

IN SPACE, LOVE HAS BOUNDARIES



DISCONNECT

IMRAN SIDDIQ

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Dedication

For our little angel

Chapter 1 - Worthless

Zachary stopped at the *clunk* under his boot.

How had nobody seen the box? With a glance into the darkness of the Wastelands, he licked his chapped lips.

Taking the box, Zachary darted past heaps of tottering metallic sheets. So far today, he'd scavenged nothing that was worth shoving into the pockets of his knee-length coat. If there was one thing to beat today, it was the pride-crashing kick to the guts of returning empty-handed for a fourth day. As the shortest scavenger of the stall at five foot six, a barren run made him the easiest target for teasing.

The stall's heckles from the day before still chilled him. *The quickest rat with the hunting skill of a slug.*

But thoughts of leaving the vast Wastelands with only a handful of screws and two-inch nails drowned in his anticipation that the jingling in the box would be ratchets, fuses and battery cells.

Zachary sprinted along the ledge of the bay to an overhanging bank. Not even the sick rested amongst the rusty vehicles deserted here. Using his trusted titanium screwdriver, he teased off the knot of wires beneath the mesh. Why would anyone take trouble to wrap and then to discard this box?

Whatever, thought Zachary freeing the last clasp of the lid. Inside there was a folded note, a silver Intercom-transmitter, and an orange-tinted bracelet. *Result!* Twiddling his long, brown hair, he scrutinised the box for hidden compartments within the padded interior. The smooth texture couldn't have started life in Underworld, could it?

Locked away from light, Underworld was a murky pit in comparison to the rich nature of Overworld that few had seen, and finds such as these were rare here. Luck placed Zachary within easy access of the clutter that lay on the west side of Underworld, the Wastelands. Spending most of his day amongst the sewer pipes didn't bother him for it was far better than the dull lanes of District Two. No day was the same amongst junk. Every gush from the pipes revealed a new surprise.

Nobody knew how thick the ceiling was or why its creation blocked Underworld from the world above. Often Zachary pondered what exactly sat above the ceiling. He guessed unlimited power, droids with abilities that dwarfed the functions of humans, and a life that didn't require working in muck. Short hours. Free time.

An eerie chill climbed his spine at imagining the scattered giant steel support pillars dropping aside? Would Overworld add to the mess of Underworld? Could the two worlds of the *Galilei* Research Base co-exist? No chance.

What did it matter? Underworld's builders had left it to rot.

Zachary squinted in the darkness at the unbroken chain links on the bracelet and the deep dent in its centre. Components of music-playing Harmon bracelets weren't difficult to locate, though one as complete as this? He clicked his teeth thinking of when a working bracelet had last been handed to the stall. Longer than five years at least. There was a harsh rattle as he shook the bracelet. If he fixed this, it could be enough to save him another day of shame.

More than that, he could show his dad that scavenging wasn't a deadbeat job by putting some good food on the table.

The Intercom-transmitter, a communication device he'd often see in the hands of a ruthless looter, felt light in his palm. If this find functioned – he held his breath – then mushrooms for supper would become a memory. Zachary squirmed. Adjusting to the slimy, vomit-wrenching taste of mushrooms that thrived in abundance was at the bottom of his to-do list.

He rubbed his back against the carcass of a vehicle, his heart thumping. Maybe the Master of the stall would let him look behind the curtain?

Zachary's hazel eyes reflected off the Intercom's shiny shell. He rubbed the recognition pad underneath, not sure what to expect. Dull lights clicked along the screen's circular pattern. Blue tinted static formed in the air a foot above the Intercom.

"What in Europa!" Zachary swiped the image. Signs of energy were a signal to the greedy. If any of the gangs roaming the dry deluge saw this, they'd seize the Intercom and snap his skinny limbs apart.

Coat over the Intercom, Zachary sunk deeper into the bank. He paused before returning his thumb to the pad. The blue static burst out again, accompanied by a disturbing cackle. A human head with long hair formed in front of him. The image rotated, showing blurs where the eyes and mouth should have been. An incomplete android? Or an Overworlder?

Zachary's curiosity peaked. He'd never seen an Overworlder before and it wasn't like he had a choice in that matter. *Galilei's* distinct division prevented any mixing. There was no doorway, window or ladder to allow sight or sound between the worlds. Yet, he held a gateway to one in his hand. Were Overworlders as perfectly skinned as

he imagined them to be? Did they wash every day without scrounging for water under steam-filled pipes?

“Fourth of August 2340, 15:16,” said a young girl.

Shut up!

Zachary crammed the Intercom to his waist. A spark erupted in the centre of the device, and then it switched off. He gasped open-mouthed. Eyes closed, he bugged his memory to repeat her soft words. It was gone. Zachary rubbed the pad. Nothing. Inactive. Dead. Worthless. No – the Intercom could be salvaged. It could be worth ... something.

His eyes narrowed at the unfolded note. “Initial surveillance confirms the location. Continue with Project Centurion.” There was nothing on the reverse.

The word *surveillance* bothered him. It was what scavengers said when watching a lucrative drop point in the Wastelands. Did the girl write the note? Was she after someone?

Zachary tapped the Intercom. It didn’t make sense for anybody to write on paper if they were going to place it with a messaging device, unless they knew the Intercom to be faulty.

He shrugged, putting all three items into his pocket. The box weighed little, but it was valuable. Hooking a wire from the box to an inner seam of his coat to aid its hidden transport, Zachary smirked. The mushrooms looked closer to being history.

After snaking around the vehicles, he jumped onto a protruding sewer pipe to reach the upper level. Whirring sounds halted him. Eastwards, embedded turbines spun clockwise like a volatile drill within the high ceiling.

A drop was coming. Normally, Zachary would’ve dashed over bust circuit boards to reach the drop point. Instead he watched a triangular section of the ceiling, secured by hydraulic arms, eject downwards. Wind spurted ahead of blazing light before rock-like objects rushed out, followed by a rainstorm of particles in pursuit. Discarded rubbish of Overworld had entered his world.

Zachary’s eyes tightened upon other Underworlders swarming to the falling treasure. It was a good one-minute run away, and by the time they reached it, the Wasteland gangs would have fought one another for the glory. If the wired-box had been part of that drop, there’d be steel cutting through bodies to get it. He shivered with thoughts of the carnage if they’d found the Intercom.

Emitters within the ceiling dimmed, ending the artificial day. Turning on his heels, Zachary took the southern route to the bartering camps of District Two.

He manoeuvred to the steep ladder against the gigantic heated pipe. Halfway up on the forty-fifth rung, Zachary gazed over the irregular horizon of the Wastelands scanning for a girl running between the swamps, searching for her box. Who was she?

On reaching the platforms jutting from a mountain of metal, Zachary moved into the bartering camp, avoiding locking eyes with the near-naked hut occupiers begging with their scrawny fingers. Drooped faces, similar in every way, shared cracked bowls of sludge. He considered them to be a clever scheme, detracting from the pick-pocketers groping his coat.

If anybody here owned an Intercom, they wouldn't place it in a box, even for safekeeping. No – they'd solder it to their belts and some to their piercings. That wired-box had to have come from Overworld.

Zachary licked his lips. The Intercom wasn't totally broken; some life inside remained, and that gave it a chance to be repaired. There was someone who could repair it, but he'd have to be quick. If Zachary's dad found out that he'd messed around with a device rather than exchanging it for money, then he'd be in for a kicking.

Recessed between the huts of the rat seller and the cockroach grinder sat Zachary's employer's stall. A bullish man nodded, allowing him entry into the candlelit foyer. He spoke little to the other scavengers lining the room's edge. Either their goods had been delivered, or they had nothing spectacular to show. He continued, descending to the symmetrically carved area underground.

At the front of a corridor, a middle-aged man mumbled at his desk as he scribbled into a paperbound book. Shekhar peeked over cracked spectacles, showing no amusement at Zachary's tentative loosening of his fingers.

The Harmon bracelet glittered in the candlelight.

Shekhar bit the lid off his red pen. "He already has many."

"This works." Zachary yanked the bracelet away from the attempted snatch.

"Whereabouts?"

"The drop."

"A working Harmon, Mister Connor? Why would anybody throw it away?"

Zachary gulped. The stall's beady-eyed Secretary wasn't a man to irritate. "Why does anyone throw away anything?"

Shekhar murmured. Pushing his spectacles up onto the bridge of his nose, he led Zachary to the wooden door with depictions of men carrying building blocks and guiding barrows. Shekhar knocked three times.

Zachary exhaled upon entry into the Master of the stall's five-cornered room. Air swept from Shekhar's slam of the door didn't detract from the heart thumps Zachary felt. He was seconds away from the padded curtain that hung behind the Master's chair. Desperation at wanting to peek behind the curtain accompanied the slide of his heel. No – wait, there wasn't time for the curtain, no matter how long it'd been since he'd gazed beyond it. Priority stormed his mind. Get home. Repair the Intercom.

Cobwebs pinned inside picture frames decorated the walls above stacked items and metallic gadgetry. Dust floated between the generous glows of the corner-mounted tubes of energy. Zachary passed the human skeleton standing there with sharpened pencils crammed into the holes and notches of its skull. It was a symbol of man stripped of protection whose purpose was to hold objects of use. Maybe that was the Master's interpretation of *Galilei*; Underworld lived as the skeleton holding up Overworld.

A strange smell hooked Zachary's nostrils. Of all the sewers he'd stepped in, this was by far the most rancid. Had something died here?

He drew near to the long, polished table in the centre of the room where Master Salvador "Biro" Burton sat observing him. The rear curtain skewered in place by copper rods tempted a grin.

Then, the thump of Zachary's heart tightened.

On the table lay a male torso. No arms or anything below the waist. Splatters of blood and jagged cuts ran along its light brown skin. Charred muscles overlapped where the neck should have been. Zachary's eyes swept the floor for dismembered limbs and the head. The rotting smell filled his lungs. A dead body? Here? Whose?

For a man who'd hoarded enough coins to build his own town, the Master's scrawny state drew pity. Going on seventy years, Biro had entered beyond the final phase of life. Blemishes littered his sunken skin. He looked ill. Diseased. Almost like the skeleton in his room. But what the heck was the Master doing with a corpse? Glaring at the torso, Zachary rubbed his sweaty palms.

Biro twitched with a never-ending shake of his left leg. "Quite extraordinary, isn't it? They're now creating them to look like us." His tone hummed between tainted teeth.

Zachary almost cried out. The corpse was an android! Impossible. It looked – too – perfect. Lines of blood-carrying veins could be made out above the region of the collar bone. Zachary shivered. Androids were pale, almost ghost-like. Where was the streaming-port that every android had on its abdomen? And why the blood, and the muscles?

“I suspect Overworlders are trying to integrate them deeper into their extravagant lifestyle,” continued Biro. “It’s rather artistic, isn’t it?”

“Did you find this?” Zachary gulped. It wasn’t his place to ask a question.

Biro’s smirk lasted a second. “Found in the most intriguing manner. Something almost flawless and no doubt expensive, yet, it came to rest here. Enough of that. Your find?”

Zachary handed over the bracelet. His eyes focussed on the padded curtain which was coloured black to prevent the sneakiest glimpse of the reward behind it. Zachary’s palms moistened as he clenched his anxious stomach. His thoughts stopped lingering on the torso.

After loosening the slim compartment on the bracelet’s edge, the aged Master directed a charged-stylus onto teeny cogs inside. The bracelet illuminated. Frozen in mid-twitch, Biro shuddered at the melody’s beginning. Soft strings gave way to a slowly building drumbeat.

An intensifying harp played, swaying Biro’s pleased face. “Shekhar will give you enough to treat yourself for this find.”

Zachary unhooked the box from his coat.

Biro’s gaze sharpened. “What’s inside?”

“I found it ... empty.” He looked at the curtain, knowing the Master would interpret it without asking.

“Going behind will forfeit any reward for the box,” Biro went on, seeing Zachary’s furrowed brow. “Tell me. Why love something so far away?”

“It lets me without asking,” replied Zachary.

Spinning the bracelet twice to prolong the melody, Biro waved for Zachary to continue. “You need to find yourself a girl”.

There was no point in Zachary fighting the urge. His breathing accelerated. Hands trembling under his chin, he went around the table, and then behind the curtain. Lights sparkled outside the awaiting window with greater strength than a thousand diodes. His heart raced quicker. The melody, behind him, peaked to a thunderous fanfare.

Remnants of Zachary's breath frosted the glass as his eyes soaked up the atmospheric dense bands of the gas giant of space.

Jupiter.

He'd always thought that there was nothing more intriguing than this planet. Except now. Something new seeped into his mind; something that reduced the gas giant to a ball. Eyes closed, Zachary took a deep breath. He visualised the blurred face of a girl without eyes.

Who was she?

Chapter 2 - Hacked

The orange glow of internal lamps within Shantytown blurred above Zachary's rush. The home he shared with his dad lay on the ground floor of a tower, a short distance from the entrance to the town.

He altered his grip of the supple package so as not to alert the attention of the beggars that lived along the gutter-trenches. Yanking keys attached by string from a pocket, he undid four door-locks on his front door. The inside offered a stove, table, and two chairs in the first section. Opposing corridors in the middle led off to the two bedrooms and at the far end was the bits-and-pieces zone. From behind ragged cloths attached to the corrugated iron-sheeted walls, he took a match from a box and lit the single lantern to illuminate the area above the table. Shadows formed like creeping creatures, moving deeper into the dark at the rear.

He peered down at the contents of the saucepan on the single electric plate of the stove. Minced rabbit meat. Spores of white fluff covered it. A putrid smell, worse than the sewers, invaded his nostrils. With his thoughts attached to the Intercom, he'd trusted the claim that it was fresh meat when he bought it. Zachary retched. Nothing came out.

Shekhar's seven Leo-coins would have purchased an armful of potatoes instead, but it'd been months since he'd consumed something worth chewing. Almost all his dad earned disappeared to the slumlords of District Two and the Resourcers, who didn't deserve payment for their volt-line stealing induction coils.

With one cup from a tub of water into the saucepan, then, nostrils squeezed, he slid the lid over it.

Zachary drew back the curtain next to the stove. Inside the alcove, a Haulage-404 droid hung mid-way from bolts secured to the wall. The Haulages were ancient, labour-efficient droids used for construction purposes. Oblong headed with two circular eyes and a blocky plated jaw, the droid resembled a muscular human clad in copper armour. With one defunct eye, its left arm removed, and nothing below its waist this was a little more complete than the one on Biro's table. *Skin.* Zachary wriggled the image from his mind as he stroked the droid's torso. No – this was how droids were meant to be. Metal and screws.

To the rear section of his home sat the Bombay core-generator. He often wondered how his bulky-framed dad managed to step over the toilet-hole to reach it. Five LEDs

along the Bombay's top remained empty. Zachary swapped two crocodile clips over, and then rotated the generator's wheel. The LEDs remained unchanged, even after a third rotation.

"Come on."

His dad had paid the Resourcers their twice-weekly charge – hadn't he? Loosening his tense fingers, he banged the top of the generator. An internal component whirred as two of the LEDs lit up with a soft aqua tone.

"Next time you do that, I'll shove my screwdriver in and dismantle you," Zachary growled at it.

Back at the droid, Zachary took the coiled-tube that ran the length of his home from the stove's socket. Clearing dust from an exposed chest-plate on the droid, he thrust the coiled-tube inward. A current sizzled along twisted circuitry. Tiny blue lights illuminated its functioning eye.

"Hello, Patch," said Zachary pulling over a chair.

"I feel rusty," sounded the droid's deep voice emitter. His jaw crunched for a few seconds.

"You say that all the time."

"Detecting anomalies is all I am good for. I detect a peculiar stench."

Zachary clicked his fingers. "Forget that. I need your help."

A flicker erupted from his broken eye. "I can offer little in my present state." Four digits on his large hand twitched in isolation.

"Do you know what this is?" Zachary held up the Intercom.

"A transmitting variant. Yours?"

"Kind of. Can you hack it?"

The droid's arm dropped limp. "For what purpose? Hacking is an illegal act."

Zachary frowned. "Why does it matter? You used to hack all the time."

"For reconnaissance."

"Reconnor-what? Look, I just need you to clear the image."

"To delete?"

"*No*. Make the image clearer. I found it in the Wastelands, and I want to see what it's got."

"I am past hacking. That was then."

"And this is now." Zachary rammed the Intercom into Patch's hand. "You need to slacken your stiff upper lip."

“Difficult given my build.” Two of the droid’s fingers clasped the Intercom. Needles and green-lit prods protruded like hungry insects from the other two digits, invading the device. They quickly disassembled the middle region of the Intercom to expose reams of wires and miniature circuit boards.

“Don’t damage it,” whined Zachary.

“To hack is to break. What do we have here? Damaged interface. Password locks. Corrupted files. Secure protocols. Deficient backdoors. Difficult. Halt, I have found something.”

Zachary almost pushed forward out of the chair. The blue-tinted face reappeared for a second, scrambled with thicker lines than when he’d seen it in the Wastelands. He slapped the air. “You had it.”

“Unworthy to expose,” monotonously replied Patch. “However, four partial segments have been located.”

Four! Better than expected. “Go on. Show me.”

The Intercom burst up an unscrambled, blue-tinted photograph. Zachary concentrated on the girl between two adults. Six or seven years of age? Rounded cheeks fit her cheerful smile and frilly dress. Was she the Intercom’s owner? Didn’t the voice he’d heard sound older?

“The file’s signature states the year 2331,” said Patch.

Nine years ago, thought Zachary.

The woman to the child’s right showed a dominant pose with hair matching the crinkles of her thin dress. On the left, a tall, formal-suited man glanced downward at the child with a look of admiration. Something perfect that Zachary didn’t have shone between the three of them. Nowhere in his home did a collective image exist of his family. Smashed. Broken. Banished. He sucked back the unwanted wobble of his lower lip.

“File two,” said Patch. “Signature stamped as 2332.”

Another image replaced the first with the assumed parents and their child. Less round, the girl continued to smile, this time dressed in a tank top. Stone-faced, the mum’s fingertips half hung over her daughter’s shoulder, and the dad stared to his side away from them. What had changed in the spent year?

“Should I go on?” asked Patch.

Zachary nodded. “More images?”

“No – a motion recording dated five weeks ago.”

“Motion – like a movie?”

A large room flickered into view. The recording had been taken from high up, giving the figure in the centre the height of Zachary’s thumb. He couldn’t make out much except that she had long hair and wore a wavy skirt. Her back turned towards him, she walked away, making a soft thudding sound with her bare feet.

Zachary gasped at the huge curved wall ahead of her. It was transparent, and gave a tremendous view of Jupiter’s bands. She had it all to herself.

With a sudden turn, letting her skirt spin around her legs, the girl whirled around. Hands tracing down the front of her top, she kept her head down as her body straightened. All of a sudden static-polluted blurs interrupted her face.

“Hey,” cried Zachary.

Patch prodded the Intercom. “Stabilising.”

Two delicate claps from her coincided with a windswept chime playing from left to right. A flute began ahead of a verse of panpipes, then the patter of hands from a hundred unseen collaborators. He recognised the tune. The Harmon bracelet.

Holding her long skirt up to her knees, matching her strides to the strums, the figure glided across the floor. When a second guitar forced the pitch of the first to increase, she raised her hands and hit out like a thrashing wave. Her hair again fell over her face. Zachary’s breaths quickened with the building drumbeat. Never losing her balance, she span, arms out, then with a smacking wrap of her body, she jumped. At the final crash of a cymbal, she collapsed onto her front with her arms spread forward. Blurry lines blended to a sharp resolution. Zachary didn’t know whether it was Patch’s doing, or the recorder’s, as the screen zoomed to her head. Straight hair covered it. The girl’s hand flicked several strands right before the recording ended.

“*Patch!*”

The Haulage-404’s solitary shoulder shrugged. “Defective file.”

Zachary restrained from punching the droid. “What about the last file?”

As Patch’s bulky fingers loosened off the Intercom. Crackles sprinkled from the device. The sound of someone moving or shuffling items back and forth came out.

“Fourth of August 2340, 15:16 ... Ro ... *pzzzt* ... Kade’s diary,” a female spoke. “I hate today more than ever. I thought they’d be mature enough to handle it by now.” She chuckled. “Who am I kidding? What do my parents get from banning joy in our home every year on this day? All I can say is, congratulations to me on this anniversary. I wish I could sob with mother, but I can’t grab her sorrow and bring it as

my own. Why does she whisper like something inside has to be said? And father, quiet as ever ... *pzzzt.*”

“Is that it?” Zachary stared at the device. It’d been years since a female spoke to him without running her fingers through his pockets. He cursed under his breath. She wasn’t talking to him.

Patch fiddled with the Intercom. “Irreparable. Did you gain what you sought?”

Excitement dried Zachary’s mouth. He forced his back into the hard chair, glancing up at the rusty pipes in the ceiling, imagining the polished floors of another world above them. “Why don’t the girls around here talk like her?”

Tilting his head, Patch stammered, “I c-c-cannot comment.”

The skin above Zachary’s ears pulled back. He bolted up, facing the generator. One LED flashed. Using Patch had sucked away two days’ worth of energy.

“Zach-ach-ach-ach.” The Haulage-404’s eye sunk into darkness.

Frozen, Zachary’s limbs shivered as the door opened.

Only one other person had a key.

Chapter 3 - The Job

Zachary feared the knowing glare fixed on his dad's face.

Marcus Connor's weathered brown eyes scanned the room as he dropped his bulging sack. "You been powering that rust-bucket again?"

Eyes dropped, Zachary winced at the invisible choke.

"How many times must I *tell* you?" Marcus's hand scraped over his formidable chest under his black-tarred vest. "I slave for us, every day, and what do I find when I get home? This? Two more days, Zach ... two more days until I have enough to buy more."

"It was only meant to be for a minute," muttered Zachary, wishing he had at least reattached the coiled-tube to the stove in time. He could have blamed an anomaly for sucking the volts in one go.

The lantern glowed close to his dad's bald head. "Is that uncooked rabbit?" An overlapped tooth jutted from his snarl. "So, son, tell me what was so important that you had to ruin dinner?"

The Intercom! Zachary exhaled at the droid's closed grasp.

"I was trying to repair his eye." His own rolled at the stupid suggestion. He'd be caught and suffer another tirade if his dad asked to see the parts.

"He's fine with one." Marcus walked to his room. "It's time you gave up on treasure-hunting rubbish and joined the Wallers. I'll have a word to get you apprentice status."

Zachary mouthed his groan. The Far-Wallers, the largest employer in District Two, sent men to batter sludge along the distant hydro-wall where circulating fans operated. To many, the preservation of the oxygen supply exceeded the need to scavenge. Not to Zachary. He was the wrong build to start with, and the common scars of acidic leakages didn't appeal to him. Zachary didn't consider himself to be handsome, but he wasn't ugly either.

"I could haggle with upstairs to use their stove," suggested Zachary. Half of the rabbit as a trade should be enough.

Marcus emerged pushing padded gloves into the front pocket of his murky-green sweatshirt. "I got a job for tonight with Gerry."

Gerry Brennan, his dad's old friend, lived in District One, known as IOTA, which stood for *Invited Only, Trespassers Annihilated*. Cordoned off from the unwelcome, it was the only zone in Underworld with a bay to outer space.

Zachary's hands dropped to his side. "What kind of job?"

"There's been some damage on the upper port side of *Galilei*. Pirates tried to take out an ex-ambassador's home. Full-on assault or something like that."

"In Overworld?" Zachary asked, his fingers restless. "What else?"

"The pirated shuttle exploded onto the hull. External sensors bombed out and the engine's belly spilt into the shell. Gerry needs me to dig out the gunk."

"But why would they contact Gerry?" Didn't the mighty Overworlders know how to deal with a breach themselves?

"Everyone's off doing something else." Marcus sniffed with a tense screw of his lips. "Anyway, I don't care. It pays well." His eyes faded with the decreasing wick of the candlelight.

"How much?"

"Thirty Gallis."

"*Thirty*," guffawed Zachary. His mouth enlarged under raised eyebrows. A Galli was ten Leo-coins. Three *hundred* Leo-coins. The smell of the rabbit felt far away. No more mushrooms, for a while.

"Gerry's prepping his ship now." No fear showed on Marcus's face.

"You're going into space?" gasped Zachary. Strange that his dad had never mentioned experiencing this before, or even the last time that he'd visited IOTA. Was he a regular visitor? "Will you be safe?"

Marcus patted him as he passed. "Sure. Plus there will probably be beefed-up security at the Kade residence in case the pirates decide to have another go."

Zachary's toes flicked the leather inside his boots. Kade. The girl used that name. How many Kades could there be in Overworld? "I want to go with you."

Doubt shook his lip. Why did he want to go? On a single name, he suspected that the girl from the Intercom would be there. How stupid to even consider that, yet, it was possible. He had to know.

Marcus took a moment to stare. "Fine."

* * *

It took a thousand steps to reach the gate to IOTA. Wide enough to push three homes through, it showed dents across the fortified sheets of metal that made it. Faces peered downward from the high compound walls linked to the opening gate. They knew his dad was coming.

On entering, the smell of aromatic spices hit Zachary. The towering homes of Shantytown didn't exist here. Space was plentiful for the dwellers here with energy beams lighting lanes. Tingles shot up Zachary's spine at the fast approaching docking bay. He'd deemed himself mad for tagging along on something that could amount to nothing.

Six ships stood ahead like creatures awaiting commands and their different sized wings seized his attention. Long. Wide. Short. Thick engines. Single-seated cockpits. Multiple windows. Sitting furthest away, one ship teased a grin. The *Muirne*. It resembled a rusty overturned bug with six connector-like legs protruding from the top. Four cylindrical propulsion-drives glowed blue beneath it, the same shade as the photograph in his dad's room.

Zachary followed Marcus up the *Muirne*'s rear-side ramp into a compartmentalised portion encircled by shelves. Padded seats fitted the midsection beyond that.

The tall, rough-bearded captain of the ship entered from the opposite corridor. Shaking his dad's hand, Gerry cocked his head. "And you brought your little squirt as well. Never a bad time to experience your first flight. Just make sure you hold onto your tummy, cos it's gonna feel like you swallowed it whole."

"Pulsars maxed, good to go," said a man in a crimson jumpsuit behind Zachary.

"Deadly," said Gerry. "Get your mob in. The payload awaits."

Marcus tugged the Captain's hand. "Thirty Gallis. Just for drilling. Right?"

"Would an Irishman lie to you?" Gerry gestured for them to join him in the cockpit. "I ain't no holy-Joe to question Kade's rush or how much he pays."

Glass all over gave the cockpit an open view of the docking bay. With his jeans scraping the coarse texture of the rear seat, Zachary eased onto it.

Gerry flicked a switch on the hub. A drone started under the ship. "Control, this is *Muirne*. Request for force fields to be reversed for exit."

Zachary imitated his dad's motion in slipping the green clasp over the black button. It self-tightened. Looking to the side, Zachary clutched his seat. Dust particles wafted upwards around the bellowing *Muirne*. Queasy pangs in his stomach juddered. He felt the ship rise with a leap toward the curved ceiling, and then it hovered, aiming

towards the growing hole at the end of the bay. Zachary lifted his legs as a wallop of force humped the ship forward. Fast. For five seconds, he sucked his breath in.

Gerry twiddled the hub's lever. "Sick yet?"

Zachary felt pressure in his stomach. "N-n-no."

The *Muirne* banked sharp left.

The muscles in his neck could have torn with the strain he made to catch sight of the *Galilei* Research-Base. The blocky substructure of the Base seemed misaligned and crooked in direct contrast to the smoother panels above. The other side of the Base shot into view. He'd heard of what lay there, and as dull as some made the Europa moon to be, it was a mesmerising ball of smudged white.

The *Muirne* glided upward presenting the gas-giant to view. Dense orange streams pulled Zachary, making the belt-strap across his waist dig into him. Never had the planet's grainy bands looked so sharp. Jupiter's massive red eye studied him.

"Back on the old world, they said heaven rested in the sky and hell below your feet. They had it wrong," said Gerry. "That there is hell."

* * *

In the short time that passed, Zachary gave up on trying to pierce through *Galilei's* upper hull to see what lay beneath.

Gerry pointed to the flattened slopes of the Base's port side. "This ambassador must have annoyed serious people in his time to be placed this far from Assayer." He pressed a blue pad. "Dock Twenty-Two. This is the *Muirne*, requesting permission to land on authority of Jordan Kade."

Zachary's throat smouldered. The Kade girl could be here.

"Consent granted," replied a stern voice over the speaker. "Tracker activated."

With the engines of the *Muirne* nearly silent, humming whirrs sounded as the ship nudged forwards in a smooth path into a rectangular opening.

"Zach," said Marcus. "Stay on the ship."

Zachary slumped into his seat. Any other day, he would have obeyed, but to let the chance to see this girl slip away was wrong. "Dad, please."

"*Stay*. It's no place for a boy. Look after the ship."

Choosing to stay silent, Zachary peered out into Dock Twenty-Two. Men and women in white suits zipped up to their necks, with full-on shades, walked by holding digital tablets. Everything was clean and polished.

Quiet gripped the *Muirne*.

They'd gone, and the ship hadn't been locked. Anybody could enter and leave. Lips pinched, he looked out of the cockpit. Gerry and his dad were heading toward a slope. Behind, six of the crimson men pushed a couple of large table-sized cylinders attached to rolling wheels.

The Kade girl's home had to be close. Maybe she'd come to the docking bay. How long does it take to clean a breach? Zachary thumped the seat's armrests. They'd never know that he'd left the ship. Stay low. Keep quiet. Sneak. Seize the opportunity.

He jumped up, darting to the rear section. Crimson jumpsuits lay on shelves, ready to be pinched. With one slipped on, he stuck down the rustling Velcro straps along his chest.

At first he inched down the ramp, then, back straightened for the short walk he headed to the slope. Not a single head face turned to question him. So far, so good.

A streak of light spread down the curving path, bringing a white glow to the grey walls. Staggering, blinking several times, Zachary edged onward. His fingers scrambled to undo the top two straps before his chest burst. With air so clean, his lungs struggled to contain the pleasure wafting through him.

Brighter light poured in around Zachary. His eyes shut in an instant. Slowly opening them, he begged for shade to absorb the daggers lancing into his head. Fighting the blurs, he spied the vast white, curved ceiling above him.

Overworld.

Advancing, not entirely sure of direction, his fingers felt tips of pointed wires. Zachary gazed down at the thousand blades of knee-high, green grass that he walked through. He touched the soft orange petal of a flower, and then tugged the stalk; it snapped. Guilt weighted his gulp, as he shoved the flower into his jumpsuit.

In a crowded region, crimson figures stood under cracks slicing into a horizontal section of the Base's edge. Fear-inducing vehicles, sporting tyres the size of Gerry, rolled past masking the actions of the *Muirne*'s crew. The prospect to sneak away was his.

A hundred feet from the cracked hull sat a well-structured building with wide-framed windows and covered in a pitch roof. From the size of the building, Zachary guessed there to be at least forty rooms inside. Timber posts propped up the balconies over wispy-leafed trees. A curved dome, large enough to match the one he'd seen on the Intercom recording, rose over the far side of the building. Finding the ground

underneath favourable, he dashed under the balcony toward the dome. On reaching the edge, he crouched and pulled open all six straps to air the sweat drenching his chest.

Zachary peeped into the dome. There was nobody dancing inside the elegant room. Empty. He pressed his ear against the glass. Not a single sound. No harps. No drums.

“What are you doing?” came a stern female voice.

Startled, Zachary spun round.

Several feet away stood a girl with straight, black hair.

Even without the blue tint, she resembled the girl from the Intercom.

Chapter 4 - Different

Hands clenched over her knee-length skirt, the girl stared.

Her green eyes tore through, silencing Zachary. Almost as tall as him, she was dressed in a flawless V-neck blouse, ironed with crisp lines. She possessed a sense of prestige that could bring the bartering camps to a standstill.

“*What* are you doing?” Her soft lips creased. She raised her finger at him. “I’m not going to ask again.”

Zachary’s back hit the dome.

The girl gestured toward the direction of the vehicles with large tyres. “Are you with the Pollutant-Demodifiers? Do you know how much my sleep was affected by the noise last night? Do you even care?” Her mouth formed each word with precision. “And tell the driver with the yellow hat that I find his greasy look abysmal. I’m surprised he hasn’t collapsed under his own weight.”

“No – I’m not,” said Zachary. He caught a glimpse of his dad throwing on a metallic jacket with two drill-heads attached along the shoulder pads. “What is a Polly-Demodi-feeler?”

“Are you kidding me? Pollutant-Demodifiers. The big truck things. They suck out Jupiter gases that have leaked through.” Releasing her hip, the girl back-stepped. “If you’re not with them, then who?” She raised her palm. “Is that smell ... you?”

Zachary sniffed the unpolluted air. “I don’t smell anything.”

“You don’t? You smell like an overflowing waste-vat.”

He saw her palm press down onto a side pocket. Had she alerted others to his presence? The glittering diodes on her wrist bracelet could be linked to a security terminal. Looking past her to the path he’d used to enter Overworld, he exhaled, hoping that none of those white-suited people rushed to his position.

Zachary pointed to the grinding noise coming from the direction of the breach. “I’m with the team brought in to clean the shell. I snuck away. I was only looking. I’ve never seen a house like this.”

“This far from Assayer?” Her fingers clicked in the air with a frown of realisation. “Yes – I know the city’s full of bigger houses and more flamboyant gardens, but we’re happy here, and if anyone asks about the Kades, you can tell them that we’re fine.”

That confirmed her identity.

The sweet thought he'd imagined of the girl disappeared fast. She didn't smile like the cheerful child of the hacked files, and her posture was rigid. She couldn't have been the same girl who'd danced in the dome.

"Do you have a sister?" he asked.

"*What?* No."

Zachary ground his teeth. "I shouldn't be here. I need to go back to the ship."

"Ship?" Her face screwed up. "What do you need a ship for? We're not that far from Assayer." She looked behind, up to a balcony. There was nobody there.

"Say," she said, coming a few steps closer to him. "You're not meant to be here. Right?" She lowered her voice. "Come with me. I want to talk to you."

The girl ran to the underside of her home.

What did she want to talk to him about? Did she know that Zachary had found her Intercom? How would she know that? Should he tell her?

To his side, the area around the cracked hull was busy. The path to the ship was clear, and nobody knew he was here. Five minutes and he'd be back in his comfy seat. Even though he'd been caught out by this girl, there wasn't an immediate risk to his safety. Instinct churned Zachary's stomach. He walked under her home, studying the connective-joints without a trace of rust visible. Standing beside a black screen attached to a wide pillar, she gestured to him to stand ahead of her.

"I'm Zachary," he said, shuffling his feet at the called-for spot.

"I didn't ask," snapped the girl. "Activate."

A thud fizzled above his head, then a dark shade materialised around him. He didn't have to think hard to realise that she'd led him into a trap. "Hey – let me out of here."

"Not until you've answered some questions, trespasser."

Zachary huffed. He should've known better than to trust a female. She was no different from the women of Underworld; charming the weak with their conniving promises is all they offered. And he'd fallen for it.

Fist tightened, he punched the edge of the near-invisible cell. A surge tickled his knuckles. He slammed another. This time a sharp jolt penetrated his arm.

