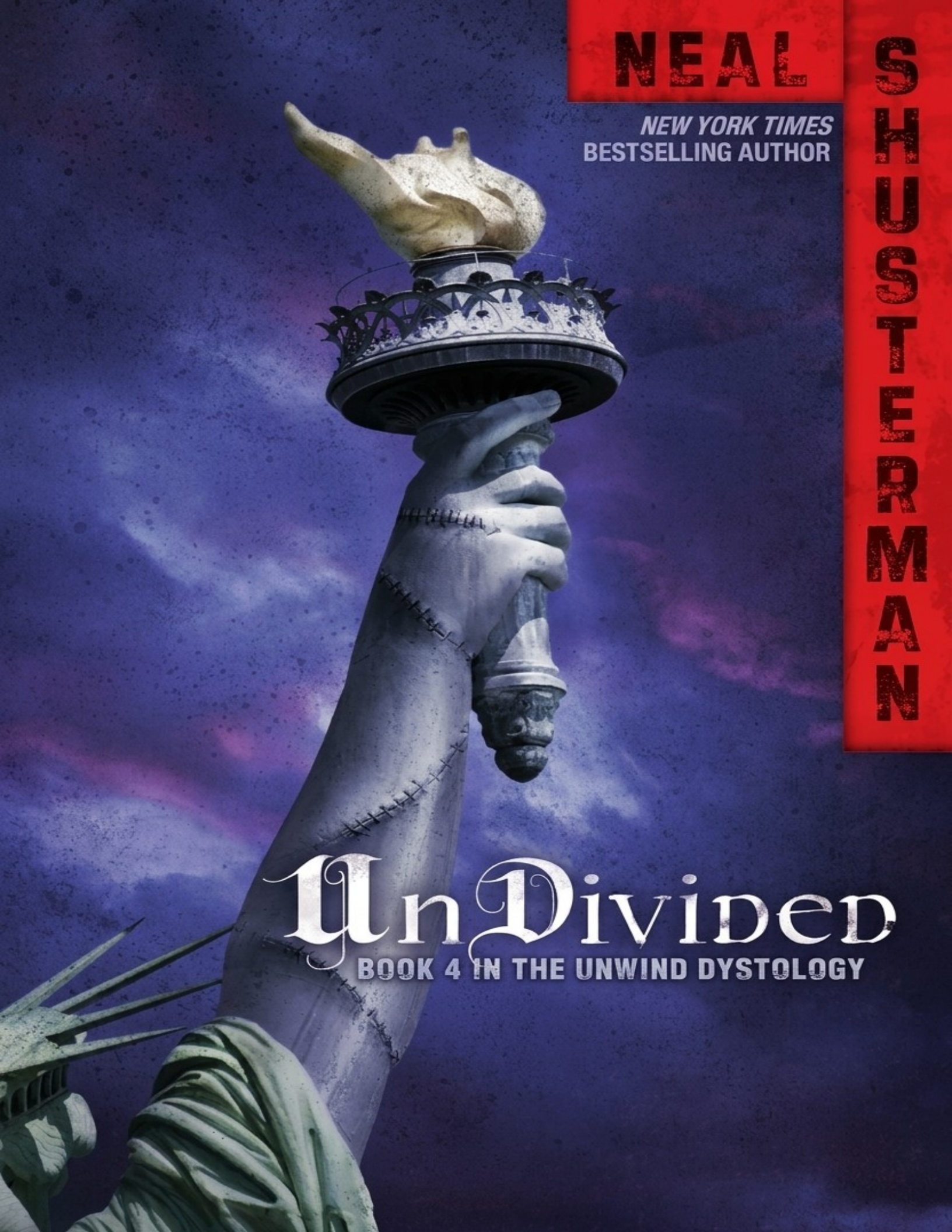




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UnDivided

BOOK 4 IN THE UNWIND DYSTOLOGY

For my editor and friend, David Gale

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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TO ALL OFFICERS AND FIELD AGENTS OF THE JUVENILE AUTHORITY:

Our task is crucial, and the time short. Over the past few months a growing minority of delinquent youth have become a clear and present danger to public safety. Following is a reference sheet outlining how to engage different classes of incorrigible youth under our jurisdiction, as well as specific individuals high on our priority list.

