Skydweller

and

Representations of the Adolescent Crisis:

group identity versus alienation

(a novel manuscript and exegesis)

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Abstract: This document contains a creative work – the text of a young adult novel, *Skydweller* – and an exegesis discussing the ways in which identity and the adolescent crisis of group identity versus alienation are represented in young adult science fiction/fantasy novels.
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Statement of Original Authorship

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted to meet requirements for an award at this or any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

Signature

Date
Rather than wanting to read about real teenagers – as SE Hinton insisted they did in the 1960s – today’s adolescents are flocking to fantasy, suspense, and mystery... Although realistic novels... show up occasionally on teens’ lists, the vast majority prefer genre fiction to realistic problem novels. (Silvey, 2006)

According to Silvey and others, young adult readers do not want realistic stories about people like themselves, but prefer to read genre fiction, and while figures are difficult to come by, Science Fiction/Fantasy (SF/F) appears to be one of their genres of choice. As John Scalzi revealed at scalzi.com, Bookscan figures show that young adult SF/F ‘is amply represented at top of the general bestselling charts of YA book sales’ (whatever.scalzi.com, 2 May 2008). But it is not the sales figures that make young adult (YA) fiction important; rather it is the ways in which the different genre and the changing patterns of YA writing engage significantly with the lives of the readers for whom they are written. Despite adolescent readers’ stated preference for SF/F forms, as opposed to realistic stories about themselves, it is evident that most YA genre do in fact have something quite profound to say about the lives of young people.

It is my belief that the SF/F, YA novel of today has moved beyond mere adventure, or the mythic storytelling of Campbell’s, ‘hero’s journey’, (Campbell, 1993) to incorporate aspects of the ‘adolescent crisis’ of group identity versus alienation first proposed by Newman and Newman (Newman and Newman, 1976). Drawing on Newman and Newman’s insights, and in order to understand this connection between adolescent
readers and the genre fiction they choose, I have written a creative piece, a novel entitled *Skydweller*, that seeks to represent this crisis in its characterization, setting, plot and theme. The accompanying exegesis uses my own work and that of other writers, to examine how this is represented through SF/F YA fiction. It also examines the psychological theory embedded within these representations and its connection to the overall area of young adult fiction.

As a singular question for research, I asked myself – in what way is the adolescent crisis of group identity versus alienation represented in young adult science fiction/fantasy? Group identity referring to the aspect of ‘self-theory that focuses on membership and connection with social groups’, and alienation being the ‘sense of social estrangement’ or lack of ‘social support or meaningful connection’ (Newman & Newman, 1997, p. 678).

In order to answer this question I utilized the methodology of practice-led research. As such, it is the creative piece which best provided the answer to my research question, reflecting Haseman’s assertion that ‘the practice-led novelist asserts the primacy of the novel’ (Haseman, 2006, p.101). Whilst this is true, it was in the combination of novel, as primary research method, combined with an ongoing research strategy that incorporated both novel and exegesis that my conclusions were reached. The methodology employed required me to immerse myself in a vast range of topics, including transhumanism and genetics, in order to make the unreal world of SF/F a reality within its own pages. There was also the constant awareness of how the novel and exegesis could come together as a more powerful piece of research and writing, with the exegesis providing a more informed reading of the creative piece.
The first part of the literature review discusses identity theory from its inception, with the seminal work of Erik Erikson, through to its current state, in order to ground the issue of the adolescent crisis of group identity versus alienation, as theorized by Newman and Newman. In the second part of the literature review I look at how identity theory has been used by other researchers in order to critically evaluate young adult fiction. Identity issues are synonymous with adolescent fiction and critics have begun to identify the need to expand identity theory to account for society’s increased emphasis on group affiliations.

Having established Newman and Newman’s theory, I then applied this to two case studies of dystopian YA, SF/F novels. The first is Scott Westerfeld’s, *Uglies*; the first in a trilogy of novels depicting its young adult protagonist in the beginning of a descent into alienation. The second is Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games*, where the teenaged protagonist’s group identity is systematically destroyed. Both are exciting, action filled genre pieces that manage to incorporate important themes and commentary on politics, ethics and environment for readers wanting more depth.

Finally I reflect upon my own creative piece, *Skydweller*. As a practice-led researcher it was in my own discovery of creating characters, plots and settings to reflect this theme of the adolescent crisis, that I was best able to understand its representation. It was also where I discovered that while, as the writer I might set out with particular ideas to explore, the novel and its characters develop a momentum of their own whereby more and different thematic aspects are discovered.
Literature Review

Part One

Identity Theory

In October 2001, Newman and Newman, published an article in the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* titled ‘Group Identity and Alienation: Giving The We Its Due’. The authors argued that Erik Erikson’s paradigmatic description of a traditional period of adolescence, with its emphasis on individuation, needs to be re-examined, and that there now exists a greater emphasis on group affiliations and alienation during this period of identity formation.

During the early years of adolescence, from puberty to about age 17 or 18, one confronts a new psychosocial conflict (not developed by Erikson) in which desires to ally oneself with specific groups and to learn to be comfortable functioning as a member of a group vie with tendencies to feel overburdened by social pressures, unwelcome, isolated, and lonely. We call this conflict *group identity versus alienation*. (Newman & Newman, 2001, p.519)

The adolescent crisis, as described by Newman & Newman, has its foundations in Erikson’s identity theory. Erikson’s eight psychological stages\(^1\) laid out a map for human identity development, with each stage requiring successful completion of a particular development stage in order for the individual to move onto the next. The period of

\(^1\) Erikson’s eight stages of psychosocial development: Infancy – trust vs mistrust (birth to 12-18months), Toddler – autonomy vs shame,doubt (18months to 3 years), Preschool – initiative vs guilt (3 to 6 years), Childhood – industry vs inferiority (6 to 12 years), Adolescence – identity vs role confusion (12 to 18 years), Young Adulthood – intimacy vs isolation (19 to 40 years, Middle Adulthood – generativity vs stagnation (40 to 65 years), Senior- ego integrity vs despair (65 to death) (Erikson, 1968)
adolescence, in Erikson’s work, is the stage known as ‘Identity versus Identity Confusion’, which emphasizes the search for individual identity during adolescence (12-18 years) (Erikson, 1968).

Many theorists have built on and expanded Erikson’s work. James E. Marcia was the first psychologist to expand on Erikson’s theory in 1966. Marcia established an ‘Identity Development Model’, which looked at the exploration of identity and then commitment to identity, which signified the linear movement to the next stage of development (Marcia, 1966). The transformation from adolescence to adulthood was found to be marked by a commitment to a particular identity. Marcia identified four ‘identity statuses’ to describe adolescents. Identity achievement, where the individual has undergone identity crisis and made a commitment to a particular identity. Moratorium, when the individual is in the midst of identity crisis but not made a commitment. Foreclosure, when commitment has been made to an identity without going through a crisis. Identity Diffusion, when identity crisis has not been experienced and commitment has not been made (Marcia, 1966, p. 557). These four identity statuses allow us to identify the different stages of adolescence and a means of interpreting adolescence in both factual and fictional settings.