"The harder you try, the more it'll hurt," announced the girl. "We've got fifteen of these dotted around to catch intruders, like you." Green eyes narrowed at him. "I'll start again. Who sent you? And don't you dare feed me any garbage about being with the repairers."

A circle gleamed overhead. That had to be the driver of the cell. Zachary reached for his screwdriver. *Damn!* It was in his coat pocket – at home. The lining of the crimson suit rustled under his curled fingers. She had him beat.

“This isn’t fair. You didn’t give me a chance,” he protested.

“I don’t care.”

Zachary gripped the air in front of his head. “My dad’s up there cleaning your infected shell. I was meant to stay on the ship in the docking bay below. You can go and check if you don’t believe me. I snuck out because I wanted to see,” he paused for a moment, “Overworld.”

“You’re from Underworld.” A stunned look filled her. “Nice try, snot-bag. Admit that you came here to finish off your game.”

She removed an Intercom, similar to the one he’d found in the box, from her skirt pocket. “I should have told mother and father when my Raptor was stolen. I saw you that night, sneaking around while I sat on the balcony. You got me with the smoke bombs in the fields. One lapse and my Raptor’s gone, but what I don’t understand is why you needed it before attacking us? There are no secret messages on there.”

“That wasn’t me.”

One crease dominated the others on her brow. “I don’t know why you do it, or what you actually think you gain by protesting in Assayer. My father has kept himself from politics and the city for years. What have we done to deserve this? Why did you want to kill us?”

Almost every muscle twitched on Zachary’s face.

“Hit a nerve, have I? Believe me, when General Sokolov, who happens to be very good friends with my father, gets hold of you ...” she sniggered. “There’s hardly enough skin on you to harm. They’ll probably mince your bones and eject you into outer space.”

“Do *you* think I caused this? Do I look like a pirate to you?” Not that he knew what they resembled. “If you want to, go and speak to my dad. Over there, with the drills. He’ll tell you where we’re from.” He kicked a pebble forward. It bounced back off the cell’s barrier-wall.

The girl studied him. “Thin. Very thin. Dirty.” Her weak guffaw strained. “You can’t be from Underworld. You’re not allowed. They’d never let your sort up here.”

“*My* sort? What do you mean by that?”

“I didn’t mean it like that.” She cleared her throat. “It slipped out.” For the first time, she looked uneasy. “It’s unheard-of for an Underworlder to be here, unless they thought it’d be too toxic for our own repairers.”

Thin fingers traced down the side of her skirt. Her fiery attitude crumbled into a wobbling lip. Her quiet voice struggled to leave her mouth. “I’ve been so stupid. I’m sorry.”

Zachary scanned the girl’s fragile frame. Her eyes remained fixed on hard soil. He understood her angst. If his home were attacked, he’d chase anyone who aroused suspicion. It was unfortunate that she’d found him.

“Forget about it,” he said. “Please let me out.”

She swiped her palm against the black screen on the pillar. “Deactivate.”

The dark shade around Zachary evaporated.

“I’ve been uptight ever since my Raptor was stolen, then the attack, and my parents arguing,” she said. “It’s been too much.”

“Because of the anniversary?” Zachary froze.

Her even, white teeth thrust from her jaw.

Think quick, thought Zachary. Deceit was a trick a scavenger knew well.

“You mentioned the anniversary.” Anxious muscles tightened within his chest as she shook her head. “You did ... you said it, earlier.”

She shook her head again, then sighed. “You really have no idea.”

“Should I?”

“My dad used to be an ambassador in Assayer – the capital of *Galilei* – that you’ve probably never seen, right?” She spoke to the pillar. “I can’t believe I’m talking to someone who hasn’t been to Assayer. Anyway, I don’t know the details, but he was kicked out, and we live here now. Miles from anyone.” She cleared her throat. “Sorry, deviated. What I meant was, although we are not in the city, everyone, I think, knows that we’re here.”

Her harsh tone had gone. “I’m Rosa.” She tugged the side of her skirt and curtsied. “Rosario Emily Kade, if Mother was listening.”

Somehow the name fit the elegance of her strong cheekbones.

Zachary gave the underside of her home one last look. “I better go back.”

“What’s it like ... down there?” asked Rosa.

How unusual that she wanted to know. Didn’t Overworlders look down onto them? Maybe they didn’t. It wasn’t like the ceiling had windows for viewers.

“It’s messy. If you took away the light, the grass, everything that makes your home special and chucked in years of waste and sewage, you’d have Underworld. There’s no space to live freely or to distance ourselves from the dirt we breathe. Then again, it’s not really dirt, or not to me.” He noted the beginning of a frown on her face.

“We’re like bugs under your feet, but we’re still human. Someone once told me that you can’t have anything worthwhile unless you have something worthless to compare it to. I suppose Overworld wouldn’t be the place it is without us.”

Rosa’s expression absorbed his words.

“My dad doesn’t do repair work like that – always. He works on the Far-Wall in District Two. It’s a place that allows oxygen to seep in to keep us alive.” Zachary pointed to a tree. “I thought they were all extinct.”

“What do you do down there?”

Was she taking interest in him?

“I’m a scavenger in the Wastelands, which is a million times worse than what I described about Underworld.” He realised that she might not understand the locations he named. “I hunt for things that get washed up and dropped into Underworld, to sell.”

“For money?”

“For anything. Money, food, electricity.” Zachary rubbed his head. “Maybe I shouldn’t be telling you this, or even talking to you. Dad will go mad at me.”

“Why would he be mad? For talking to me? Do you have rules against that?”

“Talking gets me into trouble.”

“It’ll be another hour before they finish cleaning the shell. Tell me more about the Wastelands.” She clasped her palms. “It’s been so long since I’ve spoken with another person. Well, I’ve got my parents and Alice, but not someone young. How old are you?”

Zachary gazed at the glimmer in her eyes. “Sixteen.”

Her hands unclasped and snapped back together aloud. “*Me too!* The first person I’ve met in years, and he’s the same age as me. You really can’t make these things up, can you?”

What did she mean by the first person? Didn’t Overworlders meet one another, or did they have so much time and space that people became an afterthought?

“I don’t know.” Zachary inched to the path they’d taken to reach here.

“What’s the fashion down there? Do you all dress alike? Are women treated equally, or is it a man’s world? Do you have to pay lots to travel into space, like save up for years and then watch it waste away with a click? I’ve got so many questions.”

Rosa’s excitement scared him. What devices could be recording them now? What if they were shown to his dad? Evidence.

He snapped his teeth tight. “Can you just shut up and let me go?”

Rosa scowled. “I get it. You don’t want to talk because you think that we’re too good to be seen with. You’d rather stumble in the shadows than accept that we’re not terrible.” The harsh tone crept back. “Mother says Underworlders consider us to be the real filth of *Galilei*. If you only tried to be more civilised then our worlds wouldn’t be so separated. We could actually live together like they used to before the Reckoning-Age.”

Zachary shook his head. From what he knew, the Reckoning-Age of three hundred years ago was the catalyst that saw exploration into space outweigh the need to calm the civil wars that flattened the old world.

“It was your people that shoved us down there.” He didn’t know that for sure. “In Underworld, we have to struggle to survive. You never have to worry about where your food comes from. You only have to worry about getting any. My dad has been working all day, and he’s tired ... but for your stinking money, he came to clean up your mess.”

“*Our* mess? We didn’t ask for *this*.”

Bracing his anger, Zachary thumped his thigh. “I shouldn’t have come here.”

“Yes – go back to washing in the sewage.”

Turning away rattled, Zachary rasped, “Hopefully next time the pirates will break through and leave your home in ashes. Then you’ll know how it feels to live in muck.”

Her fingers clicked causing him to turn.

Rosa slapped him. She jumped back, gasping.

Zachary clutched his cheek, unbelieving, as the sharp pain deepened. Seeing the slightest of movement is what saved scavengers from being buried under heaps of junk. Yet, here, without a hint of darkness, he’d been slapped by a girl.

“I shouldn’t have done that. I’ve never ...” Rosa paused. She removed her Intercom-transmitter again. “Take it. It’s another Raptor model. They’re worth a lot.”

“You’ll say I stole it off you.”

“No,” she cried. “Please.” Her ‘please’ was more like ‘sorry’.

The hinges were all in place and the shine on the device’s circular rim dazzled, even in the gloom under her home. As an attempt to make up for the slap, it’d do. Zachary snatched the Raptor.

“Goodbye,” she muttered.

A firm hand seized Zachary’s arm. He twisted, trying to release the vice-like grip. It didn’t budge.

“Alice,” said Rosa. “Let him go.”

Zachary stared into the pale face of a girl with hair cut in a bob. The black pupils of her white eyes shrank.

“Who is this?” asked Alice.

“A repairer.” Rosa lunged forward and took Alice’s hand off his arm.

Zachary pulled back to see the new female’s perfect white tunic and pressed trousers. He’d uncovered similar parts in the Wastelands. “A working bot.”

“An Intuitive-Assist Android.” Alice turned to Rosa. “Did he harm you?”

“No, he’s leaving.” Rosa led her bot by the hand, giving him space to pass.

Sighing, Zachary walked away from the structure. Several times, he almost looked back. Was she still there with her bot? A bot could alert others to his trespassing status. He quickened his pace through the grass.

The repair work hadn’t ended, and the path back to the docking-bay was clear. Zachary smiled at the motion of the Intercom bouncing in his pocket. Something good had come from the trip, though he was sorry it was not her. Because of four files, he’d thought she was different. Gentle. Considerate. Eyes rolling, he cursed under his breath how she’d brought distaste into his mouth. Zachary moistened his lips. Rosa Kade. She had a name. Part of him didn’t care. As far as Overworld was concerned, he was tired and disgusted of it.

“*Stop,*” came a voice.

Zachary spun, hands up.

Nobody. He scanned across the grass. There. A grey-suited man aimed a handgun, but not at him. He fired a pinging shot in the opposite direction from where Zachary was heading. In the distance, a man in green swayed before dropping into the grass.

“ROM member tagged on residential boundary,” said the shooter.

What in Europa! Zachary darted with his body bent forward and his neck aching to keep up. The grass offered little cover with his jump suit. How could red against

green hide him? What was ROM? Resisting the temptation to see if the grey-suited man had spotted him, Zachary charged down the slope. All the time, the walls darkened around him. His thoughts raced. Was that the person who had stolen the first Intercom?

“Whoa – steady,” cried a man wearing shades in the docking bay that Zachary barged into. “What’s the rush?”

Shivers ran along Zachary’s face. “I need to collect some bits from the ship.”

“Okay, but can you do it without treating this like a race circuit?”

Nodding, Zachary sprinted up the *Muirne*’s ramp. He threw off the jumpsuit, wondering at the ease with which the grey-suited man had fired. In Underworld, when not at the mercy of a gang, anyone who committed a theft would be questioned. That man was just shot. Taking a moment to absorb his goose bumps, Zachary collapsed into his seat.

If anyone asked, he never left the ship. He sat here staring at the buttons. But what if Rosa’s bot reported him? What about Rosa? And he had her bleeding Intercom!

Chills crushed his limbs as he ran to the rear of the ship. He crouched to peer beyond the ramp. People everywhere. A shadow moved through a crowd. It was a man in grey. Looking at him.

Zachary jumped up.

A blow hammered the back of his head. Staggering for a second, a rapid blur sucked his breath away.

Chapter 5 - No Place Like Home

As Zachary's eyes opened he lashed out with his arms.

He blinked at the flurry of lights streaming around him.

"Glad you could join us," smirked Marcus.

Zachary rubbed the sore lump on the back of his head. He'd been knocked out long enough for the repairs and the journey home to be completed.

Marcus shuffled in his seat. "What did I say about staying put?"

"I did. I just ... hit my head."

"You're lucky you weren't mistaken for a pirate."

"Yeah – lucky."

Ahead, IOTA's metallic end opened. Grinning as white smoke thrust out around the *Muirne's* cockpit, Zachary realised he'd exited Overworld without anybody noticing or questioning his sneaking away. Was the man who'd been shot the one who'd stolen the Intercom? If so, that made Rosa's home safe – didn't it?

He patted his chest, thinking of the rewards to come when her Intercom was handed in. Rough cotton from a vest met his fingers.

Zachary's tight seatbelt prevented him from jumping up. Belt unclipped, he froze at the frown from his dad. The last thing he needed was his dad following him to where the Intercom rested in the pocket of the jumpsuit he'd been wearing.

"I want to get one last look, before we leave," said Zachary.

Not waiting for a reply, he rushed down the corridor, decelerating to a walk at the sight of five men who sat playing cards. None of them wore their jumpsuits.

In the compartmentalised section, Zachary struggled to recall which of the five horizontal mounted shelves held the jumpsuit he'd borrowed. The landing feet of the *Muirne* clanged down, wobbling Zachary. Flicking his fingers over them, he ploughed through the jumpsuits. Sticky residue and chewing gum in some of the pockets irked him. Finally hard metal clicked against his fingernail.

"Are you all right?" Marcus's puffed put chest touched Zachary's shoulder.

Zachary hooked his hand over the Raptor Intercom. He slipped it into his jeans pocket. "I knocked over the suits accidentally." Kneeling, he replaced the suits back onto the shelf. "Did the repair go okay?"

Marcus scraped his neck stubble. “Took longer than we wanted. Fungal compounds had infected the metal right up to the hull’s edge. It would’ve burst through in a week.”

Hastily appearing, Gerry slapped Marcus on the back. “Come on – stay a bit longer? Crack open a few cans? The little one can join us. We might as well initiate him. What do you say? Came to IOTA as a boy, but left as a man.”

Marcus shook his head. “He’s not ready for that stuff. I’ll be hanging around for a bit, but I want you to go straight home,” he said to Zachary. “And don’t run. There’ll be nobody picking you up if you hit anything again.”

Zachary descended the ramp amidst white smoke gushing from the *Muirne*’s cooling-vents. Everything within the bay was the same as he’d last seen it several hours ago.

On approaching the gate, a heavy throb beat his eyelids. Walking backward through the exit, Zachary saluted IOTA. Darkness expanded as if Biro’s curtain had been cast upon him. The stagnant odour of District Two hit him harder than he expected.

He kicked a burnt tray into an open pipe, dried of waste. The tray’s base reflected a glimmer of light from the ceiling. Rosa had been determined to remind him of his status. She wouldn’t have lasted a second down here.

Outlines of people grew in the darkness ahead of Shantytown’s towers. A woman screamed in the distance, and dogs barked one after another until a chorus broke the whirring sounds of the District. No matter how late, there was never a trace of calm and quietness. No bright flowers. No waving trees. No grass to tickle his wrist.

Rather than take the long curving path, Zachary shaved fifteen minutes off his journey by pulling himself up the ridge to the outskirts of Shantytown. All of a sudden, a streak of light burst within the Wastelands. It stirred to the side then shrank back to its point of origin. Zachary saw a larger figure pull back a smaller person whose hair reflected the beam of the torch’s upward motion. The light switched off.

Where did they get a working torch from?

Thinking nothing more of them, Zachary turned into an alley with clear sight of his home. Payment from his dad’s job might be enough for them to purchase a flat higher up in the tower.

Inside, whiffs of putrid rabbit meat wrung Zachary’s neck. Flapping at the stench, he suddenly felt overwhelmed by it. With the pan in hand, he rushed over to the door. Outside, he swivelled on the spot preparing to throw the rancid meat. He didn’t stop

swivelling. His mind saw the decrepit walls of Shantytown giving way to glass panels showing the wondrous gas bands of Jupiter. Music played. Harps. Drums. Cymbals. The pattering of feet.

Zachary stopped. What was he doing?

Sinking his arm a little, he flung the rabbit meat out of the pan. It disappeared into the darkness. Someone would find use for it.

Door shut, he walked past the silent Haulage-404 droid. “Night, Patch.”

Zachary slithered under the blanket on his bed. He glazed up at the crisscrossing pipes in the ceiling. His room, half the size of his dad’s, was big enough for a single person. For the first time, it felt cramped. He wondered how big each room was in the Kade residence.

On turning, the Intercom pressed into his hip. He pulled it up. It seemed perfect. She didn’t need to tell him that the Raptor was worth a lot; it was obvious. It was rare. No – a perfect Intercom was incomprehensible, and that would arouse suspicion from the stall. Zachary groaned. Keeping it would prevent him from cashing in. Plenty of money, thanks to Gerry’s job, was on its way, but he wanted to show his dad how good he’d become at scavenging.

Looking at the reflective lid, he examined his hazel eyes and sunken cheeks. He found it peculiar that not even darkness could hide the state of his cracked lips.

The conversation with Rosa flashed in Zachary’s head. He had to hand it to her. She had guts speaking to a stranger in that manner. A thought released itself as a gasp. Rosa didn’t have everything. She was a lonely child with nobody to speak to – until he’d come along.

And the slap? She didn’t mean to hurt him – right?

Zachary flicked the Raptor’s lid open. Would there be another diary entry that could save the innocent imagery of a girl? He pushed his thumb onto the recognition pad. The circular pattern along the upper screen failed to light. Red text revolved midair.

“Password _ _ _ _.”

Did it want four letters, numbers or a combination? There was no such thing as passwords in Underworld. Clicking his teeth, he considered the options.

“Rosa,” said Zachary.

The red text flashed. “Incorrect. Password _ _ _ _.”

“Kade.”

“Incorrect. Password _ _ _ _.”

How many words could he associate with her?

“Home.”

“Incorrect attempts exceeded. Please try again in one hour.”

He closed the lid. Why had she locked the Raptor? Its value was now halved, maybe less. Zachary kicked his leg against the wall. Pushing the Intercom under his pillow, he sighed.

The Bombay core-generator would be running again once his dad paid the Resourcers. Perfect timing to use Patch to hack into Rosa’s Intercom.

No – he’d damage it again.

Zachary made up his mind.

Tomorrow he would sell the Intercom.

Chapter 6 - Drafted

An object clattering outside woke Zachary.

He spread his fingers. Sinking deeper into the pillow, he considered that only a few hours must have passed since his eyes closed. He needed more sleep. Light through the cracks of his wall seemed brighter than normal.

Wait! Zachary shot upright. I'm late.

He scrambled off his bed. Heaving yesterday's mug of water down his dry throat, he spilt a cold quantity down his neck. No time to change into a less mucky vest. He took the Raptor Intercom, peered at Marcus's empty bed, grabbed his coat, then sped to the door.

Being late to the stall was punishable with being assigned to clean the outbuildings or sent to scavenge on the debris-islands of Black Lake. He could avoid the penalties if he handed in the Intercom. Sure, they'd question the perfect state of the device, but he could come up with a simple lie. If a weird android could be found in the Wastelands, so could a Raptor.

Zachary's stomach grumbled at each turn in the maze of streets until he crashed into a chain of people at the bartering camps. Weaving through the crowd, he spied the smirks upon the three bullish men outside Biro's stall.

"Why would anybody admit to seeing an android like that?" asked a voice.

"They've probably skinned it and sold its parts."

Zachary twisted, hitting the motion of people. He skipped to the side and saw a large man standing over a smaller woman. She scraped back black hair to reveal perfect brown skin. In no way could she be from District Two. And the man, built like a Haulage-404 with muscles bulging along his neck, made the bullish men of the stall look weak.

Were they the two with the torch that he'd seen last night?

"We can't give up this easily," murmured the woman.

"If Carell finds out we're here ..."

The woman interrupted, "I know. But someone knows something." Her gaze turned into a stare at Zachary.

Zachary jolted his eyes over her, and feigned a wave into the distance. Turning on the spot, he considered her comment. The second step he intended to make vanished as a powerful hand pushed him against a hut.

“Hey,” cried Zachary, trying to unbolt the forearm rammed under his chin.

The woman patted the large man’s grip off him. “What do you know?” she said. Up close, the same height as him, her lips appeared smooth.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. You’re not from here, are you?” replied Zachary.

“Has anybody down here come across an android covered in synthetic tissue?” continued the woman.

“Androids have rubber, if that’s what you mean?” replied Zachary. Did Biro’s android belong to them? Were they from Overworld? “Are you collectors?”

The man placed his hand on the woman’s shoulder. “Leave it. He doesn’t know anything. He’s just a boy.”

With that, both figures darted into the crowd. Zachary wondered if they were from a rival stall, but still, they didn’t appear to be residents of District Two. Maybe they’d found a part of the android and were trying to make a worthwhile deal from it.

Shrugging, Zachary ran to Biro’s stall.

Inside the room lit by a single candle, Shekhar stood leaning on a pedestal. He stopped writing on a register and looked over his cracked spectacles.

“You’re late. By a full hour and thirty-three minutes.”

“My dad –”

Shekhar interrupted. “Does your dad work for us? No – he doesn’t, so I don’t care how he made you late. Make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

Was that it? A warning? Zachary expected more. He turned, fists clenched in hope he could catch any hidden thugs awaiting the command to jump on him.

Shekhar’s skeletal, scowling voice rattled out. “You impressed Master with yesterday’s bracelet. He’s taken a liking to you.”

“I’ll find something better.” The Intercom could wait.

“Wait,” called Shekhar. “Step forward.”

Inhaling, Zachary did as ordered.

An unknown boy moved out of the darkness ahead of him. Taller by a few inches, with short-as-grain hair, the boy hunched, keeping his shoulders low. Confidence lacked in his stagger around the pedestal.

Shekhar motioned with an uninterested tone. “Diego, Zachary. Zachary, Diego. Zachary will introduce you to the Wastelands.”

“*What?*” cried Zachary.

“And the drops. Teach him well. He’s new to this.”

“That’s not my problem. I hunt on my own.”

Zachary glared at the boy’s ankle-length coat, and ripped trainers. He’d never seen a more ill-equipped scavenger. Wherever the boy had come from, he showed a lack of knowledge about running through toxic swamps. And he must be nineteen or twenty; way too old. Scavenging was taught young, and improved with experience.

“Can’t someone else teach him?”

“No.” Shekhar studied the register.

Zachary rubbed his hand down the outside of his coat. Slamming the Intercom onto the pedestal might be his only chance of forfeiting the punishment.

“Has he got any tools?”

“He’ll have to find his own like you did. Get going. Time is tick-tock-ticking.”

There was little point in arguing with the secretary. Zachary moved to the exit, feeling the warm closeness of the new recruit’s breath on him.

The crowd ahead was perfect to lose Diego in. “Keep up.”

“So, your dad made you late?” asked the recruit.

Zachary threw him a gritted-teeth look. “None of your business, Deego.”

“It’s Diego. Dee-A-Go. Diego Reyes. I’m from District Four.”

“I don’t care.” Zachary ignored the blunt finger-nailed hand that was thrust out. “Do you know anything about scavenging?”

“Some. Not much.” Diego’s words dragged out in a husky sigh. “The Deluge, as we call it, is thin on the border of our town. It’s not worth going into.”

“That’s great, but a simple *no* would’ve been enough.” Zachary pointed to the ridge ahead. “We’ll climb down to the Wastelands. I’ll show you the bits you go into and the bits you avoid. What you do there is up to you.”

“You’re going to leave me?”

“I’m not going to hold your hand while you scavenge.”

“I go where you go. I’m a fast learner.” Diego’s hand pressed on Zachary’s shoulder. “I won’t get in your way.”

Zachary shook him off. “Do you see a bag on me? Huh? A trolley that I cart around? No? And you know why? Because I don’t like baggage. Nobody does around here. *I hunt alone*. Out here, it’s a bug-eat-bug world, and in the Wastelands, the bugs don’t ask for permission before ripping into your skin. The sooner we’re done, the better.”

“So, it’s that way to the Wastelands, right?” The recruit’s cheek tensed before he marched past, swaggering side-to-side. No tools and no experience ... he didn’t belong here.

That sounded familiar. Zachary shook his head, realising that someone else had thought of him in the same manner. Rosa. She didn’t think that his sort belonged in Overworld. Outsiders. Unwelcome. However, her view made sense. She’d formed a guard for protection because she didn’t know him. Whether Diego was from District Four or Three, he was still an Underworlder, even if his flared jeans made him look silly.

Zachary caught up to the recruit. Walking in awkward silence until the furore of noise diminished from the camps, they left the last line of huts. Terraced hills of hardened material cascaded downward to the Wastelands.

“Why did you come here?” asked Zachary.

“Money. Rent in District Four is costly. Forty Leo-coins a week.”

“You came all this way just to make money?”

The recruit’s eyes fluttered. “My mom can’t afford much, and my sister’s ... not well. She’s ... It’s complicated.”

Not wanting to push the recruit’s story, Zachary climbed down the first set of hills. “I hate to tell you but making money around here is tough.”

“Anything’s better than nothing.” Diego’s husky tone sounded well-taught. “I paid the stall thirty-Leos to give me some work.”

Zachary pulled him back. “You paid *them*?”

“Whatever I make, I’ll send as much back to my family as I can.”

“Fine. First thing you’ll need is a screwdriver or some pliers. I’ll take you to a trader if you don’t find any, but they aren’t cheap. And you’ll need a shorter coat unless you want to catch yourself on some nasty stuff.”

Diego’s smile exposed well-aligned teeth. Indeed, the District Four Underworlders looked after themselves.

“Have you scavenged long?” asked the recruit.

Zachary’s boots scraped against the last wall to the lower level. “Since I was eight. My dad didn’t care what I did then. He does now. He wants me to pack this in and join him at the Far-Wall, but that’s not happening. Standing still in one spot. Digging. Forget it.” Demonstrating a stubborn side to a new face thrilled Zachary. He felt

important. “After five days of learning, I was out on my own. I’ve snuck through more pipes than a rat.”

Diego’s palm slapped over his nose and mouth.

Zachary chuckled. “Not used to the smell, are you?”

“It’s much cleaner where I come from.”

“I bet it is.” He waved his hand in the air. “Time to start your first shift. Head down, eyes sharp, and keep me in sight.”

“And the drop?”

Zachary looked for particle-infested vapour under the ceiling’s glowing diodes. None of the lines of smoke indicating locations of impact were present. There hadn’t been a drop today.

“When the turbines turn, get to me quick.”

Caution marked Diego’s steps between the mounds of rubble. “I know you don’t want to be here, but thanks. I promise to return the favour when the time comes.”

Zachary watched the recruit sink further into darkness until only a grey outline remained. Although he’d broken his rule of hunting alone, he was aware that an odd feeling had surfaced. Had he made a friend?

Shut up. I hardly know the guy.

Half an hour later, they regrouped between two ridges. Screws and corded wires of different sizes poured out of Zachary’s pockets. He gestured smudged fingers at the recruit.

Diego placed, and undid, a weighty damp bag on Zachary’s palm. Small thumb-sized balls rolled into his palm, clunking as they collided. There were three silver ones, four blue ones, and several decorated with squiggled patterns.

“Oh my days,” said Zachary. He bit onto a hard silver ball. Cold tingles surged over his tongue followed by a light metallic taste. “Marbles. *This* is the rarest of the rare. Each one must be worth – at least – ten Leos.”

“One hundred and ten,” gasped Diego. “We’ll share it. You take five –”

“*Share?*” Zachary’s throat almost ruptured. “You never share your prize.” He thrust the bag forward. “If I were desperate, even then I wouldn’t.”

Stunned, Diego took the bag. “If I weren’t here, you might have found it.”

“Stop thinking like that. You’ll get walked over if you act like this with anybody else. Don’t make me hate you.”

Zachary's right-side pocket shuddered. What? The Raptor? He turned his body, slapping the vibrating pocket. Who could be contacting him? Rosa? Her parents? Had she notified the authorities? It'd been her idea for him to take the Intercom. Had she tricked him? Zachary bit his lower lip, knowing that he couldn't claim that he'd found the Intercom. Her bot had seen him. Bots could record things. Walking processors. She'd confirm that he'd been there – below her home.

The vibrating stopped.

"Are you okay? You look like you've seen a ghost," said Diego.

Zachary swallowed, keeping his hand over his pocket.

The Raptor vibrated again.

He wondered if his effort to unlock the Intercom earlier had sent a signal to alert others. The Intercom stopped vibrating. How long before it started again? Whoever it was, they'd continue their attempt until somebody answered it.

"I have to go," muttered Zachary.

"Go?" Diego stepped forward. "Where?"

"I forgot ... to pass a message on. I have to go."

"What?" spluttered Diego. "Is it because of the marbles? I'm sorry."

"No – not the marbles. Go back to the mounds and wait for me. I won't be long."

He dashed away. "I'll be back."

That was enough. Darting without stopping, Zachary ran for a minute. He reached the overhanging bank with the abandoned vehicles.

As predicted, the Raptor vibrated with blue lights encircling a green and a red circle on the Intercom's outer shell. Clutching the Intercom close to his face, he gulped. A moment of panic seized him. No need to answer; he could smash it.

Hand shaking, Zachary tapped the green circle.

"Hello," he croaked.

Chapter 7 - Fail

High-pitched rattling escaped the Raptor Intercom.

Fearing face-melting shards bursting onto him, Zachary dropped the device, muffling its crackling on the ground.

“Are you there?” came a masculine voice as Zachary grasped the Raptor.

His eyes darted over the dusty scratches on the outer shell. There was no name or detail to identify the caller. He didn’t have to respond. Control rested in his hands.

“Zachary?” said the Intercom. “Can you hear me?”

Scraping skin off his chapped lips with his teeth, he paused. “Hello.”

“Thank God,” crackled the device. “I thought you might have sold it already.”

“Who is this?”

“It’s me, Rosa,” expressed the Intercom, surprised that he’d dared to raise the question. “Do I really sound that different on these things?”

Zachary frowned at the Intercom. Had he damaged it whilst moving? It should have been perfect. Why the static damage?

“You sound like you’re in the middle of a turbine,” he said.

“Middle of a turbine?” murmured the deep voice. “Oh, I get it. Shake the Raptor. Either the receptors haven’t adjusted to your location, or maybe it doesn’t work down there. Do you have contact devices there?”

He shook it for five seconds.

Rosa’s voice returned to its gentle tone on the last shake. “Any better?”

“Yes.”

“Where were you? I called twice before.”

Her questioning shook Zachary’s squatted posture. His brow relaxed with a tingling sensation, forcing him to smile. He had demoted their meeting to being the one time that they’d speak together; yet, here they were, speaking again.

“I was busy,” replied Zachary.

“*Scavenging?*” stressed Rosa.

“I was with –” There was no need for her to know about the recruit. “There were others near me, and I didn’t want them to see it.”

Static masked her comment. He shook the Intercom again.

“You didn’t answer my question,” whined Rosa.

“What question?” His jaw dropped.

“Why have you still got the Raptor?” Rosa giggled. “I thought you’d be desperate to sell it.”

“I am,” he replied, asserting belief. “I’ll do it later. I didn’t want to hand it over before I’d spent a day in the Wastelands. They’d get suspicious. Ask questions.”

“Shrewd move.”

A fearful thought jerked Zachary. What if the Raptor vibrated at the moment he placed it into Shekhar’s scrawny hands? “You mustn’t call me again.”

“I know. I won’t. I just had to, because ...” her tone dipped, “I shouldn’t have given you the Raptor. It was a mistake. I know I can’t have it back, so don’t shout at me. But my parents, they’ll know something isn’t right.” Her words quickened. “I had two Raptors. I didn’t tell them that my first was stolen. I just replaced it with my backup. When I tell them that I’ve lost one, they’ll tell me to use the other. But I can’t, because you’ve got it. They’re going to be so mad at me. They *will* want to know why I didn’t tell them.”

“I don’t understand why they would care? You can get another. You’re an Overworlder. You’ve got money.”

“It’s not that simple. Mother never wanted me to get a Raptor in the first place. She never saw the point in them. It’s not like I have friends or anybody to call. After a while, Father gave in, but he always warned me to be careful. I had strict instructions about using it, and I’ve broken every single one of them.”

“How are you calling me?”

“I’m using my mother’s now. I’ll have to wipe this call afterwards.”

Zachary scowled. “Lie to them. Tell them that the first one stopped working. You dropped it, and the battery cell broke. And when they ask about the second, say it didn’t work. I’ve heard people say that things can burn out if they’ve never been activated. You know, past its use-by-date. Say your bot checked the Raptor and it’s a dud. Will your bot lie for you?”

“Course she will. And her name’s Alice.” The speakers sounded like her teeth were chattering. “I think that could work.”

Zachary smiled. “Remember, it’s only an Intercom. It’s not alive. It’s an object. If your parents do find out about it being stolen, won’t they be glad that you’re safe?”

Rosa sighed. “You’re right. God knows what the thieves are doing with the one they stole.”

“Don’t worry about it. My droid broke it into pieces.”

“What?”

The sharp tone cut him deep. Zachary rolled his eyes wondering why he spoke to her. He didn't owe her an explanation. One press and the Raptor would shut off. The choke that Rosa's silence caused didn't loosen. “You won't believe this.”

“Try me,” came her flat voice.

“I found it in the drop, yesterday.”

“The drop?”

“Drops come from the ceiling that would be your underground, or something like that. That's how things end up in Underworld. They get dropped here.” Zachary considered that explanation would suffice. “Your Intercom was in a metal box. There was a Harmon bracelet inside with the Intercom.” He imagined two narrowed eyes cursing him. “I swear that I had nothing to do with it being stolen.”

“You're lying.”

“I know it looks as if I stole it, and that I came back to steal something else. I get that. That's what some scavengers do when they find a rewarding spot. But I'm asking you to trust me. I didn't steal it.”

No reply. Not a sound.

A tinny hum convinced Zachary that she hadn't disconnected the call.

“The thief left a message in the box. It said something about the location being right and Project Century.”

“Centurion,” said Rosa.

“Yeah – that's it.”

Her breaths crackled out of the Raptor. “What else did it say?”

“Nothing.” Zachary screwed his mouth. Why had she reacted in that manner on a single word? What was the significance of it?

“Anyway,” he continued. “When my dad told me about his job at the Kade residence, I went along.”

“The note mentioned my name?”

Zachary closed his eyes, wondering why he couldn't shake off the honest sense of responsibility inside him. “My droid hacked your Intercom and found your surname.”

“I can't believe this.”

“I was curious.”

“No – not you. *Them*. The thieves. It’s all connected. The theft. The attack. It’d been planned. They’ve been watching us. Waiting. Stinking protesters that won’t let go of the past,” said Rosa.

What did she mean about the past?

“What do the protesters want?” asked Zachary.

“I don’t care. All they care about is upheaval. Changes to suit them. Rule-breaking. They don’t understand anything about *Galilei*.” Rosa groaned aloud. “If I’d told Father, he could have done something to stop them. We would have been prepared.”

“But you’re alive. They only damaged the outer shell.”

“And next time? And the time after that? Don’t you get it? They were testing us. Finding the weak spots. They’ve probably recorded how long it took for Father’s security to respond, and how we cleared it up. What if they use a bigger ship next time? Bombs? Or they just come straight for my home?”

Rosa sniffled. “I have to tell my father when he returns from Assayer.”

Zachary’s fingers curled around the warm Raptor, regretting the truth he’d told. “You won’t tell him about me, will you?”

“No, I won’t. You said you hacked in, and I have to be careful that you don’t do that again. I need you to wipe this Raptor’s memory. I should have done it before giving it to you. *Stupid me*.”

