



GEORGE WRIGHT
PADGETT

SPINDOWN

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First Edition

Thank You

To my wife, Sabrina

*After all of these decades, your presence in the room
still makes my heart beat a little more quickly.*

To my daughter, Faith

*whose excitement and eagerness to listen launched
me on a journey of story-telling many years ago.*

To my son, Joel

*who daily reconnects me with
the boyhood version of myself.*

To the members of Team Armageddon

*Each of you patiently took turns holding the candle
that helped me find my way through the alleyways of
this book. Thank you Shannon, Hilary, Dominick,
Erik, and Christian (in order around the table).*

*Finally, thank you to readers everywhere
who turn these pages and allow themselves to
believe, even if only for a little while.*

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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’s 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.

THE INCIDENT

The plexigluine 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 approved for extraction duties in Quadrant R-6. Prinox system alerting Mag-Rail 24/601-L4 for dispatch of F3085 to QR-6.”*

After a pause, the voice continued, *“Cardan cycle reassignment confirmed with MG24/601-L4 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 servo-motors 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 returned 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 *müne* is due to arrive here to give you updated assignments from the Prinox system. You are required to wait for this . . . er . . . *müne* 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 hybri-vores 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 hybri-vores 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 hybri-vores 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 underside 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. "Aaaaaaarrghhh . . . 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 scrambled 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 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.