Josselson (1994) found that adolescents required close relationships to evolve rather than psychological distance. Strong connections to family and friends were seen as beneficial to an integrated self-identity (cited in Stringer, 1997, p. 8). Chickering and Reisser (1993) adapted identity theory to look at psychological change amongst college students, finding similar connections between positive self-identity and the students relationships with families and others (cited in Unknown, 2003, p.13).
These foundational theories illustrate one of the main weaknesses of identity theory as developed from Erikson’s work, in that they create a very general picture based on particular population groups. In order to provide a more accurate picture, identity theory requires a narrower lens to account for diverse populations (Unknown, 2003, p.14). Moreover, society and its adolescent population in particular, are constantly changing. Newman and Newman, have called for a change in thinking on Erikson’s Identity versus Identity Confusion stage, suggesting a need now exists for greater emphasis on group identity over self identity. They offer six propositions for new directions for growth in understanding of the crisis of group identity versus alienation. Their fifth proposition, that ‘most adolescents will experience some conflict between group identity and alienation as a predictable part of the resolution of this crisis’ is perhaps the most salient when referring to group identity theory as reflected in current YA SF/F novels (Newman and Newman, 2001, p.530).

Newman & Newman’s theory of group identity versus alienation brings the adolescent crisis into line with current adolescent lifestyles. As Erikson himself noted, ‘The youth of today is not the youth of twenty years ago. This much any elderly person would say, at any point in history, and think it was both new and true’ (Erikson, 1968, p.26). In developing a theory that emphasises group identity, Newman and Newman are not proposing that individual identity is under threat, or requires replacement. Rather, they suggest that group identity, and more particularly the formation of a positive group identity, is a necessary component in Erikson’s process. In order to ascend to the next stage of development, adolescents must successfully manoeuvre this crisis.

Along with Newman and Newman, a number of other researchers have pointed out the need for further development of identity theory in order to account for changing social constructs. Kroger argues there is a need to examine identity development in
relation to the multiple social contexts many adolescents now experience (Kroger, 2000, p.147). Similarly, Weigert and Gecas contend it must be ‘part of an ongoing cultural dynamics informing identity formation’ (Weigert & Gecas, 2005, p.172). This need for a more relevant interpretation, is reflected in current young adult literature, particularly the growing market of YA SF/F. In creating fictional worlds, featuring a young protagonist in search of friendship and other groups where they feel a sense of belonging, writers are producing stories, which delve into the current adolescent crisis.

The relationship between group identity and individual identity during adolescence, is a complementary one. As young people search for connections and the supportive relationships of the group environment, they discover ways in which communities work and their own place within them. One place many adolescents find a group is online, and many of these groups revolve around favourite authors or the books or characters they write. Goodings et al concluded that a ‘shared sense of the past is critical to establishing certain kinds of identity-relevant claims’ (Goodings et al, 2007, p.475), In the online world, we can assume that the reading of, or love of a certain book or author could be claimed as a shared past. While Duncan concludes, in his thesis on the MySpace generation, that ‘commonality of interests is key to the notion of community’ (Duncan, 2008, p.162).

Avid young adult readers are able to become part of online communities where they can have regular contact with authors and other likeminded fans. Bromnick and Swallow’s study of teen heroes showed that they were ‘drawn mainly from discrete groups; sporting heroes for boys, pop stars and entertainers for girls’ (Bromnick & Swallow, 1999, p. 126). If we look at the popularity of writers’ blogs, I believe we can add authors as one of those groups. Scott Westerfeld’s blog, westerblog, was ranked number one and now number three on a list of the top fifty Australian writing blogs. In his
book, *Bogus to Bubbly: An insider’s guide to the world of Uglies*, Westerfeld dedicates the book to his group of blog commenters and follows this up by listing two pages of aliases, inspired by either his own or other young adult characters (Westerfeld, 2008). Westerfeld’s blog is a particularly successful example of the external group identity that surrounds YA SF/F fiction.

Examples such as this confirm Newman and Newman’s belief that our modern emphasis on seeing adolescents as autonomous is a mistake. Young adults are seeking, through family, online and other groups, ‘to establish an understanding of groups and a basic sense of themselves as group members who feel valued and understood’ (Newman and Newman, 2001, p. 516).

To understand the adolescent crisis of group identity versus alienation, we need to look closely at the developmental stages involved. Cognitive developmental theory suggests there are three cognitive capacities necessary for the formation of group identity: group representations, group operations, and reflective thinking about groups (Newman and Newman, 2001, p. 522). A key strength of Newman and Newman’s hypothesis on the adolescent crisis, is the further development of four interconnected elements that allow a sense of group identity to develop. They also provide a valuable tool for analysing and creating young adult fiction.

Firstly, is the capacity to categorize people into groups and recognize the features of that group’s membership. Adolescence is a time when we learn to read the signs of groups: language, nonverbal gestures, fashion, use of certain spaces, behaviours, and participation in events become ‘markers’ of group identification. They are also key strategies in creating believable characters. Secondly, there is the need to experience a sense of group history. Through interactions with a group, values, beliefs and practices
are internalised. The individual’s sense of self-identity is influenced by the growing group identity. As writers we can utilise a character’s group interactions to build identity. Third, is the need for an emotional investment in the group. Group members will have more positive feelings towards other members of their own group, and conversely experience depression or jealousy if there is betrayal. Adolescents can become bound to a group that is not right for them. Conflict is a key requirement for plot and dramatic tension. Fourth, is the ability to socially evaluate its relation to other groups. Adolescents analyse and evaluate the groups in their lives. In making judgments about the group, they make judgements about themselves. The development of strong character arcs requires this kind of judgement (Newman & Newman, 2001, p.523-525).

In adolescents who fail to make positive group affiliations, the result of the crisis is a negative resolution that leads to alienation from one’s peers. Alienation is defined as ‘social estrangement; that is, an absence of social support or meaningful social connection’ (Mau cited in Newman and Newman, 1975, p.450). If this sense of alienation is chronic it can lead to life long difficulties. Conversely, short periods of alienation can lead to a more positive resolution of group identity, as feelings of loneliness and isolation result in an appreciation, or desire for, social acceptance and an awareness of its importance. The growing importance of group affiliations was demonstrated by O’Brien and Bierman, who found that peer groups were seen to provide companionship, stimulation and support. Older adolescents however, ‘were more likely to report peer reactions as important to their feelings of social or personal worth’ (O’Brien & Bierman, 1988, p.1364).

Alienation arises from issues of common identity, common bond or both, and from personality characteristics (Newman and Newman, 2001). Common identity issues arise when roles are forced upon adolescents whereby they recognise differences in
opinions, beliefs and values and therefore have a sense of not belonging. If new friends and social activities can be established, the sense of alienation can be replaced with a positive outcome. Issues of common bond, (such as those with family, groups of friends, teams) can occur when adolescents are incapable of forming relationships that lead to them feeling accepted and emotionally supported, due to poor parental guidance. Alienation in this case is less easily rectified. Personality characteristics such as shyness, introversion, lack of sociability, and anxiety can prevent successful group relationships being formed (Newman and Newman, 2001, p. 526).