“As in clear the memory?” Zachary counted the Leo-coins disappearing if he handed in a damaged Intercom. “My droid hacked your first one because it was damaged. This one’s still password locked.”

“Come on,” moaned Rosa. “Since when did a password stop a hacker? Hang on, am I on the speaker? Are you alone? Like alone-alone?”

“Yeah. Just me.”

“Interesting. Hold the Raptor up by your face. Squeeze the black ridges on the lower case. It’s underneath. You can’t miss them. An image that resembles a blue face will appear. Press it.”

“What will that do?”

“You asked me to trust you, well, now it’s your turn. Do it. Please.”

Zachary absorbed her final word. Nobody in Underworld used it. He couldn’t recall the last time his dad had used it either.

The glow of the Intercom showed the necessary ridges to squeeze. A blue circle with two eyes and an upturned mouth hovered above the upper screen. He pressed it.

His palm itched at the circular lights intensifying. In midair, Rosa's perfect face materialised. How he wished he could remove the blue tint.

Zachary's heart beat fast when her eyes flicked around. "Can you see me?"

Rosa squinted. "Stop ruffling your hair. You're only making it worse. It's so dark. Are you in a cave?"

"Kind of. I shouldn't do this. It's dangerous. If anybody catches me ..."

Rosa's hair hung straight with a sloped wave across her brow as she looked aside. "I thought I'd see something I recognised, other than your face. Everything seems empty. Like a blank page that's been painted black."

"It's not all empty. We have piles of things out there."

Rosa grinned. "I meant empty metaphorically."

Zachary nodded, pretending to understand.

Her lips rehearsed without sound. "Are you always alone? Do you have any friends?"

"Just Patch. My Haulage-404 droid."

"That's kind of like me and Alice."

"No way. Patch's got one arm, no legs, and one working eye. He's just good at decorating our wall at home. I turn him on, now and again."

Rosa face squirmed. "A part-time friend then."

"*Zachary!*" yelled a husky voice. Diego. He sounded close.

Pinning himself against an overturned digger, he peered outward. He couldn't let the recruit see him with the Raptor.

Zachary grimaced. "I have to go."

Rosa's face shuddered. "What's wrong? Is there someone coming? You look like you're about to cry."

Diego's voice rang out again. Closer.

Zachary clenched his teeth. "Can you still call me if I wipe the memory?"

"Not if you're going to act like this. What have I done? I thought we were getting along." Rosa sat back, spreading her arms. Her buttoned shirt stretched across her shoulders.

"You haven't done anything."

"Then why the hurry to wipe the memory?"

"Because you want me to, don't you?" he snapped.

“Fine. The password is FAIL. F. A. I. L. Go to the Settings screen and enter that code again in the Memory Reset Section. That’ll wipe the memory and deactivate the locator beacon.”

Zachary stuttered. “You have a locator beacon in here?”

“All Intercoms do.”

His hand trembled around the Raptor. It could be transmitting his position at this very moment. “Who knows I’ve got this?”

“No one, apart from me and Alice. We haven’t notified anybody of it being missing. It’s not like patrollers are going to storm in.”

“Patrollers?”

“Stop worrying about it.”

“*Stop worrying?* I shouldn’t be speaking with you.” Zachary looked through the cracks of the vehicles. Where was the recruit?

“I shouldn’t have called.” Rosa shut her eyes. “Just wipe the Raptor. Wipe it.”

Her arm bolted forward, and then the blue haze of her figure disappeared.

She was gone.

Weakened warm sensations pulsed under Zachary’s thumb as he pushed the Raptor against his cheek. Had he overreacted? Rosa asked him to trust her. She said that she hadn’t activated the locator beacon, but she should have told him about the locators at the start.

“There you are,” announced Diego, skidding to a halt next to the vehicles.

Heart lunging from his chest, Zachary yelped. He rammed the Intercom into his coat pocket.

Diego waved his tar-mucked hands. “Where have you been?”

“I told you. I had to see someone.” Zachary left the vehicles.

“What, here?” queried Diego, looking back to the rusty stack.

“Someplace else. It doesn’t matter. I’ve been to see them.” Zachary changed the subject. “Find anything else?”

As if on cue, the ceiling-embedded turbines spun clockwise. He patted Diego’s arm to observe the jutting domes. Two other turbines, a hundred metres from those above, spun. Within seconds, ten more joined in, adding to the increased vapour of particles.

“How many drops a day are there?” asked Diego.

Unease chilled Zachary. “Usually one.”

Triangular sections of the ceiling, one by one, ejected downward sending multiple wide beams of light into the Wastelands. Bewildered, Zachary covered his eyes, peering upward. Was this a malfunction?

“It’s everywhere,” he said, pointing to the sections beaming down beyond the hills into the residential areas.

Tiny shapes, clustered to the centre, rolled out of the ceiling. They scattered further apart. Floating closer, their nature became clear; sheets of paper.

“This isn’t normal,” remarked Zachary, clasping the first sheet within reach.

The light from above slimmed to darkness as the triangular sections rose back to the ceiling, but Zachary read enough to bring goose bumps up all over his neck.

“Districts One to Four to be evacuated.”

Chapter 8 - Delete

Labourers from the Far-Wall mixed within the frantic crowd in the bartering camp. Even they hadn't escaped the paper drop.

Inside the stall, Shekhar's head jerked like a wrenched bolt toward Zachary. "You're back too? Is everyone striking because of some sick joke? Fine, give me your stuff and get out of here. I expect double off you all tomorrow."

Diego submitted the bag of marbles. Sparkles off the contents almost distracted Zachary from the object beside Shekhar's heel. A decapitated human head. Letting other scavengers pass him, Zachary lowered his gaze a little. That had to be a part of Biro's android. Light brown skin with curled black hair, and no eyes.

Shekhar knocked a marble on the pedestal. "Either you got lucky, or Mister Connor's taught you well. You'll get your reward tomorrow, once I've assessed everything. Okay, everybody leave." He bent down and picked up the head.

Diego struggled for breath. "What is that?"

Shekhar held it up. "An android."

"But, it looks ..." began Diego, then shut his mouth.

Shekhar shook the head. "Repulsive? But worth a lot if we get more of these." Descending the barrel-steps, his voice trailed. "Try not to have nightmares."

Zachary stood behind the recruit. "Are you okay?"

Diego's tongue slithered over his lips. "Yeah. I ... I didn't think Overworld could do that. They're not meant to – are they? There are laws."

"There're probably laws about not doing paper drops. I'll see you tomorrow."

Diego seized his arm. "You're not a bad person. Thanks for today."

So used to being termed a boy, Zachary felt showered with responsibility from the recruit's words. "We're scavengers. Don't get all sweet with me."

* * *

Paper-fuelled fires within dugout pits lit the streets of Shantytown. Zachary ducked under the specks of tinged ash floating in the air. From afar he'd noticed the glow from the lantern inside his home.

Two well-built men sat around the table, with Marcus leaned against the partition wall. A mound of paper rested on the stove. All nodded to acknowledge Zachary's entry.

Juan, his dad's Far-Waller friend, rattled his knuckles on the table. As always his black hair looked slick. "It was never like this the last time."

This has happened before, thought Zachary, removing his coat.

He accepted the "leave-the-room" signal from his dad, and moved to his bedroom. Stopping before he reached his bed, but out of sight of his dad, he listened.

Marcus grumbled. "You make it sound like it happens all the time. Nine years ago, Juan. We had two days of papers dropping out of the ceiling. And what happened? Nothing. They dropped. They stopped."

"And you still think it's because Overworlders don't like the way we live?" asked Gavin, who slurred his words between his bulging lips. Always known for getting involved in a brawl, he'd often leave with the greater amount of injuries. "I don't understand why it bothers them. We live down here, out of their way, never getting involved in their business. We make homes out of their waste, and clean the vents. They need us to stop the Base from becoming a stinking pot."

"This is just a sick joke of propaganda aimed at disrupting us," added Marcus.

"What if you're wrong, Connor? What if they mean it this time?" said Juan.

Marcus lowered his tone. "Think about it. Districts One to Four. How would you move everybody, and to where?"

Zachary heard paper crumple.

"No dates. No time. Nothing. District Five, if they've got any sense, will be locking down their borders. Gavin, you've been to Five. You know how proud they are. And don't get me started on IOTA. Their ships. Their stock."

"Say what you want, I'm going to leave. I got three small children and a wife who pesters and I don't want to be around when the IOTians pile in." Juan raised his voice. "No, Marcus, listen to me. They're going to expand *Galilei*, and we are in their way. We're just waste to them that needs pushing out of the way."

Marcus said what Zachary thought. "Who will clean the Far-Wall for them?"

"Every so often, machines take over what we do anyway." Juan sounded weary. "They'll use them. We don't know what the big men up there do. They might have droids to do all the digging, and you know what, it wouldn't surprise me if the ground opened up and emptied the waste into space."

"Okay, break it up. We need to get going or we'll miss the start," said Gavin.

Marcus turned the corner, catching Zachary's feeble attempt to jump back. "There's a meeting with the Far-Wallers. I won't be long. There are two rats on the stove. Cook

them well.” Marcus cocked his head to the rear of their home. “The Bombay’s maxed up, but don’t waste it.”

“Dad, what if it’s true?”

Marcus’s large fingers stroked the back of Zachary’s head. “We’re not going anywhere. This is the home I built, and one day it’ll be yours.” His dad paused. “And I don’t want to be carrying that heap-of-metal droid of yours through the streets.”

Zachary waited on his bed for the three to leave.

Like Shekhar, his dad sounded so sure of the drop being nothing more than a trick. How could he disagree with two Underworld veterans?

Zachary peered through the bedside cracks in the wall. The streets weren’t overflowing with people carrying their belongings. Tilting back onto his pillow, he rubbed the faint scrapes on the Raptor’s upper screen.

Rosa’s order was simple. He understood her reasons, though disobedience strengthened within him. How odd that she annoyed and intrigued him in the same breath?

Will she call again? Guilt shivered his spine at the thought of using her password. She wouldn’t know; nobody would, but then why did he feel like he was breaking an unbreakable rule?

Zachary left his bed and snuck a look at the five powered LEDs on the Bombay. His fingers shook as he thrust the energy-tube into the Haulage-404 droid.

Charged energy rippled inside Patch’s chest. “W-w-what is this?” The first Intercom clattered out of the droid’s opened hand. “I haven’t felt this g-g-good since I was last ch-ch-charged in the Contracting F-f-facility. I feel as if every part of me has been reconnected.”

“The generator’s maxed out, but that doesn’t matter. This does.” Zachary showed Patch the new Raptor. “The girl, the one we saw in the Intercom, gave me this.”

“Gave?” Patch’s deep tone showed suspicion. “You have seen her?”

“Dad had a job with Gerry at her home.”

The droid grumbled. “And you tagged along.”

“I had a chance to see her. I had to go.”

“No. You did not have to go. Why did the Kade girl give you her Intercom?”

“She felt sorry for me. Listen, she wants me to wipe the memory, but I don’t want to, because if I do, I’ll never hear from her again.”

Patch’s head tilted. “Hear from her?”

“She called me.”

“After your visit to her home?”

Sitting down on a chair, Zachary massaged his brow. “Her name’s Rosa.”

“Did Rosa Kade call to converse or to have her device’s memory wiped?”

“To have it wiped.”

“Then I am not needed to calculate the probability of her calling again.”

Zachary squeezed the Raptor. “But what if she does?”

“If she does, she will not be impressed by its continued active state.”

Feeling the stretch of his neck after his thick gulp, Zachary sighed. “I hate you sometimes.”

Patch’s single shoulder shrugged. “Likewise.”

The Raptor in Zachary’s hand beeped three times. Was that Rosa? He stared at the red message running along the upper screen. “MOSD IN PROGRESS”. The Intercom beeped again. “WARNING. REMOVE BLOCKS. PENALTIES WILL BE DEALT. REMOVE BLOCKS.”

Zachary held the Intercom to the droid.

Patch’s eye glowed brighter. “MOSD. Matter of Security Deletion. I have not seen that for eighty-nine years.”

“What is it?” stammered Zachary.

“Techniques utilised to cross-search and eradicate information considered a high-priority risk.” Patch shook his finger. “I would not be concerned with the penalty warning. It can only track back to the registered owner of the device. Rosa Kade. Her method of interference-blockage will not last. Unless protocols have changed, the MOSD requester will force a harsh delete to invade.”

“I didn’t understand a word you said.”

Zachary stared at the replaying message. What did Rosa have on her Intercom of importance? She’d said it was for her personal recordings.

“Opening message to eradicate,” whirred a voice from the Intercom.

“That is the harsh delete,” observed Patch.

A blue-tinted image burst into the air of two men separated by a vertical line. The man on the left appeared familiar. With swept back hair, his tight-skinned face looked down. He knocked back a large mouthful of fluid from a thumb-sized glass.

Rosa’s dad.

On the right sat an older man with receding hair, and a mole under his right eye. His stare remained sharp as he spoke, “You’re not confident with me?” The tone imitated the powerful accent of the Russian family across the street. “Bickering will stand in the way of progress.”

“Article 39a is entrenched in our foundations,” said Rosa’s dad.

“When did we let laws stop us? The House of Representatives still holds you in high regard, and will reinstate you, if you want.”

“The Integrated Confederation won’t look kindly.”

The Russian smirked. “They will see how we have moved on from the past.”

Her dad’s tone grew serious. “What you’re asking for was never part of the deal. It goes beyond what any reasonable man would do. I need more time.”

“We don’t have that, Jordan.” The Russian’s fist slammed down onto a table, sending a ping through the speakers.

“I’ve had nine years, Sokolov. What could go wrong if another day passes?”

Was that the same Sokolov that Rosa had mentioned?

“Everything,” replied the Russian.

The recording scrambled before switching off.

“MOSD deleted,” said the harsh delete. “You will be contacted with regards to the terms and conditions of use, and the inappropriate use of interference-blockers. Thank you and have a nice day.”

Rosa had intercepted an important conversation involving her dad. Either Jordan Kade or General Sokolov had authorised the removal of the conversation. What kind of progress did Sokolov fear would be delayed? Could it be connected to the paper drop? Article 39a? The Integrated Confederation? The House?

“What does ‘reinstate’ mean?” asked Zachary.

“To re-establish or return something to an earlier state,” replied Patch.

Zachary’s eyes widened. He grasped the corded-tube. “Time to sleep.”

“Do not ignore Rosa Kade’s request to wipe ...” Patch’s eye blanked.

Zachary paced around his home, groaning. Rosa knew her dad would become an ambassador again. Isn’t that what she wanted; to be allowed to visit Assayer, rather than be cooped up in her home? So, why did she behave as if it was never going to happen? She was so sure that she’d always stay at home. Always be alone. What else is there?

He eyed the Raptor.

Rosa would call again, wouldn't she?

Chapter 9 - A New Friend

Zachary walked along the end-border of the Wastelands.

It'd been two days since the mysterious drop of papers.

And Rosa hadn't called.

As he and Diego crossed the ledge held by crooked nails that separated them from the Black Lake, he couldn't help but wonder if Rosa had regretted having anything to do with him. Maybe she was already with other people in Assayer and the need to bother him had disappeared. Though, he couldn't deny his concern. Never had Zachary wanted somebody to bother him as much as Rosa.

Both scavengers looked out to the crumpled mess known as The Island where the most lethal gases and liquids accumulated from the Wastelands. It had no light or indication of life except occasional flickers of movement.

"Don't breathe in too much," advised Zachary. "It'll sting your lungs for days."

"I feel like I know everything there is to know about District Two."

That didn't surprise Zachary. During their joint scavenging, he'd found the recruit's curiosity eye-opening. It'd made Zachary appreciate Underworld more. Stained and lacking of flowers as it was, Underworld was their home.

District Four was known for its sense of pride; residents behaved with trust and less suspicion. But were the women different?

"Can I ask about your sister?" Zachary asked, which made Diego's eyelids twitch.

"I don't want to know what's wrong with her. That's your business."

"Yeah, and it's complicated."

Zachary swallowed. "Is she like you?"

A thin film of water surfaced on the recruit's eyes. "She's better than me. She's your age. She's never put a foot wrong, except life just ..." He thumped his palm onto his fist. "Why do you ask?"

Zachary sidestepped across the ledge. "I thought you could tell me more about girls. Do they always get ratty with the smallest thing?"

"Girls are like puzzles. They can like you and hate you at the same time. You'll never know them until they know you. It's better talking to an android. At least you can turn them off." The recruit's smirk tapered. "Do you know if they found any more androids like the one that Shekhar had?"

“I don’t think so. Nobody’s owned up to handing it in.” Zachary felt Diego’s uneasy breath. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah – yeah – no. Androids with skin. It’s not allowed. They’re not meant to replicate humans. If you create something as real as that, then you’re messing with social order.”

“I don’t follow?” Zachary motioned along the ledge to the banks leading back to the higher ground of the Wastelands.

“Imagine if androids were created to look like you and me. Imagine them walking amongst us. How would you know?”

Zachary pointed up. “They do walk around. It wouldn’t surprise me if half of Overworld was bolts and cogs.”

The recruit gave a half-hearted nod. “Yeah – forget it. I’m over-thinking it.”

Diego’s boot smashed through the bank’s hard waste. He retched at the exploding reek. Sucking in his breath, Zachary hooked an arm around the recruit and pulled him free.

Scraping the heel of his boot along the ground, Diego said, “And another thing, I can’t stop thinking of the papers. They’re threatening Districts One to Four. Do you still think that the other Districts will stop people from entering?”

“You should know. You’re from there. The further north you go, the cleaner the air and the better the homes. Nobody’s allowed to go north without permission. Down, but never up.”

Diego licked his upper lip. “I’ll be leaving soon, to check that my family are okay.”

“Today?”

“No – soon.”

Zachary understood the recruit’s concern. “Well, when you realise it’s all a joke, make sure you come back, and if my mood is right, I’ll let you join my team again.”

“Your team?” sniggered Diego. “Without me, there’s only you.”

“Exactly.”

The sudden vibration in Zachary’s jean pocket surprised him. Rolling onto his feet, his words spluttered out with haste. “I just remembered, I need to be somewhere.”

Diego’s bolted upright. “Where? Like last time?”

The vibrating stopped. It’d be a matter of minutes before another call. What if she assumed that his non-answer was a sign of him wiping the memory?

“A girl. I’m going to see her,” said Zachary.

“I knew it.” Diego clapped. “Who is she?”

Zachary increased his distance from the recruit. “I can’t say. I’ll meet you at the rusty track. I won’t be long.” He turned and ran.

Overlapping sheets of metal jangled underneath his feet until he hit a level filled with sludgy mounds. He sighted a dry sewer pipe that would make for a resting spot. Crouched inside, he waited. Why hadn’t she called again?

The Intercom vibrated.

Zachary’s fingers snapped to the device’s ridges first. He pushed the blue face, then the green circle. Lights sprinkled above the Raptor to form an image. He sucked his breath back into his lungs.

Lying on her front, on a bed or a sofa, Rosa smiled. The pointed tips of her ears showed beneath tied-back hair, as did her slender neckline. “Let me guess, you were busy,” she said. “And, obviously, you didn’t wipe the memory. What am I going to do with you?”

“Where were you?”

“When?” Rosa drew her head back. “Were you waiting for me?”

Zachary frowned. “Course I wasn’t waiting. I thought it was odd that you hadn’t checked that I’d carried out your order.”

Rosa snorted, giving her head a hasty shake. “My order. *Ha!* Well, okay then, why didn’t you follow my order and wipe the memory?”

Zachary ignored her comment. “You didn’t answer me. Where were you?”

“Are we going to go through this charade again? Your question, my question; never-ending questions. Can’t we just talk like normal people without having to check boxes with one another?” She gazed beyond the Intercom to her upper right. “Fine, I’ll tell you. There was a shortage two nights ago. I got scared, thinking it was another attack, and Mother was hysterical. Apparently, it started in Assayer and spread all the way to our home. Not had one of those for a while.”

“A shortage, like when your energy resources run out?”

“Kind of. It’s when all communication goes haywire. Every teenager’s nightmare. Broadcasts, music-streaming, solar-web, everything, even the Intercoms go down. Blip. Totally off the grid.”

The MOSD, two nights ago, thought Zachary.

Somebody had initiated a shortage to knock out every device to prevent anybody from noticing that the deletion took place. Possibilities flooded his mind of who might

have instigated this. Jordan Kade? General Sokolov? Protesters? And it had happened on the day of the paper drop.

He blinked at Rosa's image. She must have seen his finger fidget along his mouth. Did she know about the paper drop?

"Now, time for my question. Were you waiting for me?" she asked.

"I wasn't waiting for you. Like I said, you hadn't checked up on me. That's what I'd have done."

"Hmm. And the reason for not wiping the memory?"

"Damage limitation. The wipe could've ruined the inner components. The value of a broken Intercom would be as good as a bag of rust-proof nails."

Rosa cradled her chin. "So, you didn't do it because of the value? Not for me?"

Stomach fluttering, Zachary felt the nape of his neck tingle. "What?"

"I've been thinking about everything you told me." Rosa's twist to her left gave him a second to reflect on her words.

What 'everything' had he told her?

"Phew." Rosa sighed with relief. "I thought that was Alice sneaking up on me. Best tell you that she's unhappy about me calling you. She's an android, and she'll never understand emotions. The closest Alice's ever come to emotion is when I threatened to cut the sockets to her charging-chamber."

The blue tint of the image glistened across her large laugh.

"Like I was saying, you found my first Raptor, then your dad gets a job to come and repair my home. Next thing, we meet. Now what are the chances of that? Isn't it all more than a coincidence?"

Zachary's brow tensed. It could've happened to anyone.

"Well?" probed Rosa. "Did you keep the Raptor for me?"

The Intercom felt light in his numb fingers. Her searching eyes froze him, yet a sensation warmed his body. "I guess I did."

Her cheeks ballooned. "Why?"

"I'm not used to talking to a girl, especially one who's different from the girls around here. "I suppose," Zachary went on, "I wanted us to speak again, and maybe end the call without hating one another."

"Who said I hated you?"

"Me," he whispered. "I'm sorry if I made you angry."

"And you're sorry for being a moron?"

“A moron?”

Chuckling, Rosa pushed her hand under her neck. “I meant it when I told you to sell the Raptor, and to wipe the memory. I really, really meant it. But I’m happy that you didn’t. I can’t remember the last time that I spoke to anyone for longer than yelling at them to get out of my garden. My life’s been pretty lonely, until now.” Her face sunk close to her Intercom. “Do you have a family? Siblings?”

“My dad and Patch.”

“An only child. Like me.”

A sense of responsibility taunted Zachary. Should he tell her about the MOSD, and the recording he’d witnessed? Considering the negative effect upon Rosa, he rejected the topic. “Do you think you’ll ever visit Assayer?”

Rosa’s midair image wobbled for a second. “All I’ve ever wanted is to be around other people. Don’t get me wrong, I truly love my parents, but I need more, and in the weirdest possible way, you’ve been that for me. I’ve been dying to contact you again.” Her smile never dropped. “Damn shortage.”

Rosa pulled the tip of a loose strand of hair into her mouth. “Father will be joining the House of Representatives again. That’s not how I wanted our return to Assayer to be.”

“Don’t you want him to be reinstated?”

“No,” snapped Rosa. “That’s what got him into trouble last time.”

Zachary leaned inward. “What did he do?”

Her mouth quietened. “I don’t know exactly. My entire home has Obstruction-modules that prevent me searching or viewing anything with even a hint of my surname. Mother and father never talk about it.”

“That’s strange.”

“Story of my life.”

Crossing lines sped over her image, then the Intercom switched off.

Zachary shook the Raptor. “Hello?”

He pressed the ridges. Nothing. Had the Intercom’s battery drained? He was sure that Rosa hadn’t turned her Intercom off. Her hands had been under her neck.

Zachary inserted his thumb into the recognition-pad. The prompt for the password came. He spoke the letters required, “F – A – I – L.”

The Intercom dazzled orange, green and yellow amidst a melodic tune of three beats for a few seconds. A vertical list of choices flickered in midair.

Calendar. Messages. Web. Calls. He tapped the *Calls* choice. The line opened to show further choices. *Recently Made. Received. New. Favourites.* It had to be the *Recently Made* choice. Zachary tapped it. An empty screen returned. With harsher breaths, irritating his throat, he tapped the back arrow.

For a short time, Zachary buried his chin into the neckline of his vest.

The Raptor rattled in his hand. He repeated the ridge presses.

Undone hair hung over Rosa's shoulder. "Did you cut me off?"

"No," replied Zachary.

"Blasted shortage again. I'd hoped they'd sorted them out."

Or another MOSD, he thought.

Rosa scratched her head. "I'm on borrowed time. I ran to Alice to check the Raptor. She confirmed no anomalies – and then she gave me the biggest android lecture I've ever heard. She kept going on about how it's wrong to speak with you. One of these days, I am so going to remove her Emote-chip."

"Patch would probably say the same to me."

"What do they know? They're just a bunch of circuits," chuckled Rosa.

A flutter brushed the back of Zachary's hair. "I tried to call you, but I couldn't work it out. Too many options, but your password worked."

"Well, as it is the password I set on the Raptor, I'd be alarmed if it didn't."

Eyes locked, he didn't care for the annoying drip inside the sewer pipe. "Why'd you choose the word 'fail'?"

Rosa pulled the strap of her tank top. "Do you get on with your father? Can you sit and talk to him about anything? Do you feel," she sighed, "like there's a reason for existing? For being alive?"

"Only when he hasn't had a bad day at work."

"My parents don't have a reason for not talking to me. It's simply that Mother is withdrawn, and Father spends all his time in the study. When I was younger, I used to think it was my fault, that, maybe, I did something wrong once, or that they never wanted me. They must have had the perfect lifestyle, until I came along." She clicked her fingers. "Rosario Emily Kade. Daughter of the Kade household with no goal except to annoy her parents."

A distant voice from her side spoke, "Mister and Missus Kade are here."

"My parents are home," whined Rosa. "I've got to go."

Zachary moved right, following her roll. "When will I hear from you?"

“Tomorrow, give or take a shortage.” She inhaled, drawing her head to her chest. “I’ve never been able to use these Raptors to call anyone except my own number. And now I have you. You’d better save the battery usage. Push your thumb onto the pad three times, then pick the *Power Off* choice. I’ll call you tomorrow at about this time so don’t switch the Raptor on until then. It works the same way, push your thumb in.” Rosa licked her upper lip. “You know what this makes us now? We’re officially friends.”

“Rosa,” said Alice.

“Speak soon. Bye.” Her blue image dropped back into the Intercom.

“Bye,” mouthed Zachary, sliding his head along the pipe.

He’d made a new friend. But, it didn’t feel enough. Scavengers never admired things from afar. They’d stand on the edge of risk to reach a wanted prize. He wanted to *see* her again, and not just with the Intercom.

Zachary stared at the ceiling.

How?

Chapter 10 - Decisions

Zachary concentrated on the sparks flowing within Patch's chest. Vibrant currents glittered across the droid's eye. Sitting on the floor, Zachary peeked between his fingers. The Intercom in his pocket felt heavy.

Hollowed emptiness had filled the remainder of his day. It didn't matter that Diego and he had uncovered a half-depleted battery component worth six Leo-coins.

Rosa had done something unexpected; she'd changed him.

Scouring the Wastelands didn't excite Zachary anymore. It troubled him and that felt wrong. If he couldn't rummage through slimy sewers then what was the point? Give up and mope about until Rosa called? It had to stop; he had to take control of his thoughts.

Zachary's fingernails dug onto his palm. "I'm confused."

"Have you conversed with Rosa Kade, again?" Even without flesh, Patch shared the patronising nature of his dad.

"She calls me, not the other way around. I couldn't call her even if I wanted to."

Zachary scratched his brow. The short conversations had become an addiction. Denying that he wanted to call Rosa was a blatant lie. He'd lost count of the abandoned lanes that he could have snuck into and made a call to her. But who would answer? Her mother? Her bot?

"Her logic for doing so makes sense," said Patch. "Her diary entry indicated a lonesome girl seeking attention."

"You don't know that, and you're making an assumption."

"Is my logic flawed?"

"You've only heard her. I've *listened* to her."

"And that makes you know her? You are making the same assumptions about her as I am, therefore neither of us is illogical or correct."

Zachary flicked a piece of bitten-off fingernail into the air. "She doesn't have anyone her own age to talk to. Her parents don't let her out. Something to do with her dad, but, she's got me now, and it makes her happy."

"Are you happy? I recall your haste in hacking the initial Intercom. It has not lessened. I see the same questions in your face as the day that Tania Connor left Marcus Connor."

"Don't say her name." Quivering water welled up in his eyes in an instant.

“A male lost in thought over a female is the same, regardless of the cause.”

Zachary glared up at the irregular joints of the ceiling. “Rosa’s not a bad person. It’s like I understand her and then I don’t, all at the same time. I feel like I can talk to her, but I’m afraid to. She’s ... different.”

“Different from whom?” asked Patch. “You have never spoken of anybody with interest or pleasure. You have always distanced yourself from association.”

Zachary recollected a moment in his home from twelve years before. Then, there’d been order in the arrangement of cutlery, the stacking of plates and the folded dishcloths. Three chairs had sat around the table. The slim man who’d come to collect his mum hurried her to leave behind the packed bags that would slow them down. She’d hugged Zachary so tight that he thought she’d be taking him with her, but she didn’t.

“I’m sorry,” were Tania’s last words.

Four years old. Unfed. Confused. Alone.

Zachary had pounded the door screaming for her to come back. The door never opened; not even when he begged Patch to smash the locks. But what could the droid welded to the wall have done? And when his dad returned home, he wished the door had remained shut.

The large dent in the centre of the table where his dad had slammed his fist that day was still present. Zachary had cowered in the corner of the room, crying, struggling to shut up no matter how agitated his dad became. Marcus stormed out of their home. The door was unlocked. Zachary could have left, but he didn’t. Every limb failed to move as he curled up in tears. Hours had passed before Marcus returned after searching. He never said if he’d found them, or whose blood etched his knuckles.

Zachary had run to his room when his dad turned on the Haulage-404 droid. Marcus had smashed a chair against Patch, and then clobbered the droid with no break for minutes. Without a sound, Patch took it all.

It had been the darkest moment of Zachary’s life in this home. His mum had destroyed any trust he had in anybody. Days with his dad’s anger had intensified the cold hatred Zachary developed toward her. With age, he saw other homes unravel amidst similar deceit. Nobody was immune, and when he came to know of a family living in peace, he wondered how long before somebody trampled on their happiness.

Zachary had vowed never to bring his home to a wrecked state on the promise of a woman’s heart. Yet, he couldn’t cling to that decision any more.

“Rosa is different,” he said. “She lies to protect herself. She doesn’t do it to hurt anybody. She has a good heart, and if she found something she liked, she’d want to look after it.”

“Do you like her?” questioned Patch.

Zachary grimaced. “The girls around here don’t care about you. They judge you on what you’re wearing, how many coins you have to spend on them, and how much respect you can carry on your shoulders when you march down the lane. They never give anybody a chance.”

Patch shook his finger. “But you’ve never tried. Have you?”

“You know I haven’t. I’m nothing but a poor scavenger. That’s what my dad thinks of me. Rosa doesn’t.”

“How do you know that she doesn’t?”

“*I don’t*. Damn, Patch, can’t you say anything nice? Look, Rosa has every right to look down on me, but she doesn’t.”

“Does she know your feelings?”

Zachary’s neck tingled. “Do you think I should tell her?”

“You have both crossed a boundary and I do not know what the outcome will be. An Underworlder feels for an Overworlder. Incompatible civilisations. Worlds apart with differing expectations.”

“We can *still* be friends.”

“I detect that you have exceeded that.” The droid’s cold fingertips touched Zachary’s head. “Even a machine can empathise with your grief. If you continue to converse with Rosa Kade, then be prepared to desert the feelings you harbour.”

Zachary’s pounding heart battered inside him. He recalled his worthless life. Getting up. Scavenging. Handing in treasure. Cooking. Sleeping. If he’d never found that Intercom, he wouldn’t have experienced the perfection she’d thrust into his imperfect world. Eyes closed, he tried to think back to before he found the wired box.

He couldn’t.

Rosa’s face whooshed back as if she’d always been there.

“But what if –”

Patch interrupted, “There is no ‘if’. It can never work.”

“That’s what people say about everything.”

“Rosa Kade is your first. There will be more.”

“Give up on her, you mean?” demanded Zachary.

“Give up on something too risky to have.”

Something big clunked outside followed by thuds and a squeal. Zachary ran to the door, unlocking it even though shrieking increased.

Paper flapped onto his face. Taking it, he blinked at the thousands of sheets scattering down from the ceiling. Since when did a drop point exist above Shantytown?

“We’re going,” roared a middle-aged man at another in the opposite lane. A stove crashed between them from a home above.

“Look what you’ve done,” shouted someone high up.

Zachary shut the door. Next to the lantern, he read the sheet.

Districts One to Four to be evacuated. This warning must not be ignored. Vacate immediately.

“Trouble?” asked Patch.

The droid took the paper Zach handed to him. “Where did this come from?”

“Overworlders are using the drop points to launch these. That’s from the second batch. The first one was less aggressive.”

Patch beeped. “You must inform Marcus Connor.”

Zachary smirked. “You believe in this? Dad already knows.”

“This is not a scheme to be ignored. This has happened before.”

“I know. Nine years ago, but nothing came of it.” Zachary surveyed the area of the droid’s head that made loud grinding whirs. “What’s wrong?”

“No – it *has* happened before.” Patch heaved a crackling cough. “Scouring-SH3Ys. Welders-HN4Zs. MM-Conduit-Relayers. Haulage-404s. All droids received a destabilising command when our use was spent.” A deep human voice omitted from his open mouth. “Haulage-404s will be decommissioned. This command must not be ignored. Prepare for functional-destruction.”

Patch released the sheet of paper. “Droids dropped like nails.”

Zachary stepped back. “They wouldn’t do that to us.”

“Wouldn’t they?” Patch’s eye glowed. “In the dark of Underworld, who would see what happens?”

Chapter 11 - The Trick

Zachary watched his dad slurp from a bowl of mashed potato. Nothing had been mentioned about the latest batch of sheets dropped the previous night.

Marcus lifted up a pair of scratched, steel-clad boots. He'd borrowed them from Horatio who lived on the uppermost fifth floor of their tower. Dismissed from the Far-Wallers because of the spasms in his arms, Horatio now led a dormant lifestyle doing little but watch Shantytown.

"I don't need these anymore. Take them back before you leave." Marcus kicked out one leg, revealing a thick boot with blackened metal coverings. "Reinforced titanium wall-hoggers."

It was bizarre to Zachary that his dad had used the *spend-with-caution* Gallis on footwear. With the threat of departure from the Districts, shouldn't their money be hoarded?

Marcus gazed at him. "Is everything fine with you?"

Zachary's brow creased. He glimpsed at the still posture of the Haulage-404 droid. What could his dad be referring to?

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"Is there something you want to tell me?"

Keeping his balance steady, Zachary shoved his hands into his pockets. He felt the smooth curve of the Raptor's side. "What do you mean?"

"You're quieter." Marcus left the table. "Is something bothering you?"

