

### “Wireheads”

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“It's not fair.” Broad Back was from Earth. He liked sunrises. Even though it was officially morning, he couldn't tell if it was morning or dusk on the Second Grade. The space platform was stationary. The sun was always in the same place. Hot on one side, cold on the other. It was a procedure to generate electricity, the heat gradient. Of course, most of that power was used for the artificial gravity (AG) generators. But the AG wouldn't be necessary if they just spun the platform. Keeping it properly spinning would require 10% of the power needed for the AG. The spin wasn't done because the leaders of the platform didn't like the stars moving in circles. The citizens called the platform “the Second Grade” because the leaders acted like second grade schoolteachers to everyone. The leaders clearly didn't care; the citizens weren't really anything more than staff to the leaders. They were under paid because of a lack of respect. The Second Grade's main revenue generator (RG) was teenager rehabilitation. It was why Broad Back was on a station without a sunrise or sunset.

Broad Back was one of those teenagers in need of rehabilitation. Of course, he hated the place. “The sun is always right there.” He pointed at the sun. The platform's dome components filtered the light and radiation, so it was at the proper level for most humans. The Second Grade was further away from the sun than the Earth, so Sol was much smaller than he was used to. The AG on the platform was set at 0.75 G. Clients from Earth were fitted with a belt that augmented the platform gravity to 1 G immediately around them. There were no superpowers on the Second Grade. Only the leaders had power on the Second Grade. The diurnal cycle of day and night was maintained though by a migration from one side of the platform to the other. The Second Grade was riddled with routine. Routine was part of the rehabilitation. Broad Back walked with the other clients. Walking everywhere was part of the routine. Broad Back scratched at the back of his neck. “Hate this too.”

“Scratch not.” Phalyn whispered. “Implants are expensive. To replace is extra fee.” Phalyn was no Earther. It showed in her physique. She was born in microgravity. Her belt augmentation reduced gravity further. Everyone had a right to their own gravity. It was written in the contract.

“Gov pays. What would caring matter?” Broad Back didn't put a tone in his voice. They were monitored every moment. A harsh tone was demerit worthy.

“The family. The family balance sheet. The Gov will reconcile.” Phalyn's tone was always moderate. Her volume always low. In a space craft, quiet was the only privacy available. Where she was from, all citizens were quiet.

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Binky was a smartass. He was proud of it. “Why bother with Earth geography? If it will just change?” He smiled at the teacher. The other client-students remained quiet. They didn’t think they were smart and none wanted to be an ass.

“Over millions of years, yes. You are correct, but that is not relevant to this class, or the question I asked.” The teacher reached over to the sky board class rooster. She pushed the red button beside Binky’s picture. “You know the rules. You know the consequences. A demerit is appropriate.”

Binky’s smile evaporated. He started to cry. The teacher scanned the class; the client students looked at their desktops and nothing else.

After dinner, there was a free period lounge. The lounge was large. There was popcorn, salted with no butter. There were videos of all kinds. There were video games. All covered by their tuition. The video games were unused by the most recent client students. Broad Back, Phalyn, and Binky watched a CGI animation that was on when they sat down. It was full of action, loud and brightly colored with little dialogue. Each animated situation lasted less than ten minutes. It was attention span appropriate. It was in the contract too. Binky laughed at all of it, Broad Back only once and a while, but Phalyn never laughed. She just ate the popcorn. There was no amusing food where she came from. Food was rationed. Food added mass. Food used fuel. Fuel was rationed too.

With the sounding of the bell, they all walked back to the dark section of the platform where their beds were. Broad Back wanted to rub his neck where the implant was, but what happened to Binky made him reconsider such behavior. Phalyn had been correct this morning: it was against the rules. In their beds, supine was the only position. On the ceiling above, written in the appropriate language, was “Sweet Dreams!” It was there even when the lights were out. And then, there was bliss. It was like floating in a warm bath. It was like eating too much but not feeling full. It was like a touch by your mother. A long touch. It was disorienting. Even though Binky started to cry, Broad Back remained with bliss. As did Phalyn. Demerits reduced the duration of the bliss event. It was one of the rules. Bliss was rationed here.

The teacher pointed at Broad Back. “Where are you from?”

Broad Back blinked. His face reddened. “An Earth dome.”

“On which continent?” The teacher didn’t smile. The classroom A/C moved her hair slightly.

“The Americas.” Broad Back was concerned about getting a demerit so he answered immediately and briefly.

"North or South?"

Broad Back frowned at his answer. "North."

"Which dome?"

"Southwest dome." Broad Back was breathing heavier.

"Good. What did you do there?"

Broad Back blinked back a tear. He wasn't sure what was happening. "I watched the weather most of the time. I liked the sleet the best. The way it crashed on the dome. I could hear the thumps."