Empirical research by Kidwell and Dunham, attempted to measure symptoms of Erikson’s adolescent identity crisis, which was thought to be associated with reduced ego strength, and psychological and physical symptoms (Kidwell, 1995). While the results supported Erikson’s theory, it is interesting to note that the symptoms observed could also be seen as indicators of adolescent alienation. The repression, projection, denial and reaction formation noted by the study would also support Newman and Newman’s concept of alienation and a failure to achieve positive group identity. A more current interpretation might be achieved by testing Erikson’s idea of exploration alongside group identity issues of these adolescents.

Schachter has suggested that Erikson’s classic theory is under threat due to its concentration on ‘the individual and on personal integration’ (Schachter, 2005, p.138). In suggesting changes, or rather incorporations to Erikson’s original theory, theorists are observing a societal change brought about by greater emphasis on group affiliations. In the stage of Adolescence, this is demonstrated theoretically through developmental approaches such as Newman and Newman, and empirically through the observable change in adolescent lifestyle from individual to group centred, and textually through the fictional representations seen in young adult fiction.
Developmental approaches to identity provide a useful tool for the creative approach to adolescent fiction, in that identity moves from the static to what Kroger refers to as a ‘structural organization more responsive to opportunities that will obviate developmental arrest as well as promote further movement towards maturity’ (Kroger, 1996, p.8). As writers, rather than theorists, we are able to represent these opportunities as they are presented to our characters, just as our readers are presented with and navigate through their own opportunities. The following section investigates the ways in which identity theory has been used to analyse young adult fiction, and the paradigm shift that is occurring in YA SF/F fiction and its relation to adolescent identity in particular.
Part Two

Identity theory and adolescent fiction

In the 1950s, Holden Caulfield emerged as the most famous fictional teenager of the time. Today, Harry Potter is more likely to be seen as such. Besides fifty years, what separates the two is that Holden, a character in a realistic fiction, ‘seems to have learned very little; his feelings at the time of the events he relates appear to be his feelings now’ (Brooks, 2004, p.357). Unlike Holden, Harry Potter matures from an innocent eleven year old to a very dark at times adolescent. Admittedly, he has had seven books with which to affect this change.

Waller argues that while Caulfield has become an archetype for adolescence, this is not necessarily deserved: ‘As a fictional representation of a sixteen-year-old he may offer some authentic characteristics, but it seems problematic to base any aspect of a theory of normal adolescence on a character who is possibly neurotic, periodically in therapy, and always a dramatic, fictional construct’ (Waller, 2004, p.99).

This suggests that the divide between realistic and fantasy characters might not be as wide as sometimes assumed. Harry Potter’s struggle for identity, while achieved against a backdrop of mythical creatures and magical forces, is no less real within the fictional setting, than that of any realist character. Stephens discusses an unusual difference between general SF/F and ‘junior science-fiction’ and ‘post-disaster fiction’, in that the latter use ‘elements of the realistic mode’ (Stephens, 1992, p. 288). This includes the use of first-person narration, giving the text the ability to comment more directly than
is usual in the genre. This recognition of the realistic mode of YA SF/F hints at the possibilities of the genre for representations of the adolescent crisis.

Stringer looked at the connection between YA fiction in general and psychological theory. Her book, ‘Conflict and Connection’, discusses the ways in which psychologists are expanding and redefining the original identity achievement theories of Erikson and Marcia. She concludes that this signals a move from emphasising independence, to a theory that ‘entails a more complex balance between self-sufficiency and meaningful affiliation with others’ (Stringer, 1997, p.8). Based on Stringer’s work, it can be concluded that the adolescent crisis of group identity versus alienation fits neatly within this movement of expanding and redefining. Stringer’s assessment confirms the legitimacy of the representation of the adolescent crisis of group identity versus alienation, as a meaningful tool for interpreting YA fiction.

In McCallum’s study of the ideologies of identity in adolescent fiction, she takes a Bakhtin approach to representations of subjectivity in YA fiction. Subjectivity and solipsism form the two extremes of representation for McCallum. While these are more focused on an independence side of identity, it is interesting that McCallum states that novels ‘which are not overtly about subjectivity but which are about personal, social or intellectual growth, maturation, and understanding, entail more or less implicit concepts of selfhood, identity and agency’ (McCallum, 1999, p.9). It can be concluded from McCallum’s work, that the implied audience and the cultural construction it entails, effectively render any YA fiction as containing some element of identity (McCallum, 1999).

More recently, Waller has argued the case for what she terms YA ‘fantastic realism’ (which would seem to encompass SF/F) and its ability to conceptualise
adolescence and the adolescent experience. The dynamic created by fantastic and real elements in current YA novels offers opportunities to ‘test dominant discursive frameworks… question(s) the validity of everyday experience and ‘normal’ adolescence by incorporating impossible, fantastic elements’ (Waller, 2009, p. 195). Based on Waller’s work, a connection can be made between fantasy fiction and the realistic experiences of adolescents. Waller also discusses the relationship of recognition between reader and protagonist, whereby the adolescent reader (absorbed in their own egocentric importance) follows a protagonist who is the ‘the most important person in a quest that has far-reaching implications’ (Waller, 2009, p. 62). It can be concluded then, that adolescent readers do see themselves as represented by non-realist fictional characters.

The connection between identity theory and criticism of adolescent fiction is a long-standing one. Previous critics, Waller (2009) and Stringer (1997) in particular, have reflected on the need to look at this relationship in a way that accounts for the current adolescent experience, which emphasises group affiliation more so than independence. Based on the above authors, it can be concluded that the adolescent crisis of group identity versus alienation provides a possible vehicle for achieving analysis based on contemporary adolescent experiences. However, while YA SF/F provides a valid reading of the adolescent experience, it is important to remember, as McCallum (1999) illustrates, the implicit nature of identity within these texts.
A Case Study – Uglies by Scott Westerfeld

“All four books in the series start the same way, with someone crashing a party. ...”

(p.168)

In a similar fashion, preparing an academic study of a novel like Uglies feels a little like crashing a party. There is a sense of fun and adventure throughout the novel that is resonant of this being a genre piece. It is a fantasy novel that deals with the importance of adolescent friendship and group acceptance. As Westerfelds’ 15-year-old narrator, Tally Youngblood reveals, life has changed since ‘Peris became pretty’ (while she remains an Ugly) and that ‘losing your best friend sucks, even if it’s only for three months and two days’ (p.3).