Zachary frowned, blowing air. "It's nothing, Dad. I'm fine."

Marcus nodded. "Zach, I'm sorry that I've never been the best dad for you."

Whoa. The strength in Zachary's legs faltered a little.

"But, I'm still your dad, and if anyone out there's hassling you, I don't care who it is, that rat Shekhar, his tight-pocketed boss, or any of the gangs, remember, I'm here."

Several days since the episode of the Bombay depletion, his dad's anger had succumbed to a form of composure he'd never seen. Thoughts bombarded Zachary in wondering if now was the right moment to reveal Rosa. "There's new competition in the Wastelands. I've had a few tiring days. Running and digging."

"It doesn't have to be that way. You can have five more months, and when you hit seventeen, you're coming to the Far-Wall. No debate. Five months." Marcus turned to the door. "See you later."

What if there wasn't a Far-Wall in five months?

Zachary returned to his bedroom.

Rosa would call soon, and he hoped that time would slow to let their conversation last. The urge to scavenge, the force that forever propelled him, felt distant. Studying the grime under his fingernails, images of Rosa's disgust at holding his hand amused him.

Another concern dumbfounded him. He prodded the small pinholes along the edge of the device which indicated a method of charging, except he didn't have the components. And there was no chance of forcing a wireless charge either. Once the Raptor's battery ran out, that'd be it. Zachary kicked his bed. He couldn't think of the last time that a scavenger had found an intact charger. But – parts – yes. There must have been traders with expert knowledge of building a charger. Wires. Chips. Connectors. It could be done. And if that didn't work?

What about stealing one from IOTA? Zachary recoiled at his audacity.

Inserting his thumb, the Intercom reactivated. After placing it in a pocket, he took the boots off the table, and left his home. With the boots hanging from tied straps around his neck, Zachary climbed the external ladder. Mid-climb, he peered out to watch the dwellers of Shantytown shrink. The District resembled the mounds and tips of the Wastelands. There's no way that Overworld could move them and all their stuff. It'd take forever. The streets would be blocked for days with everybody arguing.

Zachary slowed as he passed each home, intrigued by the missing sounds of generators chugging, or dwellers shuffling across creaky floors. Had they left last night?

Horatio lived alone in a square block not much bigger than a bedroom. Zachary knocked on the wooden-beamed door, expecting the old man to yell to be left alone. The door opened.

Flies buzzed in the middle of the room containing a stove, a wardrobe and rolled carpets. Leaving the door open for some light, Zachary swiped at the flies. He observed blankets and pillows missing from the bed. The wardrobe was empty of clothes, and the drawers of cutlery. Placing the boots on the table, he eyed the corners of the room, expecting the old man to surprise him.

Had Horatio left in a hurry? For fear? Worry? Self-preservation? If the paper drops were to be believed, even a madman wouldn't have scarpered without bartering his goods first.

Zachary's jean pocket vibrated. Sucking air, he rushed out of the block, then darted left to cower by the rear wall where no one was close enough to spy on him. Rosa's image rebounded off the wall, almost spreading onto him. Strands of hair hung over her right eye. He could make out the dimples on either side of her smile.

"Hey. Are you in a hole? You look all cooped up," said Rosa.

"I'm not in the Wastelands, I'm ... it doesn't matter. You've called early."

Long eyelashes batted. "Do you want me to go?"

"No. Stay."

Her smile didn't slump. There was something different about her appearance. A shadow-like shade covered her eyelids. "It's confirmed. We'll be returning to Assayer within a week. Mother's already scouting apartments that we can choose from."

So soon? Against other Overworlders, and other boys, Zachary wouldn't stand a chance.

"Father's been granted his ambassador status again." Rosa scrunched her mouth. "I can't keep complaining about it not being the way that I wanted, but at least it's happening. I've always wanted to go shopping properly. Do you know how difficult it is to get the right size when ordering online?"

Zachary fought the headshake his mind demanded he do. What did she mean by ordering online? Did a trader bring the goods along a line?

Rosa tapped her shiny lips. "Do you have clothes stores down there?"

"We find and trade what we can. These are my dad's clothes, before he grew."

"That's cute," she said. "So, anything exciting happen in your world?"

The warnings from the sheets.

"Nothing," replied Zachary.

"O-kay," slurred Rosa. "Well, I have some exciting news. Father will be on the channel this morning. He's been invited by the House of Representatives to make the whole ambassador thing official." Her words drifted through him. "I just hope he knows what he's doing. I don't want him and Mother to forget all about me once we're in the big city."

Rosa cleared her throat before speaking in a deeper tone. "Good evening Mister and Missus Kade, welcome to the banquet held in honour of your family. And who is the

young lady with you? Oh dear, you've forgotten who she is. Not to worry, we'll have her escorted out. Go on. Shoo."

Zachary sighed. "You'll make lots of new friends wherever you move to. Lots of people who'll share all the things that you missed out on. You wouldn't want your friends to know that you were talking to me." He gulped. "An Underworlder."

"Hold on," she said.

The image of Rosa's face zoomed out, showing shelves aligned with precision behind the curved headboard of her bed. Ahead, dressed in a frilly-shouldered blouse with clips running down the centre, Rosa sat upright. "I didn't go to all this trouble for just anybody. Are you forgetting that *you're* my friend?"

Zachary teased words from the corner of his mouth. "No, it's just that —"

"I know what you're thinking. Who knows what will happen when I become the centre of attention in the City. I might just be reduced to standing in the corner whilst people in luxurious dresses and suits mingle around fountains of wine."

She zoomed the Intercom back to her head. "I'm lucky to have met someone as honest as you, and I swear that I will do my damndest to keep you close."

But we're not close, thought Zachary.

"Can I ask you something?" queried Rosa.

He stroked the image where her neck curved toward her shoulder. "Sure."

"Do I still annoy you?"

Thinking about his reply, he held her stare. "A little before. Yesterday, not at all, and today, I don't think you could say anything that'd annoy me."

"A challenge I gladly accept." Rosa grinned, narrowing her eyes. "I'm pleased that we met, even if it was after my home was nearly wiped off the Base."

The Raptor beeped an image of an emptied capsule.

"The battery," whined Zachary. "How do I charge this?"

"Can you get hold of a 6-pin adaptor?"

"Down here? No. Intercoms are rare." He rolled his eyes. What if the Intercom died before they arranged their method of maintaining contact?

"I'll get one sent to you." She grunted, baring her teeth. "Stupid me, they don't deliver down there. The drops from your ceiling. I'll put it in a secure box with a hardcore code. All you have to do is find it."

"We have drops everywhere. I'd never find it."

"This is not fair!"

“Who are you talking to?” said a cold-toned female voice.

Rosa’s hand enlarged throughout the image. “Nobody – I’m recording a diary entry. Please, Mother, this is private.”

The woman’s voice trailed behind Rosa. “Turn that off and come to the lounge. Your father will be on soon, and I need help with the recorder. Wires and connections, I don’t know. It’d be a lot easier with a simple record button.”

“Got to go – I’m sorry. Don’t turn it off. I’ll call you as soon as my father’s done.” It looked like something else begged to escape Rosa’s mouth. “Bye.”

The Intercom silenced.

Zachary grabbed his forehead, muttering his last thought. “I like you, Rosa.”

Staying pressed against the wall, he imagined Rosa sitting with him, looking out over Shantytown. She’d breathe through a torn segment of cloth wrapped around her mouth with hands claspng her nostrils shut. He couldn’t laugh. She’d hate it down here. She’d never want to visit Underworld. He needed another way to get to meet her.

Diego!

The recruit would be returning to his home in District Four, and then onto Five. Could Diego’s family help to barter Zachary’s way up the Districts? He cupped the Raptor against his cheek. Doubt pounded his heart.

His eyes thrust open at the Intercom’s vibration.

Eyes watering, Rosa held her blubbing mouth. “I’m sorry.” She knocked her head back. “I’m so sorry for what they’re doing.”

The Intercom bounced as she crashed forward covering her head. “Father can’t be doing this. This is not right! *THIS IS NOT RIGHT!*”

Scraping her hands through her hair, Rosa bit her wobbling lip. “The House of Representatives voted to revoke Article 39a. General Sokolov, my father’s stupid loyal friend,” she rasped. “They’re going to change *Galilei* forever. They’re going to restart the exploration of Europa.”

Chills paralysed Zachary’s gums. “Why?”

“Because *that’s why* we’re here. *Galilei* was meant to be the landing module on the moon. They never succeeded. Never. But, now,” her voice faltered, “the General wants to make it happen, and my father, my so-called-ambassador-for-the-people father is helping to make it happen.”

Zachary felt a spasm ripple along his shoulder muscles. “But, this is good, right? If they land, we won’t have to live in a ship in space.”

“There’s more. Sokolov announced the Relocation Programme of Underworld. They’re planning to take back Districts One to Four.”

The tense push rocketed through Zachary’s spine. He sunk with his legs sliding under him. The sheets of paper. The warnings. They weren’t a trick.

Zachary swallowed. He had to tell everybody. He had to tell his dad. “When?”

“In five days.”

“*Five!* That’s too quick. We have to move our things across the Districts. It’s not that easy. This isn’t happening. You’ve got it wrong. Are you sure?”

Rosa’s fingertips enlarged around the edge of the image. “Why would I lie about this? Zach, I’m scared about what they’ll do. The General’s not a nice man. He always gets his way.” Her fingers fiddled over her Intercom. “I switched the recorders over when mother answered an incoming call. Hit ‘accept’.”

The word appeared in an orange box above the Raptor. Zachary tapped it.

A short-haired woman sitting on the far side of a semi-circular table appeared over Rosa’s image. “Is General Sokolov’s claim of protecting the diminishing resources a cover-up for rejection from the Integrated Confederation? Are we on borrowed time? Is *Galilei* due a recall? What next? Doctor Harley, your view?”

The image slid to show a dark-skinned man scraping a finger across his lips. “Masim Sokolov is doing what he must to protect the lives we lead. We pay taxes and we contribute to the continued upkeep of this amazing Base. Underworld takes up valuable space that, if primed correctly, could be the turning point for a new age for *Galilei*. We are stretched, and it’s been a long time coming.”

The woman reappeared. “Sorry to interrupt you, Doctor, but the outline processes for the Relocation Programme have just been released. In brief, plans have been made to negotiate the peaceful movement of Underworlders from the Districts. And, according to this,” she sat upright, “negotiations started four days ago and are due to conclude shortly with all indications pointing to a peaceful resolution.”

The image fizzed back to Rosa holding her face. “Do you believe me now?”

Zachary shook his head. “There aren’t any negotiations.”

“But they said –”

“There aren’t.” He smacked the wall. “Your recordings are lies.”

“They’re news reporters, why would they lie?”

“I don’t know?” He rose, jerking his head left to right.

“Zach, you have to get out of there.” The image spluttered.

“Nobody will believe me. They’ll call me mad. Maybe if I replay the recordings?” His temples pulsed. “Then I have to explain this Intercom.”

“Can you hear me?” Rosa’s face split in two between jagged lines. “Zach?”

“You’re breaking up.” He shook the Intercom.

“I can’t hear ... have to get out ... talk to Father ... change his mind.” The Intercom fuzzed with her image frozen.

“Rosa?” Zachary pressed the Raptor against his chest.

The capsule showed “3%”. It wasn’t empty. Why the malfunction? Was this due to another shortage? Did Overworlders know that she was talking to him? Why wouldn’t they? Heck – they controlled the oxygen, the outpour of waste, the drops, and the blasted sheets of paper warning them to leave. He looked onto the unaware residents who moved bug-like in Shantytown. They had to be warned.

A hard object smacked Zachary’s back, knocking him down. His arm crashed through the roof of the home below. Twisting, sinking further through the hole, he saw a figure clamber off the roof.

“Working things like these aren’t for little boys,” sneered Horatio, lifting the Raptor several feet from Zachary’s grasp.

Horatio stamped down, shattering the floorboards, and sending Zachary into the flat below. The table he landed on, rigid as it was, broke his fall. Rolling off, he heard the scuttling racket of Horatio speeding down the ladder. Zachary wobbled out of the doorway.

He glared down onto the thief. “*Give it back!*”

Boots snapped to either side of the ladder’s frame, Zachary slid downward. Horatio burst west out of Shantytown to the steep cliff that overlooked the Wastelands. With his grey locks hanging in the air and arms spread, the old thief jumped off the cliff.

Zachary skidded to a halt. Moaning, and looking like a fur-matted dog, Horatio crawled, clutching his stomach with a small object fizzling behind him.

Digging his nails into the cliff-face, almost drawing blood, Zachary lowered himself. He hurtled towards the Intercom. It lay within a boot print. Its upper screen was smashed and the rear battery compartment hung by thin strands.

Nothing happened when his thumb pressed the recognition pad.

The Raptor was broken.

Chapter 12 - Disorder

None of the increased pressure Zachary put on the pad helped. Loose fragments vibrated every time he pressed it. He kneeled down, pulling out copper strands embedded in the ground. Did they all belong to the Raptor? Unsure, he took what he could, or what made sense to. All the time, anger frothed in his mouth.

Three thin cogs slipped out from under the screen; one careered into a swamp and sank. The other two, he caught. Black liquid trickled from out of the battery compartment onto his palm.

A tinny noise sounded from the Raptor. Hoping, he held it up. The Intercom sparkled golden shards over his cheek. Eyes blinking, he brushed them away. Clasped too tight in his hand, the raptor snapped. Zachary's arm plummeted to his kneecaps. He shoved every manageable part into his pocket.

Horatio continued his pathetic run.

"Why did you do this?" shouted Zachary.

"Leave me alone," shrieked the thief. "You've got it. Go away."

"Leave you?" Zachary yanked his boot free out of a pit, and charged forward. Hurdling off a mound, he lunged and hauled the thief down.

Blood leaked from Horatio's mouth. Hands up, he pleaded, "I'm sorry, boy, I'm sorry. I needed the money."

Zachary showed the spread of black fluid on his palm. "I needed that to talk to her. It was my Raptor. She gave it to me. You had no right to take it. That's not how we take things. That's not how we scavenge. We don't steal." He snatched Horatio's collar. "You heard her. You must have heard her. She's worried. She was trying to help me. To help all of us. Do you understand what you've done?"

Horatio's eyes showed the shame of a man lost for words.

"It's broken. What will I do now?" cried Zachary.

Horatio lowered his arms, and turned his face as if he expected a hard boot to crack his jaw. Eyes closed, he inhaled.

Zachary stepped away from him.

Unlike the raging anger filling his muscles, sympathy sifted into his thoughts. He saw a man who'd taken notice of the warning sheets. A man who was prepared to make the journey across the Districts with whatever he could carry. At a time of

desperation, Horatio had seen an object worth enough to aid a new life someplace else.

Zachary pressed the tight ache above his heart. Everything felt empty inside. “Get out of here.”

The slope swallowed Zachary’s legs several times as he climbed the cliff. Once over the jagged edge, he headed to Shantytown, all the time caressing the pocket containing the Raptor.

A deep, bellowing horn reverberated in the direction of the Far-Wall. That was new, and unexpected. For several seconds it seemed to change direction as if sweeping along the end point of District Two. Residents began to assemble around the northern side of the town. Zachary eyed the ground vents that were usually misty, and then looked upward, noticing that the giant ceiling fans had stopped. Something was wrong.

A man leaned out of his doorway three storeys up, and clanged a pan against a standing pole. “I can’t believe it. They’ve done it! The Far-Wallers have done it!”

“They broke through?” came a voice within the crowd.

“Aye! The highest crack in the Far-Wall that I’ve ever seen,” laughed the man. “There’ll be fresh air coming our way, and you know what else? I bet they’ll find new lines of electricity.” He folded his arms, holding his chin aloft. “Don’t know about you, but I’m not planning on leaving now.”

“I’m with you,” said another voice.

Chugging wind resonated from the Far-Wall.

Zachary squeezed through the crowd, knowing that the blockages his dad worked on shouldn’t have affected the fans above them. If anything, the fans should be turning faster.

Mechanical gears clicked through the loudening chugs. Then, a long drawn screech made him and others cover their ears. A thin line of light split the wall from top to bottom. More clicking and the obvious turning of a cog hitting hard components echoed through the District. The split line widened.

Zachary gulped. Legends described a treasure trove of rich pipes and ancient machinery lying beyond the wall. What had the Far-Wallers uncovered?

His eyelids fluttered. Could this be connected to the so-called negotiations?

“Get back,” cried Zachary, turning to face the eager crowd. A hand swiped him aside. People pushed onward.

“It’s a trap.” Zachary grabbed a burly man’s bare arm.

“What you talking about?” rasped the man. “We’ve discovered new land. That light’s the secret power grid that was meant to be used here.”

Zachary watched the light in the wide area return to almost darkness.

Rapid hissing noises followed by screams stole everybody’s attention.

“What’s going on out there?” yelled the burly man.

The man from the three-storey home peered forward. “I’m not sure. I think they’re bringing something out.”

Zachary climbed the pole next to the nearby home. A dozen figures walked out of the new area in an orchestrated line. Tiny dots glowed blue where their eyes should have been. In an instant, flickering yellow-tinted light sprayed outward with the unusual sound of a hundred fingers rattling against tins.

“They’re, they’re, they’re ...” spluttered the man above Zachary.

A large machine with wide legs and a body shaped like a giant beetle sauntered between the blue-eyed attackers. Its circular arms rotated giving rise to an orange glow in the centre. It ejected a fiery ball. Zachary froze as the fireball arched upward. High. Gaining speed. It changed course, sinking into Shantytown.

Zachary leaped from the pole, hitting the ground as the fireball exploded onto the watcher’s home. He rolled away from volatile flash of light followed by scorching heat. Like a wonky stick set alight, the tower crumbled.

Zachary coughed in the coarse ash. Figures disappeared inside the clouds that thickened across the horizon. Screams poured out amidst rattling machinery. Nearby, a four-storey tower erupted into flame. Limbs wrestled through the chaotic crowd. An elbow swung across his chin. Floored, he cowered from a fierce onslaught of charging feet.

Thumping rumbles were coming closer. The walking machines, five so far, fired missiles that sliced through the air, hitting the towers and trailing white smoke.

The lanes of Shantytown confused Zachary as to which direction to take. None seemed safe. A woman’s shriek spun him away from the corner he was about to take. Staying low, he inched forward to see her situation.

“Please, let us go” she said. Dozens stood behind her. Men. Women. Children.

Ahead stood a man clad in tight black armour with blue eyes glowing on his helmet. Puffs burst out of two vents around his mouth.

“We’ll do anything you want,” she continued. “We’ll leave immediately.”

The hum emitting from the rifle increased in pitch, then a click sounded.

“Too late, lady,” wheezed an echo from the man. Gun pointed, he fired.

Zachary collapsed onto his side, losing his composure at the sight of blood splattering across the opposite wall. Thuds drowned out the short-lived screams. Why did he fire? They’d surrendered. They all had.

When the whizzing action of the gun stopped, he heard the attacker’s crunching footsteps wade through the dead. Zachary lay frozen, save for the unrelenting pumps of his heart that deafened him.

Stop beating. Stop.

The attacker’s boots, lined with sharp-toothed grippers, stopped an inch from Zachary’s hand. “Java Nine, calling in. Sections B-three to B-five cleared. Moving into B-six.”

“Change of plan,” wheezed a similar voice heading toward them. “Puma and Lynx units have been forced back in B-eleven. Seems like these stinkers are packing some firepower.”

“Sweet,” said Java Nine. “Control request for backup to B-eleven. Let’s go. General Sokolov isn’t going to like their tactics. Do you think they’ll be waiting for us in District Three?”

“Who cares – I’ve been waiting to unload these cannons for months.”

Zachary watched the soldiers run on. Appearing all of a sudden from a neighbouring street, a large walking-machine pursued them.

Zachary’s head whirred. Ricochet marks on the walls. Strewn limbs. Tattered clothes. Death. Knees up to his chin, eyes closed, he counted the negligible gaps between long sessions of bullets firing.

Using a wall to aid his wobbling legs, he stood. Fire raged from the uppermost homes of each tower. Absolute chaos. Zachary sprinted through tunnels of smoke. One street to cross, and he’d be home. A deafening explosion threw him into the air. Landing hard on an overturned ground sheet, he slid down into a charred crater. Hot debris scorched Zachary’s cheeks, and the high-pitched ring worsened the throbs belting his head.

He crawled upward, nursing his sore back, to see a nightmare unfold. Flames dispensed downward from Horatio’s home to the third floor, leaving only a matter of time before the entire tower fell. Shielding himself from the raining particles, he

charged into his door. It swung open. Something tripped him. On his knees, Zachary stared at his dad's friend, Gavin, with burnt holes in his neck.

"Zachary," said Patch.

Somebody had switched the droid on. "Where's my dad?"

"He left."

Under the unpleasant heat, Zachary jumped toward the droid. "When?"

"Three minutes ago," said Patch. "It was unsafe to wait. You must travel to IOTA. Marcus Connor will meet you there."

"District One? That'll be under attack as well."

The droid's hand seized Zachary's shoulder. "Marcus Connor saw units advance into District Three. The units will take down Districts Two and Three before they tackle IOTA. I am confident that IOTA will not fall easily." Patch released him.

"Leave."

Zachary croaked. "What about you?"

"Do not concern yourself with me. I am a machine."

"*No!* You're not a machine. You're my friend." Zachary hooked his arms around the droid. Pushing off the wall, he yanked backward. The welded bars did not shift.

"Help me."

"You must leave."

"*Shut up!*"

Zachary's fingers slipped. Lying on his back, he touched the dark fingertip of the Haulage-404; still cold. "My home. You. Why is this happening?"

Patch looked down. "You still have Rosa Kade."

Zachary showed the damaged Raptor. "No, I don't. It's broken."

Needles protruded from Patch's thumb. "Let me hack it one last time for you. Speak to Rosa Kade while you can."

Zachary placed the Intercom into the droid's whirring hand. Within seconds the Intercom fizzed under sparkling lines shooting outward.

"I will force a message across the network. She may not receive it. Speak."

Creaks above disturbed Zachary's thoughts. How long did they have?

"Rosa," he said. "General Sokolov has sent his soldiers into the Districts. They're killing everyone. Burning everything. The Raptor's broken." His palms slapped the floor. "I'm never going to see you again. Rosa, I ... like you."

Wood splitting under shearing metal announced itself above Zachary, before the ceiling collapsed. The full force of Patch's hand batted Zachary across to the middle section of his home.

Pushing off fallen shelves, Zachary edged to the almost unrecognisable components of the Raptor. Taking it, he sat up, searching through the blackened clouds for his droid. Fire spat downward, searing mixed debris. A fiery metal-framed bed crashed down, blocking Zachary's path. What was left of the ceiling folded. Two stoves and a spinning generator hit the Bombay. Zachary clattered sideways to his bed as the Bombay exploded forward. Eyes against the ground, he listened to the frightening crashes, the creaks and the never-ending snaps. Fire multiplied at each corner of his home.

Zachary crawled through the wreckage lit by what seemed like a hundred lanterns bobbing on string. The front section of his home was devastated, and out in the street the Bombay core-generator continued to splutter currents. A gust surged through his home taking white smoke with it.

Sparkles fizzed over twisted bars with part of Patch's back chassis hanging from them. Where was the droid? Zachary scavenged through piles of beams and sheets. A warm metal hand gripped his. At the sight of the Haulage-404 droid, Zachary's head sunk down. Segments inside his cracked head glowed blue, and grinding cogs motioned where his jaw panel had been dislodged.

"Z-z-zeave-z-z-zme," crackled Patch. "Z-z-zgo."

"I can get you fixed. Stay with me. *Don't* you dare shut down."

"I-z-z-zmuzzzt." Patch's arm flailed into his head.

Zachary grabbed the three fingers left on the droid's hand. "*Stop it!*"

With a wrench, Patch's arm swayed back out. It grasped a thin, green rod covered in microchips, the part that governed a droid's functions, the Cognitive-Syntax Driver. Without it, droids deactivated.

Lungs heaving, Zachary squeezed the Haulage-404's neck. "Why?"

The glow within Patch's eye vanished. A machine had made a sacrifice to ensure a human survived. Ducking clear of falling debris, Zachary stroked the ruined droid's head.

With the greed rod, Zachary charged out into the carnage of Shantytown. Spinning on his heels, he watched his home clatter downward. Even the tears of hundreds

wouldn't make a difference to the flame-ridden horizon. Overworld's army had claimed District Two.

Rubbing ash from his face, Zachary sprinted south, choosing the smoking, crater-filled route, away from the rattling guns. All of a sudden, a firm hand tugged at his vest, spinning him.

Chapter 13 - Snake Seven

Zachary bashed the hand and struck an uppercut.

“It’s me,” cried Diego. Without his long coat, the recruit clambered up, rubbing his chin. “You’re alive. I didn’t think ...”

Zachary pulled the recruit against a shattered wall. Hands holding one another’s shoulders, they inspected the grazes and marks of blood on their clothing. Although explosions echoed around, he felt safe with familiarity

Diego clenched his stomach. “The soldiers came quickly. Their Rock-Walkers bombed through anything in their way.” His hands shook. “The walking machines with the guns. We’ve got a broken one in District Four.”

“They’re moving through the Districts fast,” said Zachary. “Are you alone? Did anybody else make it out? The camp?”

“The stall’s gone.” The recruit’s bleeding fingers covered his chin. “They went through people like they didn’t matter.”

“Like we were waste.” Zachary grimaced. “We have to get to IOTA.”

Diego looked south. “Will they let us in?”

“We won’t know if we stay here.”

Zachary began his run, knowing the recruit would follow. Ground, dark without flames, met their boots. Minutes passed with silence between them until the high gates of District One grew close. They were already opening.

Zachary glanced back to see beams of light coming from several Rock-Walkers and a large congregation of soldiers advancing. IOTA was the next target. He felt a push from the recruit to the side.

Four IOTians left District One carrying thick tubes covered with spokes. More joined with two further tubes. Another push from Diego directed Zachary to sprint past the unsuspecting IOTians to the open entrance, but he couldn’t resist watching the contraptions being thrust into table-sized domes rising from the slushy ground. Upright, the tubes were pushed down.

“Alpha’s in,” shouted an IOTian. “Ignite.”

A bolt of currents shot down from the ceiling into the tube. Commands for the other tubes to be in place were distorted by the erratic energy bursts spreading to create a connected net. It didn’t appear solid, but could be enough to slow down the onslaught.

“They’ve erected a force field,” said Diego

Zachary didn't care for anything except for passing through the gate. Panicking IOTians raced around one another. A buggy roared forward carrying four men armed with rifles. Burnt rubber replaced the spicy aroma of IOTA.

Zachary and Diego tagged onto the rushing swarm of IOTians that surged toward the buildings on the left side where the anguish of a large gathering could be heard. IOTians pushed long levers extending out of the floor clockwise. Pipes ran from the three levers to a metallic chamber. Was this how they powered the force field? Fresher IOTians shoved fatigued figures aside to take control of the levers.

"They're diverting their power to keep the army out," explained Diego.

"I never knew they could." Zachary scanned each sweaty face staggering away from the levers. There. "Dad."

Marcus's thick arms crushed Zachary's spine as he hugged him. "Are you hurt?"

"Our home's gone. And Patch." His dad's presence lifted his hope that they might survive this.

Marcus loosened his hold. "We'll start again. Elsewhere. What matters is that you're safe."

"Is that how you're powering the field?" asked Diego, watching the turning levers. "Is it strong enough?"

Marcus gave the recruit a quick top-down look. "Yes – it should be. It's based on old mechanics from when the dock was built. Something to do with forcing copper conductors to process air sucked out of the vents. The damn Overworlders infected the power lines with negative charges. Everything's powerless. Even the ships – they're all grounded."

Marcus looked at the levers. "These IOTians don't know what hard labour really means. Stay here." He jogged into a crowd and was soon masked from sight.

Zachary hesitated. What could he do to help?

Diego patted him. "The technician's struggling. Inside the chamber."

A window on the side of the metallic chamber showed a tall man racing back and forth around a central hub. He rammed down buttons that kept popping up.

"The field's controls are failing," added Diego. "We can help him."

"How do you know?" Even if the recruit was right, were they allowed inside? Was the technician alone for a reason? "We might make it worse."

"Or we can do something to stop it going wrong." Diego raced to the chamber.

A small entrance separated the initial doorway from the main room of the chamber. Diego made a swift glance backward as he moved into the main room then rammed his palm against a button on the nearby wall before Zachary reached him. Panels slammed down in front of and behind Zachary, trapping him in the lobby.

Zachary smacked the porthole window on the panel to the main room. “Diego! What are you doing?”

Not answering, the recruit bounded over the hub to grapple the astounded technician. After a twist of the neck, the technician slipped onto the floor. Diego stood still for a few seconds before removing a slim Intercom from the pocket of his flared trousers. Since when did he have an Intercom?

“Snake Seven, reporting in. I’m at the force field’s hub,” said the recruit.

“Who is this?” fizzed a voice from his Intercom

Diego scraped his forehead. “Snake Seven.”

“I have no record of you –”

“Authorisation code 8-0-A-7.”

Spit from Zachary’s scathing growl smeared over the porthole. Diego was one of them? The liar. The cheat.

“Hmm. They sure kept you lot secret. Did you say that you were with the force field generator?” responded the Intercom.

“Yes – the hub. I’ll knock it off, but you have to confirm my request first.”

Goose bumps tingled on Zachary’s neck. “*Open the door!*”

“Your request will be authorised. I will see to it myself that your sister receives her rehab. Now, Snake Seven, knock off the force field.”

Zachary punched the panel, angered that he hadn’t seen this before. This was the reason for Diego’s displeasure the day he stepped into the Wastelands: he wasn’t from District Four at all.

“Diego. Stop this,” cried Zachary.

The recruit arose. “You want to know the real reason for why I’m here? It’s because of my sister. She needs treatment. She’s sick. I tried everything I could, but nothing worked. Nobody wanted to help me.” He thumped his chest. “I’m part of the District Infiltrators.”

The words rebounded within Zachary. “You knew this would happen. You let me believe the paper drop was a trick.”

“I never made you think anything. It was your choice.”

“You never stopped me. You betrayed me. People have been slaughtered. I ran through streets filled with blood.”

“My sister needs help.” Diego’s fingers shifted over the hub. All of the three warning buttons had popped up. A red beacon flashed on the ceiling. “They told me you were nothings that needed moving. I hoped they’d find another way.”

“*Scavengers hunt alone,*” spat Zachary. “I broke my rules for you.”

Diego pointed at the hub. “When I turn these off, the army will come in full force. This chamber’s made from rhenium diboride. It’s the toughest metal you can find. This will be the only thing left standing. You will survive. We both will.”

Zachary’s stomach turned inside out. “What about my dad?”

Several men charged at the window of the main room. They’d noticed the alarm. Zachary twisted to face the bangs coming from the first door of the chamber.

“Zach!” Marcus thumped the door. “Let me in!”

“I can’t. He’s going to turn off the force field.” Zachary sprung to the second door. “You do this, and I’ll never forgive you.”

Diego scowled as he turned a glowing dial on the hub. “You don’t understand what’s at stake.”

“Unauthorised deactivation of Energy Barrier has been detected. State authorisation code,” spoke a mechanical voice in the main room.

The recruit squirmed. “What code?”

“Incorrect. State authorisation code.”

“A word or a number?”

“Incorrect. State authorisation code.”

Hands flung over his face, Diego whined, “They never said there was a code.”

“Incorrect attempts exceeded. Target acquired.”

Darts harpooned from the upper corners of the room giving Diego no chance to dodge them. Fingers reacting to reach the gush of blood from his neck stopped midway. The recruit dropped dead.

The room’s voice spoke, “Energy Barriers shutdown.”

Zachary backtracked to the first door. “It’s going to come down.” The sound of machinery powering down filled the chamber. “Dad, there’s loads of them out there. You won’t stand a chance.”

Yellow light reflected upon his dad's dilated eyes. Screams came and went from IOTians running amok. Explosions. Whirring noises. Something whistled overhead. Then, the dreaded bullets.

"Dad, get out of here."

Marcus thumped the door with his shoulder. "I'm not leaving you."

Zachary's heart plummeted. "Hide! I need you!"

Sadness filled his dad's face. "No – it was me who needed you."

The chamber rocked. The second door whooshed upward behind Zachary. Marcus's bloodied hand slapped the porthole. Like a hungry predator, a Rock-Walker emerged from black smoke filling the area. Bullets sprayed from his revolving arms onto the chamber.

DAD!

Cowering, eyes locked on the door, Zachary held his face. No – it can't have ended this way. His dad would've evaded it; he had to have. The chamber rocked again. He crawled backward, wondering why the firing hadn't stopped. His dad hadn't been brandishing a weapon, but what did the soldiers care? They'd massacred innocent people in the streets and had now taken the most important man he'd never understood as well as he should have. Zachary eyed Diego's corpse. How could his scavenging partner have deceived him?

"Look at what you've done! You helped them kill my dad. That was my dad. You could have made him come with me. You could have trapped us both. *But you didn't.*"

Zachary raised his elbow, ready to bludgeon the recruit. Was that remorse he saw in Diego's empty face?

"You shouldn't have done this," he whispered. "We were friends."

Two blue glowing lights motioned outside the first door's porthole. "We've got the area covered. It's safe to come out."

Zachary sat, startled, unsure of how to respond.

"Come on – open up," said the soldier.

Zachary shook his way to the wall-mounted button that Diego had used earlier. Upon pressing it the first door unbolted upward. Fire raged deep into IOTA beyond the two soldiers entering full of confidence with their wide-legged swaggers. Nowhere behind could he see his dad.

An aged man, without a helmet, in thinner body armour followed. He slid fingers along a palm-shaped device. "Identify yourself."

Zachary eyed the dead recruit. Were the Snakes such a secret that nobody knew their identity? In times when a threat was real, survival became the single option.

He straightened himself. "Diego Reyes. Snake Seven. Code 8-0-A-7."

The aged man smiled. "Congratulations, Seven. You're a hero."

Chapter 14 - Into The Wall

Zachary didn't flinch from the old man's scrutiny.

"I heard of them starving the corporals, but they certainly went to work on you."

The old man pushed a button on his padded collar. "Commander Paver here. District One's been taken. Minimal inhabitant survivors. Low casualty count to the units."

Zachary bit his lower lip to hide the scowl begging to be released. Was this the man that Diego had spoken to earlier about his sister?

Paver paused. "Absolutely, I agree, sir. He's here now. As you wish. The General credits the valuable Intel you provided. Panthers, escort Snake Seven to Rendezvous Point Three."

Zachary's heels pressed down, trying to counter the shaking in his legs. So far, the army had fallen for the trick, though it couldn't last long with all of the devices that they possessed. Wrong build. Wrong voice. Wrong face. Add to that, the dangerous sounding nature of Rendezvous Point Three.

Dread swamped Zachary's thoughts as he followed the Panthers out of the main room. Why couldn't the lobby have been longer; any delay to what was coming next would be a blessing. Empty, charred boots lay on the smoking ground. Tongue clenched between teeth, he stepped out. It couldn't have been worse. Black crust covered a man with his tortured front upwards and fingers distorted beyond curled arms resting on his chest. Gut wrenching emotion swayed Zachary sideways. Knees thumping the ground, his hand caught the corpse's brittle vest.