DIVISIONAL RISKS

These are teens with a history of delinquent behavior, but whose parents, for whatever reason, have declined to sign an unwind order. They must be treated as any other citizen and may be tranq'd only in self-defense. Otherwise they are returned to their families if apprehended. Officers should gently encourage these families to seek a divisional solution.

FERALS

Incorrigible teenagers who have left home and have gone "feral" still have the rights of any other citizen. Ferals who prove themselves to be violent may be tranq'd with just cause. The feral may then be taken to detention centers until such time as parents can be found and notified, or until the law changes allowing for their unwinding without parental consent.

AWOLS

Unwind orders have been signed for all AWOLs before they escaped or evaded custody, which means that all of their rights have been revoked until they reach the age of seventeen (or the age of eighteen, if the Cap-17 law is overturned). AWOLs, therefore, are considered nothing more than a

collection of parts, and may be treated as such. They are to be tranq'd on sight, and brought to the nearest harvest camp. Please strive, however, for a minimal amount of physical trauma in their capture, as the parts they contain have more value than their person.

CLAPPERS

By making their blood explosive, these nihilist terrorists present the greatest standing threat to public safety. While clappers can be of any age, they are almost always AWOLs, ferals, or divisional-risk youth. If faced with a clapper, remember to keep your distance, and to use approved ceramic bullets to neutralize the threat before the clapper can detonate. Ceramic bullets will take the clapper down without risk of explosion.

THE STORK BRIGADE

While statistics show that storks (i.e., babies abandoned on doorsteps) make up a disproportionately large percentage of Unwinds, it does not excuse the murderous rampage of Mason Starkey and his Stork Brigade. Rather, it validates the need for a stronger unwinding program. In order to protect harvest camps from Mason Starkey's ruthless attacks, we are increasing security, and upgrading weaponry at all harvest facilities. Should anyone encounter the Stork Brigade, do not engage. Instead, report any positive sighting to the nearest field office so that we can send in a swift aerial attack to take out the entire brigade.

CONNOR LASSITER AND RISA WARD

While it is believed that the "Akron AWOL," Connor Lassiter, is being given asylum by the Hopi tribe, we cannot ignore the possibility that it is merely a ruse, and he may be somewhere else entirely. It is possible that he has even returned to Ohio. Any officer who positively identifies Lassiter is charged with bringing him in, dead or alive. It is believed he may be traveling with Risa Ward, who, as you may remember, was given a new spine by Proactive

Citizenry, one of the nation's leading charitable organizations, only to betray them and incite other teens to violence.

LEVI JEDEDIAH CALDER (AKA LEV GARRITY)

This tithe-turned-clapper violated the terms of his house arrest, and has been in hiding for several months. While it is commonly believed that the clapper organization blew up his residence in an attempt to kill him, it is our position that he staged that explosion himself, and that he is now working with the clappers.

CAMUS COMPRIX

While the rewinding of the unwound is not our immediate concern, we have been asked by Proactive Citizenry to be supportive of their efforts—especially in light of Risa Ward's betrayal. You are therefore to speak of Camus Comprix—and rewinding in general—in the most positive of terms. Whether you consider him to be a human being or not is irrelevant.

PARTS PIRATES

While the black market for Unwinds has increased in recent years, its success is directly related to our failure to catch and process AWOLs. It is our firm belief that with increased vigilance and greater federal funding, the number of AWOLs lost to parts pirates will drop, and the black-market cartels will fall.

THE CHANCEFOLK QUESTION

It has become increasingly evident that Native American Chancefolk tribes are working at cross-purposes to our objectives—particularly the Arápache, who have been known to give secret asylum to AWOL Unwinds on a regular basis. These so-called foster-fugitives are out of our jurisdiction as long as they remain on tribal land. Do not engage Chancefolk in any sort of direct conflict until such time that current treaties fall and military action is taken.