Westerfelds’ novel, Uglies, is the first in a trilogy of novels revolving around, Tally Youngblood, and the ‘pretty’ culture she has grown up with. Tally is about to turn 16 and cannot wait, because then she will have an operation to make her ‘pretty’, move to New Pretty Town, and spend all of her time attending parties, having fun and getting drunk. When we meet Tally, she is already feeling isolated as she is the youngest in her group of friends and therefore the last to have the operation. Tally is unquestioning of the operation. She aspires to be a pretty, because pretties have worth and uglies do not. As Tally attempts to sneak in to New Pretty Town to visit her best friend Peris, she knows she does not yet belong on his side of the river: ‘Of course, Tally was nothing here. Worse, she was ugly’ (p.7). Tally knows the language of the groups that make up her culture.
In this modern sf/fantasy, Westerfeld creates a world that follows the basic structure of Erikson’s eight stages of Psychosocial Development. The story is set within the world of Tally, in the adolescent phase, but the various stages of individual development are identified in the novel. Everyone in Tally’s world starts out as a ‘littlie’ and lives with their parents in the suburbs. The term littlie encompasses each of the stages of identity prior to adolescence. At 12, the beginning of adolescence, individuals move to Uglyville, where they do ‘tricks’ and play out any adolescent rebellion they have. In Uglyville, they are taught to believe they are ‘ugly’. They are encouraged to call each other names and find fault in order to diminish self-esteem and make the pretty-operation more appealing. On their 16th birthday, everyone is made ‘pretty’ and moves to New Pretty Town to have fun. The novel is not specific about the progression after this, but mention is made of middle pretties, represented in the novel by Tally’s parents. Middle pretties have had operations to ensure their physical appearance makes those around them feel reassured and safe; a change which is suggestive of Erikson’s young and middle adulthood stage. The period known as maturity is the domain of the ‘Crumblies’, although uglies and pretties refer to anyone older than themselves as crumblies (Westerfeld, 2005, 2008). Westerfeld appears to be using the various stages of development within the ‘Uglies world’ to challenge societal norms of identity and maturity. In this regard Newman and Newman’s expansion of Erikson’s model is fundamental to the novel’s concerns regarding the stage of adolescence.

Tally’s world comes into question when she meets Shay, another ugly who shares her birthday. Shay gives Tally a sense of security because now they ‘don’t have to worry about one of us abandoning the other. Not for a single day’ (p.37). It is the beginning of their sense of shared history, which Newman and Newman see as essential for positive group identity formation (Newman & Newman, 2001, p. 524). Alienation is something to
be feared in Tally’s mind. Unlike Tally, Shay already knows about the Smoke, a hidden city where uglies can go to avoid the operation and have a choice in how they grow up. Exposed to a different early adolescence group and the myth of the Smoke, Shay, who did not want to become a pretty but was fearful of running away, has now had a chance to re-evaluate the outcome of her choice. The adolescent crisis has already begun for Shay as she feels the social pressure to become a pretty, but her desire to be herself strengthens, as the time gets closer. Being pretty is not right for her and she must now escape, hoping to take Tally with her. Westerfeld uses his character, Shay, to critique aspects of social conformity, while setting Tally up for the crisis of identity as she is exposed to these non-conformist values.

Unlike Shay, Tally is unquestioning. When Shay tells Tally about her plans, Tally has no interest in going. Tally’s sense of history and emotional investment in the group she and Shay have formed is not as strong as that which exists for Tally, Peris and the rest of her now pretty friends. The strongest bond Tally has experienced is that between herself and Peris. This bond of friendship is in a sense Tally’s closest family bond. While ‘adolescents evaluate the nature of their ties to immediate and extended family members’, Tally has not yet begun to question these ties and therefore cannot break from her current group identifications to follow Shay (Newman and Newman, 2001).

When Shay leaves to join the Smoke, Tally is again left alone and feels increasingly alienated.

The uglies in her own dorm treated her like a walking disease, and anyone else who recognized her sooner or later asked, “Why aren’t you pretty yet?”
At this point Tally is in a foreclosed state. She is committed to becoming a pretty and conforming to societal expectations. And yet, it is that very society that will force her into the adolescent crisis by refusing to allow her to conform.

They looked so young to her now, especially the just-arrived new class, who gawked at her like she was an old pile of dinosaur bones.

She’d always loved being independent, but now Tally felt like the last little to be picked up from school, abandoned and alone. (p.96)

Made to feel an outcast, Tally experiences feelings of alienation. Newman & Newman theorized that periods of loneliness and alienation were ‘important for the continued formulation of both group and individual identity’ (Newman and Newman, 2001, p. 527). For Tally, her alienation leads her to question societal norms she previously accepted and question the identity, which has been chosen for her.

As with many YA SF/F novels, family is often absent and replaced by a group of peers. Philip Pullman’s Lyra (His Dark Materials) has absent parents and is driven by her desire to save her friend, Roger. Harry Potter, the most famous modern day orphan finds solace in his friends. While D.M. Cornish’s, Rosamund (Monster Blood Tattoo) is an orphaned boy who finds comfort in the company of other socially alienated people.

The absence of parents, or familial group ties, is a deliberate and effective construction, which denies the protagonist ‘a template’ for forming strong group relationships, and leaves them susceptible to crisis and eventual alienation (Newman and Newman, 2001). As McCallum contends, this displaces and destabilizes notions of identity and selfhood, but can also affirm them (McCallum, 1999). In Tally’s case, alienation from the familiar surrounds of childhood is intended to affirm her group
identity as ‘ugly’ and thereby her acceptance of the next stage of maturation, which is to become a ‘pretty’. When Tally briefly reunites with her parents, their assessment of her situation confirms Tally’s growing feelings of dissatisfaction with the group identity chosen for her.

Tally looked at her father, and for a moment she saw something other than wisdom and confidence in his expression. … For the first time in her life, Tally found herself listening to a middle pretty without being completely reassured, … she couldn’t shake the thought that Sol knew nothing about the outside world Shay had fled to. (p.117)

It is only when Tally is forced to go after Shay and find the Smoke that she experiences the four interconnected elements (Newman and Newman, 2001), which allow her to form her own unique group identity, and thereby the self identity that will carry her throughout the entire series. She recognizes the distinguishing features of groups and upon entering the Smoke begins to understand the appeal of this group over those of her own city. ‘Tally had spent the last four years staring at the skyline of New Pretty Town, thinking it was the most beautiful sight in the world, but she didn’t think so anymore’ (p.209). She quickly experiences intense interactions with the new group and forms a sense of history. Because she has to work with the group, she experiences a sense of achievement whilst simultaneously feeling her own impending betrayal of them, her growing feelings for David, and Shay’s jealousy, which leads to a greater emotional investment than she has experienced before. These three experiences lead her on her own personal journey, where she is now able to make a social evaluation of the Smoke group over the Pretty group (Newman and Newman, 2001). ‘All day long a terrible thought had kept crossing her mind: Maybe the Smoke was where she really belonged’ (p.244). In implementing Newman and Newman’s elements of positive group identity, Westerfeld
presents a positive representation of the adolescent crisis as seen through Tally’s experiences.