The nearest Panther kneeled. "Are you okay?"

Marcus's chest hadn't lost its warmness. Was that from the blast or did his heart contain faint hope?

Zachary sucked back the onslaught of heavy air building below his cheeks. "He helped me to get into District One. He shouldn't have died. He never did anything wrong."

"Is there a problem?" asked Paver from behind.

"No, sir," replied the Panther, bolting up.

Paver passed them. "I hope your time in the gutters hasn't established feelings towards the cockroaches? Letting them live would've given them a warrant to breed."

The relationship that Zachary believed to exist with Overworld disintegrated. With no opportunity to negotiate as had been stated, Underworld had fallen to the sick plans of their rulers. It was true; Underworld defined waste in *Galilei*.

Terrified fingers hovered over Marcus's face. Zachary wanted to be sure that his dad's eyelids were shut, but the crust above them appeared thick. "What will you do to their bodies?"

"We incinerate them for fuel, or we eject them into space. Fuel appeals more."

Of all the injustice, that comment pulled Zachary's eyes in, ready to unleash anger boiling through his fingers and aching muscles. If only the Panthers weren't present, he'd have snapped Paver's wrinkled neck. How dare they burn the bodies?

Zachary glanced to his left, seeing the rear thrusters of the *Muirne* lying like shreds of a home demolished. In Underworld, the dead weren't buried. Some were discarded in the black lakes, and others pushed to the depths of the cracks in the ground that nobody delved into. Were the Overworlders worse?

A Panther lifted Zachary. "I don't want to be here when the incinerating starts."

After a final look at his dad, Zachary began to walk alongside the soldiers. Mounds of dead bodies smoked next to the gate, battered off its hinges. Corrugated sheets of steel, ripped apart as if made of cloth, littered the area.

The Panther's speedy pace took them east along the beginning of the residential section of District Two. Zachary spotted a single tower standing in Shantytown. He couldn't take anymore. Eyes closed, nose sniffing, he counted the short seconds between each explosion.

Beyond the dipping banks another crack in the Far-Wall was present.

"I bet you'll be glad to be back in your own slacks," wheezed the first Panther.

Zachary scraped skin off his lips. "I can't wait."

"And I can't wait to hear what tales you and the other Snakes have to tell."

Unease fluttered in Zachary's stomach. Great – there were other Snakes.

"Snake Three's already checked in at the R-point," continued the first Panther.

"Two more signalled their positions in D1, but they were dead by the time we reached them. Seems they weren't good at staying hidden. How long have you trained for this?"

"For a while."

"You thin soldiers actually came to some use. It makes sense why you were chosen. In fact, do we even know each other?"

There were no numbers or symbols on the uniforms to distinguish between the Panthers. "I don't know?"

The soldier's flat mouthpiece detached downward like a ramp while the upper section separated into three panels. The head of a blond-haired soldier, not much older than Diego, emerged and smiled. Were all of the soldiers so young?

Zachary returned a blank stare.

The helmet closed returning the wheezed voice. "Ah well, at least you know me now. Believe me, when the General is done with you, you'll be on every device by nightfall. How many of you were there?"

Paired soldiers gave Zachary a clue. "Eight, two per District."

"Didn't one in D3 call in as Snake Ten?" mumbled the second Panther.

Baring uneven teeth, Zachary scowled. "I don't know the exact number. They didn't tell me everything. We were meant to be a secret, remember."

"Fair enough," shrugged the first Panther. "Right, we're here. I suggest you stay close and don't go wandering off. I don't want to have to explain to the General why you took a bullet to the head."

At least a hundred blue eyes displayed between trucks that chugged along inside the wall's space. Men in armoured trousers and grey vests aimed telescopes toward District Two. Messages about measurements and damage details were broadcast across the hum of large screens glittering above hubs.

Metal grated against metal on the northern side of the inner wall where a lift ascended, carrying grey-suited people.

"First things first. The Disinfector. Hold on when it starts, or you'll be knocked back to the sewers," said the first Panther pointing to a circular ring of high panels with a wide doorway in the centre.

Water sprayed out of nozzles along the enclosure's inner surface onto standing soldiers. When the water stopped, the soldiers shook then left with wisps of steam floating off them.

"Go on, Three's just coming out," said the first Panther. "Best place for a reunion, wouldn't you say?"

A short man wrapped a large towel over himself. Zachary couldn't let Snake Three's sight fall on him; a single accusation and he'd be primed for target practice. He jogged past Snake Three without stopping to exchange words, not that the infiltrator appeared bothered to participate.

Within the enclosure, Zachary's lungs reeled in the humid air. He wondered how this thing worked? Was it automatic? He pushed the red dial protruding about waist high. Blistering water pulsated outward like bullets. Gasping, arms stretched, he blinked. Faster spurts thumped his body. Zachary batted away the tickling water that brought a strong alkaline taste to his mouth. The sting set in his eyes. He turned, and pulled the dial out to end the water.

The rush of heat startled Zachary. Taking the fluffy towel handed to him by a nearby man, he wrapped it around himself quickly and pulled the hood down.

"He's just here, General." With an open helmet, the first Panther beckoned Zachary to a table with the blue-tinted image of a tall, wide-shouldered man hovering above it.

Masim Sokolov's chin turned before the rest of his frame. Hands clasped across his waist with his thumbs pressed, he nodded. "Your actions have impressed me."

The Russian accent made Zachary shudder with displeasure.

"The House of Representatives gives you respect. You shall be decorated for your efforts." The General stroked his chin. "You would make a fine bodyguard for Ambassador Kade's daughter when they return to Assayer."

Rosa.

"Continue to demonstrate courage and you'll be duly assessed as a suitable candidate for the Souls Programme. Until we meet."

The transmission switched off.

"Is that it?" asked Zachary.

"Yup – you're clear to go, and, once you've freshened up, make sure you attend the party we're holding." The Panther gripped his arm. "It'd be wrong to dance without the chief guest."

Zachary's boots squeaked on approaching the lift. Snake Three, a young man, sat on the floor running hands through short hair. Not a good situation.

"And here comes the hero," sang a spiky-haired soldier on the lift's platform. "You two are the only ones to make it back. I'm glad I wasn't desperate enough to put my hat into a suicide mission. Number Three's told me he did it because he's worthless up there, but, now, you can be *proud* of being worthless."

Diego's reason struck Zachary; he'd done it for his sister, someone he cared enough for to put himself at risk of being caught. Would he have done the same for Rosa?

"Do you two know each other?" asked the soldier.

“I didn’t bother with anyone when they selected us.” Snake Three kept his head down. “I just want to go home. I’m tired.”

“*Tired?* Of what? All you did was mix with dirt,” scoffed the soldier.

“That was enough.” Compassion filled Three’s tone. “They weren’t bad people. They didn’t deserve this.”

The soldier typed on a display screen attached to the platform. “I’m sure you won’t say that when a couple of chicks jump on you. Right, let’s get going.”

“*Wait!*” A man in grey overalls ran to them, waving a hand-sized bag. “I need this to be examined, immediately.”

The soldier groaned. “I haven’t got time. We’re off to see the General.”

“Make time,” said the grey man. “We found it on a District One resident who’d stolen it from one of the Snakes. I want full diagnostics of any communication made in *and* out of Underworld.”

The soldier pulled a circular screened-device, the size of his hand, and an Intercom from the bag. “Seems like one of your Snakes got sloppy with losing his Intel-Depository. I wouldn’t want to be in his dead shoes.”

Zachary gazed at the intact Intercom. The Raptor’s wet parts crumpled with a rummage of his pocket. If he could get the new Intercom then he had the chance to repair his Raptor. But doing so would jeopardise General Sokolov’s wish for him to guard Rosa. Who was he trying to convince; the moment he reached the top, he’d be dead.

The platform jumped up an inch into a slow ascent amidst the metallic grind. Open pipes within the wall passed them. Above, Zachary saw a grated platform littered with figures. Lots. More soldiers. Bigger guns.

Now what? Think! Knock the soldier over. Grab the bag. And what about Three? Little threat appeared in the glazed look of the other Snake. Zachary had to take the chance. Fists tensed he strained a stare at the soldier.

“What?” scowled the soldier.

Zachary jumped, wrapping the towel over the soldier’s head, then pulled him down. Giving Snake Three a cautious look, he snatched the bag off the platform. In a second, he’d enter a part of *Galilei* that he knew nothing about and might regret.

The next open pipe approached.

“*What the hell!*” The soldier spun Zachary round.

Punching with the bag clasped in his hand, he sent the soldier rocking backward onto Snake Three, who hadn't moved.

Zachary dived into the open pipe.

A shot echoed behind.

Something smacked Zachary's back sending him onto his front.

Chapter 15 - Relationships

Adrenaline pressurised Zachary's head. Eyes widened, he blinked off the blurs and touched his damp back. He arched upright in the large pipe to inspect himself. A small hole in the bag indicated the bullet's path. Unclipping the top of the bag, he heaved a sigh at seeing that the bullet had scuffed the edge of the Intel-Depository.

Outside, from higher up, the soldier from the lift called for attention.

Zachary's palm skated along the moist pipe as he ran, hunched. Pockets of steam ejected in short bursts overhead. Coughing, he heard a humming noise drawing close. The lift was returning. Zachary ran deeper into the curved pipe. Where did it lead?

A thud behind him sent chills down his spine.

"I see him," wheezed a voice.

Zachary bounced off a hard dead-end in the pipe. His kick reverberated instead of shifting the panel.

Damn.

A water droplet trickled onto his nose. Zachary looked up at the small hole above him. It'd be tight. Leaping up, he squeezed into the upright tunnel. Steam tore at the skin of his neck. Why did the steam here prove so toxic compared to the slush he'd waded through in the Wastelands? He continued upwards towards an opening.

Not slowing after he passed through it, Zachary moved to another dead-end with a hole leading down. He pressed his temples. If correct, then this would bypass the last path and place him close to the lifts. Was that dangerous? What if the soldiers had predicted his route? Maybe the soldiers assumed his movement to be forever up and so to go down would seem ... stupid.

Boots sliding, Zachary landed into a new pipe. Whirring sounds muffled his movements. Loud bangs pounded in a sequence with second-long gaps. Crawling under the thickening white smoke, a thirty-foot grate presented passage over a deep chasm. Zachary rushed forward. Jolting, he stayed on course and dived into another pipe, without smoke, but a dead-end soon arrived. He gasped in shock that he'd made it alive. Not a single soldier was in sight. Yet.

Zachary removed the Intel-Depository from the bag. He guessed it to hold important information. Could it provide something for him to use? A sparkling circle illuminated in the centre followed by the buttons of a keyboard appearing under four empty boxes, and the words, 'Enter Password'.

Zachary smacked the dead-end wall.

Taking the Intercom from the bag, he suspended his thumb over the recognition-pad. He had no idea of the password he needed to operate it, and he didn't want the device to lock. Zachary pushed into the rear-grooves of the Intercom's underside, removing the lower shell. Intact inner components glistened at him. Although this wasn't a Raptor, the green circuit boards appeared the same. He pinched between two layers to remove a red chip – the identity of the Intercom. With light prodding, he separated the crumpled components of the broken Raptor out of his pocket. There he found a bent, but similar, red chip. Zachary blew flakes off the chip's mangled edges. The Raptor's chip slipped into its new home.

Zachary rubbed the pad. "F – A – I – L."

A vibrant flash of blue ejected from the Intercom, then it shut down. The same outcome followed on his second try.

"No." Zachary drifted onto his side, stroking the Intercom.

Did wanting to tell Rosa that he was alive too much to ask for? Shivering, he imagined her lying on her bed in a similar pose, grasping her own Raptor.

The Intercom vibrated.

He almost didn't believe it.

Rolling onto his front, Zachary answered, "Rosa!" Silence from the Intercom. That was odd. With calmer tone, he tried again. "Hello. Rosa?"

"Who is this?" responded a stern male voice.

Zachary tensed. Had the army intercepted the Intercom? No – how could they? He'd swapped the Intercom's identity.

"Who is this?" asked Zachary.

He tried to activate the viewer setting. Text materialised on the upper screen, 'Images not permitted by caller'.

"Are you Zachary?"

How did he know his name?

"Did you steal my daughter's Raptor?" said the man.

Zachary gulped. It was Rosa's dad; Jordan. "No, Mister Kade. She gave it to me. My dad helped to clean the infected shells around your home."

"And you've been calling her ever since?"

"No – she called me." Zachary's mouth filled with grimy spit. He swallowed every few words. "She wanted me to wipe the Raptor's memory, but I didn't, and we talked

now and again, because she wanted somebody to talk to, because she doesn't have anybody else."

Goose bumps chilled him. Why was Rosa's dad calling him? Where was she?

Jordan's sigh crackled. "Your account is similar to my daughter's. I will accept your acquisition of her Raptor, but I do not approve of your continued contact with her, and especially of how you have coerced her."

"Coerced? What do you mean?"

"How old are you?"

What a strange question. "Sixteen."

"The same age as her. How convenient," said Jordan. "You remind me of the arrogant bullies that I knew when I was young. They'd take on personas that matched their prey to lure them in. What you're doing isn't new. Gaining my daughter's trust by pretending to be her age, from Underworld, and to understand her, is a plan that you've executed rather well."

"You think I made it up?" Zachary bit his lip. "I'm not a pirate. I never stole her Raptor, or attacked your home."

"Count yourself fortunate that I have not turned this over to Hadrian Tower." Finger clicking sounded. "They'd have you by now in a small cell, tried for theft, conspiracy, attempted murder and the spread of vicious lies, but the compassionate side of me wants to give you a chance to explain yourself."

Zachary's neck stiffened. "Do you really think I'm that bad?"

"Explain."

Zachary couldn't suppress the rage. "*If I* wanted to use Rosa against you, I'd have done it when I was at your home. I could have hurt her then. I'm sixteen. Do I sound older? Do I? I don't have any friends. Okay. I'm a loner. I'm a scavenger. Rosa gave me her time. More time than anyone's ever given me. She wanted to be my friend. I let her, and I'm glad I did." He inhaled aloud. "*Where* is she?"

"Don't use that tone with me."

"I will," snapped Zachary. "If only you had let her out, and let her make her own friends, then none of this would've happened." Zachary's stomach churned. What was he saying?

Jordan's tone cut through the Intercom. "A pathetic scavenger. Do you look at my daughter as a trophy?"

"*No!*" Why did her dad not understand? "Please, just tell me that she's okay."

“You sound concerned.”

Zachary held the Intercom from his face. “Allow the Intercoms to transmit images. Then, you’ll see me. You’ll see that I’m just a kid.”

“You will have *no* contact with her. She will not call you, and neither will you call her. If you commit to breaking this, I will have you dealt with. My daughter does not belong with anyone, especially an Underworlder.”

Zachary growled. “Where is she?”

“Did you really think that she would fall for you? Is that what you wanted? Do you want to move up here? Do you want money?” Jordan’s tone lowered. “Was it her interest in your sad life that drove you to lie?”

“Lie about what? I’ve told you, I know nothing about the pirate attack.”

“How about the lie that Underworld is under attack?”

Zachary panted. Everything inside his stomach turned. “But we are.”

“You don’t sound like you’re under attack?”

“I escaped. I got out. Sokolov’s army attacked us.”

“Listen to him.” A faint female voice came from the Intercom.

Rosa?

“I’m not so gullible that I can’t see how you’ve used the announcements of expansion and the movement of your Districts to spin yarns to my daughter,” said Jordan.

“B-b-but.” Zachary squeezed the Intercom. “I’m not lying. You’re the ones who’ve been lying. There were no negotiations. You dropped papers, orders, telling us to move, but you never explained why, and then your soldiers attacked us. You’ve destroyed the Districts.” Zachary’s face felt rigid as rock. The tears he’d managed to hold for a minute flowed. “Your soldiers killed people. The Panthers. The Pumas. Sokolov. Commander Paver. Rock-Walkers. Fire. Dad. They shot him.” Sniffing, he continued, “I did lie. I admit it. I pretended to be Snake Seven, so that I could escape, and now I’m trapped.”

“Snake,” muttered Jordan. “Masim had a file on his table called ‘The Snakes’.” Then he said more directly, “Are you telling the truth?”

“Yes.”

“Overworld soldiers came down and attacked you?”

“He’s already told you that they destroyed the Districts,” came the woman’s voice. “The boy isn’t lying. I can feel it.”

“It doesn’t make sense, Amelia. Masim made clear there’d be no bloodshed.”

Zachary kneaded his neck. “Blood is all I saw, Mister Kade. I can see it now.”

“How many soldiers did you see?” asked Jordan.

“I don’t know. Three hundred, maybe more, and lots of Rock-Walkers.”

“That’s the entire army,” said Amelia. “Masim sent in the whole army, and he has your name as the one who commissioned it.”

“We don’t know that,” said Jordan. “The boy could still be lying.”

Amelia puffed. “I suppose he thought up the name Paver? How would he know him?”

“There’s more,” Zachary said. “Sokolov wanted me to be Rosa’s bodyguard. Something about the Souls Programme.”

“What did he tell you about the Souls?” snapped Jordan.

“He said I could become part of it. I don’t know what he meant. He never explained it.” Zachary shook his head. Had he said something awkward?

“Did you mention Rosa to him?” Persistence dominated Jordan’s pitch.

“Of course I didn’t.”

“Fine. If any of this is true, then I am sorry for your loss, but if not ...” Jordan paused for several seconds. “I will leave you now.”

“*Wait!* I know you’re not going to let me speak to Rosa, but please tell her that I’m alive. Tell her that I got out.”

“You will not speak to each other again. To her, you are dead. It’s better that way. I’m sorry, but you’ll never understand our differences.”

The Intercom silenced.

“*Come back!*”

Jordan Kade’s words scorched him; he’d tell Rosa that Zachary was dead? No – she wouldn’t believe him. She couldn’t. How had they reacted when she told them about communicating with an Underworlder? How did they get the Intercom from her? It was always her mum’s Intercom. Damn!

Slouching, with his heart pulsing, he stretched the bag’s strap over his shoulder. Something clicked on the other side of the dead-end before it slid sideways, disappearing into a cavity within the pipe. Steam burst down onto him. Zachary plunged through the new hole and into another pipe. It became obvious that the pipes alternated in openings to allow the movement of steam, and that offered him more time to increase his distance from the soldiers. The route curved for several minutes

as if it travelled around a powerful object, which hummed on the right side of the pipe. Where were the connecting tunnels? He should have reached at least one by now.

The bag clattered. Zachary grabbed the vibrating Intercom. Was it her parents again? Had Jordan gone back on his word and reported him to the army? Was it Rosa?

“Hello?”

“Are you alone?” asked a female, flatter in tone than Amelia Kade.

“Yes – I’m alone.” Zachary took a guess. “Alice?”

“Correct,” replied Rosa’s bot. “I overheard your conversation with Mister and Missus Kade. Do not fret, they both left moments ago. The nature of my call is to advise you.”

Zachary frowned. “Where’s Rosa? Is she okay?”

“Mister Kade has arranged to meet with General Masim Sokolov to discuss the recent attacks within Underworld. I can assure you that Mister Kade is troubled by your account. The specialised Intercom in your possession contains an irremovable locator-beacon that is currently transmitting your co-ordinates.”

“Can I deactivate it?”

“Not unless you destroy the Intercom. If your account is confirmed, and General Masim Sokolov feels threatened by your revelation, he will order for your search. You must discard the Intercom, and find another place to hide. The probability of being caught increases if you keep it.”

Zachary ruffled his hair. “But I *need* this. How will I talk to Rosa?”

“Mister Kade made his order clear. You will not communicate with her.”

Tears welled, blurring Zachary’s vision. “Is Rosa not allowed to choose what she wants? Doesn’t she want to talk to me? Does she hate me? Don’t you care about her?”

“My loyalty to Rosa is unquestionable,” replied Alice. “I am her protector.”

“But not her friend, because if you were, you’d tell me where she was and you’d let her decide.”

The bot paused. “Mister Kade suspected foul-play by your doing and locked Rosa inside her room before making contact.”

“*What?*” Zachary pictured Jordan yanking Rosa’s arm. “Did he hurt her?”

“Mister Kade loves his daughter, and would never harm her. He felt compelled to protect her from misjudgement. She is too young to understand.”

“I think she understands perfectly well. If you listened to her, you’d see that. You *must* let her out.”

“Inconceivable. Mister Kade would be angered, and Rosa’s emotions will intensify associated risk,” said Alice.

“I don’t care if she doesn’t want to talk to me. You *have* to let her out. She shouldn’t be a prisoner in her home.”

“Take my advice. Abandon your current location.”

“*No!* Not until you release her.” Zachary kneeled with the Intercom held up in prayer. “I just want to talk to her ... one more time.”

A gritty tone filled Alice. “I should have followed the rules and prevented her from calling you. This has gone on for too long. The hazard for both of you is immense and I must prevent any more. It is you, Zachary Connor, that must choose. Stay and await your demise at the hands of the army, or run, whilst your feet remain attached.” The Intercom made the whooshing sound of a cancelled call.

Questions without answers were all he had. Arms spread against the pipe, he wept. “What did Rosa do wrong? All we did was talk.”

Zachary heard dirt crunching under fast-approaching footsteps. He turned just as somebody grabbed his Intercom-holding hand.

“What’s this?” hissed Shekhar.

Chapter 16 - Desire

Twirling with precision, Zachary swiped himself free from Shekhar's grasp. How had he got here? There was no way that he could have convinced the army that he was a Snake. Not at his age.

Shekhar flicked open the sharp blade of his penknife. "You little bugger. Give me the bag. You know the rule. Hand in what you find."

"We're not at the stall now."

The secretary grimaced. "We're always at the stall."

"Stop this," said a weak voice coming up behind the secretary. "Who is it?"

Shekhar's mouth screwed. "Connor. He's got gear on him."

Using the pipe to balance, Biro hauled his leg along. "Mister Connor. This is a surprise."

"Master, he has a –"

"Enough – we'll need him." Slime covered Biro's clothes and his bare feet. Dark cuts bore into his side where his waistcoat was torn.

Zachary couldn't comprehend how three people from the same stall happened to meet up in this strange place. "How did you get here?"

Biro's arm twitched. "We made it to the bent beams beside the Far-Wall. Do you know them? Quite the find. They're hollow inside."

Shekhar steadied the Master's shuddering posture. "A hole blasted in a beam let us through. It wasn't easy to climb." His voice quivered. "Master took a battering when the stall caved in. We only just made it out. What's your tale?"

Zachary sighed at the two elderly men, worn out from escaping. His own passage through the toxic pipes felt insignificant. "The end sewers of the Far-Wall. I followed some pipes here."

"The sewers." Shekhar smirked. "We've been through muck that's half of what you'd find in the sewers, yet you don't look so dirty to me." He stepped forward. "I heard some soldiers talk about aid from infiltrators."

"I was thinking the same about you." Zachary motioned behind him. "I got drenched by the steamy pipes."

"We've been through pipes, and we're not drenched."

“Enough of the questions,” mumbled Biro. “He’s been with us since he was a child. Why would he align with them?” Even surrounded by bruising, the Master’s eye hadn’t lost its beady glare. “Is the bag yours?”

Zachary adjusted the strap on his shoulder. “I found it.”

“Like a true scavenger.” Biro’s face begged for relief.

After helping the Master rest on the floor, Shekhar looked up. “Who were you talking to?”

Zachary pulled in his lips. How much had the secretary heard?

“The person the bag belongs to called. They wanted to know where it was.”

“Really,” said Shekhar.

“Shekhar.” Biro reached out. “Go and check that it is safe.”

“We already have –”

“*Shekhar*. Check, again. Don’t worry about me. I’m sure that I’ll be safe in Mister Connor’s presence.”

Leaving his eyes on Zachary for as long as his turn allowed, Shekhar spoke, “I hope you have tough hands. You’re going to need them.” Hunching his back, he disappeared into the pipe.

Biro patted the floor. “Come. I am not interested in the contents of your bag. It’s worthless when you have nobody to trade with.”

Upon sitting, Zachary glimpsed the spasms along the old man’s leg.

“Now, more than ever, I could do with an android leg,” sighed the Master. “A flick of a switch and my legs would heal.”

“Can they do that?”

“Oh yes. Androids weren’t built just to be helpers. They’ve assisted less able people to function.”

“Is that what was in your room? The torso?”

Biro almost stopped breathing before he revealed a palm-sized screen. His fingers danced on it. “What you saw is something even I don’t quite understand.”

Zachary saw a 2D recording of Shekhar probing the torso. A layer of skin, entwined with muscles and textured by cords, hung off the table.

“Veins contain magnetic fluid. It’s sticking to the needles,” reported Shekhar’s recording. “Electrode causing a reaction.” The diaphragm region of the torso clenched. “We have movement.”

Zachary stayed looking at the device after Biro switched it off. “Are they meant to be replacements for a human?”

That sounded ridiculous. Substituting a metallic structure for a human limb was believable, but an entire body? Stomach. Lungs. Heart.

“Duane uncovered it,” said Biro.

“*Duane?* He’s useless. He does nothing but collect wires.”

“Except on that day. He saw a man come down from the ceiling on a rope.” Biro twiddled his crooked fingers down a line. “Climbing down. Crying for help.”

“Androids don’t call for help.”

Biro smirked. “The man-droid misjudged the placement of his rope. It tangled, and pulled him up into a turbine. Sliced up like a rat.”

“It doesn’t make sense,” shrugged Zachary.

“Nothing ever does.” Biro tapped Zachary’s arm. “Can I ask you to be honest with me?” He continued on the nod. “I was close, before Shekhar overtook me. I heard your conversation. It didn’t sound like the concerned owner of an Intercom. Who is Rosa?”

Head lowered, Zachary succumbed. “She’s an Overworlder. We’ve been talking, whenever we could. Her bot was warning me—”

“Yes-yes-yes, I know.” Biro’s fingers rattled Zachary’s arm. “I don’t care for the details.” Branches of blood littered Biro’s sympathetic eyes. “Your voice crumbled.”

“I just wanted to talk to her.”

“Wrong. You want her. Speaking to her is a small step. You want her to be present, otherwise she’ll become a memory you fear you’ll forget.”

The Master’s understanding words stunned Zachary. “What do I do? She’s an Overworlder.”

“Worlds apart are we? Earth. Mars. Jupiter. Saturn. Over. Under. Inner. Outer. Rich. Poor. What does it matter? Created or evolved, when you scrape the flesh off the bone, we are the same.” Biro leaned close. “Do not give up on seeking Rosa. Find her. Treat it as the greatest scavenge of your life, and never let anybody take her away from you.”

“It’s not that easy,” protested Zachary.

“They say we live for a reason,” whispered the Master. “I still don’t think I know mine, but you’ve revealed yours.”

Shekhar reappeared, looking tired. “It’s getting hotter. Now or never.”

Zachary helped Biro to his feet. "Where are we going?"

"Out of here," replied Shekhar. "They didn't build this network of pipes for nothing. If anything stops working, someone has to come down and fix it. We found a way to reach Overworld."

The teasing grin the Master gave Zachary filled him with hope.

They continued to an opening like the first hole he'd entered after leaving the lift. The reason for why the two veterans hadn't left before became apparent. A thick, long pole stood upright seven feet away along the opposite wall. Above the pole hung a ladder connected to a wheel. This time, there was no grated path. Just sheer darkness below.

Zachary flapped his vest. He understood the task. Jump the gap. Climb the pole. Pull down the ladder. Freedom.

Shekhar took the bag's strap. "I'll keep hold of this for you."

Zachary whacked his hand aside. "This stays with me."

"It'll weigh you down. Give me the bag."

Clutching the secretary's collar, lugging him close, Zachary grunted, "I am not going to do this if you keep arguing with me."

"We could have left you back there."

Zachary released the collar. "I've made it this far *on my own*."

"Little boy," scowled Shekhar. "You'll always need us. You work for us."

"Hold it!" snapped a voice. Zachary turned to blue eyes glowing over an aimed rifle.

Biro lunged, arms up. His hand thumped the soldier's rifle up. A bullet echoed inside the pipe. Zachary ducked. The soldier elbowed Shekhar's jaw, and then kneed Biro onto the floor.

"Shut down the Valley Quadrant. *Shut them down*," wheezed the soldier.

Metal slamming against metal rang out around Zachary.

"Go," whined Biro on his knees. "Find your desire."

Zachary leaped. Momentum took him to the pole. Fingers slipping, he slid down. Turning, he shoved his body between the pole and the wall. He fought the ache in his forearms as he climbed. Ahead, he saw the soldier ram his rifle's nozzle into Shekhar's mouth. Twisting along the edge, a panel sealed the pipe. Zachary's head clipped the back of the wall as a shot echoed. Then another.

There was no time to linger over the two ended lives.

Ascending the pipe, he took to the ladder and scrambled up the rungs to an orange hatch. He rotated the lever, twice. Bright light burst onto him as the hatch clicked upward.

Zachary crossed into a small room. Turning another lever, the hatch returned and locked. Cooled air surged through his lungs. Easing his eyes open, he surveyed the room. Human-sized glass capsules, stacks of overalls, documents, folders and the surface, from top to bottom, all shared a common colour; white.

Except for the large red writing above an oval-shaped door.

It read, 'Wipe your feet. Welcome back to Overworld.'

Chapter 17 - A New World

Not a single speck of a smudge lay on the floor.

When had anybody been here last?

Although the sound of soldiers rattling up the ladder behind him hadn't materialised, Zachary didn't intend to sit around waiting. He rushed to the oval door. It didn't give a hint of movement. There were no display screens, recognition pads, or instructions present. How did this open? He knocked, and pushed. There could be anybody on the other side. Had he placed himself in a worse position? Returning to the hatch was not an option.

"Door open," he said, not believing in his own words.

His fingers met with the crisp folds of the overalls on a shelf. Zachary's reflection across a polished white screen embedded on the opposite wall startled him. Hair thrust backward with strands flicked behind ears, he rubbed the stain on his forehead. Fragile grit. A reminder of Underworld.

Under the screen, three rows of drawers in the wall revealed trousers, shoes and socks. Plenty of them and in differing shades. After rummaging for the appropriate sizes, he changed into navy trousers and a mauve t-shirt with silver stripes running along the shoulders. A fresh feeling. The trainers he put on cushioned his feet. A heavy lump choked Zachary's throat at the sight of his old clothes dumped in a heap. He shoved them into a drawer.

A square panel on the wall clicked open after a press. Flat and cross-end screwdrivers, wrenches, chisels, wire-clippers and pliers sat inside. All in pristine condition; priceless in Underworld. But here, there were many. They weren't rare finds.

Standing over the hatch, he murmured, "I just need a sign. Something to help me out of here." His thumbs squeezed over his closed eyelids. "Please, Dad, help me."

The oval door whooshed aside.

A brown-haired woman in navy overalls and pushing a trolley from which long handles protruded stood looking puzzled at him. "I'm sorry, I thought it was clear," she said, pulling the trolley backward.

"*No – stay,*" said Zachary. "I was leaving."

“Well, if you’re sure.” She gave him a suspicious double-look. “Are you one of the new apprentices, because apprentices aren’t allowed on Floor C without suitable supervision.”

Zachary moistened his lips. “Yes, sorry. I wanted to explore, and I don’t know how I’ve ended up here. Can you remind me of the way out?”

Relaxing her narrowed eyes, she chuckled. “There’s always one, isn’t there? Left to the lift, then up to wherever you need to be. I hope you haven’t fiddled with anything, because it’s always the cleaner that gets the blame.” Steam ejected from her mop.

Not wanting to increase the woman’s doubts by enquiring how the doors opened, Zachary gestured his thanks and stepped into a white corridor. Slim lines of light trailed overhead as he sped onward. A large panel marked the end of his route. A ping resonated after a press on the triangle symbol in the centre.

Nausea crammed into his stomach. What if there were others inside the lift? A hum of decreasing pitch came from behind the panel that slid aside. Inside the empty lift, an inner wall displayed a list of letters with buttons beside them.

A – B – C – D – E.

Which should he choose? Three voices in conversation, not yet seen, drew near. Zachary pushed on the letter A. The lift panel shut. Grabbing the banister he felt a rapid upsurge. Panic gripped him as the panel opened. His hopes of finding another empty corridor diminished. Dozens of people, some in grey overalls, others in clothing similar to his, stood around large pillars in a long room. Tapping on pillar-mounted screens, their conversations overrode Zachary’s presence. Walking quickly, he resisted eye contact with the few who turned their heads.

Dead ahead stood a closed door with two red lines above its arched frame. A man in the process of tossing some sort of device over his arm waved a black clip at the door. Green light shone in the door’s centre, and it opened, letting the man leave. Now that Zachary looked, the clips were apparent upon every person in the room. He had to get a clip too.

Six men heaved copper pylons as tall as themselves across the room. Each had a black clip fastened to their shoulder. Zachary zigzagged until he walked alongside the man at the rear. Moaning about the day, preoccupied by his struggling attempt to push the pylon, he was the perfect candidate.

Zachary filled his lungs.

All of a sudden, a female voice burst from the thin speaker in the corner of the room. “High Alert for Wanted Criminal.”

Every pillar-mounted screen switched from bright colourful content to a column of scrolling text.

“Five counts of murder, twelve incidents of grievous bodily harm, kidnapping, and arson-attack upon the Arms Division of Hadrian,” read a woman in front of her screen. “Last movements detected under the Maintenance Section of the Camelot-Mall.” She clutched a nearby man’s arm. “He could be here.”

“Please do not approach. Notify the Security Patrollers immediately,” said the room’s speaker. “Known aliases of the wanted Criminal include Santos Luis and Diego Reyes. Anyone caught concealing the Wanted Criminal will be charged with aiding and abetting.”

One face dominated every single screen.

It was Zachary’s, right after he’d left the Disinfector.

Turning on the spot, he forced his leg out. The pylon-pushing man at the rear tripped. With an underhand scoop, Zachary caught the man’s flapping arm, and swiped at the black clip. It didn’t come loose. Releasing the confused man, he tore at the layer of wires. The clip came free. Jumping to the side, Zachary sprinted for the arched door.

“He stole my ID!” yelled the fallen man.

An arm swung toward Zachary. He ducked with his hand held out. The door lit green. Escape.

“He’s the Wanted Criminal,” cried a voice.

Zachary stumbled out of the room into people. He pushed on. Gasping at a swift hand attempting to grab him, he whipped through bodies to create a gap. An elbow caught his stomach. Winded, and ignoring the angered voice berating him, Zachary eyed the sparkling ceiling. And going down the side between the walls of the huge Shantytown-like room were hundreds of stalls. Large. Loud. Colourful.

“Stop him,” shouted somebody.

Stooping, he mingled with Overworlders, moving away from the chasers. Even with arms brushing past him, Zachary shivered. The army had created an image of him as a murderer. Soon everybody in Overworld would recognise him.

Zachary sunk against a wall. People moved in and out of the decorated stalls. Children holding balloons on strings chanted with merriment. A raucous group of

teenagers ran with bags hooked onto their belts. The building was full of happiness. He wanted to assume that Overworld knew nothing of the attacks, but couldn't. What if this was their way of not caring, and why should they care? He glared at the women flaunting their slim bikini-clad bodies next to a water-spraying fountain. The splashes sounded like bullets to him.