"Did you ever wonder what made sleet differ from rain?" Still no smile on the teacher, but no frown, either.

Broad Back almost cried. "No. Both fell from the sky."

"Both are water." The teacher nodded. "Not curious about what makes them act differently or about the Earth weather? The constant storms. The Gore – Schmitt Ice age?"

Broad Back shook his head.

"But you have heard of it?" The teacher was beginning to smile.

Broad Back swallowed while nodding.

"Have you heard of Dopamine Deficiency Syndrome?" She raised her eyebrows.

Broad Back nodded again. "DDS. Yes. The reason I am here."

The teacher smiled. "Yes. Yes. It is why you are not curious. Did you ever wonder why you were not curious?"

Broad Back looked around the classroom. None of the student-clients were doing anything other than looking at the desk's top. He swallowed. "Curious about not being curious?" He knew it would generate a demerit. He closed his eyes.

"Very good. Very good. To my point, exactly." She smiled and clicked her tongue.

Broad Back opened his eyes, slowly. "I, it, was relevant?"

"Yes. Exactly relevant. Very appropriate. You see class, questions related to the topic are what we desire." She waved her hands in the air before the bell rang. "Class dismissed."

The student-clients were slow to respond. The teacher had never smiled before. Class had never gotten out early before. It was confusing. Confusion made them all hesitate. But when the

teacher left the classroom, they all thought it was appropriate for them to leave too. Also, the bell had just rung.

Binky was annoyed, so annoyed. "I ask a question, demerit. You ask a question, reward. I don't get it." He was keeping his voice down, so the tone didn't matter.

Broad Back shrugged. "Me neither."

"Teacher's pet." Binky muttered.

Phalyn ate the popcorn. She even crunched quietly. "Relevance. She said relevance."

"Not the questioning, but the question?" Broad Back looked at the monitors in the lounge. They were functional and functioning.

Binky went to turn something over, but he knew the monitors were monitoring. "I didn't want to come here."

"No one asked me." Broad Back turned to Phalyn. "Anyone ask you?" Phalyn shook her head. "I was told on the way here it was for the good of humanity."

"What does that mean?" Binky rolled his eyes. "Was that relevant enough?" Binky stared at one of the monitor cams. It didn't reply. It never did.

"Curiosity required." Phalyn said with a mouthful of popcorn. "Relevant curiosity."

"It is stupid." Binky burst out. Two of the monitors cams turned to focus on Binky. Now, there were three. Binky started to cry. Broad Back and Phalyn looked at the CGI dancing in the screen. Another monitor cam focused on Binky. Now, there were four.

But to everyone's surprise, bliss came to everyone this night. No tears necessary.

Broad Back's mother was crying. She sat where he usually sat and watched the weather. She was too upset for the weather. She had never left the Earth. She had never left North America. Her status and education level kept her in the dome. She ventured out very seldomly because of the severe weather. Her son, Broad Back, though: he was in space now. His status had changed. The Administrator had changed it, not her. She had won the privilege to have a child in a lottery. A year without contraception was the actual prize. Population in the dome had to be controlled. It was by mandatory contraception food additives. She had gained 20 pounds that year. The food seemed to taste better then. She didn't get pregnant until the last month. She put in an extra effort to get Broad Back. She knew who the father was only by the genetic tests.

She cried for him. He was her goal in life. But now he was in space being cured. She didn't

think he was ill. He just liked to watch the weather.

"The human race needs inventors." The Administrator had told her.

She had not disagreed. "You want Broad Back to be an inventor?" She had never met anyone who was an inventor. She just knew the dictionary definition.

The Administrator smiled, knowingly. They all gave that same expression to her. She hated it but never said anything to them about it. "We want him to want to be an inventor. Good inventors are very difficult to find."

"Do they get lost, easily?" She was confused with what was being said. She only understood that they wanted to take Broad Back into space and that she had no power to stop them.

The hated expression came back. "Dopamine Deficiency Syndrome causes a loss in curiosity. No invention without curiosity."

Again, she didn't disagree. "Isn't there a pill?" There were pills for every mood.

"We need relevant and sustainable curiosity." The Administrator had a different smile. "Treatment is necessary."

"But I won the Lottery." She started to cry at that moment and hadn't stopped since.

"Good luck is a rare item, too." Back was the hated expression.

So, she spent her free time sitting where he had sat watching the weather. She cried harder when there was sleet. It was his favorite. "But I was told not to ask too many questions and I haven't. Isn't asking questions curiosity?" She didn't understand a great many things. That made her cry, too.

