



“Here it comes!” Theodore Malone shouted.

“But we’re not ready yet!” I yelled back, scoping the sorting bay for any sign of *it*. I snatched the hand laser off the floor and hid it inside my vest.

“Give me that,” Maxine Bennett protested, and took the tool from me. She pointed it at the scavenger-bot now dissected on the metal floor in front of us. “This is the last one. If that thing gets its paws on this before we fix it, who’s gonna clean this place up? Not me,” she said. “I plan to do more on this ring than just pick up after Switzer.”

I did too. I just hadn’t figured what that was yet. I strained my neck to see past the huge cranes rooted on the inner dome at the center of Weegin’s World. There was no sign of *it*.

“Fine, Max. Then you keep working, and I’ll find some way to block the lift,” I said, standing up and tearing back toward the other kids.

“Better hurry, JT,” Theodore said from across the sorting-bay floor and to my far right.

“You could help,” I told him, but Theodore shook his head. He was safely out of the way, perched atop one of the electric-blue sorting belts. The belts were placed every meter or so inside the curved factory. Theodore waved me over to join him on the gaseous device, but I needed to make it to the second-floor lift, located between him and the last belt.

Our roommate, Randall Switzer, was dozing on that farthest belt. I could see a portable O-dat clutched in his oversize paw. It was a weak attempt to prove his intelligence, but I knew the lazy malf only wanted to nap.

I heard the lift squawk into action. Theodore stood up on the belt. “It’s on the lift! Forget about the bot, JT—just run!”

I froze. From where I stood, I couldn’t see the lift, but I could definitely hear what was on it.

“Work! Work! Now work!” *it* screamed over the machine’s metallic hum like a distress beacon.

“It’s getting off the lift—now,” another kid said.

I turned back toward Max. “Leave it,” I shouted at her.

I took my chances and charged toward Theodore.

I hadn’t even broken stride when my feet were knocked out from under me. Before I hit the floor, a heavy, clawed foot (the worst kind) thumped against the lower part of my vest, knocking the wind out of me.

“I see you with tools. Where you get tools?” *it* screamed at me.

“I’m fixing the scavenger-bot,” I shouted back. “You broke

them all!” But I knew speaking to him was useless. The bald little beast just tilted his head whenever I spoke, as if amazed I could make sounds with my mouth. It was worse than trying to reason with Switzer.

“My tools!” he said, and pushed down on my chest.

When I was first assigned to Weegin, almost one complete rotation ago, my Guarantor always cradled a yellowed larva in his thick, three-fingered hands. He nursed that puffy thing phase after phase, and I never once bothered to ask him what it was. No one did. Weegin answered most questions with a twist of your nose or your ear, or even a painful yank on your hair. If he had wanted me to know what it was, he would have told me. But the mystery was gone now. Two phases ago, right after I fought the Belaran, Madame Lee, inside the central computer, that puffy lump of flesh hatched into the little monster that stood over me as I gasped for air.

“Who gave knudnik my tools?” he demanded, and lifted his disgusting foot off my chest.

Previous confrontations with Weegin’s offspring taught me to give up early since he never understood a word I said anyway. I simply curled up on the floor, clutched my stomach, and waited for the oxygen to find its way into my lungs. Looking satisfied with my condition, the undersize monster set his beady eyes on Switzer.

The alien was not exactly a miniature version of Weegin, as you might expect. His hands were far more muscular, and his legs appeared thicker and stronger than they should for a Choi from Krig. The bald protégé stalked the corridors of Weegin’s

World with his lower jaw thrust absurdly forward, the result of a severe underbite. A row of pointed teeth curled up and over his top lip as he marched around barking orders at everyone. Somehow this pink little maggot thought he was in charge.

He ran straight at Switzer and slammed the operation button next to his head. The sorting belts hissed into motion.

“Work. You. Big thing. Work now!” he yelled, and stood guard so no one could get at the controls.

Theodore had jumped to the floor. Switzer, however, remained soundly asleep. Even the clatter of the awakened cranes did not stir him.

“Maybe he’s deaf *and* dumb?” Theodore said.

“Switzer!” Max shouted, but he did not move. Switzer kept right on sleeping as the blue mist holding him up headed for the chute. The chute was a hole in the wall that led to a furnace burning deep beneath Weegin’s World. It was a drop Switzer, would not survive. Max and another kid tried to get to Switzer, but Weegin’s hatchling snapped his large, protruding snout at anyone who moved.