Tugging on hair strands to cover his left eye, Zachary followed the movement of some people holding bulging bags. Ahead, transparent walls showed tall, polished buildings standing outside.

Fear slowed Zachary's step. To walk in their District, amongst Overworlders, increased his apprehension. Once outside, there'd be few groups of people to hide within. He counted eight people ahead of him until he accessed the exit.

Zachary puffed his breaths. Four people.

He stepped out. Grey tiles covered the ground. People dispersed into opposing directions. More stalls. Places. Sleek vehicles rolled across the roads. Central to his viewpoint was a giant tower, shaped like a needle, that almost touched the ceiling. What lay outside the see-through ceiling comforted him. Jupiter. Something that wasn't new.

People separated on the road, murmuring. Four blue-uniformed men walked at an even pace toward the building he'd just exited with handguns secured to their belts. Security-Patrollers?

A patroller halted.

Zachary's heart thumped.

"Iris scans have detected Reyes." The patroller tapped his glove. "*There!*"

Dipping his shoulder left, Zachary darted right. Orders from behind called for people to leave. Ahead, three more patrollers with extended truncheons emitting electrical sparks rushed toward him.

"Stop and you won't get hurt."

Something roared behind Zachary. Then smoke burst around him. The patrollers fell back. Another roar. More smoke.

Zachary burst right through a thin gap between two growing clouds. Spasms sliced Zachary's side. A stitch! Not stopping, he pressed on his abdomen and moaned.

"*Move!*" shouted a masked, black-clothed man charging through the smoke towards him.

Zachary obeyed. He glimpsed back and saw the masked man collide with the patroller. Who was that? Who cared? Zachary made for an alleyway. He lost count of the turns he made, until he reached an opening that faced a new horizon of buildings. Panting and spitting, he coughed. He couldn't hear any footsteps following, and there were no patrollers within sight. Staggering, he walked on.

"Warning," announced a buzzing voice.

A pink wall erupted upward over the opening. Currents ran along it.

"Warning," repeated the voice behind him. Another pink wall went up.

Gritting his teeth, Zachary touched the first pink wall. A bolt lashed over his arm. Shaking after his topple, he glared. Trapped!

The floor hugged his cheek. It was over. The patrollers would hand him over to the army. Soon, they'd realise he wasn't Snake Seven, and since Underworlders didn't deserve to be in Overworld, there'd be only one outcome.

Termination.

Chapter 18 - Touching Distance

As *Galilei's* ceiling dimmed, a dark shade masked Jupiter and strengthened the glow of the barrier. Nobody had interrupted Zachary in the half-an-hour he guessed he'd been trapped. What was taking the Security-Patrollers so long? He was the Wanted Criminal. Shouldn't they have found him?

A defeated sigh escaped him. "Come and get me."

Surges continued to traverse the barrier. Zachary wondered how many core-generators powered them. There must be a dozen for each wall with a limitless supply. So much energy joined by vast space, yet Overworld required Underworld to expand.

Zachary peered through the intermittent, finger-thin gaps along the vertical length of the wall. Overworlders walked beyond without a care for the barrier. Was it normal to have disturbances in Assayer?

For the tenth time, he scanned the high walls of the alleyway. There wasn't a window frame to cling to or a protruding block to climb, but what about the tiles on the ground? With some force, the tiles could dislodge and hopefully open a way out.

Taking a flat end screwdriver from the bag, Zachary teased it between the bottom edges of the wall. It sunk in deep. Pushed at an angle, the tile shifted to show metal. No – this couldn't be it. There had to be a pipe, a vent, or something that he could crawl through. Zachary stabbed the screwdriver. The shaft snapped.

"Rats!"

His old screwdriver would've handled a hundred stabs like that. There wasn't anything else he could think of to get out of here.

A chugging hum approached from the other side of the barrier. Zachary leaned away from it. Hisses followed the whirring movement of an object coming to a halt. Standing, broken screwdriver in hand, he readied himself to pounce the moment the fuzzing wall dispersed.

Footsteps drew close to the barrier.

"Zachary?" said a female.

Could it be?

He smacked against the wall, inching as close from harm as he could up to the thin gap. A rapid intake of breath grated in his throat at the sight of shoulder-length black hair.

Joy sang in his tone. "It's you."

Rosa knelt down on the other side. The skin above her nose creased with concern as she searched his face. "Alice, we've found him. He's okay."

Zachary panted. "I knew she'd let you out. I knew it."

"She told me everything." Fingers fidgeted over a red half-sleeved top. "Don't get too close to the Confiner. It'll fry you."

"I know."

"It's unsafe to remain here," said Alice some steps away. "I have satisfied your request regarding his well-being. We must leave."

No, thought Zachary.

"The Security-Division is aware of his location," continued the bot.

"But they haven't come yet," he said.

"That is because they are involved in skirmishes with protesters." The bot's attitude confused him. Was that concern or neglect? "Before you ask, I am not knowledgeable in the Confiner deactivation process."

Rosa stood up. "Use the Trojan's interface. Download the schema. Learn it."

"What's a Trojan?" asked Zachary.

Rosa returned. "My father's Pulse-Bike. It's ancient. He hasn't used it since I was a baby. We used it to get away from home." A red bullet-shaped bike with fat wheels hummed from close behind her. "I never thought I'd get out of my room. I screamed and screamed until my throat cracked. I can't blame Alice for not coming. I'd be scared of Father too. Breaking your owner's command is the biggest sin an android can commit."

Zachary smiled. "She did it."

"You really must have loosened some cogs in her head."

"I think we argued."

Rosa's face lowered forward. "Father didn't believe me. He said I was mad. No – he held me, stared into my eyes, and asked me what had gone wrong."

"I thought he hadn't hurt you?"

"He didn't. He was angry that I dared to question him, and that I was stupid for talking to you." Her pupils reflected the pink glow of the Confiner. "I couldn't stop thinking about you. It's what stopped me from going insane." She paused. "Zach, Alice told me about your father. I'm sorry."

Quivers crushed Zachary's happiness.

He pulled out the remains of her Raptor. “Somebody stole it from me. Stupid Horatio. I chased him, and he dropped it. Then the army came, and I stole one off them. It doesn’t work properly.”

“Zach.”

“I haven’t had time to hack its password. There’ve been soldiers after me, and now patrollers. They’re calling me a criminal.” His voice croaked. “All I’ve done is run and run and run.”

“Zach. Look at me.”

Zachary fought to hold the tears in.

“If my father died, I couldn’t have done what you have. I’d have given up. I’d be lost. *You* didn’t give up.” A serious expression overcame Rosa. “What’s happened is wrong. My parents know that, and they’re doing something about it. Sokolov will answer for his actions.”

“Can your dad stop him?”

Rosa took time to nod her reply. She turned to face the aqua glow coming from inside the Trojan. “Alice, how long?”

“Two more minutes.”

“Hurry up.” Rosa bit her fingernail. “We’ll get you out, Zach. I promise.”

Zachary spun, thinking he heard bullets coming from beyond the rear Confiner.

“What if the patrollers arrive? What about you?”

“I’m here.”

“I know, but they might think you’re with me.”

A surge travelled along the Confiner distorting her voice for a few seconds. “If it wasn’t for this damn wall, I’d give you the biggest hug ever. Of course I’m with you. You’re not alone anymore.”

Her bot made exhausted thumps inside the Trojan.

“How did you find me?” asked Zachary.

“The locator beacon in your Intercom,” replied Rosa. “Alice detected the swap with the identity-chips when she spoke with you. She’s been tracking your movement ever since.”

Zachary grinned. The bot had a heart.

“We thought we were too late when you started moving left and right through the alleys, but, I’d have found a way to get to you. I wasn’t going to turn back.” Rosa

grinned. “There’s something bothering me, and it’ll sound stupid, so I might as well not say it.” She clicked her teeth. “*Alice! Come on!*”

“Frustration noted,” said her bot.

Zachary acknowledged Rosa’s sudden tactic. “Say it anyway.”

“Say what?” smirked Rosa.

“What’s bothering you?”

Rosa tugged strands of hair dangling over her shoulder. “When I was in my room, locked up, I had a chance to analyse everything, especially the connection that my father had to the attacks. He would’ve carried on in his study without the faintest idea if you hadn’t told me. And, how did you tell me? With my Raptor.”

Rosa shook her head. “Can’t you see it? My Raptor gets stolen. You find it. We meet. We talk. We’ve then gone through the worst day of our lives, but we’ve escaped. We’re *both* here. Is it coincidence?”

Zachary couldn’t reply. Her animated face pleased him better without the background crackles or the blue tint.

“Do you think that fate brought us together?” She scattered hair from across her cheek. “I told you it was stupid. *Alice.*”

“Almost there,” replied the bot.

Rosa groaned. “When you escaped, did you mean to come to Overworld?”

“I’m not sure. It just happened,” replied Zachary.

Her eyelids fluttered. “So, you weren’t coming to see me.”

Random thoughts perplexed him. “I was being chased, and I ended up here.”

“But, not to see me.”

“Not then.” Zachary sucked in. “But, now, yes. I was worried about your dad locking you up. I wanted to know that you were okay.”

“Is that it? Just to check that I was okay,” Rosa murmured beneath her raised hand. “Well, now that you know I am, once we’ve helped you out, you can carry on with your tour of Overworld.”

Zachary pulled back from the Confiner’s gap.

Rosa’s fingers curled over her face. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. I’m being stupid. Forget I said that.”

“I already have,” whispered Zachary.

“Look, I’ve got an idea. If the patrollers capture you, say you’re from Haven Hill, and that you’ve been mistaken for somebody else.” She clapped. “Say that you have a twin. *Do not* tell them that you’re from Underworld.”

“Won’t they know?”

“They might, but if you confuse them, it’ll buy you time.” Rosa’s eyes rolled. “Stay quiet until my parents get to you. We’ll help you.”

Zachary swapped the knee he balanced on. Jordan’s lecture sounded in his head.

“They’d do that for me?”

“You did what I couldn’t. You made them listen. My father will convince the House to stop. You’ll be safe. You won’t have to worry anymore.”

A niggling thought surfaced. “What happens to me after that? I’m still an Underworlder.”

“Fate intended for us to meet. I’m doing things that I never dreamt of doing, and it’s because of you. You’ve given me something that makes me feel alive. Like I have a purpose in this Base. I don’t want that feeling to end.”

Black pupils engulfed Rosa’s green eyes. “You won’t be returning to Underworld. I don’t know how, but we’ll find a way for you to stay with me.”

Zachary stuttered. “With you?” It almost made him blush.

“We’ll get you somewhere close to where I’ll be in Assayer. I’ll visit you, and I’ll help you in Overworld.”

Zachary shivered, squeezing the excitement building in him to the tips of his thumbs. Was she telling the truth, or was she trying to raise his hopes? He had to believe she meant every word.

“There’s a reason why I wanted to see you one last time,” he said.

“There doesn’t have to be a last time,” said Rosa.

Fighting the agitated flutter of his stomach, he continued, “I’ve never admitted to anyone that they’re beautiful.” The stomach fluttering flew upward into his chest. “I like you.”

Eyes enlarged, Rosa’s hands clamped her mouth.

“I cannot access the deactivation mechanism,” said Alice. She moved Rosa away from the barrier. “There is an alternative, possible solution.”

Zachary saw them move to the Trojan.

Rosa spoke without tone. “Alice, what are you doing?”

The Trojan roared forward. It collided against the Confiner's wall causing bolts to clash midair. The bike's front panel crushed inward. A small hole emerged between the wall and the bike. Alice appeared, ramming her arm through the hole into a thin upright vent. The Trojan bounced backward into the street, returning the Confiner in full.

"NO!" shrieked Rosa.

Shuddering on the spot, Alice twisted her hand. Fabric on her sleeve burned back before the pale covering of her arm melted to a metallic frame of components. The bot yanked her hand out of the wall.

A beep sounded.

The barrier's walls ahead of and behind Zachary switched off.

Alice staggered, holding her limp, deformed arm. "Do not worry. I am still functioning, however, this will take some explaining to Mister Kade."

Zachary blinked, looking into Rosa's teary eyes. She pounced forward, enveloping his shoulders with her arms. He returned the embrace. A fresh scent filled him as Rosa's face buried below his. The warmth of her body removed the cold dread of patrollers charging in. He didn't know what to do. When was the last time he'd hugged anybody?

Taking her time, Rosa faced him. "Did you mean it, that you like me?"

Hands pressed against her back, Zachary's heart beat fast. He wanted to show her that he meant every word. His mouth tingled amidst the blood rushing up to his head. Intrigue filled Rosa's eyes, as her lips separated with a small gap.

"What are you waiting for?" she whispered, invading the lingering space.

"Stand apart," demanded a voice behind the smoking Trojan.

Keeping Rosa clutched, Zachary turned toward handguns raised by three patrollers.

"There is no need for this action," said Alice.

"Stop," said a patroller.

"I can vouch for their –"

A gun fired.

Black liquid gushed out as Alice's head rocked off her neck.

Chapter 19 - The Target

Rosa's scream rang in Zachary's ear.

"They killed her," she whimpered, reaching out to the darkened orbs of the bot's eyes.

"You have to be alive to be killed," said the firing patroller, identified by the wispy trail coming from his handgun. "Stand apart."

"Don't move," muttered Zachary.

Rosa's arms hung loose. "She was only an android. She never hurt anybody."

Zachary scanned for options. Even if the Trojan wasn't broken, trying to reach it would be impossible with the patrollers ready to pick them off in a second.

The leading patroller spoke into a collar-mounted Intercom. "Target acquired, with another." He cocked his head. "You two are really trying my patience."

Overworlders in the streets scattered away from the growling engine of a six-wheeled truck with a large rear compartment that arrived. Additional patrollers descended from it.

"We're going to do this properly." Rosa gripped Zachary's vest. "No more running." She faced the leading patroller. "My father is Ambassador Jordan Kade. You have no right to behave in this manner around me."

"We know who you are," replied the patroller. "Separate them."

The new patrollers sprung, arms positioned.

Zachary spun Rosa, keeping her stuck to his chest. Something whacked his spine. Sharp pain dropped his jaw. A metal stick lashed his thigh. Sudden weight plummeted onto his back, shoving him hard onto the ground. Rolled over, Zachary saw Rosa being held by a patroller.

"Let her go," cried Zachary.

A patroller lifted him to his feet with a handful of hair.

"Release him," snapped Rosa.

Cold metal slapped against Zachary's wrists, locking them tight to an overhead chest-lock. Tiny teeth bit into his wrist.

"What do we do with this one?" asked his patroller.

Zachary threw a puzzled look. Didn't they know he was?

"Scan him," said the lead patroller next to Rosa. "Is he from your home?"

Rosa blinked. "Yes."

“No match on the iris scan,” said Zachary’s patroller. “Broadening parameters.”
What – they weren’t here for him?

The lead patroller tightened his grip on Rosa’s arm. “I prefer it if you didn’t lie. Haven’t you embarrassed yourself enough already?”

Rosa squirmed. “My father sent you.”

“That’s right. You’re the target. Ambassador Kade isn’t impressed by your escapade, and ordered your collection. He’ll meet you at Hadrian Tower.”

Zachary shuffled forward a step. Wasn’t Jordan meant to be helping them?

“Sir,” said Zachary’s patroller, holding up a digital display-pad. “The boy checks in as the Wanted Criminal. ID 43-728. Diego Reyes.”

The lead patroller teased a smile. “Our luck just changed.”

“Sorry, sir?”

“He’s wanted for something else. This here is the rogue infiltrator.”

“Infiltrator?” Rosa elbowed off the patroller guiding her to the truck. “What are you talking about?” Her fingertips touched her chin. “His name is Diego?”

“Your friend’s been causing some trouble for us,” said the lead patroller. “Seems like he has a problem with following orders. Lock him in guys, and keep him under watch. He’s a nifty bit of work.”

“Orders?” said Rosa.

Frozen on the spot, Zachary mumbled, “No. It’s a lie.”

She eyed the lead patroller. “What were his orders?”

“To aid the negotiation efforts in Underworld. He defected after getting a little cosy with the dirt-bags.”

Rosa’s legs shook. “You lied to me?”

“No,” said Zachary. Strong hands tugged his head back. “It’s not what you –”

A band lashed over his mouth reducing sound to slurs. All the time, water built up in Rosa’s eyes.

“Save it for the inquest,” said his patroller opening the black bag. “Sir, he’s still got the Intel-Depository on him.”

“Excellent. I say we nip this in the bud and score extra points.” The lead patroller breathed down onto Zachary. “Where were you heading with this? Were you meeting somebody? Huh? Are you a covert protester?”

Zachary eyed Rosa’s bitter glare. She’d been sucked into the lie.

Walking away, the lead patroller spoke into his Intercom. "Sector 18B has been secured. Notify General Sokolov that we have the Wanted Criminal."

A cross-shaped device shot down onto the lead patroller's abdomen. It clicked with a bleep. Retching, he looked up in shock. The device dispersed currents from either end of the device. As if knives had been connected to it, the patroller's body sliced open. Burning intestines unravelled onto the ground.

"Skirmish alert," shouted Zachary's patroller.

A smoke bomb burst up between them and Rosa. Zachary fell onto his side. Piercing through the smoke, he saw Rosa on her knees, coughing.

A gun went off.

"Get up." A masked figure in black hauled Zachary up onto his broad shoulder. Dust made the direction that the figure had come from undistinguishable.

What in Europa!

"Got him," announced the figure. "Go!"

Wait! Rosa! Let me go!

A smaller masked figure overtook them. Another blast of smoke caught Zachary in his face. He gasped at the irritation creeping into his eyes. Large hands pulled him down off the shoulder.

A machine with pumping pistons chugged against the wall of an alleyway. The smaller figure clicked a lever on the machine, causing a panel to open out.

Zachary felt the rush of dropping after a thumping push into a dark tunnel. He reeled off the tar-covered ground into hands that pulled him through a cavity behind interlacing pipes.

"What is going on?" mumbled Zachary.

Bright light shone onto his face. Keeping one eye shut, he looked up at the big masked figure and the other person holding the torch who'd now removed their mask.

The woman scraped her hair back. "We've been sent to rescue you."

Chapter 20 - Underground

Zachary fought the gnawing teeth of the cuffs. What the heck did they mean by a rescue?

Rosa had been in his arms. She'd rushed to embrace him. He had her. Then.

In the dark of the tunnel, Zachary imagined Rosa standing close. Her lips twinkled. He'd almost had a kiss. She'd wanted the same – right?

A brief scent of her fresh hair remained on his fingers.

Light from the torch demolished his dreams and brought him back to reality. Rosa was held captive by the patrollers, but the realisation that she hated and thought of him as an infiltrator, irritated Zachary.

“Later, Bhavini, keep moving,” said the larger figure.

Zachary scowled at they pushed him to keep him walking in the tunnel. Cuffed hands clasped against his heaving chest, his feet dragged. For rescuers, they weren't very considerate about his current state.

Now unmasked, the stubble-headed man squashed Zachary's shoulder. He was like a taller version of his dad. Neck muscles bulged under a blocky jaw. “Stop dragging your feet. The patrollers will be scanning. Do you want to get caught?”

“You're not helping, Caine.” The woman eased the brute's hand off Zachary.

It was an odd pairing. One, tall with strength showcased by a puffed chest, whilst the other, less than an inch taller than Zachary. Although thin, her smooth skin presented her as somebody who didn't live in Underworld. Zachary rolled his eyes as a memory surfaced. They were the same couple that'd been searching for the android in the bartering camp. Zachary looked back and forth between them. The *rescuers* couldn't be part of the army, otherwise why would they snatch him from the patrollers? What if Bhavini and Caine were part of the infiltrating Snakes? Maybe Sokolov had ordered them to ensure the Snakes remained a secret.

The tunnel shrank, giving a wider spread of the torch's beam. Hooks and cross-shaped objects protruded from the thin rucksacks the two rescuers carried.

“Okay, that'll do.” Bhavini shone the torch on Zachary. “Don't make a sound.”

Caine's butch frame loomed over him as he cut the cuffs with pliers. The chafed skin of his wrists was the least cause of Zachary's anger.

“What the hell were you doing?” He stepped back from their glares, quietening his tone. “Why did you leave her behind? Who sent you to rescue me? Who are you?”

Caine snorted. “Talk about ungrateful. We saved your behind back there.”

“I never asked you to. I’m going back.”

“No, you’re not. We didn’t cross the line up there for nothing. The streets will be swarming.” Caine turned to Bhavini. “I told you he was with her.”

“What?” Zachary shook his hands midair. As if they cared about crossing lines when they’d come down hunting for an android.

Bhavini lowered her torch. “Calm it, Zachary, I’ll explain.”

Their knowledge of his name irked Zachary.

“Caine, backtrack twenty-steps. Keep watch. I can handle him. Go – this will be quicker without your testosterone.”

Bhavini waited until the brute left. “Take slower breaths or you’ll pass out.”

Zachary looked deeper into the tunnel. Could he dart off and gain a head start?

“Don’t even think about it. We’re not the bad guys,” she said, as if reading his mind.

Zachary snorted. “I bet that’s what everybody says.”

“Trust me. Okay, I’ll keep this short. We were told that you’d be in the vicinity of the mall. It’s a good thing you were. Caine wasn’t lying about us putting ourselves on the line for you.”

“Like I said, I never asked you to.”

Bhavini sneered. “Sure, because you had it all in hand. Got to give it to you, though, you’re something else for getting out of Underworld.”

“It wasn’t easy.”

“I’ve heard.” She tipped forward her earlobe, showing an embedded tube. “We intercepted alerts that you’d been spotted. The name change did confuse me.”

“I’m not Snake Seven, Diego or Santos. I lied.”

“Smart move. We lost you outside the mall. Next thing we know, the patrollers are on strict orders to collect somebody entering Assayer. We took a chance and followed. Luckily, you were in the same Sector.”

Bhavini’s heel clicked on the ground. “One part doesn’t fit. What were you doing with that girl?”

Zachary kneaded the strain crushing either side of his head with his hands. “She came here to help me. I should be with her, and if you hadn’t interfered –”

“You’d never see her again, if we hadn’t. And you can forget the heroic drama of going back. We came to collect you. She was never part of the equation.”

Zachary met her gaze. “There wouldn’t have been an equation without her.” He sighed bringing his hands up. “I’m *begging* you. Please, help me.”

Bhavini’s eyebrows arched. “Right now, they’ll be hunting high and low for us, and she’ll be under strict observation because of her link to you.”

“Will they hurt her?”

“Their last order was to bring her in unharmed.”

That didn’t decrease the annoyance soaking his mouth. Zachary kicked out, banging a pipe. “Are you protesters?”

“If you mean ROM, then yes. The Right Order Movement. Pirates, protesters and troublemakers are terms the House of Representatives use to portray us, but it’s not what we stand for. We fight for something bigger.”

Bhavini removed Zachary’s bag from her thin rucksack. She must have clinched it from the patroller. She delved in the bag and held up the Intel-Depository. “We came for this. For months, we’ve been trying to get our hands on something to give us the upper hand, and lo and behold, an Underworlder delivers.”

Caine emerged toward them. “Important thing is if it still works.”

“He would’ve ditched it if it didn’t.” Bhavini fumbled deeper into the bag. “Have you been communicating with that girl?”

Zachary returned her frown. “Yes – why?”

“With this?” She whipped out the Intercom on to the floor.

“*Hey,*” yelled Zachary.

Without hesitation, Bhavini stamped, cracking the Intercom’s upper-shell.

Caine piled onto Zachary’s chest, driving him against the pipe.

“*Stop,*” cried Zachary.

Bhavini flicked the lid off a silver-tube in her hand and poured clear liquid onto the Intercom. Smoke arose from bubbling froth.

“Forget her. She was using you,” said Caine. “It was a well-executed plan to lure you in to where they wanted you. Didn’t you see the way they knocked off her android? They’ll replace her in an instant. You fell for it.”

Zachary grabbed the protester’s padded sweatshirt. “I *needed* that.”

“No – they needed you. She was the bait.”

Standing with her attention fixed on the grey puddle growing under the froth, Bhavini spoke. “Firstly, they can track Intercoms. Secondly, they probably already

have, and thirdly, it would've made you a liability. ROM doesn't deal with liabilities."

Zachary groaned against his sweaty palm. For the second time today, he'd lost a working Intercom. What else could go wrong for him? The protesters had what they wanted. Why did they still need him?

"I'm going back to her," he said.

"Do we have to go through this again?" grunted Caine.

"Who are you to decide on what I do? I promise I won't tell them about you."

Bhavini's sharp tone cut him. "You've seen too much. You have to come with us now. This girl, whatever her name is, she obviously means a lot to you –"

"Everything," muttered Zachary.

"Maybe we can help you." She motioned for Caine to remain silent. "If this really is your first time above the midpoint, then you'll be caught quicker than escaping hydrogen. Someone wants to meet you. Carell, our leader."

* * *

Vest drenched with sweat, Zachary handed back Bhavini's water flask after they travelled through a long stretch of hazy humidity. At the end of the torch's beam lay a door already opening inwards.

One foot in, his skin calmed under cold air. The place was smaller by miles in comparison to the streets of Assayer. Ladders connected the levels above and below the wide platform that Zachary stood on. He struggled to absorb the different nooks and crevices littered with entwining cables. Lights twinkled, almost in tune to the sounds of components moving. Laughing children chasing one another brushed past him. How safe was this place?

Caine left them on the platform. "I'll let Carell know."

Zachary's eyes bounced from the array of pliers, electronic screwdrivers, drill-bits, padded jackets, and circuit boards on shelves. Whoever mingled here would be champions among scavengers. But none of that mattered anymore. Grimacing, he removed his fingers from the displays.

"Is this where you all hide?" he asked.

Bhavini tidied a pile of gloves on a shelf. "We call it the *Gilgamesh Ark*. Like Noah, but without the animals." Zachary didn't understand her chuckle. "This is the second

incarnation of it. The last one was flattened, eight years ago, so we're pretty attached to this ark."

"Will Carell help me?"

"With Rosa? That depends on a few things. ROM isn't just about protesting against the rules. We want what's fair for everyone in the Base. There's stuff going on up there that will blow your mind."

A flurry of people rushed under the platform to greet a muscular man coming through with a rifle in his hand. He motioned to the crowd to disperse. "Clear the passages. We've captured one."

Zachary bolted to the railings along the platform.

Behind the muscled protester, two others pulled along a white-coated man.

"Let go of me. I've done nothing to you," whimpered the man. Blood oozed from the rear of his head. "I'm a scientist."

The lead protester rammed the handle of his rifle onto the scientist's head.

"Stop," stuttered the scientist. Another harder ram put him to the floor. But he crawled. A third hit stopped him still.

"Take him to recon-bay," instructed the muscled protester.

Lines of blood followed the resulting drag into a side corridor.

The railing warmed under Zachary's grip. He was surprised at the calmness of the crowd at the killing. How was that different from the soldier that had attacked the Districts?

"He killed a man who didn't have a weapon," said Zachary.

Bhavini shook her head. "He was already dead."

Chapter 21 - Intent

Zachary reversed. "He was alive. I saw him."

Bhavini's blank expression shifted beyond him.

Caine had returned. "Carell's ready for you."

"Well, I'm not ready for him," snapped Zachary, raising a finger at Bhavini. "What in Europa happened there?"

"He saw Vincent bring in a Souls," she said.

Zachary bit on his hand. Souls as in the same Souls that Sokolov deemed suitable for him? Is this how ROM dealt with them?

Caine scratched his chin. "That's fine, but Carell's waiting. You can have your moan after you've seen him."

"That's it?" Zachary's sarcastic chuckle didn't have the effect of gaining anything from the frozen glares. "I'm not going anywhere until you tell me about Vincent and the Souls."

Caine loomed over him. "Down the corridor. Carell's room is at the end."

"You hardly know me, and you're going to let me walk to Carell's room on my own?"

Caine's spherical shoulders rolled. "Should we fear you?"

"You've been summoned. Stop thinking that everyone is out to get you," said Bhavini. "This isn't a trap. Nobody will jump you. Take it from me, if Caine's letting you go alone, he has faith in you."

"Just a little," grunted Caine.

Accepting the kind words wasn't easy. Sticking to the big man's instructions, Zachary shuffled off the walkway to the opposite corridor. Scraps of metal nailed to the walls reflected the spotlights from above. The route to Carell's room was bright and cleaner than the previous area of the *Ark*. Zachary reached a door constructed from thick planks.

Inside, white walls were prominent with shiny silver devices arranged along shelves. The chassis of androids and various mechanical components cluttered long tables. A functioning hydraulic arm, rotating from its mounting on the high ceiling, carried a pole surrounded by wires, and welded it to the underside of the balcony. Sparkling streaks rained off the welding into evaporating puffs. A buzzing drone

alerted Zachary's attention to further hydraulic arms shifting in the large room. Was the room alive?

Between pillars covered in screens, he glimpsed a cabinet on the balcony displaying dozens of thin tubes that glowed green.

"Welcome," said a softly spoken male.

Zachary edged around a pillar to face the centre of the circular room. A man sat upright, cross-legged, on a wide-armed chair. Dressed in a tunic and flared trousers, both plain white, the man appeared the total opposite of the dark clothed protesters.

Zachary gulped. "Carell."

The white-haired man patted the arms of his chair. "Is that a guess, or are you more informed than we are led to believe?"

"A guess."

"Indeed, a good guess. I'm Sebastian Carell. Seen by many as the trusted guide to those that dare to rise above the aristocracy of *Galilei*." His palms rose as if a fanfare would erupt. "You are, I admit, smaller than I thought." Rather abruptly, he stood up. "Come to me."

Raising his hand after Carell's drew close, Zachary felt a firm shake.

"It is exceptional for an unauthorised Underworlder to cross the ceiling of one world to the floor of another, however, I bear witness to seeing three in a matter of hours. If that is not a sign of change, then I don't know what is."

Three? There were more?

Carell's lurid smile hung on. "Caine has told me some of your tale so I know what you have gone through, and that makes your arrival all the more special."

"You know nothing about me," retorted Zachary. "Nobody does."

Carell's forehead creased as if pondering a question. "Gloomy, isn't it, when the mighty trample on the weak? You must be boiling with hatred."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you want to see *them* punished for tearing down the Districts? Don't you want to see them burned for sneaking into your streets? Your homes? Your lives?"

Carell's head tilted. "Your life?"

Zachary squirmed at the suffocating aroma leaving the leader's mouth. "I don't care why you think I'm special. All I care about is finding my friend."

"Friend. A strong concept." Carell's eyes shrivelled into slits. "I would only cast aside hatred if the outcome favoured the risk."

The leader stepped away from him. “Earlier, Hadrian Tower ordered five patrolling units to locate Ambassador Kade’s daughter.” He halted. “Oh, you’re surprised that I know of her? You must forgive Bhavini and Caine’s ignorance of politics.”

Zachary puffed through clenched teeth. What else did Carell know?

“One of the units found her with you, who happens to be another person whose alter ego has been posted in every division. Bravo for beating the time it took for me to top the most wanted list.” Carell tapped on his palm. “They now know that you’re both connected to one another. They have her. We have you. By holding onto her, they will bide their time in the hope that you’ll be foolish to go to her. If you go, then all is lost.”

The logic of what he said tightened Zachary’s chest. “I can’t sit here doing nothing about it.”

“For years, we have scoured to collect intelligence on the corruption that dwells within the House of Representatives. For years, we have failed. You, a boy caught in the crossfire of two worlds, have brought us close to achieving our aim. You did well to keep hold of the Intel-Depository. Once unlocked it’ll prove the strongest nail in the House’s coffin. But, until we unlock it, you are the only able-bodied evidence we have of the attack.”

“*Me?* You don’t need me. Send your protesters down to see the damage.”

“And risk being caught in the carnage?”

Zachary’s chin locked. “You want me to leave her behind?”

“You must seek patience.”

“*Patience?*” Zachary almost punched the screen flashing with intermittent letters and numbers. “If I wait anymore, I might be dead tomorrow.”

“Do you want to know why they attacked Underworld?”

Zachary flapped the air. “To expand.”

Carell stood ahead of a panel displaying dozens of printed images of groups. On closer inspection, the occupants of the groups were cheering.

“Every Base is governed by the Integrated Confederation,” Carell said. “The Moon, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. They all serve a purpose. *Galilei*’s was to colonise the icy moon, Europa. It was meant to be the mining prize of the system. The Confederation weren’t impressed by the Base’s failure, so they left *Galilei* to run of its own accord, believing that the House of Representatives would be ideal for its well-being. How wrong they were.” Carell moistened his lips.

“But they’ll know about the expansion plan, and when they inspect –”

“They won’t inspect without cause. Once their plans are unlocked, we can alert the Confederation and bring down the House.”

Zachary’s cheeks wobbled at the throbbing behind his eyes. Is this all ROM had to offer as support? Did they hide in the middle of two worlds, waiting for a chance to destroy one? And what about the other if they had a means to do it? He eyed a hanging model of a short-winged shuttle.

“Did you attack Jordan Kade’s home?”

Carell gave a slow headshake. “That wasn’t us. Oh, we know about the blame being administered to us.”

“Then who?”

“Kade’s home was attacked the day before his reassignment as Ambassador to the House. It was the perfect push that Masim Sokolov orchestrated, convincing Kade to agree to revoke Article 39a. I won’t deny that we were watching Kade, though the attack and increased security measures put a stop to that.”

The theft of Rosa’s Raptor, thought Zachary. They were trying to obtain information about the House from her.

Carell led him to a small, transparent sphere, split down the middle by a partition. Inside a miniature model man stood on the partition, and below it, magnetised to stick to the underside of the partition, was another man.

“The Base was designed to support dual living. When the upper half was complete, droves of labourers were dispatched to work on the lower twin, until resources dried up. Without warning, the House deactivated the gravity fields causing everything to crash down. Nobody questioned the declaration of a malfunction.”

This was too much. Zachary tugged on the hair at the nape of his neck. “You said there are other Underworlders that escaped.”

Carell’s head bobbed. “They know you well. Shekhar and Salvador.”

Zachary spluttered, “They’re alive?”

“Both are seriously injured. You’ll find them with the Medics Section, two tiers down.” He paused, thinking. “There is one piece of advice I must give you. Be wary of your feelings for Kade’s daughter. The differences between you both will not bode well.”

Why did everybody say that?

The leader moved over to the androids' torsos without artificial layers. "I bet you've seen a lot of these in the Wastelands."

"Never as polished." Zachary rubbed the cold metal of one. "Are you a collector?"

"Of sorts. I am fond of experimenting."

A screen next to Carell beeped on with the message, 'Adjustment Complete'.

"Ah, our time is cut short. It's been a pleasure to meet you. Explore the *Ark*, but do not leave."

Zachary closed his fist. "You promise to help me when the time's right?"

"Be patient."

Questioning the honesty in the leader's spirited tone, Zachary retraced his steps toward the doorway. He glanced toward a hissing sound, and caught sight of an inner-wall shifting aside. Inching back to avoid being seen, Zachary recognized the rifle-carrying protester, Vincent, enter with his allies carrying the scientist by his arms. The blood on the scientist's clothes looked fresh.