We are making great strides in bringing a lasting solution to the threats of violent youth. Through our efforts, the Anti-Divisional Resistance has collapsed. I believe we can look forward to a day free of fear from the juvenile sector, when our best and brightest youth can flourish like a tree that has been properly pruned. You, the agents and officers of the Juvenile Authority, are the ones who will make that happen. I thank you for your service.

Herman Sharply
Secretary of Juvenile Affairs

Part One

Sanctuaries of Purpose

“If you’re feeling like I feel, throw your fist through the ceiling. . . .”

—lyrics from “Burn It Down”

by AWOLNATION

1 · AWOL

A tranq tears past his head so close that his earlobe is skinned from the friction. A second tranq flies just beneath his armpit—he actually sees it flaring past—hitting the trash can in the alley ahead of him with a dull *clank*.

It's raining. The sky has torn loose with a late summer storm of near biblical proportions, but the storm is his best friend today because the relentless torrents hinder the Juvey-cops in pursuit. The sheets of rain make it harder for them to get a bead on him.

"Running will only make it worse for you, son," calls one of the Juvies.

He'd laugh at that if he could catch his breath. If he's caught, he'll be unwound; what could possibly be worse than that? And calling him "son"? How can a Juvey-cop have the nerve to call him "son" when the world no longer sees him as a child of the human race. As far as humanity is concerned, he's an object. A bag of biomatter ripe for salvage.

There are two, maybe three Juvey-cops chasing him. He won't turn to count them; when you're running for your life, desperate to remain undivided, it doesn't matter whether there's one, or ten, or a hundred Juvey-cops behind you. All that matters is that they're behind you—and that you run faster.

Another tranq whizzes past, but it's not as close as the others. The Juvies are getting sloppy in their aggravation. Good. He passes an overstuffed trash can and dumps it over, hoping to slow their pursuit even more. The alley seems to go on forever. He never remembered the streets of Detroit having back alleys this long. The end finally comes into view maybe fifty yards ahead, and he's already visualizing freedom. He'll explode out of the alley into the city traffic. Maybe he'll cause a car accident, like the Akron AWOL. Maybe he'll find a tithe to use as a human shield like he did. Maybe he'll even pair up with a beautiful accomplice too. These thoughts push purpose into his bone-tired body, and speed into his strides. The Juvies fall farther behind, and now he has

a spark of the AWOL's most valuable commodity: hope. It's something in short supply for those who have been deemed not worth the sum of their parts.

In an instant, however, that hope is eclipsed by the silhouettes of two more Juvey-cops blocking his exit from the alley. They've got him trapped. He turns to see the others closing in behind him. Unless he can sprout wings and fly, it's over for him.

Then, from a dark doorway beside him, he hears—

“Hey, you! Over here!”

Someone grabs his arm, pulling him in through an open door just as a volley of tranqs shoot past.

His mysterious savior closes the door, locking out the Juvies—but what good will that do? Being surrounded in a building is just as bad as being trapped in an alley.

“This way,” says the guy who saved him. “Down here.”

He leads him down rickety stairs to a dank basement. The AWOL takes a moment to size up his savior in the dim light. He seems to be three or four years older than him—eighteen, maybe even twenty. He's pale and thin, with dark stringy hair, and weak sideburns longing to be a beard, but failing to bridge the gap.

“Don't be scared,” the guy says. “I'm an AWOL too.”

Which seems unlikely, as he appears to be too old—on the other hand, kids who've been AWOL for a year or more tend to look older. It's as if time ticks by twice as quickly for them.

In the basement, there's a rusty sewer cap that's been opened, and the dark hole, which couldn't be more than a foot wide, emits a malevolent odor.

“Down you go!” says the stringy-haired dude, as cheery as Santa about to go down the chimney.

“Are you kidding me?”

From upstairs comes the report of the door being kicked in, and suddenly that sewer hole doesn't seem like such a bad idea. He squeezes through, having to wiggle his hips and shoulders to fit. It feels like being swallowed by a snake. The stringy-haired dude slides in after him, then pulls the sewer cap

closed, with a scrape of metal on concrete, sealing out the Juvies, without leaving a trace of where they went.