I pulled myself off the ground. “Distract that thing,” I told Max, and she chucked a wrench at him. The alien turned on his heels and stomped straight toward her, his lengthy claws clacking on the metal floor.

“Tools are expensive!” he screamed.

I stuck my hand in the greenish-gray radiation gel used to protect our skin when there was junk to sort. I slid over to Switzer and reached my hand under his nose. The ghastly smell—rotten meat mixed with crusty socks and a touch of

recycled toilet water—did the job. Switzer wrenched his head away and fell to the floor as Weegin dashed out from his glass bunker. I ran to an O-dat at the other side of the bay and accessed the local computer network with my software. I shut the cranes down instantly.

“Is it here? Speak. Is it here yet?” Joca Krig Weegin shouted from the second-floor balcony that jutted out over the sorting-bay floor. He hoisted his knobby body onto the railing and canvassed each one of us with his bloodshot eyes.

“Is what here, Weegin?” said a voice from the tall glass doorway.

I spun around to see the Keeper, Theylor. His purple velvety robes swept the floor as he entered Weegin’s World.

“You’re not welcome here!” Weegin screamed at the regal alien, raining spit on anyone below him. “They’re mine. Every last one of them!” With that he turned and scrambled back into his office.

I saw Theylor’s left head frown while his right head turned to all of us and said, “Hello. I hope everyone is fine?”

“We’re a little bored,” I said.

“No, *really* bored,” Switzer added.

Switzer was right. There was nothing to do at Weegin’s anymore. Our Guarantor’s junk business was in shambles ever since his dealings with the disgraced Trading Council member, Madame Lee, had failed. Most cycles, I simply roamed around the complex while Weegin barricaded himself in his office. It was nowhere near the life I had imagined for Ketheria and myself before we had arrived on the Rings of Orbis.

“Hello? Hey! I need a little help here, anyone?” Max said, jumping from side to side using an even larger wrench to swipe at Weegin’s offspring.

“Weegin hasn’t even named that thing,” Theodore said.

“His name is Nugget,” said my sister, Ketheria, as she entered the sorting bay. She noticed Theylor immediately. “Hi, Theylor.”

“Hello, Ketheria,” he replied.

“Come here, Nugget,” Ketheria said, and the creature immediately stopped harassing Max and marched over to Ketheria, sticking his chin out and up. For some reason he never bothered my little sister. Ketheria tickled him under his chin while he reached up and played with her light brown hair.

“Ooh, ooh,” the alien moaned.

“Freak,” Switzer said, sneering.

“Which one?” Dalton Billings said, and Max shot Switzer’s friend a steely look.

“Why does she like that thing?” Switzer asked.

“Jealous?” Max teased him.

Switzer snarled at her but caught Theodore grinning. Theodore was easier prey for him than Max, and he moved toward my friend, fists raised. I stepped forward, too.

Nugget saw this and sprang to his feet, charging at us with his ridiculous lower jaw smacking against his upper lip.

“Work. Now. More work!”

“There is no work, you little rat,” Dalton shouted at to Nugget as he stomped past.

“He doesn’t understand anything we tell him, Theylor,” Max said.

As Nugget got close, Theylor raised his long right hand, and the alien was frozen in midstride. I could see a soft, warm glow from a bronze device wrapped around Theylor’s arm. I’d seen him silence someone before, when we first arrived on the ring, but I’d never noticed that gadget before.

“*Thank* you,” Max exclaimed.

“This may help,” he said, and made a sweeping motion with his slender arm.

The blue translucent skin on his fingers peeked out from underneath his velvet robe as he pointed to an R5 that now entered Weegin’s World. “Right there will be fine,” he told the robot.

I hadn’t seen an R5 since we first arrived on Orbis 1. The robot was used to implant neural ports behind everyone’s left ear allowing them to link up with the central computer. Everyone but me, that is. I don’t need a neural port. I am a softwire—a leap in human evolution that allows me to interact with any computer using only my mind. Some of the other kids, especially Max, think my ability is really golden, but I find it just makes most Orbisians very nervous. The Citizens think their precious computer is some kind of all-knowing sentient being. It doesn’t make them very happy knowing I can get inside it whenever I want.

“Who’s that for?” Theodore asked.

“Who do you think, split-screen?” Switzer said, rolling his eyes and snickering with Dalton.

Ketheria stepped forward and said, "That's for Nugget."

"You are correct," Theylor told her.

