

“Keep turning,” shouted Fowler as the hatch slowly crept upward.

Drenatol stood up and relieved Prall as Müne watched in disgust.

A constant blast of wind from outside came through the small opening. The gust beat against Fowler’s eardrums. The door had climbed to the halfway point.

Drenatol yelled above the sound of the wind, “It’s not slowing down!” Fowler saw the wind hitting the man full in the face, forcing his eyelids partially closed.

“I know!” Fowler yelled back. “Just keep turning!”

Prall attempted to lift by pulling on the lip of the door, but it would not budge. Fowler stepped away to massage his wounded hands, and Prall moved to where Fowler had been. Drenatol and Prall strained against the wind resistance and managed to retract the door to the open position. The wind’s roar was deafening.

Prall shouted to Fowler, “It’s not slowing down!”

“I know it’s not . . . We’ll have to jump!”

Sholve faced him. “Jump? The pod is moving too fast,” she protested.

“It’s—” Fowler cupped his hands over his mouth to be heard above the noise of the wind. “It’s the only way.”

The continual roar in the car was deafening, but by the terrified looks on their faces, he knew that they had heard him. Prall and Drenatol silently turned to one another.

“It’s the only way,” Fowler repeated. He looked through the open doorway. The red glow from inside the pod made it impossible to see into the darkness. His mind flashed back to the housing corridor earlier when the lights had gone out. That seemed like an eternity ago.

“Fowler, there’s no light out there to see,” yelled Prall over the wind noise.

“The spinners will make dormant dead any workers who remain on this train,” answered Fowler. He looked over at Sholve. “Just like they did with the workers in the pod-car at Bay 105.”

Prall shouted back, “How will you see?”

Fowler reached for the light from Roon. She eagerly let go of the device, as if holding it put her in jeopardy. “I have this,” he said, raising the light. “I’ll jump last, and then turn this on to see.”

“Then who jumps first?” asked Drenatol.

“I’m a prall. I should go first.”

“Then me.” Sholve stood again and looked toward the opening.

As Fowler turned back to Drenatol, Müne mocked, “Many days to you, Fowler 3085.”

Fowler pleaded once more, “Müne, come, too. There’s nothing good for you at Sector 20104-16. It’s not productive.”

Müne shook his head. “You sound as certain of this as you were that the pod would stop if you opened the door.”

“Is there any way I can convince you, Müne?”

The man huffed, “Is there anything that a fowler can teach me? *I am a müne!*” His eyes shrank to a squint in Fowler’s direction. He mockingly added, “Is there any way I might convince you to obey Prinox’s command? What about you, Prall? Are you taking orders from a fowler now?”

Prall lowered his head, avoiding looking at the superior worker.

After a moment, Fowler remembered Roon. He looked at her. “Roon?”

She turned her face away and answered, “I . . . can’t . . . I . . .”

He waited a moment for her to turn her face back to him, but she didn’t.

Prall, Sholve, Drenatol, and Fowler lined up in the doorway. The wind howled ferociously, slamming against their bodies. His heart pounded. He experienced an odd, new sensation, a nauseating anxiousness—the feeling of naked fear. *Why am I doing this?* He tried to block out his doubt, but fear exploded inside of him. *There’s no other choice*, he convinced himself. *We can’t outrun the spinners if they’re waiting at 20104-16. We’ll be pinned in the pod-car like Sholve was at the station.*

Fowler caught Drenatol looking back at Kimball’s body on the floor. He suspected the man was trying to remind himself why he was about to throw himself out of a moving mag-rail car. Fowler’s clothes were still damp with blood. That was motivation enough for him. He clutched the compass light tightly to his chest.

Then, all at once, Prall took a step forward and disappeared into darkness, swallowed up by the roaring wind.

Sholve gasped.

“Go!” shouted Fowler, even though his own stomach lurched. “Everyone go now!”

Sholve looked queasy, but she closed her eyes, clenched her fists, and stepped into the blackness.

Roon abruptly sprang from her seat and turned to Müne as if to speak, but then pivoted toward the doorway and disappeared through the opening.

Roon's unexpected change of mind startled Drenatol and Fowler, but Drenatol took a few steps back from the opening, and after a running start, leapt through the hole.

Fowler looked back at the müne. The man had his arms were securely folded in place, and he stared into the red lights of the pod.

Fowler glanced at Kimball on the floor, and then jumped into the void.