“They’ll never find us down here,” his strange savior says with a confidence that makes the AWOL believe him. The kid turns on a flashlight to illuminate the space around them. They’re in a six-foot cylindrical sewer main that is wet with runoff from the storm, but doesn’t seem to actually be in use. It still smells rank, but not as bad as it seemed from the other side.

“So whaddaya think?” the straggly-haired kid says. “It’s an escape worthy of Connor Lassiter, right?”

“I don’t think the Akron AWOL would climb into a sewer.”

The kid grunts and leads them to a place where the sewer line is fractured, and they climb out into a concrete utility conduit that’s hung with wires and lined with hot steam pipes, which make the air oppressive.

“So who are you?” the AWOL asks his rescuer.

“Name’s Argent,” he says, “Like ‘sergeant’ without the S.” He holds out his hand for the AWOL to shake, then turns and leads the way down the steamy, narrow conduit. “This way, it’s not far.”

“Not far to where?”

“I got a pretty sweet setup. Hot food and a comfortable place to sleep.”

“Sounds too good to be true.”

“I know, doesn’t it?” Argent offers him a smile almost as greasy as his hair.

“So what’s your story? Why’d you risk your ass for me?”

Argent shrugs. “Isn’t much of a risk when you know you’ve got ’em outsmarted,” he says. “Anyway, I figure it’s my civic duty. I escaped from a parts pirate a while back, now I help others less fortunate than myself. And it wasn’t just any parts pirate I got away from—it was the ex-Juvey-cop who Connor Lassiter tranq’d with his own gun. He got drummed out of the force, and now he sells the kids he catches on the black market.”

The AWOL reaches through his memory for the name. “That Neilson guy?”

“Nelson,” Argent corrects, “Jasper T. Nelson. And I know Connor Lassiter too.”

“Really,” says the AWOL, dubiously.

“Oh, yeah—and he’s a real piece of work. A total loser. I showed him hospitality like I’m showing you, and he did this to my face.”

Only now does the AWOL see that the left half of Argent’s face is badly damaged from wounds that are still healing.

“I’m supposed to believe that the Akron AWOL did that?”

Argent nods. “Yeah, when he was a guest in my storm cellar.”

“Right.” Obviously the guy is making all of this up, but the AWOL doesn’t challenge him any further. Best not to bite the hand that’s about to feed him.

“Just a little farther,” says Argent. “You like steak?”

“Whenever I can get it.”

Argent gestures to a breach in the concrete wall through which cool air spills, smelling like fresh mold, instead of old rot. “After you.”

The AWOL climbs through to find himself in a cellar. There are other people here, but they’re not moving. It takes a moment for him to register what he’s seeing. Three teens lying on the ground, gagged and hog-tied.

“Hey, what the—”

But before he can finish the thought, Argent comes up behind him and puts him in a brutal choke hold that cuts off not just his windpipe, but all the blood to his brain. And the last thing that strikes the AWOL’s mind before losing consciousness is the bleak realization that he’s been swallowed by a snake after all.

2 · Argent

He's on top of the world. He's at the peak of his game. Things couldn't be going better for Argent Skinner, apprentice parts pirate, who's learning the trade from Jasper T. Nelson, the best there is.

Argent didn't land in Nelson's service under the best of circumstances, but he certainly has made the best of the circumstances he was given. He has proven himself so valuable that Nelson had no choice but to keep him on. The evidence of Argent's value is tied up in the U-Haul behind him.

The small van, a one-way rental, had replaced a rented car that they had left abandoned in a suburban Walmart parking lot. Argent doesn't worry that they'll be tracked down for these little bits of petty larceny, because Nelson is a true master of evading so-called justice and keeping under the radar. Having been a Juvey-cop for so many years, Nelson knows all the angles, all the ropes. He knows how to skate smoothly across the slick surface of the law.

Nelson is Argent's new hero. Connor Lassiter, the previous object of Argent's hero worship, was a disappointment. Now both Argent and Nelson are united in hatred against the Akron AWOL—and such hatred can be as powerful a bonding force as love.