Interestingly, with the final line Westerfeld returns Tally to where she began as she gives herself up to the authorities (and her rejected group identity), because of her new belief system discovered as a member of the Smoke. “I’m Tally Youngblood,” she said. “Make me pretty” (p.425). As the first in the trilogy, the conclusion is not all that it seems. The narrative that has come before tends to suggest Tally will have the strength of identity to remain true to herself, and not be so easily seduced by life as a pretty. In this the first novel, the representation of the adolescent crisis of group identity versus alienation, is a positive one. Tally forms a positive group identity, and is therefore confident enough of her self-identity to risk it by becoming a pretty. In this, Westerfeld has created a strong, self-assured female character, who offers readers a positive interpretation of the adolescent crisis. The reader is hopeful this will continue throughout the series, but is never left doubting that the crisis will continue within the adventure filled world Westerfeld has created.
A Case Study – The Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins

...this crazy lynx started following me around the woods... I finally had to kill the lynx because he scared off game. I almost regretted it because he wasn’t bad company. But I got a decent price for his pelt. (p.7)

Katniss Everdeen is a survivor. She has had to be, since the death of her father in a mining accident. She lives in District 12 of a post-apocalyptic America known as Panem. Hers is the poorest district of the twelve, which all work towards feeding the privileged populous of the Capitol. There used to be a District 13, but they were decimated after rising up against the Capitol. In order to keep the Districts in line, and remind them of what will happen if they should attempt the same, the Capitol devises the Hunger Games - a yearly, televised fight to the death, using two children (known as tributes) from every district as contestants. Each year, from age 12 to 18, every child’s name is added to the draw one more time, plus an extra for each additional year. If they are starving, they can trade extra entries for grain to feed their family. Katniss, at 16, has twenty entries.

Like Westerfeld’s world, Collins has created a dystopia where identity is largely determined by the overriding authority. Identity is forced upon the inhabitants of Panem, but unlike the uglies in Westerfeld’s novel, these people have no sense of happiness (cultivated or otherwise) about their situation. Goodings et al, argue that all communities must construct a relationship to place, which then mediates the social relations of its members (Goodings et al, 2007, p.475). The place-identity is well defined, as each District and the people within it, have their identity entwined with the productivity of the District and their place within it. Katniss’s relationship with, Madge, the mayor’s...
daughter, reflects this. They stick together at school, rarely talking, because they have
nobody else. But Madge is the mayor’s daughter, and ‘it’s hard not to resent those who
don’t have to sign up for tesserae’ (p.13).

Newman & Newman contend that alienation can result from issues of common
identity such as that constructed in Collins’ dystopia. When adolescents are forced to take
on roles, or expected to comply with opinions, beliefs or values that they do not subscribe
to, alienation can result (Newman and Newman, 2001, p.526). Katniss does not believe in
the opinions, beliefs or values of the Capitol, on a world level, or the unfairness that exists
within her own district. As such, she finds herself alienated from her own world. At
home, she is different and apart from her mother and sister despite her love for them.
They are healers, while she is a survivor. In the woods, where she teams up with Gale, she
keeps their friendship from leading into romance because ‘good hunting partners are hard
to find’ (p.10). To use Marcia’s identity statuses, Katniss could be classed as being in a
state of foreclosure, where she has made a commitment to an identity without attempting
identity exploration (Marcia, 1966, p.552). When Katniss is forced to team with Peeta
during the Hunger Games, her commitment becomes evident; ‘by teaming up with him,
I’ve made myself far more vulnerable than when I was alone’ (p.263).

But it is only in this play of commitment that Collins achieves any depth of
character for Katniss. When we meet her, we know she is a survivor. As she makes her
way through the games, we know she is a survivor. And finally when she leaves the
games, she is still that survivor intent on remaining alienated from Peeta.

For Katniss, the adolescent crisis begins when she finds an ally in Rue, the small
competitor who reminds her of the little sister for whom she gave up her own freedom.
Newman and Newman stated that alienation could play a positive role in identity
formation, when the period of aloneness brought about an appreciation of social acceptance, and a realization of its importance (Newman and Newman, 2001, p.527). As Katniss cradles the sleeping Rue, she realizes ‘how very lonely I’ve been in the arena. How comforting the presence of another human being can be’ (p.209). From this point, Katniss is never quite the same. She has moved from a state of foreclosure, to being forced into a crisis of group identity versus alienation. The competitors in the Hunger Games are at once her enemies, attempting to stop the survival she is so committed to, and at the same time a small number become her allies and friends. Rue, helps her and is a reminder of innocence, Thresh lets her get away because of his own sense of right and wrong and Peeta protects her from the first moment because of his childhood love of her.

In opening herself up to Rue, Katniss forms a group identity with the others. Their language is that of the only tributes to stay true to their moral code. Unlike the Career tributes, they are not mad killing machines enjoying the social status of the games. They form a sense of history from their time in arena. Although this time together is short, it is intense. Thresh has stayed alone for the entire games, but in hearing that Katniss helped Rue and made her end dignified, Thresh is instantly bonded with her. The small group’s emotional investment lies in their attempts to help each other stay alive, despite knowing only one can possibly live. It is because of these factors that they see themselves as different from the other tributes, and form their own group. As part of this group, Katniss moves, for a time, beyond her foreclosed state of alienation.

Despite this, like Westerfeld, Collins ends by returning Katniss to the place where she began. She buries her feelings about Rue and Thresh’s deaths in order to survive. Her initial attempts and plans to make the Capitol look bad fade, as she must smile for the Capitol’s cameras or risk her own life. As Haymitch, her mentor, tells her:
‘Listen up. You’re in trouble. Word is the Capitol’s furious about you showing them up in the arena. The one thing they can’t stand is being laughed at and they’re the joke of Panem,’ says Haymitch. … ‘Your only defense can be you were so madly in love you weren’t responsible for your actions.’ (p.357)

In saying this, Haymitch unwittingly gives Katniss an escape from her conflicted feelings. She retreats to the idea that it was ‘all about the game’; the safety of her alienated self.

As I slowly, thoroughly wash the makeup from my face and put my hair in its braid, I begin transforming back into myself. Katniss Everdeen. A girl who lives in the Seam. Hunts in the woods. Trades in the Hob. I stare in the mirror as I try to remember who I am and who I am not. By the time I join the others, the pressure of Peeta’s arm around my shoulders feels alien. (p.371)

At times it seems Katniss’s alienation is part of her defiance against the Capitol. She refuses to play her preordained role within District 12, and instead becomes a hunter, although it is an unconscious decision. But upon Rue’s death, she realises Gale’s ‘ravings against the Capitol’ are something she can no longer ignore (p.236). In realising this, she begins to commit defiant acts that begin with her ‘burial’ of Rue, and continue through to her saving Peeta and herself against the Gamemakers’ wishes.