Zachary snuck back inward. Too far away to make out the voices beside the buzzing robotics, he shuffled up to a pillar. Steps clanged from the protesters taking the scientist up to the balcony. Vincent brought forward a reclining chair. As straps lashed over the scientist's limbs, a groan escaped him.

He's alive!

"We had a bit of trouble with his adjustment," said Vincent to Carell, who'd joined them. "He deviated. A few knocks brought him into touch."

"Easy on the damage. Time after time I tell you." Carell stood before the scientist, who looked to be in his forties. "How are you feeling, Ethan?"

Tears streamed down the scientist's cheeks. "How do you think I feel?"

Vincent tapped buttons behind the chair. A large drill-like device lowered from the ceiling to hover over Ethan's head. It rotated into a quick spin.

Zachary's pulse quickened.

Carell leaned forward. "Do you know me?"

The tugged straps squeaked under Ethan's struggles. "Sebastian."

Carell continued. "I will spare you, if you tell me where the copies are stored?"

"Copies of what? I don't understand. I'm just a scientist." Ethan's mouth slumped. "What what what can not know how meaning mean meaner." The next few words slurred.

Carell sighed. "Damn. He's a goner. Do it."

Vincent plunged the spinning drill-head into the defenceless scientist's neck, then guided it up to the jaw. Zachary held his stomach. Ethan's fingers rattled under the straps. Thin muscles rolled off after Vincent thrust the drill out of the scientist's wobbling head. Zachary covered his mouth. He couldn't be sure, but he thought Ethan's throat glittered. Was that metal hanging out? Was that a glowing green tube inside his neck?

Sparks fizzled as Carell pulled out the tube. "Clean him up, and return his parts to me. Next time, Vincent, double the charges to the cortex."

Zachary's thigh muscles tightened as he scuttled backwards. His stomach rushed up to his throat. He hurtled forward along the corridor. Everything spun. He retched up the contents of his stomach. Burning air scorched his throat. He spat between his trembling fingers, and saw Bhavini rush over to his side.

"The scientist's an android," moaned Zachary.

Bhavini put her arm around him. "You weren't meant to see that."

Chapter 22 - The Souls

Bhavini flapped a hanging mat aside, leading to a bench within an alcove. “Relax. We’re alone now.”

Zachary constricted his twanging stomach as he analysed Bhavini’s face. With smooth, wrinkle-free, pale-brown skin, hazel eyes, and not a single crack on her lips, she appeared flawless. He blinked, recalling what little he’d seen of the artificial head that Shekhar had held in the stall. Wasn’t that also perfect?

“Are you an android too?”

Bhavini looked like she’d been punched. “Do I look like one?”

Zachary swallowed several times to lessen the sting in his throat. “Ethan didn’t look like one. Is this what you meant by *stuff* happening up there?”

“Trust me, I’m not an android, and don’t ever want to be.” Lost in thought, she looked up. “Okay, this will be a little rusty for me. I haven’t had to explain this for a while.” Bhavini cupped his head. “It’ll be easier if I show you.”

* * *

One level down, through a well-lit tunnel, was a glass dome overlooking a room bustling with activity. People sat around tables inspecting android limbs, and screens, flickering with images of overlapping muscles, hung over them.

Zachary counted four dissected androids.

Bhavini stood with her back to the dome. “The Integrated Confederation created *Galilei* for Europa.”

“I know,” nodded Zachary. “Land. Mines. Homes. Resources dried up.” He dug his fingernails into his sides. “They switched off the gravity and made Underworld.”

“That’s the slimmed-down, Carell version. The resources didn’t stop just because *Galilei* failed to mine. They *never* had a chance to mine. The Confederation pulled the funding to explore Saturn’s moon, Titan. Advancements in Relative-Light-Distortion Propulsion made the transfer of equipment to Titan practical.”

“I don’t understand?”

“Bending light to propel you across long distances.” She folded her arms. “*Galilei*’s true goal was to secure a stable footing on Europa. That’s what mattered. The colonisation phase could’ve come years later.”

Zachary watched an android, still wearing human skin on its front, be hoisted up into the air. Its limbs hung loose, the exact opposite of a rigid metallic object.

“If there’s no funding, why is Sokolov restarting it?” he asked.

“Everybody thinks that *Galilei* is an orbiting, everlasting fortress, but they’re wrong. The space we have available is taken for granted. More people are born than those dying. There are two reasons for why the Base’s Maintenance-Division contracts Underworlders to perform hull repairs. First, they’re cheap, and second, fewer people in Assayer ever come to learn of it.”

Zachary nodded at the implications. “The House doesn’t want them to know about the attacks.”

“Or that *Galilei*’s cracking.”

A rod pushed into the hoisted android’s back caused a silent scream; it shouldn’t have felt pain. Zachary gulped, noticing the cold stare Bhavini gave to the android. What did the ROM workers below achieve by harming it?

“I don’t understand how attacking Underworld will help them land on Europa.” Zachary’s scalp prickled as he suddenly realised. “They’re going to use Underworld’s metal.”

“It’s the richest source of recyclable metal in easy reach, and it’s free.”

The room below suddenly vanished into darkness. *Whoa!*

Bhavini stretched to a shelf containing small discs. She turned a dial and swapped the disc inside a small box. Lights in the room reactivated to show wind brushing through the air. Where were the androids? Uneven mounds grew on the white floor. What was going on?

“This is a big screen,” gasped Zachary.

“Collected memories.”

“From?”

“I’m getting to that.” Bhavini tapped the dome.

Cracks tore under the screen, reflecting back the white surface that was fast approaching. Red light flashed throughout before the recording ended.

“Every ship sent to Europa has struggled against Jupiter’s pull,” she said. “The ships compact into themselves, like crumpled cans. Toxic gases leaked through that ship you just saw, melting the crew.”

The next disc played.

A large room was filled with suited people and others in white uniforms looking over brightly glowing screens along the face of tables.

“Nine years ago, Sokolov brought the great minds of *Galilei* together to work solely on conquering Europa. Scientists, physicists, astronomers, meteorologists, geologists, mining corps, and other whizz-kid gurus became the occupiers of the *Centurion*.”

Zachary pre-empted the drop in her tone. “What went wrong?”

“Carell was part of the project, and he hated Sokolov’s attitude. Nobody inside the *Centurion* cared about who they launched. Failure made the project stronger. Failure gave them a chance to learn.”

“So Carell left.”

“Carell did more,” smiled Bhavini. “He joined up with a fringe movement who shared the goal of ruining Sokolov’s dream. I was part of the gang then. We had the easy part of distracting the patrollers for a planned attack.”

The footage stopped after an explosion burst through the *Centurion*’s left wall, throwing tables and people into the air.

“Carell stormed the *Centurion*, but things went off plan. The codes to the Cryo-Reactor that he needed to skyrocket the place had been changed.” She held her deep inhalation for a few seconds. “Jordan Kade offered the codes in exchange for the hostages that Carell had taken.”

Astonished, Zachary coughed. So, Jordan Kade had been present at the time. Was that the reason for his disgraced removal as ambassador; because he had to barter lives for codes?

“Things got messy when the patrollers moved in. Carell managed to plant his detonators and get out, though not everybody did.”

Unease rippled through Zachary’s delicate stomach. “How many died?”

“Lots.” Bhavini muttered under her breath. “The charges within the Reactor caused an outward burst of Cryo-molecules. Everything inside was locked into deep freeze. Technically dead, yet intact.”

Zachary shuddered.

“Before Carell defected, he worked on advanced androids with the Segments Laboratory. Another of Sokolov’s obsessions is to go beyond the programmed state of a mechanical chip to a living one.”

Hands raised, Zachary eased away from the dome. “Are you saying that he ... no, that’s impossible. You’re not allowed to make androids like us.”

Bhavini activated another disc. On the table that materialised lay a purple body locked inside ice with icicles hanging from its raised arm. Zachary stepped back as the image zoomed in to the tip of a needle entering a tiny hole in the skull.

“In deep freeze, they extracted ribonucleic acid from the brain. It’s a flawed method of trying to force memories of the donor to a host, but, by adding it to a self-sufficient membrane, the RNA can influence a pre-programmed cognitive unit. An android is an android, no matter what, even with the best emotive syntax, but if you add a trace of someone’s life, then there’s a high chance of its capabilities expanding.

Unpredictable, yes, but most function with similarities to the original donor.”

Zachary writhed. Although he was sure she was telling the truth, he refused to believe that a human part could influence a bot. It made no sense whatsoever. Combinations worked if flesh was added above metal as a layer, but not within. A piston could be seamed with ligaments to allow fluid motion and action, but to pass on memories of a previous life sounded ridiculous.

“So, if my brain was injected into a bot ...” began Zachary.

“Not all of it. Just the RNA and even that’s hit and miss. And it’s not injected. It’s added to a living membrane that absorbs all that it can.”

“It’s disgusting. That’s messing with things that shouldn’t be messed with.”

Bhavini stared at the worn disc she held in front of the box. It’d been watched more than the others. She pushed it in, her eyes closed. “Three hundred years may have passed since they prohibited methods of human reanimation, but when you’re floating in space without the law-makers, who’ll know?”

Zachary glared at the blue haze materialising under the dome. Small dots randomly grew into various shapes before wires snaked over them. Panels whooshed in to wrap around cogs. Clunking, with twisting coils, a skeletal frame hovered upward. Hundreds of components piled inwards until an android stood. A green tube was lowered down into an ejected rod attached to the android’s neck, then the rod was dragged inward. The android’s eyes glowed blue.

“The Souls Programme,” rasped Bhavini as the footage stopped. “Each disc here is a collation of dozens that we’ve captured. Splicing them together we understand a bit more of Sokolov.”

Zachary’s eyelids twitched. “Do they know they’re not real?”

Bhavini's tongue bulged inside her jaw. "They're not supposed to. They have self-mending skin filled with amino-acid creators, a working digestive system, and glimpses of memories that remind them of their past."

"But *do* they know?"

"Some of the Soul androids have malfunctioned, and have self-harmed on realisation of their true nature."

"Sokolov's playing God, but what in Europa is Carell doing with them? Dead people. Freezing. Bots. Ethan thought he was actually alive. He screamed when they drilled into him." Zachary held his cringing face in his hands. "You can't rip them apart just because they're cogs and bolts."

"They're copies of dead people, and once they realise, it's better to end it."

"*End it? Copies.* So when Carell finds one, he just sucks out its RNA?"

"He believes that he's freeing them from serving the House."

"Who gave him permission to do that?"

Bhavini snapped, "Who gave it to Sokolov?"

Zachary ruffled his hair, confused as to who was worse: the General for creating the androids, or the ROM leader for destroying them.

"But, just because they find out, can't you do something to help them? Cogs or not, they have bits of someone inside them."

Bhavini thumped the dome. "Imagine finding out you're not who you think you are. Your brain goes into overdrive. You start looking for the answer. Those androids go further. They start calculating reasons that defy logic. They go mad. We are doing them a favour by terminating them." Exhaling, she spoke without letting her tone break. "My husband was with Carell in the *Centurion*. He was caught in the blast. They used my husband's RNA to test the first lot of Souls. They've had him for the last nine years."

Zachary watched Bhavini slide down, head dropping to her knees.

"The last we heard was that he'd escaped and was trying to find his way to me," she sobbed. "An intercepted report, five days ago, recorded him as offline. He'd gone too far."

The android head that Shekhar had now made sense.

"You were looking for him that day," said Zachary, wondering if he should reveal the location of her husband.

Bhavini nodded with tears in her eyes. "I knew it. You're the boy from the camp."
She wiped her cheek. "What a small world we live in."

Chapter 23 - To Live

Zachary sped along the corridor leading to the second lower level of the *Ark*, to the Medics Section. He caught sight of his reflection along a chrome pipe. Every one of the ten pockets lining his padded vest's front was clipped down. Dressed in black now, he felt no different from the protesters.

The walls along a downward ramp bore dark splats of red. A room twice the size of his home awaited him with grey-clothed people and a dozen beds behind translucent curtains.

"Can I help you?" asked a woman.

He knew he shouldn't have gone there. Bhavini's orders were that he meet her in the Dining Section after his shower and change of clothes.

"I came to see the Underworlders," said Zachary.

She held her palm out. "Do you have clearance?"

"I'm from Underworld too."

Her expression softened. "You're younger than I thought. Beds three and four. Do not stress them. We're not sure how long they'll survive."

Zachary stumbled off the ramp, following the gesture of location.

On one of the two adjacent beds lay Shekhar, eyes shut, on his front. Five fluid-filled tubes led from under his blanket to a glass cube with a pump, clearly connected to his chest from the synchronised breaths.

On the other bed, Biro's eyes opened. "You made it." His cheeks sank inwards as if his spirit required freedom. "How far did you get?"

Zachary sat down on the bed, watching the blanket twitch where Biro's fingers moved underneath it. Complicated numbers and flashing symbols splurged across a nearby screen. "All the way to the streets of Assayer."

Biro wheezed. "Is it a sight to behold?"

Zachary's chin lowered. "It's clean. Too clean. You wouldn't like it."

A wheezed chuckle caused a beep from the screen.

"Master – should I –"

"No – it happens a lot."

Zachary couldn't resist asking, "How did you get out? I heard the soldier shoot twice."

“Shekhar dodged the first, but not the second. Straight into his chest.” Biro’s eyelids fluttered. “Luck brought the protesters to us before the soldiers caned us.”

Zachary put his palm lightly upon Biro’s shoulder. “I shouldn’t have left you. I should have stayed.”

“Why do you say that?”

Tears in his eyes, he looked up at the screen showcasing more numbers and bouncing lines. “Because you’re my Master. You let me become a scavenger, when nobody else believed in me.”

“Consider yourself sacked from my employment. You’re free to do as you please.” A dry tongue touched Biro’s pale lips. “Did you find her?”

“I did, but I lost her.”

“Lost can always be found.” Biro moaned. “I feel tired.” A bouncing line, one out of the seven displayed, steadied to a wobbling flat-line. Veins on his forehead protruded. “You’ve made it so far. Keep going. A scavenger never gives up the hunt.”

The curtain was moved by a woman carrying a tray. “I’m sorry, but I need to change his dressings. I must ask that you leave.”

“Goodbye,” said Biro.

Zachary nodded, wondering if Shekhar had heard them. “I’ll be back.”

“Not without her.” Biro whimpered as the curtain drew shut.

Gazing at a man limping with a deep gash behind his calf made Zachary think of how long it’d be before every person in the *Ark* ended up in the Medics Section. Overworld was not the free world that he’d imagined. It was the total opposite.

* * *

Zachary’s pulse quickened at the rush of footsteps coming from the main level in the *Ark*. He jumped aside from the protesters speeding across the exit.

“Hey,” cried Bhavini, pushing out of the second passing wave. “We’ve been summoned to the Arcade. Everybody – come on.”

“What’s happening?”

“The future.”

Taking his hand, she dragged him into a crowd. Going right, Zachary felt the heaving excitement of the *Ark*. Soon they reached a curved seating area overlooking a stage. After a minute, the commotion in the Arcade grew with at least two hundred

protesters there. Five men on the stage separated to give space to the leader of the *Ark*. Cheers poured from the seats. Silence took its time to settle after Carell's subtle wave.

Removing a smug grin, the *Ark*'s leader spoke. "A great man once said, victory – victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory, there is no survival." Carell paused at the odd murmur. "Winston Churchill, 1940. Four hundred years on, and those words have not lost their meaning."

Carell tugged on his tunic sleeves. "It is with regret that I confirm that *Galilei*'s House of Representatives has purged Underworld's Districts."

"*Murderers*," shouted a voice from across the Arcade.

"Yes – they are," said Carell. "When the House has what it wants, it will bring a new reign of oppression. Please don't get me wrong, you all know that I too want to achieve a landing on Europa. But, this way? No. The time is coming when Masim Sokolov will only have those that serve him left alive. How many of us have looked down upon Underworld? Dare we admit that even we considered ourselves superior?"

Carell brought his hand back to his chest. "A boy from the darkness below our feet has outdone years of what our skilled have strived for. *One* boy. Think of what can be achieved if we all lived with the same burning passion inside us."

Unease tingled Zachary. He'd escaped because he had to, not for ROM.

Three men pushed a large, wheeled screen onto the stage whilst the leader continued. "We have accessed intelligence files that detail the past and future actions of the House. Of Sokolov. Of *Galilei*. Finally, we have solid evidence. The time for change is now."

Clapping erupted throughout the Arcade.

Hundreds of overlapping files lit up on the screen. One file ejected to the side and unfolded. Individual lines surged downward. From out of one line, a hatched image of dozens of buildings formed. The image tilted to show a specific section of Assayer. In the centre was the tall blade-like structure that Zachary had seen outside the mall.

"Hadrian Tower contains the lock that prevents *Galilei* from communicating to the outside. Once inside, we can inform the Integrated Confederation of our suffering. Only then will the balance of power shift back to the people of *Galilei*. Only then will all our beloved who have perished be revenged." Carell held both arms up. "We will strike and *gut* the lungs of the beast!"

The seating shook amidst banging feet.

“Sokolov’s army is thinned by the ranks occupying Underworld. There is no better time than now.”

“Yes,” shouted someone below Zachary.

“We will strike their barracks. Destroy their shield-core generators, and pin them back like they have done unto us,” snarled Carell. “Our time to rise is *now*. *Tonight we will live*.”

Zachary shuddered at the increasing chants.

Carell’s fist thumped the air. “Victory! Victory! Victory!”

* * *

Within thirty minutes, the *Ark*’s walkways became zones of assigned activity.

Protesters piled guns along the walls with ammunition counts ringing out. Was this how the soldiers had prepared behind the Far-Wall this morning?

A boy, ten years or younger, ran with a rifle balanced across his shoulder. Whatever the cause, that boy shouldn’t have been fighting. Why was nobody pulling him back?

Zachary sidestepped bands of men. “Bhavini, this is madness.”

Not looking up, she selected long-handled knives from an outspread blanket. “What do you mean? Isn’t this what you wanted? We’re going to Hadrian Tower.”

“You don’t have a proper plan. I’ve seen what they can do, up close, in my face. They have machines that will flatten you.” Zachary grabbed her hand. “How do you know that there aren’t more soldiers? Sokolov isn’t stupid. He won’t have sent his whole army to Underworld. You’ll be surrounded. He knows we have his Intel. He knows that Underworlders escaped.”

Bhavini stiffened. “Nine years ago, a handful got in. They did it. So can we.”

“Nine years ago, you lost your husband.” Zachary didn’t break his look into her eyes. “Sokolov didn’t have a big army then.”

“Under that vest, I can see your heart pounding with fear. I know you’re scared, and you don’t have to come. But, if getting to Hadrian Tower to rescue Rosa means so much to you, then I don’t have to spell out what’s at stake. I’ll let you decide.”

Zachary pictured Assayer from afar covered by bellowing smoke hiding any view of Jupiter. How would that be different from District Two?

“People will die,” he said.

Bhavini placed loose bullets into her revolver cartridge. “People die every day because we sit back. I can’t make promises for Rosa’s safety. If she’s in Hadrian, then she’s already a part of this.”

Pressure mounted inside Zachary, pushing his composure to burst. Resisting the urge to scream, he gritted his teeth. If Carell was right about Sokolov using Rosa against him, then Zachary’s presence was all the more required.

He flinched at the weighty gun handed to him. “I don’t know how to use this.”

Bhavini ran through the safety switches, the loading mechanism, and the intensity-flick to increase the rate of fire from single to multiple.

“Oh, and another thing,” she added. “Sokolov isn’t the only one with machines.”

Chapter 24 - Rank Unit Four

Zachary didn't have much time.

He shot down the ladder to the lowest level of the *Ark*. An arched door separated him from the long, dark room where the machines rested.

A man in baggy clothes leaped out from behind the door. "And you are?"

"I wanted to see what you've got."

"Why?" The man adjusted the smeared goggles under his hat.

"To see if they're suitable."

"Suitable? These bad boys have been dormant and waiting for a day like this for years. Oiled up, re-cogged, fired up and packing some juicy shells. Trust me, they'll make the pesky patrollers think twice about caging us in." He checked a beeping clip on his belt. "I got some schemas to load. Don't go touching anything. I've just loaded up their commands."

Zachary eyed the room. "Loaded? Are they on factory settings?"

"Course," frowned the man leaving him by the door. "I don't want them thinking twice about tackling a Rock-Walker."

"You're going to send them in? What if they get damaged?"

The man continued his walk. "They're only machines."

Zachary rolled his eyes. Taking away choice from a machine made it no better than a stove. To the protesters, the machines were simply tools. Were these machines inferior to the androids of the Souls Programme? To some the Souls were lumps of metal, but to the General, they were the chassis for continuing life.

Rears against the wall, twelve droids of varying sizes and multi-tooled arms stood in a line. Bhavini had told him that they'd all been uncovered from melting-pits; unused until now, their time to serve had arrived.

Zachary's fingers pulsed over the formidable Pounder-1978 droid. Its ram that resembled hands would be perfect for battering hard material, however, its bulging torso, hollow on the knock, wouldn't withstand a direct fireball. No matter how many smoke bombs the protesters threw, these droids would be noticed.

"Do you have a name?"

The Pounder's single red eye gazed onto him. "Rank Unit Two, support to Arsonists. Downloading at eighty-nine percent," it warbled in a mechanical tone. Head upright, the droid stood still.

“Do you understand where you’re going?”

“Hadrian Tower. Downloading at ninety percent.”

Zachary walked along until one of the metallic zombies caused a smile. A Haulage-404.

“What rank are you?”

Not looking, the droid replied with a deep tone, “Rank Unit Four, Cannon-Bomber. Downloading at eighty-eight percent.”

“Are you downloading an attack plan?”

“Affirmative. Downloading at eighty-nine percent.”

Zachary peered to the doorway. “Are you allowed to change the plan?”

The Haulage-404 droid’s blue eyes blinked. “Is this an application for further commands? Downloading at eighty-nine percent.”

“Further commands,” repeated the other droids, all of their heads whirring to face Zachary. Each spoke over the other with their respective downloading status.

“No, just for Rank Unit Four.” Enthusiasm rippled through Zachary. “Can you handle more than what you already have without affecting your commands?”

“Slots available for further commands. Downloading at ninety percent.”

“Show me.”

Tilting forward, the droid’s head opened down the middle. A casing unhinged to show four slots, two containing circuit boards.

Zachary removed Patch’s chip from his pocket. Melted along the corner with scrapes and a deep scratch going down the centre, he hoped it wasn’t beyond use. He slipped the chip into a slot. A silver pin clasped it, before currents sizzled through.

The droid’s head shut. “Activate? Downloading at ninety-one percent.”

“Go for it.”

“Activated. Downloading at nine –” The Haulage-404 jerked, knocking his right shoulder against a thin-armed Welding droid. “Ac-tiii-vaaa-ting.”

Oh no – had he damaged it? Zachary jumped up to grab the droid’s head. An arm clattered him against the wall. Sliding down, he cringed from the numerous beeps coming out of the droid.

Rank Unit Four flexed every finger. “Override. Misinformation. Conflicting. Hacked. Shutdown. Abort. Shutdown. Reconfigure. Realign. Con. Con. Connor.” The Haulage-404 glanced left to right. “Is this where droids go after service?”

Zachary blinked back the sudden tear in his eye. “Patch?”

Looking downward, the droid's jaw panel mumbled. He caught Zachary's leap up and rested his hand behind Zachary's head. "I have legs."

Zachary wiped the droid's face. "You don't know how it feels to hear your voice."

Patch's eyes glowed bright. "New commands have been loaded. Hadrian Tower to be attacked. Freedom for *Galilei*. Dispose of General Masim Sokolov. Is this true?"

"All of it, and you're part of the –"

"The Rusty Dozen," grumbled Patch. "This crew has a detrimental name. I will see to it that it is changed. You look young, Zachary Connor."

"I scrubbed up." He held the droid's hand. "Dad's dead, and I don't want to lose you again."

Patch's voice whirred. "I am sorry to hear this."

Zachary blinked. A machine had empathised with him. Did he mean that, or was his emotive chip relaying an expected response?

"I cannot predict the outcome of this attack, but I feel," Patch's hands twitched to the wide-barrelled cannons holstered on his legs, "like I'll have a better chance than sitting on a wall."

"Stay close to me. If you go down, I'll take your chip."

Patch shook his finger. "No – you are not coming. I have seen the plans. They are dangerous. The slash and bomb approach will produce casualties of high magnitude. You must stay here."

"I can't."

"Why?"

"For Rosa. She's in the Tower. They've got her. They took her away from me."

Zachary stared into his palms. "I had her, Patch. In my arms."

"And you think that by participating, you will locate her?"

"Yes."

"No."

Zachary punched the wall. "*Why not? She needs me.*"

"She does not. She is an Overworlder."

"I'm practically one too. There's no Underworld left. We're not worlds apart anymore."

"Being in the same world does not make you equals. Life is full of levels, and you still occupy the bottom cog."

“I will change that,” whined Zachary. “You know the plan. When they’re in the Tower, they’ll knock out the communication blockers and send a message to the Confederation. Sokolov will be punished for my dad’s death.”

“And what about Carell? Does he not deserve punishment? My cognition is rife with information of Carell. I detect admiration from his followers, even though his method of survival depends on deceit and selfishness. I calculate he will benefit greatly from this.”

Zachary squeezed the bridge of his nose. “Why do you have to always take over my mind? Can’t you shut down your mathematical brain? Just stop calculating the outcome all the time.”

“The line between right and wrong is blurred,” said Patch. “Overworld is in a confused state of what it wants as opposed to what it needs. Freedom does not always come with war.”

“So why are you prepared to fight for them then?”

“I am programmed to. I cannot disobey.”

“Then what do I do? I thought my life was over when the soldiers came. And it didn’t get better in IOTA. Diego lied to me. And when they killed Dad ...” Zachary’s insides burned. He looked up from the droid’s comforting hold. “If I don’t try, and something happens to her, I’ll never forgive myself. I watched my dad die, Patch. I watched him, and I did nothing about it.”

“Could you have helped him?”

The image of his dad’s bloodied hand smacking the IOTian chamber’s porthole flashed in Zachary’s head.

“I couldn’t get to him.”

“Then you cannot take the blame.” Patch’s hands tightened around Zachary’s head. “Commands indicate thirty-six minutes remaining before the Right Order Movement proceed to battle. Now would be the ideal time to release your pain.”

Choking back the lump in his throat, Zachary wept against Patch’s torso.

Chapter 25 - Scrapheap

It took the protesters little time to navigate through tunnels and pipes to reach an empty aqueduct. They were a short climb away from the open streets that led to Hadrian Tower.

Pistons ground above the protesters who were grouped into gangs of fifteen and swapping ammunition. Their noise opposed the tactic a scavenger would have used.

Caine placed two hand-sized grenades into a launcher whilst mumbling into an Intercom attached to the collar of his half-armoured jacket.

Zachary imagined Carell sitting in his comfy chair, relaying commands. Send the irrelevant to do the dirty work; yeah – that sounded like Carell’s style.

Bhavini checked the quick release of the safety catch of her handgun. “The diversions are underway. Building sites in west Assayer have been set on fire. Let’s hope Hadrian deploys its units to intercept.”

In synchronisation, most of the protesters pulled down their balaclavas. Human eyes appeared eerie compared to the blue circles of the soldiers. Some eyes showed youth. Inexperience. Fear.

In Underworld, the young worked to survive. They didn’t fight with guns. Is this all Overworld had to offer?

“Quit slouching,” whispered Bhavini. “Others are noticing.”

Sitting up, Zachary licked his lips with a serious expression. He scanned the balaclavas, giving passive nods. It felt wrong that ROM regarded him with honour and used his troubles to encourage them.

I’m not your hero.

“Patrollers are moving west to locate the root of the attacks,” said Caine out loud.

The glow of a small tablet that Bhavini held up shone onto her face. “The Rusty Dozen are passing through the nitrogen conduits. Crunch time.”

Zachary gripped his knee. Everything was happening quicker than he imagined. He heard another protester report the intercepted orders of patroller units to increase their numbers.

“Have the machines made it?” asked Zachary.

“Not sure, we’ve lost their signal,” sighed Bhavini. “Damn, I knew they might get caught.”

“Caught?”

“Some of the conduits have tremor detectors implanted. It’s one of their ways of catching people sneaking in from underground. If they detected the machines, they’ve probably locked down the conduits.”

Zachary visualised Patch releasing his cannons. “They could still make it.”

“Not through two-metre-thick barriers. And if they try to blast it, they’ll take out a whole sector.”

Tilting away from Bhavini, Zachary gnawed his fingernails. Nothing could prepare him for going into battle against people who used guns like screwdrivers. He’d devised a plan with the Haulage-404 that didn’t involve carving Carell’s name into Assayer. Get to Hadrian Tower. Find Rosa. Get out.

Finger on Intercom, Caine raised his fist. “The units have left the road to Hadrian clear. Final round check. Get ready.”

Dread tickled along Zachary’s veins. His fingers clicked back and forth on the trigger of his rifle, hanging by a strap that weighed his shoulder down.

Caine stroked his grenade-launcher’s barrel. “This is our time to change *Galilei*. Don’t look away when your enemy stands ahead of you. Bring it to them. ROM!”

“*ROM!*” bellowed the gangs.

A group burst beyond Caine toward a ladder positioned below an open hatch.

From behind, Bhavini tapped Zachary to tell him to ascend the ladder. He climbed up into a sloping pipe. Warm air covered him. Keeping his head low, he frowned at the pinging clatter the guns made. The pipe got hotter. Steam, not toxic like before, spurt along the edges. Bringing his elbows in, he shuffled. How did Caine manage to get through this?

A hand pulled Zachary out into a room decorated with polished ornaments. Price tags floated ahead of vases with invisible joins. This wasn’t an alleyway, but a stall. Protesters ran between cabinets to the front where a horizontal window faced a street. An orange flash surprised him. Smoke trailed over a crater in the road. A second explosion razed a stretch of the pavements. Who’d fired? ROM? The army?

Bhavini brushed past him to the doorway. “Are you ready?”

Zachary held the rifle tight across his upper chest. Cold metal pressed against his lips. “How do I know if I am?”

“You’d have turned back if you weren’t,” she smiled, before racing out into the dimmed streets of Assayer.

Zachary charged after her. Smoke rushed over him.

“Bhavini,” he called out.

“Blow the Officers’ Establishment,” shrieked a male.

What?

Squinting, Zachary spun with the taste of the rifle’s metal vexing his mouth.

A building, whose structure curved as it met the ground, erupted. Shards flew across the street. An alarm sounded in the distance. A scream. Bullets rattled. It was District Two all over again.

He couldn’t see Bhavini. Where were the gangs? Had they abandoned him?

A protester hobbled into sight, clutching his shattered kneecap. Puffs of smoke escaped his torso before he fell.

Zachary gulped at blue eyes piercing through the smoke. The soldiers had arrived. He bolted to the side, locating a safe street without smoke or fire. His gasp choked at a burning truck rolling ahead of him. Crouching, searching for mounds of waste to hide behind, Zachary panicked. Without an Intercom, he had no method of contacting members of ROM or knowing which way to go.

“*Hold it!*” A soldier approached taking slow steps with the nozzle of his gun showing an orange glow. “Hand over your communication devices and state your intentions.”

Zachary shook. “I don’t have an Intercom.”

“Don’t lie to me.”

The road behind the soldier blasted upward. Zachary ducked, throwing arms over himself. Rotating, the soldier fired into the distance. A second blast blew the soldier in half.

Zachary crashed onto his back. Grimacing, he rolled over to grip the rifle. Pain throbbed above his hip as he watched a large metallic figure whirl toward him.

Patch looked down. Bullets attacked the Haulage-404 droid’s back. “Either get out of here,” spinning from his waist he fired a shot from his cannon, “or shoot.”

Zachary wobbled to stand. “Where are the others?”

“I separated from the Rusties to find you.” Several panels on his long cannon lit up. “The Tower is ahead. Do we execute plan B?”

“To the Tower,” nodded Zachary.

The droid’s pounding feet matched Zachary’s heartbeat. The streets of Assayer resembled the Wastelands. Flashes joined sounds of carnage. People fled like wisps of smoke between raging fires. Specks of ash floated in the air. Several feet ahead,

Patch piled shot after shot into an area where wall debris had been collected to form a barrier for the soldiers. "Keep going. Stay straight."

Zachary's finger shook on the trigger. "We have to stay together."

"I will hold them off. Go straight."

But ...

A soldier, with one functioning blue eye, limped out of a cloud of grey smoke. In one motion, he unhooked and aimed forward.

Zachary fired twice. The soldier's chest and neck shattered. Red blood gushed onto the white road. Nausea crippled Zachary as he struggled to justify this kill. He had to do it. The soldier would have killed him. His stomach churned.

"We've got movers," wheezed a voice within the grey smoke. "Check it out."

Charging into the smoke, Zachary thumbed the switch from single to multiple, then pushed the trigger. The rapid fire of his rifle staggered him. Four blue-eyes collapsed. Zachary kneeled beside the protester moaning on the ground between the soldiers. It was Bhavini.

"I'm not hit," she said pressing above her chest.

"Where is everybody?" Zachary cried, examining her frame for leaking blood.

"Divided. The army were waiting for us. I don't know who's still alive. The lead gangs have been battered." Bhavini showed a double-tube device clipped to her inner vest. "Carell's message. I've got a copy. It's up to us."

Zachary gasped. "You're going to contact the Confederation."

Gun cocked, Bhavini growled. "You want Rosa, you get me to the Tower."

A protester ran past them. "*Move! Move! Move!*"

Twice as tall as a Haulage-404, the Rock-Walker appeared. The top half of its legs, thick and round, revolved with ease as the Rock-Walker made light work of the rubble on the road. Both its arms snapped open, changing from cannon nozzles to a long gun attachment. The driver of the murderous machine had seen them.

They had seconds. Was there any point in firing?

The Rock-Walker skidded with a quick twist to face the other way. It jumped backwards, then several feet up into the air. The machine's cockpit screeched across the road as it tumbled over. Something had floored it. With no hesitation, the Rock-Walker's legs counteracted to upright itself. It grabbed something and threw it overhead.

Patch landed on his feet with no cannons in hand.

“I’m going to rip you apart,” wheezed the Rock-Walker’s driver.

Patch pushed off the road to shoulder-barge the machine. The Rock-Walker unleashed bullets into the Haulage-404. Sparks burst outward. An arm panel spun off Patch, exposing his circuitry.

Clawing underneath the Rock-Walker, the Haulage-404’s carrying ability showed. He lifted the machine up even though fire poured over him.

“Is that all you got?” snarled the driver.

The pistons on Patch’s left leg bent. Leaping up, he bashed the machine down. The Rock-Walker’s left arm reformed into a grappling hand of three claws. It crunched through the droid’s chest. Patch shoved his fist through the cockpit.

A fireball erupted between the two at war.

Zachary covered himself in the cloud of smoke that followed.

Limping away from the decimated Rock-Walker, Patch shrugged. “I win.”

All of a sudden, the road below the Haulage-404 droid exploded.

In the air, Zachary’s body wobbled out of place. A high-pitched ring deafened his flight, before he crashed to the flame-ridden ground. Bhavini pulled him away from the crater.