"But why didn't Weegin take him to get this done earlier?" I asked.

"Yeah, it would have made life around here a lot easier," another girl said, frowning.

Theylor looked up toward Weegin's office. "It seems your Guarantor has been avoiding contact with us for quite some time."

I looked up and saw a mound of unanswered messenger drones stacked outside Weegin's office. They waited patiently to uplink the screen scrolls they carried with Weegin's neural implant, if he ever let them.

"What are they for?" I asked.

"First we must deal with . . ." Theylor began.

"Nugget. His name is Nugget," Ketheria reminded him.

Theylor looked at my sister and smiled. He placed his long, slender hand on her head without touching the strip of metal now physically attached to her skull. When Madame Lee exposed Ketheria's telepathy, Keeper decree required that she be fixed with a prosthetic to diminish her abilities. Ketheria didn't seem bothered by it, though, and her hair had grown back nicely, almost covering the sculpted metal that banded her head. My sister said she even liked the large amber crystal placed in the metal over her forehead. I asked her once if it hurt. She just shrugged and said, "Not anymore."

"How are you, Ketheria?" Theylor asked.

"I'm fine."

"I'm glad," the Keeper replied. "I am also glad Nugget has a friend."

"He's different from his father, isn't he? Weegin is a Choi, but Nugget is a Choisil," she said.

"I am afraid you are right," Theylor said. "It will be hard for Weegin to accept Nugget. But he has you now, Ketheria."

"Yes, he does," she replied.

I looked at Nugget, frozen in the middle of the sorting-bay floor, and I actually felt sorry for him, even though I didn't know what Ketheria was talking about.

"Can you unfreeze him?" Ketheria asked.

"Certainly."

Theylor raised his hand again, and the startled Nugget shot off across the bay.

"Enough with the reunion—let's implant the little bugger!" Switzer cried, scanning the room for Nugget.

Switzer had hated the implanting procedure more than most, but he smiled and rubbed his hands together. I think he enjoyed watching people suffer.

"C'mon, freak," Switzer growled, moving a crate to expose the small alien shaking behind a metal container.

"Stop it!" Ketheria yelled at him.

"Please, big thing. Please," Nugget begged as Switzer closed in. Switzer reached out for the alien, but Ketheria stepped in front of him. Even though Ketheria was eight years old now, she was still only half the size of Switzer.

"Stop," she said, holding up her hand.

"Get out of my way, freak," he said while taking a cautious

step backward. Switzer never seemed comfortable around Ketheria after we found out about her mind-reading abilities.

I moved to intervene, but Theylor stepped between them.

“That will be enough, children,” Theylor said. “Ketheria, could you bring Nugget to me, please?”

Ketheria knelt in front of Nugget and spoke softly to him. I could not hear what she was saying, but I knew he couldn't understand her anyway. She tickled him under the chin some more and then stood up, taking his big hand. Ketheria led Nugget over to Theylor and the R5.

“Thank you,” Theylor said.

“Freak,” Switzer mumbled under his breath.

“Nugget will not be hurt. As you all remember, the procedure is painless and only takes a moment to perform,” Theylor said.

Theylor reached for Nugget's hand, but he wasn't having any of that, so Ketheria had to lead him over to the chairlike robot. She helped Nugget get comfortable and gently pressed his face down on the headrest.

“Please,” Nugget whimpered.

“It's all right, Nugget,” she comforted him and caressed his dark-purplish wings.

The robot shifted, making adjustments for Nugget's size. Nugget struggled to free himself, but the machine held him in place.

“Danger! Danger! Daaaaann . . . !”

Before Nugget could finish shouting, the R5 had implanted a small port at the back of Nugget's left ear.

“What about the codec?” I asked. The central computer interprets all of the different alien languages for us using a translation codec that is uplinked through the neural port. It even connects with your optical nerves so you can read in any language.

“This R5 is now equipped with the translation codec. Everything is done at once,” Theylor said. “Nugget should now be able to understand everyone.”

The R5 released Nugget, and he scrambled to the other side of the sorting bay.

“Danger! Danger! Danger!” he screamed, and found a crate to hide behind.

“Hey! Freak! Can you understand what I'm saying to you?” Switzer shouted at Nugget.

Nugget cocked his head to the side and slipped out from behind the crate.

“Yes?” Nugget said, but it was more like a question. He squinted his eyes and waited for a reply from Switzer.