McCallum suggests that cultural or psychological displacement of a character can ‘destabilize and place in question their concepts of personal identity… (or) assert the idea of an essential self which transcends social or cultural structures’ (McCallum, 1999, p.104). In subjecting Katniss to the Hunger Games, she is effectively displaced both culturally and psychologically. She experiences destabilisation, as she can no longer shut down her emotions and alienate herself from even those closest to her. And yet, for all members of her group, it is the assertion of their essential self that draws them together.
They are all survivors, and they all refuse to break from their strong moral codes. Waller contends that; ‘In terms of young adult literature and the teenager, guiding impulses are usually moral and pedagogic, so that in defining adolescence, we also seek to shape and contain it’ (Waller, 2009, p.97). Perhaps this is Collins’ purpose. However, it is also part of the characters’ appeal to a young adult audience, as they confront their own struggle to achieve a positive group identity and avoid long-term alienation.

Westerfeld’s Tally remains positive in adversity, returning to where she began by becoming a pretty, but leaving the reader with the belief that she has strong group affiliations and a positive self-identity. Katniss, however, returns to her alienated self, leaving the reader wondering which way her life will go when she returns to District 12. Collins, through the use of first person narrative, gives us much insight into the conflicts that arise for Katniss. She is desperate for her mother’s affection, despite the fact she doesn’t trust her (p.290). She keeps her emotions tightly locked inside; ‘Whatever I’m feeling, it’s no one’s business but mine.’ (p.298) and, ‘I just need a few moments of privacy where I can let any emotion cross my face without being seen’ (p.309). In the end, while Katniss has sometimes questioned her emotional reactions, she is still not prepared to explore beyond her alienated self.

For the first time, I allow myself to truly think about the possibility that I might make it home. …But then…what? What would my life be like on a daily basis? Most of it has been consumed with the acquisition of food. Take that away and I’m not really sure who I am, what my identity is. (p.311)

Like *Uglies*, *The Hunger Games* is the first in a trilogy. Collins has left the way open for Katniss to begin her exploration in subsequent novels. Collins’ representation of
the adolescent crisis is a bleak one, despite the excitement and tension of the novel. As is
typical of the genre though, it leaves the reader with hope for Katniss in the future.
Reflective case study – Skydweller by Sandra Makaresz

The fertility lottery had been in place since the early 22nd century – one every thirty years. I was the result of the year 2200 lottery. We were the back-up population. A fallback against SkyCity’s unavoidable mortality. Preferred unseen, and unheard. (p.17)

Skydweller started its journey as an article in New Scientist magazine in late 2006 (Klerkx, 2006). The article began with a remark from Robert Heinlein, that if you can make it into low-Earth orbit then you’re halfway to anywhere in the solar system. Apparently the first 160 kilometres are the most difficult and expensive. It went on to describe a futuristic plan to erect giant space elevators, that would take us to a space station sitting in geostationary orbit at 36,000 kilometres, and tethered by an asteroid in high Earth orbit. I immediately began to imagine a boy who lived there.

Space elevator research has continued and changed (http://spaceelevator.com/) over the short time I have been writing. So too has my story. Originally the story began with a boy escaping, via a space elevator called the Skylift, from a city known as SkyCity. He rode the Skylift to Earth and began a quest to find his mother, who had taken the same route ten years ago and never been heard from again. As I wrote that story, I found I had more questions than answers. I kept wondering who this boy was, where had he come from, what was his life like that he acted this way, what had happened to him when he was living in the sky? I began to make notes for his back-story, until I realised that my beginning was, in fact, an end.
In writing the novel I was interested in understanding how the group dynamic worked for the adolescent teenager. Identity is an area that has held my interest for many years. I had noticed a growing number of books and authors being followed on the Internet. They were often science fiction and fantasy authors. Obst et al’s research into the sense of community in science fiction fandom concluded that ‘community and a strong sense of community do still exist. It may be where we find it rather than its strength or nature that is changing’ (Obst et al, 2002, p. 116). I could see communities, or groups, of teenagers connecting through these books, and I wondered how their lifestyle of global connections and online identities would change in the future. I wondered if, in the future, an adolescent boy would still care about those types of connections. From these thoughts, Zander emerged.

Zander is 16, and about to receive his work allocation from, The Committee, the ruling authority in SkyCity. While the allocation is imposed, everyone is allowed a preference. Zander has no preference: ‘Our preferences had been submitted to The Committee for consideration over a year ago. Mine had been blank. I had no idea what I wanted to do for the rest of my life’ (p.21). My intention with Zander was to characterize him as different, but not fully able to understand why. He lives in the upper echelons of SkyCity society, he’s a first tier, but he has no direction and lives largely in the shadow of his father, Ryl Black, second in charge of, The Committee. Despite having all the advantages, he feels different from the other first tiers.

I also had him believe that his genetic enhancements, a requirement of SkyCity life, were minimal in nature at the request of his parents. Because of this, he feels he is a bit of an oddity, and not as good as those around him. ‘I didn’t know if I was of any use to the various work teams that kept this place circling the Earth’, and, ‘Lerrin and Skyler had been so gen-enned they couldn’t possibly fail’ (p.24). This furthers his sense of alienation.
In Skydweller, the city itself is constructed in a way that is at once, a conservative class based society and at the same time, a ‘fluid space’, to use Bean and Moni’s term, which is ‘disorienting, disrupting a fixed sense of place, (which) spills over into teens’ interior worlds’ (Mansfield cited in Bean & Moni, 2003, p.640). Such spaces lead to feelings of disconnection and alienation, as family, community and other institutions, which would normally ‘forge a coherent identity’, are displaced. For Zander, family has little relevance, as he has a distant father and an absent mother. Despite this, we know he would like to have greater family ties:

I felt strangely aware of how much I didn’t miss her. … I suddenly wanted to.

Wanted to have some sort of reaction, other than a vague mental image of what she looked like. I couldn’t even be sure if the face I saw was right. (p.44)

While he is disconnected from family, he is at the same time connected to his community by class; he is a first tier. These forced ties of common bond and common identity, as described by Newman & Newman (2001), lead to feelings of alienation as Zander discovers he does not believe in the values of this group.

The design of SkyCity, as one early reader described it, has a ‘mall feel’ to it. In achieving this I have created a space familiar to today’s urban adolescent. However, it is not until Zander begins to venture beyond the familiar of the first tier that he is subjected to these disconnected spaces. It is then that the crisis of identity, of who he is and where he fits, begins.

SkyCity consists of five tiers, made up of five levels each. The first tier is the highest level, and the most open and opulent. With each tier the space becomes tighter, ceiling heights become lower and facilities diminish. The city has existed for over two hundred years. There is no external vision throughout the city, except small areas of the
first tier, and these are not visible to the general populous. There is a need to keep them contained and controlled. Zander accepts this until he begins to explore previously unknown areas of his own level and the other levels. When he is exposed to these other groups, his sense of displacement and alienation further emerges and we see the beginnings of the adolescent crisis.