Argent turns around to take another look at the kids in the van behind him: four of them bound and gagged, practically gift wrapped for delivery. The AWOLs are all awake and squirming. Some cry, but silently and to themselves, because they don't want to incur Argent's wrath—which he has threatened to rain upon them several times. Of course, it's all blustering on Argent's part, because Nelson won't let him physically hurt them.

"Bruises reduce their market value," Nelson pointed out. "Divan does not like his fruit bruised. He's already going to be aggravated that he's getting a consolation offering from me, instead of the grand prize."

The grand prize, of course, is Connor Lassiter.

Nelson could tranq them into silence, but he won't. "I have to conserve," Nelson told Argent. "Tranqs are expensive."

However that doesn't seem to apply where Argent is concerned. Argent once tried to turn up the volume on the radio, and Nelson tranq'd him for it. Not for the first time either. Nelson seems to take great pleasure in rendering Argent unconscious. "It's like shocking a monkey to teach it not to take the banana," Nelson had said. The next song on the radio had been "Shock the Monkey." Argent is convinced that Nelson is psychic.

The prewar oldies station now plays Pearl Jam at the volume Nelson prefers: just loud enough to almost hear. Argent must constantly resist the impulse to turn up the annoyingly low music.

As Argent looks at the AWOLs in the back, the last kid that Argent caught locks eyes with him. He's a harsh-faced boy with gentle amber eyes that clash with the severity of his face. His eyes beg for something from Argent, but what? Release? Mercy? An explanation of why his life has come to this?

"Stop it!" Argent tells him. "Whatever you want, you're not gettin' it."

"Bff-foo," he mumbles through his gag.

"No bathroom stops!" Argent growls. "You'll hold it until we decide to stop—and don't give me those puppy-dog eyes unless you want 'em punched black-and-blue." Another idle threat, but the kid doesn't know that. The boy casts his eyes to the scuffed floor of the van in defeat, which cheers Argent up.

"Hey," Argent says to him. "Funny that we're in a U-Haul, because we're hauling *you*. Get it? Hauling *U*?"

"Do your lips ever stop flapping?" Nelson asks.

"Just having some fun." Argent has to admit that there's something very rewarding in talking to people who can't talk back. "Hey—I think you're gonna want this kid's eyes," Argent tells Nelson. "They're even nicer than the ones you got now."

And after an uncomfortable pause, Nelson says, "There's only one pair of eyes I want."

Even without Nelson telling him, Argent knows whose eyes he wants as his ultimate trophy. "You know, one of them's not even his," Argent points out.

“Connor got stuck with a new eye along with his new arm.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Nelson snaps. “It’s not about whose eyes I *receive*; it’s about whose eyes I *take*.”

“Yeah, I get that. If you’re seeing through his eyes it means he’s not seeing through them anymore.” Then Argent grins. “And besides, who wants a trophy on a shelf somewhere, when it can be right in your face. Get it? *In your face?*”

Nelson doesn’t even offer him the courtesy of a groan. “I don’t want to hear your voice anymore,” Nelson says. “Just because you’re a waste of life doesn’t mean you have to be a waste of breath as well.”

“Yeah? Well, this waste of life just caught four prime AWOLs for you to sell to your black-market buddy.”

Nelson turns to him, revealing the good half of his face—the half that wasn’t burned when he lay unconscious in the Arizona sun. Here is something else that bonds them beyond their shared hatred: They both have half of a face. Put Nelson’s left half together with Argent’s right, and you’ve got a whole. That proves they belong together as a team.

“He’s not my buddy!” Nelson says. “Divan is the premier flesh trader in the western world. He even gives the Burmese Dah Zey a run for its money. He is a gentleman who appreciates formality, and when you meet him, you will treat him as such.”

“Whatever,” Argent says. Then he has to ask “So does this Divan guy treat Unwinds like the Dah Zey? Without anesthesia and stuff?”

The suggestion elicits groans and muffled sobs from the back, and Nelson throws Argent a searing glance. “Do I really need to tranq you again to get you to shut up?”

Argent, not caring for those little glimpses of death and the headaches that follow, zips his lips, determined to stay quiet for the duration.