Broad Back was thinking of his mother less and less. He never had a problem with learning the class material. It had been the assignment. He always did the assignments. Phalyn hadn't had any trouble, either. Binky just did what got him by without punishment. He never asked the right questions but finally they weren't the wrong questions. He was satisfied with that. Broad Back, though, started to wonder about the gravity augments. Even though it could stand up to water without damage, Broad Back started taking his gravity augments off when he took a shower. It was the shower water drops. They didn't look like the ones on Earth. It had to be something with gravity affecting the water. When he took off the device for the first time, he hit the ceiling of the shower. He felt so powerful. It made him laugh to feel that way. The shower was the only time they had privacy so he only experimented with gravity there. He wasn't sure if it was against the rules, but he was cautious about it. He finally asked Phalyn. "Have you taken off your augments?"

Phalyn paled. She shook her head. "I would die, I think."

Broad Back nodded slowly. "Yes, yes. It is not the same. Yes." Broad Back wasn't confused. It made sense. "Is there a rule against it?"

Phalyn frowned. "Doesn't need to be. It is dangerous."

"So, no punishment likely." Broad Back smiled.

Phalyn frowned more deeply. "What are you thinking?"

"Why walk if you can fly." He nodded. "Tomorrow. You will see." With the bliss sleep came quickly. His excitement didn't keep him awake.

Broad Back had found the device's power circuit breaker. He didn't need to take it off his person, just switch off the power. The next morning, he walked to the light side up to the open area of the central park. Then he switched off his gravity augments and jumped high and long. He made it all the way across the park before anyone noticed. Everyone usually looked down. But Broad Back's yell of glee made everyone look up.

"How did you get over there?" Binky shouted. It was a reasonable neutral question.

Broad Back just leaped back to them. All the student-clients laughed. Laughing was appropriate. Then they all looked at the Administrator for a sign of disapproval. The Administrator didn't show any negative reaction. Broad Back didn't wait and leapt to the other side of the park. Broad Back was breathing heavily from excitement more than effort. "What is gravity? I have to find out." He was surprised at how he felt. He wanted to know how it worked. The artificial gravity and real gravity. The science section wasn't until the afternoon. It was disappointing.

Broad Back switched the augments back on and walked the rest of the way with the other student-clients. They walked in their approved queues but they were noisy now, giggling and yelping for no reason. Broad Back just smiled quietly. He had pushed enough for one day, he thought. An Administrator was standing at the school entrance. She waved at Broad Back to come with her. This action quieted everyone. They all looked back down as they entered the school. Broad Back walked to another building behind the female Administrator. Broad Back could only think, "Blissless night." But he so enjoyed the leap. It was worth it.

"Where am I?" Broad Back had never been in this section of the Second Grade.

"Excellent!" The older female Administrator snapped. "Such progress."

The younger male Administrator nodded. "Good question. This module in front of you is the artificial gravity generator."

Broad Back's eyes widened. "Really? How does it work?"

The older female Administrator clapped her hands. "It is not a simple answer, but we will be working here with you. Is that something you would enjoy?" She emphasized the last word.

Broad Back smiled. "I certainly would."

"Excellent!" was said by all.

Phalyn didn't understand Binky's anger. She was happy for Broad Back. He was happy so she was happy. "But you don't care about gravity, do you?" She spoke in low tones. She was afraid of bliss demerits. Binky cared about them too.

"It's not gravity!" Binky pulled off his augments and immediately collapsed. He too was born in microgravity.

"It is." Phalyn said softly.

Binky turned the augments back on and stood up. "Why him and not me? That's an appropriate question." Binky was breathing heavily from his anger.

"We don't define appropriate." She sighed. She didn't quite know what was appropriate herself.

Binky jumped up at the video game monitor. He pulled at it but it was firmly anchored to the wall. "How does this work?" He yelled. "That's what you want to hear." He tried to smash the screen with his fist but only hurt himself. It made him cry. Phalyn started to cry, too. She wanted to go back home. She didn't care about the treatment. She wanted to be with her family. Binky had no family. It didn't matter to him. But they both cried in the corners of the lounge. Everyone else had left when Binky got loud. Broad Back wasn't in this section anymore. He had advanced. Phalyn missed Broad Back too. There were no goodbyes. Broad Back's leaps had been the last she saw of him. When she asked about him, the reply was hurtful. The Administrator had said. "He has moved ahead. He must be quarantined. So, he won't be contaminated. His progress must be maintained." She hadn't told Binky the last part. He was upset enough.

Broad Back couldn't sleep the first night. He was so excited about learning the artificial gravity generator. He didn't care about the bliss. It occurred to him that it was artificial bliss just like the artificial gravity. He touched the relays on his neck and smiled. "How do these work?" He really wanted to know, just to know. It made him laugh. Only much later in the night, when he was getting tired, did he think of Phalyn. "Hope you will complete the treatment ok." He said to the ceiling. There was nothing written there. Only a three-dimensional projection of the galaxy and its billions of stars. Broad Back watched the stars slowly move and fell asleep.