In considering the adolescent crisis as something both internal and external to the novel, part of the construction was with a thought to how setting especially could crossover to other media. Richards argues that: ‘To make any sense of print fiction without reference to the wider media is somewhat futile’ (Richards, 2008, p. 64). While fiction should not be constructed with an ‘ulterior motive’ of crossing over into other media, it is interesting to ponder how a YA SF/F ‘world’, in particular, would play out visually; if in no other space than the reader’s imagination. In doing so, I hoped to generate richer landscapes for the reader, and other media, to draw on. In creating a strong, fictional world, I hoped to encourage positive group affiliations amongst young adult readers. Fan fiction, and fandom generally, are examples. I have already referred to Obst et al’s study into science fiction communities, but fan fiction has also seen enormous growth as, ‘with the advent of the Internet, the genre has suddenly become available to a mass readership’ (MacDonald, 2006, p.28). While it might seem an abstract point, it is important to recognise these areas as possible extensions of exploration and positive group identity, for the reader.

It is of course the characters that truly represent the adolescent crisis. Zander is the first-person narrator of the novel. He is a somewhat naïve narrator, as he has had very limited experiences even within his own tier. ‘“Should I know about them?” I wondered out loud, as I thought of how sheltered an existence Ryl had maintained for me’ (p.38). While first person has the advantage of allowing the reader to understand the motives of
the central character and provide a stronger ‘voice’ for the character, it also has its
disadvantages. Zander’s naivety makes it difficult to describe the world he lives in, as it is
mostly seen through the eyes of a first time viewer with little understanding of the
complexities of the world he inhabits. Collins also utilizes first person narration in *The
Hunger Games*, and the result is a text similarly dependent on action description. I found
myself as the writer having to guard against writing what *I* saw, as opposed to what
Zander saw.

Richards (2008) argues that realistic texts tend to explore issues through
‘introspection or dialogue, rather than at the explicit narratorial level’, and hence there is a
greater use of first-person narration (Stephens, 1992, p.256). Conversely, he sees fantasy
as using this type of narration less so, commenting instead through less direct means. As
with Collins first-person narrator, I felt it was important to be able to hear Zander’s
feelings directly, as they are often spontaneous emotions based in the moment, rather than
emotions grounded in a world of experience, and gathered wisdom. By working with a
first-person narrator I hoped to see the adolescent crisis in a more raw emotional state.
Zander, like Katniss, is very much of the moment. While he is not completely foreclosed
like her, neither does he arouse the positive, upbeat fun of the third-person narration of
*Uglies*.

Zander’s sense of alienation begins with his relationship to his father. He
experiences issues of common bond such as coldness, distancing and rejection (Newman
& Newman, 2001, p. 526). While they are important factors in the relationship, Ryl is
never seen as anything more than a very strict parent, except through Zander’s
interpretation of him.
Ryl Black was feared or awed by everyone in SkyCity. To me he was an embarrassment. Part of me hoped he did catch us, bott us. At least everyone would see his true colours then, instead of treating him like a saviour.  (p.6)

While Zander cannot see any good in his father, I wanted to leave hope for future reconciliation between the two. Zander is not as fearless as Tally, or as hardened as Katniss, therefore I wanted him to be able to one day come through the adolescent crisis and resolve his parental relations. There is also hope for his relationship with his mother. Part of this is due to the fact that he doesn’t feel abandoned despite her disappearance. Instead, he feels nothing, and it is this that troubles him:

I felt strangely aware of how much I didn’t miss her. Holding the gold band, I suddenly wanted to. Wanted to have some sort of reaction, other than a vague mental image of what she looked like. I couldn’t even be sure if the face I saw was right.  (p.44)

Zander understands the language of groups, as they are part of the culture he has grown up with. Different tiers dress differently. First tier Committee members wear black, Botts wear grey uniforms, security red and so on. He, as a first tier youth, is in a small group attached to the elite, yet dressed in grey similar to the Bott class (thus emphasizing his low status as an adolescent, within the elite first tier). In SkyCity everyone knows, to which group you belong. While Zander has formed a small group, with Lerrin and Skyler, he is not wholly committed to that group. They share a sense of history:

Group learning was also good because Lerrin had taken a liking to me about a year ago, and things had been more interesting since then. I’d always stuck to myself before…  (p.21)
He has the beginnings of an emotional investment in the group, but he doesn’t trust their friendship entirely, especially Lerrin:

I still didn’t understand exactly why he’d suddenly started talking to me. I’d never fit in, and every first tier kid knew it. (p.21)

When the book suggests ‘betrayal’, Zander tries hard to convince himself it couldn’t be his friends, but he is never entirely convinced.

The word ‘betrayal’ jumped into my head and I quickly pushed it aside. The book was wrong. They were my friends. They wouldn’t betray me. (p.75)

His uncertainty is eventually proven correct, as Lerrin continues to show more and more attributes with which Zander is not comfortable. As he grows in experience, through exposure to other groups such as the botts, Mutineers, and the other tiers, his perspective on life matures and he is able to see Lerrin’s true nature; ‘Lerrin had betrayed me. I’d got Skyler all wrong, again’ (p.172). He is also better able to make social evaluations of his small group as his maturity grows. Earlier in the story, Zander sees Lerrin’s disdain of others as just part of his personality. As they mix with other groups he begins to make judgments of Lerrin’s actions and realizes he doesn’t find Lerrin’s behaviour acceptable, an essential element of positive group identity according to Newman and Newman (2001). We see this during their interactions with the Scientists of God precinct:

‘Then show the proper respect, third tier.’ My stomach turned at his words. … He turned and stalked toward the unadorned door without a second glance, leaving me in the midst of the group. My feet turned to lead, refusing to move. ‘I apologise for my friend,’ I said, before I could think. (p.86)
Zander’s experience of the adolescent crisis of group identity versus alienation, is unlike either Tally’s or Katniss’s. While Tally’s has a positive group identity and Katniss finds it difficult to break free from her alienation, Zander’s crisis is more moderated. Unlike Tally and Katniss, he does not return to the same point at which he began the novel. Rather, Zander is at the beginning of the next stage of his exploration of the crisis. He is determined to find his own identity and choose his own group identity.

‘Am I a Mutineer?’ I asked.

‘I don’t know,’ she replied. ‘Should we find out?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘It doesn’t matter anyway.’ …

‘One day I’m coming back to this place. And it won’t be as a Mutineer.’

(p.182)

While Zander definitely experiences the adolescent crisis of group identity versus alienation, I feel it was a difficult area to focus on while writing the novel. I came to the project believing in the connection between reader and protagonist through identity. Although this hasn’t changed, I found identity to be something that wove itself naturally through my own writing, and that of the many other YA SF/F novels I read during the process, rather than, as McCallum (1999) suggested, something to be explored more specifically. Other themes rose to the surface of their own accord. One of these was our connection to the environment, and it was noticeable in many novels including *Uglies*, *The Hunger Games*, *Life As We Knew It*, *His Dark Materials*, *In The Blood* and many more. It was not an area I had consciously set out to explore.