Nelson tells him they’re still not done.

“We’ll catch one more AWOL before we bring them to Divan,” he says. “If I’m not bringing him Lassiter, I want to show up with a full load.” Then Nelson glances at Argent again. “I need to know that you’ll make good on your promise once we arrive.”

Argent swallows, suddenly feeling bound just as tightly as the kids in the back. “Of course,” he says. “I’m a man of my word. I’ll give you the tracking code the second we unload the ‘merchandise.’”

Nelson nods, accepting it. “For your sake, you’d better hope that your sister’s tracking chip is still active—and that she’s still with Lassiter.”

“She is,” Argent tells him. “Grace is like a barnacle. Once she clings to a person, it takes an act of God to pull her off.”

“Or a gun to the head,” says Nelson.

It chills Argent to think about it. True, he’s furious at Grace for siding with Connor over him, but would Connor kill her to get rid of her? After everything, Argent still doesn’t see him as the type to do such a thing. Still, it’s something he’d rather not think about, so he lets his thoughts drift to something more pleasant.

“So does this Divan guy have any kids? Like maybe a daughter my age?”

Nelson sighs, pulls out his tranq pistol, and fires a low-dose dart at Argent. The tranq dart hits him painfully in his Adam’s apple. He pinches the little flag and pulls the thing out of his neck, but not before it delivers its full dose.

“That’s coming out of your pay,” Nelson says, which is a joke because Argent receives no pay from Nelson. He had made it clear it’s an unpaid sort of internship. But that’s okay. Even getting tranq’d is okay. Because life is good for Argent Skinner.

As he dives down toward tranq sleep, he takes comfort in the absolute knowledge that Connor Lassiter will soon be going down too—but unlike Argent, Connor will never be getting up.

3 · Connor

In a dusty corner of a cluttered antique shop on a weedy side street of Akron, Ohio, Connor Lassiter waits for the world to change before his eyes.

“I know it’s here somewhere,” Sonia says as she digs through a pile of obsolete electronics. Connor wonders if the old woman was alive to witness the birth and the death of all that technology.

“Can I help?” Risa asks.

“I’m not an invalid!” Sonia responds.

It’s a dizzying prospect to think that they are about to lay eyes upon *the* object on which the entire future hinges. The future of unwinding. The future of the Juvenile Authority’s iron grip on kids like him. Then he looks over to Risa, who waits with the same electric anticipation. *Our future*, he thinks. It’s been hard to consider the concept of tomorrow, when life has been all about surviving today.

Grace Skinner, sitting beside Risa, wrings her hands with friction-burn intensity. “Is it bigger than a bread box?” Grace asks.

“You’ll see soon enough,” Sonia says.

Connor has no idea what a bread box is, yet just like anyone who’s ever played twenty questions, he knows its precise size. It’s all he can do to keep from wringing his own hands too, as he waits for the device to be revealed.

When Sonia began to tell the tale of her husband, Connor thought he might, at best, get some information—clues as to why Proactive Citizenry was so afraid of not just the man, but the world’s memory of him. Janson and Sonia Rheinschild, winners of the Nobel Prize for medicine, were erased from history. Connor thought Sonia might give him information. He never expected *this*!

“What if you invented a printer that could build living human organs?” Sonia said, after telling them of the disillusionment that ultimately took her

husband's life. "And what if you sold the patent to the nation's largest medical manufacturer . . . and what if they took all of that work . . . and buried it? And took the plans and burned them? And took every printer and smashed it, and prevented anyone from ever knowing that the technology existed?"

Sonia trembled with such powerful fury as she spoke, she seemed much larger than her diminutive size—much more powerful than any of them.

"What if," Sonia said, "they made the solution to unwinding disappear because too many people have too much invested in keeping things exactly . . . the way . . . they are?"

It was Grace—"low-cortical" Grace—who figured out where this was leading.

"And what if there's still one organ printer left," she said, "hiding in the corner of an antique shop?"

The idea seemed to suck all the air out of the room. Connor actually gasped, and Risa gripped his hand, as if she needed to hold on to him to stave off her own mental vertigo.