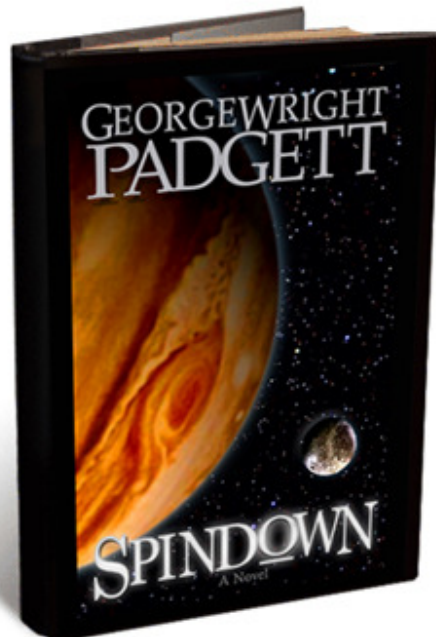
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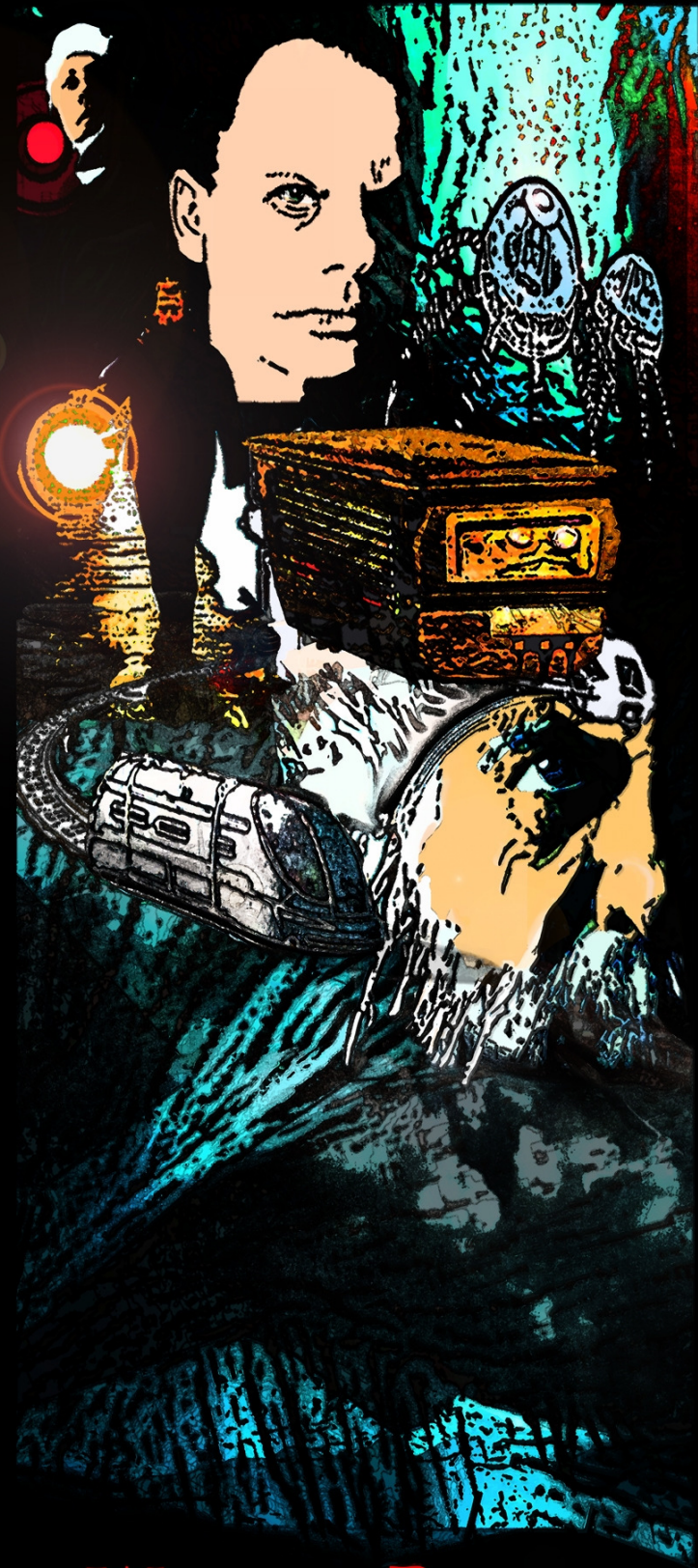
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S P I N D O W N



GEORGE WRIGHT PADGETT



The Author

George Wright Padgett has always had a passion for story-telling.

Born in Houston, Texas, he grew up consuming a steady diet of science fiction and comic books. His time is divided between being a husband and father of two, a jazz piano player, a graphic artist, and a playwright. With what time is left over, he writes science fiction, horror, and the occasional mystery while sitting on the sofa next to his mini dachshund, Jenny.

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