“Good. Now get out of here and leave us alone.” Switzer pointed to Weegin's office. That was not a good idea. Nugget puffed out his chest and stomped his oversize feet toward Switzer.

“No. Work. Work! To work now, big thing!” Nugget cried, pointing at the conveyor belts and snapping his jaw. “Work!”

“Great,” Theodore said.

“Thanks, Theylor,” I said. “I guess.”

Nugget darted around the room corralling the other children and goading them toward the belts. Theylor smiled with

his right head while his left head turned toward me. “Will you give this to your Guarantor please, Johnny?”

“Sure, Theylor,” I said. “What is it?”

“You will know everything shortly,” Theylor responded. I hated it when he was so vague. It usually meant something was about to change. “And Johnny?” Theylor turned before he was out the door. “Enjoy Birth Day,” said both of Theylor’s heads, and then he was gone.

“It’s Birth Day?” Theodore asked.

“I guess it is. Happy fourteenth,” I said, just as surprised as the rest.

“What’s on the scroll?” Max asked me, motioning to the glowing screen scroll the Keeper left for Weegin.

Max and Theodore stood there staring at me.

“How would I know?” I asked them.

“Take a peek.” Max nudged me.

“Maybe he shouldn’t do that,” Theodore argued.

“Oh, give me that,” Max said. She grabbed the scroll and unraveled the organic screen from its metal container. She pulled the uplink from the scroll and inserted it into her neural implant. The glow from the metal casing flashed: INVALID USER.

“Told you,” Theodore said.

“Here, you do it,” Max said, holding it out to me. “Do the *push* thing,” Max said. She knew very well I could sneak into hard drives, network arrays, light drives, anything to do with a computer.

I was about to push into the scroll when an alarm went off. I looked up and saw the field portals at the top of the outer

metal dome sparkle to life and begin to fade away. *Could a cargo shipment really be arriving?* I wondered. Nothing had come through those portals in over a phase. I stood next to Theodore and watched as the robotic cranes warmed up by stretching out their huge tentacles. But before they were in position, a small metal crate was thrust through the opening. It dropped from the sky like a meteor, right toward my sister.

“Ketheria, watch out!” I yelled and leaped forward, catching my sister’s arm and yanking her aside.

“You all right?” Max questioned her.

Before she could answer, Weegin burst from his office and scurried down onto the sorting-bay floor.

“This has to be it. It has to be,” he said, rubbing his three-fingered hands together.

“What *has* to be it?” Switzer said, inspecting the metal projectile.

“Shut up. Get back, you imbecile. Move away from here,” Weegin scolded him.

Switzer simply stepped aside, scowling, but that didn’t stop me from creeping forward. *What was in the crate?* I wondered.

“I said get out of here!” Weegin snapped before I could get close. “All of you. I’m deducting one chit for not listening.” He used his small body to shield the contents of the crate. Nugget scrambled next to his father, but Weegin only pushed him aside.

“How can you deduct chits? You haven’t paid us for a whole phase,” Switzer protested.

Weegin ignored him and attached a thick data cable into his own neural port. He glanced over the ragged nubs on his

shoulders to make sure none of us could see him tap an access code into the O-dat. Satisfied with Weegin's entry, the crate hissed open and Weegin jammed both fists inside the container. Quickly, he pulled out an unmarked plastic box and clutched it to his chest. His eyes darted over each of us without looking at anyone in particular. Then he grinned and raced off toward the lift. If Weegin still had wings, I'm sure he would have flown.

"I wonder what was inside," I said, walking over to the empty carcass Weegin had left behind.

"Nobody is to disturb me!" he shouted from the second floor as the latest messenger drone slammed into the closing office door.

"Never mind the crate, JT," Max said. "What does this scroll say?"

"Oh," I said, looking at the screen scroll still in my hands. I pushed into the scroll, and the message instantly appeared in my mind's eye as if an O-dat was mounted inside my forehead. I read it aloud.

Joca Krig Weegin,

As previously arranged by Keeper decree, the labor force of human beings is to be transferred to work duty on Orbis 2. Since all business for Joca Krig Weegin has been forfeited on every ring of Orbis, you are called upon to surrender your humans for immediate relocation.

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"Weegin has to give us back," I said, glancing up at his office.

"He's not going to like that. We're the only valuable thing he has right now," Max said.

"This is not good. I feel it," Ketheria muttered.

I looked over at Theodore, who was rummaging through the discarded shipping crate. He froze, his eyes widening. "And I think it just got worse," he added.