Finally Sonia pulls forth a cardboard box that is about exactly the size of what Connor imagines a bread box would be. He makes room on a little round cherrywood table, and she sets the box down gently.

"You can take it out," Sonia says to him, a bit out of breath from her efforts.

Connor reaches in, gets his fingers around the dark object, then lifts it out of the box and sets it on the table.

"That's it?" says Grace, clearly disappointed. "It's just a printer."

"Exactly," says Sonia, with a smug sort of pride. "Earthshaking technology doesn't arrive with bells and whistles. Those get added later."

The organ printer is small but deceptively heavy, packed with electronics tweaked for its peculiar purpose. To the eye, it is gunmetal gray and, as Grace already noted, entirely unremarkable. It looks like an ordinary printer that might have been manufactured before Connor was born, and the casing itself probably came from a standard printer.

"Like so many things in this world," Sonia tells them, "what matters is what's inside."

“Make it work,” asks Grace, practically bouncing in her chair. “Make it print me out an eye, or something.”

“Can’t. The cartridge needs to be filled with pluripotent stem cells,” Sonia explains. “Beyond that, I couldn’t tell you much more. I’ll be damned if I know how the thing does what it does; my forte was neurobiology, not electronics. Janson built it.”

“We’ll have to reverse engineer it,” Risa says. “So it can be reproduced.”

The small prototype has an output dish large enough to deliver the eye Grace requested—but clearly the technology could be applied to larger machines. The very idea sets Connor’s mind reeling. “If every hospital could print organs and tissues for its patients, the whole system of unwinding collapses!”

Sonia leans back slowly shaking her head. “It won’t happen that way,” Sonia says. “It never does.” She makes sure she looks at each of them as she talks, to make sure she drives the point home.

“There isn’t one single thing that will end unwinding,” she tells them. “It will take a hodgepodge of random events that come together in just the right way and at just the right time to remind society it’s got a conscience.” Then she gently pats the organ printer. “All these years I was afraid of putting it out there because if they were to destroy this one, there’s no recourse. The technology dies with the machine. But now I think the time is right. Getting it out there won’t solve everything, but it could be the lynchpin that holds together all those other events.”

Then she smacks Connor so hard with her cane it could raise a welt. “God help me, but I think you’re the ones to take charge of it. Janson’s machine is your baby now. So go fix the world.”

ADVERTISEMENT

You don’t know me, but you know my story, or one just like it. My daughter was run down by a sixteen-year-old on a joyride. Afterward, I found out that this boy had

already been in trouble with the law three times, and had been released. Now he's back in custody, and may be tried as an adult, but that won't bring my daughter back. He never should have been there to steal that car—but in spite of his criminal record, and in spite of a clear penchant for reckless and violent behavior, his parents refused to have him unwound. The Marcella Initiative, named after my daughter, will make sure this kind of thing never happens again. If voters pass the Marcella Initiative, it will become mandatory that incorrigible teens of divisional age be unwound automatically after a third offense. Please vote for the Marcella Initiative. Don't we owe it to our children?

—Paid for by the Coalition of Parents for a Safer Tomorrow

Connor immediately takes the secret artifact to the back room. He's always had an uncanny skill with mechanics, but this time, he doesn't even dare to open the casing for fear of doing something irreparable.

"We have to get this device into the right hands," says Connor. "Someone who knows what to do with it."

"And," points out Risa, "someone who isn't so tied to the current system that they'd rather destroy it than put it to use."

"Some trick that'll be," says Grace.

Sonia hobbles into the back room and catches the three of them still staring at the printer. "It's not a religious relic," she announces. "Get over it."

"Well, it is sacred in its own way," says Risa.

Sonia waves her hand dismissively. "Tools are neither demonic nor divine. It's all about who wields them." Then she points her cane to the old trunk, indicating it's time to descend into the shadows of her basement.

Grace pushes the trunk aside. She grunts as she does it. "What's in this thing anyway? Lead?"

Risa looks to Connor, and Connor looks away. They both know what's in there. He doubts even Risa knows how heavily it weighs on his heart. Much