“No!” he cried, reaching for the three metal fingers visible from the crater.

“He’s gone,” she said. “Did you mess around with that droid’s core?”

Zachary slumped against her. “I can’t do this without Patch.”

Bhavini caught his flailing hand. “Zachary. Look at me. Can you hear that? Can you hear the bullets? Soon, there’ll be nobody left. Now, suck it up, and help me reach the Tower.” She handed him his rifle back. “You might not be a ROM, but you’re a fighter. Now fight.”

Both of them raised their weapons at the six-wheeled truck braking across the street. Caine kicked open the passenger door. “Do you still have your module?”

“Yeah. Got yours?” asked Bhavini.

“The patrollers had me. They took it. They know what we’re planning. Get in; this is our ticket to the Tower.”

Zachary assisted Bhavini into the truck before Caine drove on. The truck rumbled over debris. The large arched supports of Hadrian Tower appeared. Plumes of smoke billowed out from some of the windows.

Biting his lips, Zachary prayed that Rosa was safe.

“Get down,” said Caine as they mounted steps between the arches.

Cannon-fire hit the truck.

Bhavini's hand embraced Zachary's.

"ROM!" shouted Caine.

An explosion jerked Zachary's heart. Bright light enveloped him. Something hard clipped his leg. Particles scraped past him faster than he could imagine. An object collided with him, or he with it? He lay still for a moment, before shuffling to see beams hanging by thick-coils above him. A cloud of heated energy burst across his line of sight. Everything felt warm. Crumbled walls lay on top of desks with burnt bodies scattered about. Was it possible that he had survived another near-death experience? How many more did fate have in store for him?

Zachary crawled to the front of the truck's cabin, which was covered by fallen metal pillars. Even if the protesters were still alive, the imminent cave-in of the tower's entrance posed a risk.

A light brown hand moved inside a small hole within a pillar.

Zachary touched the index finger. "Bhavini?"

Her finger pulled away into darkness then returned holding the module.

"Take this." She sounded weak. "It's up to you now."

"I don't know what to do," stuttered Zachary, taking the module. For a small object it felt heavy in his charred palm.

"Communications Level." Bhavini panted. "Load it into the Comms-Hub."

"What does it look like?" Zachary drove his finger into the hole. "Bhavini?"

"You'll know ... It's protected. Do it ... for" She stopped.

"For who?"

No reply.

"Bhavini?"

Lips quivering, Zachary inched his wrist back to his mouth. Bhavini couldn't be dead. He was meant to help her, but not like this. It didn't matter that he wasn't a member of ROM; their problem had become his. Punishing the House had to happen. Zachary pushed the module into his pocket. He had two prizes gnawing at his scavenger mind now: Rosa and the message.

Rifle in hand, Zachary climbed over the debris in the room. An open lift lay waiting: perfect. Inside, he glared at his strange reflection of a scruffy boy in a dusty padded vest. It reminded him of the sixteen-year-old scavenger who'd uncovered a wired box in the Wastelands, but there was a difference. That boy never had responsibilities

thrust onto him that he had to perform. Lives never relied upon his action. A protective layer had washed off inside the Disinfector. Now, the dirt had returned. It was the skin he'd grown up with. Sure, there wasn't support, and the fate of ROM lay in his pocket, but it wasn't so different from being a lone scavenger.

Zachary gripped the rifle. He wasn't a boy anymore. An aim trembled his jaw: Rosa Kade, and he intended to find her.

Images booted up onto a wall-mounted screen in the lift. Exclamation marks glittered around a hatched image of the Tower with its fifteen levels. On the fourth level of the Tower was the Communications Level. Zachary's eyes widened at the comment flashing alongside it. "Urgent Support required for Ambassador Kade."

Zachary punched the select button to the fourth level.

Chapter 26 - Threatened

The lift bounced, stopping at the chosen level.

Zachary stepped out into a small, smoky room.

“Mister Kade,” he said aloud.

There was nobody present, or as far as he could tell. Something rumbled above him. If Carell thought the modules were lost, did it make sense for him to order the protesters to bring down the Tower? There was no better time than now that Zachary wished he had an Intercom.

Beeps sounded as the lift door shut. Zachary huffed at the red lines crossing over the door to indicate a malfunction.

A closed door stood opposite him. Fingers jammed into a thin space down the centre, he separated the panels. White smoke rushed onto his face. Zachary crawled into the next room. Electrical sparks sprinkled from a crack in the ceiling onto toppled cabinets. A lake of red surrounded a group of soldiers crushed under beams. Zachary checked the ammunition count on his rifle. Ten bullets.

He listened for sounds of movement beyond the crackles. Like a scavenger preparing for a grab-and-dash attempt, Zachary made slow steps in silence.

Within the smoke, a tall shadow stirred, making frantic arm movements.

“You *must* help me,” cried a man.

“They are not my problem,” grunted a Russian voice. “I have no time for this.” Masim Sokolov walked through the smoke, unflinching at the sparks trickling into the room.

Jordan Kade caught the General’s arm. “You owe me.”

“I owe you nothing. You did your job. Now, let me do mine. I will not let the weak win this battle.”

“Forget the battle. You *must* help me to release them.”

Cowering behind a table, Zachary looked beyond the two men to a semi-transparent panel that stretched from floor to ceiling. Someone was behind them.

“I can’t,” rasped Sokolov pushing off Jordan’s second grasp. “The commands to revoke are burnt out.” His right fist smashed a screen. “Nothing can get to the hubs now.”

Jordan’s unbuttoned shirt flapped. “You’re meant to be the one that controls everything.”

“I still am. Once we are out of here, I will send units to recover them.”

“Recover them?” Jordan’s posture straightened. “That’s my wife and daughter you’re talking about.”

Zachary almost dropped his rifle. There was no way to reach the panels without passing Jordan and the General.

“You know there are ways to heal the suffering,” said Sokolov.

“Don’t you dare,” growled Jordan.

“Dare? It was your idea in the first place.”

Rosa’s father blinked several times. “If you don’t help, Alice will release every God-damn file I have on you and the House.”

“Your android has been destroyed,” said Sokolov.

“One android was. You see, Rosa’s a clever girl. She told Alice to make a backup of her cognition-drive. The moment your men destroyed her, she awoke in a new body. Yes – you’ve forgotten that I have a few.” Jordan showed a silver clip under his shirt collar. “If Alice doesn’t hear from me within the hour, she’ll release everything.”

Hatred filled the General’s face. “It won’t just be me that suffers.”

“I’ll handle that later.”

“Fine.” Sokolov walked past Jordan toward the panels.

Staying in a crouch, Zachary followed them. With each step, the silhouettes moving behind the panel became clearer. A figure in red beat her palms against the panel. It had to be Rosa.

“Structural integrity at thirty-two percent,” rustled a mechanical voice within the room. “Please vacate immediately.”

Sokolov typed on a desk-mounted keypad. “Revoke protection on level four.”

“Negative,” replied the mechanical voice. “Integrity reaching critical state. Protocols do not permit reversal of protection until all threats have been eliminated. Structural integrity at twenty-nine percent. Please vacate immediately.”

Sokolov bashed the keyboard. The panel in front of the trapped people rose by several inches.

“Father!” shouted Rosa, pushing her hand under the panel.

Zachary inched closer. He could see Rosa, and also Amelia Kade, who was pressing her hands together in prayer.

“I will get you out,” cried Jordan, dropping to his knees.

“This is not working. We must leave,” said Sokolov. Keeping his face forward, he reached to a loose pole leaning against the table. “I’m sorry, Jordan. My time with your family comes to an end here.”

“*NO!*” Finger on trigger, Zachary jumped up. “Put the pole down.”

Rosa’s eyes glistened.

“What is this? Who are you?” Sokolov’s eyes narrowed with a sideways wobble. “*You*. The sneaky Underworlder that tricked us.”

“Connor,” muttered Jordan.

Zachary locked eyes with the man who’d scorned him and ordered him to stay away from his daughter. Did Jordan still hate him for being here? Zachary reacted late to Sokolov’s hasty removal of a revolver from his rear pocket. Pain lanced into Zachary’s thigh with a bullet. Flipping backward, he hit his head. Grinding stings tore through him. Grasping his bleeding leg with one hand, he reached for his rifle with the other.

A black boot stamped on his hand.

Sokolov seized Zachary’s throat. “You’re the reason for everything that’s happening. If you hadn’t spoken to Rosa, then nobody would have known. ROM wouldn’t be here. You should have stayed in your gutter. ”

Zachary grappled with the choking hands. “You should have stayed out of my gutter.”

“*Father*, stop him!” shrieked Rosa.

Sokolov released his grip, giving Jordan a look. The General wrestled open every pocket on Zachary’s padded vest. He snatched the module. “A viral feed. Ah, Carell’s trying to checkmate me.”

“Structural integrity at twenty percent. Please vacate immediately.”

“Leave him alone,” shouted Rosa. “Let him go. He’s been through enough.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” Zachary swayed to stand. His leg shuddered. “I came here for you.”

“Structural integrity at sixteen percent. Please vacate immediately.”

“Do you hear that?” sneered Sokolov. “Time is running out. Inform your android to destroy all evidence, or I will kill the gutter-boy. Would you let that happen in your daughter’s presence?”

Rosa punched the panel. “Don’t!”

“How can I be sure that you won’t kill us all?” demanded Jordan.

“Call off your android,” warned Sokolov.

Zachary watched Jordan press on his collar.

“Alice, delete the files marked *zloy*. All of them. Just do it.”

“And the backups,” said Sokolov.

Jordan squinted. “There are none. Now. My family.”

“Structural integ-gr-gr-grity ... twelve p-p-p,” stuttered the mechanical voice.

Now!

Zachary jumped to the rifle, sucking in the sting of his fall. A slap knocked the air from his lungs before he could rotate to take aim. On the floor, he gazed into the barrel of Sokolov’s revolver. Jordan whacked the gun upward. It fired, splitting an overhead beam that fell.

Zachary covered his head, counting to five before the sound of items falling into the room silenced. The General was nowhere to be seen.

Machinery ground near to the panels; they were rising. Rosa ducked under to spring forward.

Her warm hand caressed Zachary’s neck. “It’s over.”

With Amelia to support him, Jordan spoke, “Not yet. There’s still one thing.” He flicked the module to Zachary’s lap. “The Hub’s protection is broken. Do what you want with it. Rosa, come with us.”

“But, Father, what about him? He’s coming with us.”

Amelia stood firm “There is no future for you with him. We must leave now.”

Rosa tightened her clasp on Zachary. “He came back for me.”

Suddenly, the floor below her parents buckled, dropping them both from view.

Rosa rushed to the edge. “I can’t see them. I can’t see them. I can’t see anything.

Mother! Father!?”

Zachary arose with a hop just as a shadow grabbed hold of Rosa. Sokolov forced the revolver under Rosa’s chin. He yanked her head back, and walked forward. Red lines oozed down his face.

“Bring the module to me,” he growled.

“Let her go,” spat Zachary.

“Don’t listen to him,” cried Rosa.

“When will children learn,” sighed the General.

Shifting the gun away from under her, he fired. The bullet entered Zachary's right shoulder. He screeched and fell onto his hands and knees. Sokolov pulled the trigger again. Empty. Flicking a switch, the barrel flipped inside out.

"Boy – I have a shatter-bullet loaded here. Give me the module, or I will remove every trace of you."

Zachary's lungs squeezed his breaths. Things whitened in his sight. Thoughts of pain intensified. Shock. Smacking his palm onto the dripping wound, he mouthed, "Let her go first."

Sokolov grimaced. "If I'd gone for your left side, you'd be dead within minutes. Why can't you see that I am doing this for the good of the Base?"

Rosa squirmed. "You're a sick man."

Sokolov raised his chin as he spoke to Rosa. "You'd think better of me if you knew the truth. Comms-Hub, play back Centurion-files marked Kade-Sabotage-2330."

Cylindrical machines, positioned close to where Rosa and Amelia had been held, responded, "Locating files."

"Everything ends now," said Sokolov.

"No," yelled Rosa.

She twisted, tussling with the hand that held the gun. It disappeared between them. Sokolov spun on the spot. She didn't let go.

"Rosa!" Zachary elbowed forward.

A blast erupted, spraying jagged shards outward.

Zachary rocketed backward, struggling to command his senses and undo the awkward twist of his body. Several feet away, the General lay covered by smoke.

Blood spread from Rosa lying on the floor.

Chapter 27 - Kade Sabotage

Zachary froze.

What had he just seen?

The cold front across his face vanished.

Fighting the numbness of his leg, Zachary crawled forward, ignoring the devastation of the room. In his head, the General's scathing words repeated.

You're the reason for everything that's happening. If you hadn't spoken to Rosa, then nobody would have known. ROM wouldn't be here. Rosa wouldn't be here. You should have stayed in your gutter.

Zachary grimaced as a gorge tore its way along his shoulder. "I'm nearly there," he whined.

Rosa's finger twitched. "What's happ—" she groaned.

Adrenaline jolted Zachary up onto one leg, but spasms made him tumble again onto his front.

"Kade-Sabotage-2330 file loaded," reported the Comms-Hub. A large, wide screen ejected upward from the hub. Why did Sokolov want to tell Rosa about her father's actions nine years ago? The fourth level was crumbling. The Tower could fall, and the General's last act of evil was to replay this?

The screen showed eight equal squares of varying angles of the same room. It was a circular room filled with mechanical objects on desks. People moved between them. Some chatted, while others marvelled in excitement.

A familiar voice spoke from the screen. "Influencing contractual obligations and levers to ensure nothing stands in the way of progress is paramount." Pride filled a younger Jordan Kade's expression. The picture changed. A man with the same sharp nose as Carell shoved a gun up to Jordan's chin.

"Father." A young girl appeared, wrapping her arms around Jordan's waist.

Carell smacked Jordan, and tore the girl away from him. Rosa had been there?

"Malfunction alert," said the Comms-Hub.

The screen went blank.

Jordan Kade must have escaped from the *Centurion* before it detonated. He must have taken Rosa, otherwise how could she be here? Zachary's thoughts returned to the crumbling room and the mere feet that separated him from her.

On her side, black fluid leaked from Rosa's abdomen. Sparks fizzed out of her exposed metal neck. A tear running down her right cheek mixed with a glittering crack along her jaw. Dislocated from a spherical shoulder joint, her right arm whirred. Rosa's left eye shook upward, almost turning in on itself.

Zachary's limbs shuddered. He now understood the change of her childhood appearance from the files that Patch had shown him, the reason why her parents kept her away from others, and the need to seclude her.

He shivered.

His heart thudded under frantic breaths.

Zachary interlocked Rosa's fingers and rested his hand under hers, not caring for the sparks.

Both her eyes twitched. "Zach."

"I'm here." The smile he tried to give didn't happen.

"I see codes everywhere," she mumbled. Skin shrivelled around her green eyes. "I didn't know."

Thick fluid gushed from her mouth.

Zachary tightened his hold. "I ... believe you. I'm going to get you out of here. Someone can repair you." His words quickened. "I'm not going to leave you."

Rosa squirmed. "Zach."

"This isn't fair," he whispered.

Her eyes widened. "Behind y—"

A hand sliced hard across Zachary's face. Rolling on all fours, he spat blood. "And so it has come to this for my greatest creation." Sokolov positioned himself between Zachary and the Comms-Hub. The General's powerful arm wrapped around Rosa's waist. She withered, exerting little pressure to escape. She was weak.

A flicker of energy shot out of Sokolov's right side. Altering his stance above the uneven floor, the damage to the General came into view. Wires encircled a bolt with shifting pistons where his biceps should have been.

Zachary's fingers curled. "You're an android too?"

"Not exactly," replied Sokolov. "Carell's disrespect in attacking the *Centurion* didn't just destroy the precious lives of many. It cost me my arm." Blood seeped out of his mouth. "It is amazing what you can do with a few cogs."

"You knew?" muttered Rosa.

“RNA extraction was your father’s idea.” Sokolov poked the crushed mesh of her stomach. “We simply added the necessary components.”

“Why?” she groaned. It was obvious from the fluid flowing from her stomach that he meant to hurt her.

“Jordan was arrested for aiding ROM. Everybody suspected him of conspiracy with his ex-colleague Carell.”

Zachary snatched a dangling cable to pull himself up.

The Russian hissed. “I overturned the charges but had to remove your father from office. He was a broken man. Your mother hated him for leaving you behind.”

Rosa cocked her head. “He ... left me?”

“It wasn’t his fault. He couldn’t have stopped it. You died, Rosa.”

She whimpered. A spark fizzed along her cheek. “I never knew.”

“You never should have. You are the only one that we pushed to the limits.”

Sokolov glared at Zachary. “Synthetic layers entwined to a life-replicator, every part of you was built to imitate a human. To grow like a human. To age. Shed skin. You would have died a human, if it wasn’t for *him*.”

The General’s hand raised her chin. “She was the most perfect we made. She accepted her RNA transfusion and connected with her past in an instant, unlike the others who took time.” Sokolov’s eyes narrowed. “She can be saved. Parts can be replaced. Skin will grow back. But first, you must do something for me.”

An electric current burst from Rosa’s abdomen. She wriggled at arm’s length from the General.

“The longer you take to think about it, the higher the chance her RNA implant will cease to function,” said Sokolov.

“What do you want?” Zachary released the cable, managing to balance.

“You will send a message to the Confederation to inform them that protesting scum instigated an illegal uprising, and fraudulent propaganda was created to harm the House. You will show them the module and name Sebastian Carell as a traitor.”

“You want me to lie.”

Remorse lacked in Sokolov’s tone. “Time to question me is not yours.”

“Don’t do it,” said Rosa.

Zachary closed his eyes. He had no idea of what remained in Underworld. Was it wiped clean, leaving a polished hull? Had the Black Lake been drained into space?

How many humans had burned in the melting pots of the Base's engines? But what Zachary did know was a person in front of him, tugging on his heart.

He limped, keeping his head facing the General, toward the Comms-Hub.

"Comms-Hub, activate connection to SC001," said Sokolov.

"Voice recognition applied. Connecting," replied the Hub.

"No trickery. Do this, and I will ensure she is fixed," said Sokolov.

Back turned to the General, Zachary pulled out the module. "And me?"

"One life must cease before another can live."

"Zach." A tinny sound followed Rosa's voice. "Don't."

Swimming specks of light dazed Zachary's own sight. He leaned onto the Hub, feeling his spine tingle. A hole in the centre of the Hub, between notches, seemed to match the shape of the module. The screen of the Hub activated to a man wearing a cap with several blue-uniformed people wandering behind him.

The man spoke, "Please state who you are. I cannot identify you amongst personnel authorised to use this terminal."

Zachary heard Rosa call his name again.

He slapped the Comms-Hub. "I am reporting an invasion by the Right Order Movement of Hadrian Tower."

"What? Who authorised this intrusion? Who are you?"

Another, older face appeared next to the man.

Zachary tasted blood building under his tongue. "My name is Zachary Connor ... from Underworld."

"How did you gain entry to this terminal?" asked the first man.

"Keep going," muttered Sokolov.

Zachary turned, ignoring the rants from the Hub. "Give her to me."

"Finish the broadcast." Sokolov glanced at the currents pouring from Rosa.

"Tell them the truth," she moaned.

Zachary spun in a heap onto the Hub. "ROM has invaded the Tower because the House of Representatives did this." He rammed the module into the hole. An 'Activate' symbol floated over the module. He pressed it. "Save *Galilei*."

"Coward," bellowed Sokolov, hurrying toward the Hub.

Zachary's eyes swept for a weapon. There was nothing. He had seconds.

"I'm going to tear you apart!"

"*NO!*" screamed Rosa.

With the next wave of currents dispensing out of her, she ploughed herself into the General's broken arm. The current spread. Metallic whirring sounded under his right torso. Bolts of electricity surrounded them both as they reacted against one another. A loose bolt smacked Zachary onto the Hub.

Currents raged deeper with Rosa maintaining her push into Sokolov's socket. Purple veins protruded across his face. Gasping, he let go of Rosa. Light flashed between them, throwing her away from him.

Zachary caught her. Prickling currents decreased along her body.

Sokolov stood, wide-eyed, with smoke trailing from his open mouth. Stiffened, he fell forward through the hole to the third level.

Zachary cradled Rosa on the floor.

Gnashing sounds increased inside her. "It hurts."

The girl he knew was there. "We have to get out of here."

"I don't feel ... like an android." Dozens of tiny lit-wires switched off in her stomach. "Weak ... ening."

"*Stay* with me."

"For ... give ... me."

Rosa whirred to a halt.

Chapter 28 - Dying

Zachary brushed Rosa's hair, hoping the twinkle in her green eyes that hadn't dimmed and the warmth of her face meant she wasn't gone.

Death shouldn't have come so quickly.

"You're still there," he mouthed. "I know you can see me. Blink. Please, blink. Tell me you can hear me. Please."

Fearing harm from his action, Zachary shook Rosa with care. Nothing about her responded except further black fluid filling his palms. It didn't feel right to class her as a bot. With his hand over her shredded cheek, Rosa appeared almost the same as the day he'd met her. Without the worn state, the scruffy, non-straightened hair and the smudges of battle, she was still Rosa Kade.

Zachary's spasms, tightening into knots, swamped his senses. Maybe he'd lost as much blood as she'd leaked fluid. Maybe it was time to accept that he couldn't keep outrunning death.

There was nothing to live for.

Zachary sunk to Rosa's chin. It felt cold. Tiny pieces, built inside her jaw to meet a purpose, glimmered. Miniature coils surrounded pistons the size of a pin. She was a giant Harmon Bracelet. A walking Raptor. An android. She could be repaired.

Although the neck crack was deep, it hadn't pierced the inner metal. Zachary furrowed his brow. Wasn't that where the RNA was positioned? He lowered Rosa, peering into her neck. There was a definite green glow, and if it glowed, then surely it worked. She wasn't all gone.

Staggering, Zachary lifted Rosa up. Heavy, and with no flexibility in her limbs, he dragged her towards a collapsed wall where he could see the outline of steps.

"Confirm that this is not a hoax," said a voice from the Communications Hub.

"What do you care," replied Zachary.

"We have to be sure before forwarding this to Command."

Specks of light returned to haunt Zachary's vision. He rocked, keeping his hands around Rosa. Acid burned his throat. "Comms-Hub, send all Intel of the Souls Programme to the Confederation."

"Sending," responded the Hub.

Zachary shivered on the staircase, moving downward with no control in his speed. Rosa's legs trailed behind. The staircase darkened as he descended.

Hard smacks into the wall shook him more than the bullets spraying across the horizon that he could see through cracks. Two flights of stairs remained. Zachary's neck drew inward, and then his legs gave way. He crashed onto rubble. It was over.

Eyelids fluttering, Zachary gasped above her face. "Rosa."

He couldn't end it.

* * *

Cold air rushed through Zachary's head.

He sat up, catching a rubbery hand over his stomach. Another hand gagged his scream. Something forced Zachary down to lie flat. Bright light hung overhead in an otherwise dark room.

"Tranquillize him," said a woman in grey clothes.

"He's had too much already," said a male.

"*Just do it.* Hurry up."

Something pierced Zachary's neck. A chilling freeze gripped him.

"Carell wants him," added the woman. "Applying support-apparatus."

A veil of darkness lowered toward Zachary.

He hoped the veil would miss.

It didn't.

* * *

Zachary's eyes opened to a fresh sensation tickling him. Not a single part of him ached or felt out of place.

He stood, barefooted, surprised by the aqua-coloured mist swirling around him. A perfect white, full-sleeved top covered him over trousers that felt so thin they almost didn't exist. There were no cuts or grazes on his smooth skin.

Was he dead?

The mist dispersed a little after a brush of his hand.

Zachary cleared his throat. "Hello?"

Nothing responded.

His ears twitched at a single flute easing into the silence. It came from neither below, above nor around him. Panpipes joined the flute, then the ascending strum of a guitar and the patting of several hands as if a chorus of people hid within the mist. Zachary recognised the tune; it'd been the one that played when Rosa had danced.

If this were heaven, enjoying it without her seemed wrong.

Intrigued, Zachary ran forward, wanting to know who was playing. The melody intensified with crashing crescendos. A rush of wind halted it.

His skin prickled at the whispering wind.

It spoke to him.

“Wake up.”

Chapter 29 - Disconnected

Zachary awoke to a haze.

Something flapped on his left. Dagger-like stabs ran along his body as he lay on a flat bed. Blinking he saw the flapping belong to an upright drum beating in tune to his inhalations. That, and the curtains around him, and he couldn't be mistaken. He was in the Medics Section of the *Ark*.

A woman in grey stepped out from behind the drum. "How are you?"

Zachary sighed. "I feel weird."

A sharp twinge pushed him deep into the mattress.

"Careful, don't strain yourself," said the medic. "You've been through a lot, but you're past the worst of it. You'll feel a little lightheaded with the quantity of the blood we've transfused."

Staying still, throbbing pain built inside Zachary's thigh and shoulder.

"Your tissue damage wasn't severe; it'll heal." She patted him on the forehead. "Don't worry. You're in safe hands, though you won't need us. It seems that you have your own assigned nurse. She's been waiting here for the last few days." The medic glanced to Zachary's right before leaving behind the curtain. "He's all yours now."

Zachary eyed the fat bandage wrapped around his shoulder, then beyond to several feet away where, on a chair, sat a girl with her knees bent up to her brow. She had buried her head, leaving only black hair flowing down her legs. Dressed in grey, she resembled a medic.

"I'll understand if you don't want to talk to me," said the girl.

"*Rosa*." Zachary's heart beat faster than the pump. "You're alive."

Her green eyes welled up with tears. "You mean, I'm working."

Back ache resisted Zachary's attempt to sit.

Rosa rushed to his bedside. "No – stay down."

The crack that had existed on her jaw could barely be seen under light stitches. Nothing whirred in her movement as she reversed away from the bed. She was almost perfect again, except for the remorse on her face.

"Come back," muttered Zachary.

"Why? You must really hate me. You've been through so much, and look at the state you're in." A tear crossed her cheek. "It was all my fault."

"But you didn't know."

Rosa swivelled. “How couldn’t I? It’s my body.”

Zachary couldn’t be sure, but her figure appeared intact with no sudden sparks, dangerous currents or leaking black fluid. “They mended you.”

“Patch collected you from the Tower.” Rosa’s tone brightened. “You must have told him a lot about me. He brought us both back to the *Ark*.”

“Is he okay?”

“Not really. He keeps complaining about the generators not having as much oomph as a fully-loaded Bombay.”

Zachary dropped the brief chuckle. “Did they look after you?”

Nodding, Rosa stroked her arms. “I don’t know who I am anymore. Whose parts are in me? They did the best that they could, but I won’t be able to do the things I used to, like eat and drink.” She gave a severe, long, drawn-out sigh. “They’re the least of my worries.”

“The medic said you’ve been waiting for me.”

“Just to check that you’d be okay.”

Adjusting his position so that his back was up against the pillow, Zachary said, “Is that it?”

Tears flowed down both Rosa’s cheeks. “What do you want me to say? That things can be like how they were.” She laughed onto the back of her hand. “I don’t even know how they were before? All I know is what runs in my programme.”

“You’re different.” Zachary winced at the tight sting in his thigh. “Did Carell explain the RNA process to you?”

“That doesn’t change what I am. You’re human, I’m not.”

Zachary glared. “Part of you is human.”

Rosa pinched midair. “A small part.”

“It’s better than nothing.”

Rosa approached the bed. “When they switched me on, I thought I was in heaven. Everything felt new. I wonder if the rest of me is waiting for the missing part.” She rubbed her head

Zachary let his pulse quicken. “Rosa, I still like you.”

Rosa shook her head. “How can you? *I’m an android*.”

“And?”

“And? Don’t you get it? We can’t work. I’m not real.”

“*You* are.” He watched her quivering lips. “Androids don’t cry, but you can.”

Zachary knew that many faced with this dilemma would run from the lie they'd believed in, but how could he blame Rosa for actions beyond her control? Ahead he saw a girl; a girl he'd travelled through the pipes of *Galilei* and fought an army to reach. So what if she was a creation of metal, modelled by people, made to look perfect? If the *Centurion* attack had never taken place, would Rosa have grown to look the same? It didn't matter. She was here and still tugging at his beating heart.

"I don't want to have anybody else around me but you," said Zachary.

Rosa's eyes twinkled as her hands lowered. "Do you mean that?"

"I wouldn't say it if I didn't."

"But, do you *mean* it?"

Zachary heaved in a lungful of air. "Didn't we agree that we wouldn't argue over answering questions?" He grinned at her raised brow. "Of course I mean it."

On the bed, Rosa edged to within a foot from his face. "All I thought about, while you slept, was would you still like me?"

Zachary touched her warm hand. "I don't care what anybody says."

Rosa leaned close. He took over, wrapping an arm around to bring her to his neck. Her hair smelt like fresh air. Stroking Rosa's back, Zachary felt her forehead rise up. It wasn't hard like metal, but soft.

"I can hear your heart," she said, glimpsing his lips. "Thank you, Zach, for being there."

The tip of Zachary's nose nudged against hers. He let Rosa advance. Lifting her upper lip with his, they kissed. Every second felt more real than he'd imagined it to be.

She flung her head back. "I'm still an android."

"You're still Rosa. I," he wanted another kiss, "love you."

The medic woman appeared in a rushed state, pulling the curtain all the way along the railing. She paused at their embrace. "Sorry. I'm not entirely sure you should see this, but as it was because of your bravery, I think you should."

In the distance a screen on the wall activated. Medics gathered alongside injured protesters. Confused heads turned and noticed Zachary. One by one, they nodded in appreciation. On the screen, a man stood behind a pedestal. Further serious-looking men flanked him.

"Turn the volume up," said a protester. "There's interference on the Confederation's feed."

Zachary grasped Rosa's waist. "The module. Did they accept what I sent?"

"All of it," she replied. "The Confederation's been in contact with Carell. Assayer is in upheaval. It's better to be underground than up there."

"Is Sokolov –?"

"We think so. They haven't found him. Hadrian Tower's a mess."

Zachary stroked her hand. "What about your parents?"

"Patch hacked a network to show definite activity at their home." She pressed on his lip. "I'm not going back to them. It's better this way."

The man from the Confederation continued. "Plans to rectify the shortcomings of *Galilei's* administration are considered greater than the advantage to be gained. The devolvement of standards aboard *Galilei* troubles us. No other Base has undergone such travesty and disorder. It is reminiscent of what history teaches us about the Old World. Please understand the predicament we face with overturning events."

With a glimpse to his side, the man on the screen made a single nod. He leaned forward. Wrinkles dug deep under his baggy eyes. "We have sent codes to *Galilei* to enforce our remedial solution. Sometimes the weaker of the species must allow the strongest to make their mark. Minds dominated by disorder have no place in the Integrated Confederation. I beg that you will forgive our action and seek to live amongst yourselves in the world you've created."

A screeching noise rang around the Medics Section. Then, the screen switched off followed by the lights and every machine. A yelp echoed from the exit slopes.

"A shortage," said Rosa.

Zachary heard silence take over from the humming sound that had been present on the other side of the wall behind his bed.

"Nothing's working," said a man. "Everything's off."

"What about the generators?" cried a female.

Feet rattled along the floor in every direction. In terms of severity, this was far worse than a shortage.

"Zach," whispered Rosa. "What have they done? I'm scared."

"I'm here. I've got you," he said, clinging to her waist.

In absolute darkness, amidst the alarm of protesters rushing to escape, Zachary understood the Confederation's actions. They wanted to wash their hands of the disgraced Base and leave it to rot, like the House of Representatives had before with a certain half. What better way to send a warning than to force *Galilei* into Underworld.

Zachary whispered, "We've been disconnected."

Review

Thank you for reading my debut novel.

Writing takes a lot of dedication, sacrifice of time, and head banging on the desk. I hope that I satisfied you, but I won't know unless you spend a few minutes adding a review. It's the comments, the highs, the lows, the great bits, and the slap-in-the-face groan parts that will help me evolve as a writer.

Give me a few minutes, and I'll keep going.

Please revisit the site of purchase and add a review.

Synopsis

In 2340AD, 16-year-old Zachary Connor survives by scavenging in the Wastelands of Underworld. His miserable life changes when he finds a rare Intercom with the recording of a girl; the first Overworlder he has ever heard. It peaks his curiosity, making him want to know her, though he knows that to be impossible aboard the *Galilei* Research Base.

During an opportunity to sneak-away visit to Overworld, he meets 16-year-old Rosa Kade, a beautiful girl living a sheltered life. When she accuses him of stealing her Intercom, Zachary is insulted by her offensive view of Underworld. Out of guilt, Rosa gives him a new Intercom, to sell for his own needs, and orders him to wipe out the contents of the Intercom.

Zachary cannot follow her order. He is drawn to Rosa, wanting to keep in contact with her. He begins to feel for her, something that he's never felt for anyone before. This intensifies with each precious conversation Zachary has with her. However, his happiness is crushed when Overworld's Army led by General Masim Sokolov attacks Underworld. Devastated over his dad's death, Zachary escapes to Overworld.

Zachary meets Rosa, who left her home to find him. He finds solace with her. In the midst of a skirmish, Overworld protesters seize Zachary separating him from Rosa, who is taken captive by Sokolov. In the protester's mid-world lair, Zachary learns that Sokolov has been extracting ribonucleic acid (RNA) from Overworlders who died nine years ago. He is even more troubled when he discovers that the RNA influences the capabilities of androids – all with the ultimate aim of colonising Jupiter's moon, Europa.

In an attempt to rescue Rosa, Zachary joins the protesters and battles his way to Sokolov's headquarters. Sokolov reveals Rosa as the RNA influenced android of a girl who died nine years ago. Fearing for Zachary, Rosa electrocutes Sokolov, and damages herself in the process. Zachary attempts to save Rosa, but his wounds weaken him. He collapses with her in his arms.

Zachary awakes to find he is recovering in the protester's lair, and that Rosa has been repaired. Although they are different, their understanding of one another is very real

and that is what binds them. They need each other even more when power inside *Galilei* is switched off reducing the Base into darkness.

Scheduled for 2013

Dissemble: Book Two of the Divided Worlds Trilogy (June 2013)

Disrupt: Book Three of the Divided Worlds Trilogy (July 2013)

Tyler Nitbone and the Snowflake Traitor (November 2013)

About The Author

Imran Siddiq lives in Syston, Leicestershire (UK) and works as a Senior Information Manager with the NHS. He makes time to write in-between work, tweeting, dabbling in digital art and feeding his two cats. A timetable stretching out for the next three years keeps his focus sharp. Can you blame his ambition to tell a tale or a dozen?

Interact and seek what lurks in his mind at:

<http://www.imranwrites.com>

<https://www.twitter.com/flickimp>

<http://www.facebook.com/imransiddiqwriter>

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Believe it or not but thanks goes to my guide in Borneo who left me alone to absorb the zillions of bugs creeping within the jungle. In a minute of solitude, I realised the one thing missing from my life that had spurred me on as a child; writing. I couldn't blame anybody except myself for not continuing the worlds and dastardly characters I used to create. As soon as I got home, I started writing. Disconnect is my second novel, and at the time of writing, I'm working on my sixth.

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I hope that I delivered.