There was also the element of adolescent romantic attachments to consider. My trio of friends was originally written as, Zander and twins, Lerrin and Skyler. As I read
more widely in the genre, I realised the familial relationship of my characters did not allow for any exploration of this facet of the adolescent crisis. It avoided the tensions encompassed by the characters’ growing maturity, and represented a ‘missed opportunity’ for creating greater conflict and dramatic tension, as well as the common bond realised through adolescent romantic relationships.

My own representation of the adolescent crisis is a balancing act between the positive outcome of Zander’s exploration of his group identity and growing maturity, and the negative aspect of his eventual rejection of those group identities. While he is not completely alienated by the end, he chooses to abandon previous connections and determines to find his own path. He realizes that certain group affiliations, such as that with his father, are lost for the moment. But the reader has a sense of hope for the future of these relationships.

As the first in a trilogy, Skydweller establishes a YA SF/F world, which portrays the beginnings of the adolescent protagonists crisis of group identity versus alienation. It also paves the way for further exploration in subsequent novels. Representation of the adolescent crisis is not primary, but rather is intrinsic to the novel.
Conclusions

Adolescent identity theory is, by its nature, entwined with young adult literature. Young adult literature, by definition, is written for adolescents and generally features adolescents. For any character to be a true representation they must be in Erikson’s period of adolescence and therefore, as Newman and Newman contend, dealing with some form of conflict between group identity and alienation.

While this has been recognised as possible within realistic fiction, the case studies discussed and my own creative work, demonstrate that YA SF/F is also able to capably represent this crisis. The great benefit is, that it does this within a genre that today’s adolescent wants to read.

It can be concluded from the creative works presented and the theoretical underpinnings, with regard to identity in particular, that young adult SF/F is an area open to further research. The combination of an increasing readership and an ability to explore important thematic discourses, situates young adult SF/F as a genre worthy of interpretation and research.
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Skydweller – a novel

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CHAPTER ONE

The problem with dares is they always go wrong. I’m not talking horribly, fatally wrong. You know what I mean - the, *I imagined this differently in my head* type wrong.

And then there’s the problem of what to dare. There’s just not that much you can dare here. A space station has few avenues for excitement. A space station has so many rules, but mostly one punishment.

So instead we do stupid dares. Meaningless dares. Dares that take up your time, but don’t change your life forever. That’s what I thought anyway.

Trouble is, sometimes you don’t realize things have changed, until they already have.

* * *

My heart and feet pounded. We raced through endless corridors.

‘Do you know where we are?’ I asked.

‘Of course I do. Left!’ Lerrin barked the order, then turned sharply, with Skyler and me following. ‘Right up ahead. Then follow my lead. We’ll need to be quick.’

‘What are you planning?’

‘Shut up and follow, Zander.’

‘There’s a security guard on our tail,’ Skyler said. ‘Your last stunt won’t hold him off forever.’

‘Right!’ Lerrin turned, barely losing speed, and we stumbled around behind him. Then he leapt in the air, grabbed a steel pipe above, swung up, kicked a panel out of the ceiling and used his own momentum to slide up into the chute above. By the time we ran underneath he was sliding the panel back into place. Disappearing.
I kept running, working out his plan as I went. The corridor was long, with a series of pipes running across the square-paneled ceiling at regular intervals.

Lerrin was a genius. Of sorts.

Skyler pointed to the next pipe. ‘You’re next Zander.’

‘Ladies first,’ I said.

‘Will you be okay?’

‘Just go,’ I said. I hated it when she started ‘taking care’ of me.

Skyler jumped and grabbed the next pipe, perfectly executing her swing. In seconds it was just me, and the corridor was rapidly getting shorter. I watched the next pipe approach. There were only two left. Two chances, and a dead end. The closer I got, the less inspired Lerrin’s genius seemed.

Thud. Thud. Thud. Heart? Feet? I couldn’t tell anymore. It was all just noise in my head.

I leapt up, reached for the pipe. My fingers gripped, then slipped.

One chance, and a dead end.

The final pipe approached. That security guy would be onto me any second.

I leapt again, grunting loudly as I tried to eke out some last bit of strength. I gripped, swung, kicked out hard, and latched my feet over the edge. Dammit, I was going to fall. My feet hooked tight, as my fingers slipped from the pipe. I swung. Silence. No more pounding feet. Then my heart began again - the only sound left in the universe.

‘I knew you wouldn’t make it.’ Lerrin’s upturned face stared down at me from the chute.

‘Just help me up!’

They yanked me in by the ankles and laid me out in the maintenance chute. Lerrin slipped the cover back into place, as Skyler looked at me and held a finger to her lips.
I heard the guard running down the corridor below us. A radio crackled.

‘It’s a dead end down here sir. I’ve lost them.’

Lerrin rolled his eyes at the guy. It wasn’t personal. Lerrin thought everyone was inferior.

‘Returning to base,’ the guard said.

Lerrin mimicked him silently. We heard his footsteps heading away. Like a satisfied cat, Lerrin stretched out lazily, his heel banging against the metal as he did. The footsteps stopped. Skyler glared at Lerrin. Footsteps again - heading back in our direction. Lerrin turned pale. I hadn't seen that before. It would have been funny if we weren’t all about to be caught and handed over to The Committee.

Silently I grabbed my shoe, slipped it off and threw it as far back down the chute as I could. The metal cracked loudly as it flexed at the sudden movement. The shoe bounced and hit a second panel before stopping. Another crack. We held our breath. The footsteps stopped. I heard the click of his radio briefly, before he clicked it off again.

‘Whole damn city’s falling apart,’ he muttered to himself. Then he turned and walked away.

We listened to his footsteps in silence, then waited just a little longer before any of us felt safe enough to speak. I turned to Lerrin.

‘You,’ I pointed at him, ‘can go get my shoe.’

We began edging our way back through the chute to the restricted zone of the old SkyCity library, our original destination. The chute was small and cramped, but none of us wanted to risk security again. Ventilation grates spread out evenly about two metres apart; their blades cut into our knees. At least the filters seemed to be working, despite this being a restricted area. Resources are tight: no point wasting air on a place few were allowed to go.
‘Air’s clean,’ I said, more to hear a voice than anything else. The silence was starting to get to me.

‘They keep it functioning down here,’ Skyler replied from behind. It had been her idea to come. Not a bad dare really. Breaking into a restricted area was risky. I reckon we’d be botted if we were caught. A little gene tinkering and they can turn you into a nothing. You can still work of course, but there’s nothing else going on. It had been dubbed as botting – an old style lobotomy with a 22nd century twist.

‘Why keep it functioning?’

‘Maybe the books need it,’ Lerrin said.

‘Yeah. The Committee is deeply committed to 21st century book collections.’

‘Quiet you two.’ Skyler slowed to a halt. ‘There’s bound to be a guard and I don’t feel like another run just yet.’

‘Why are we doing this?’ I asked.

‘Because even if we have to risk getting botted, it’ll be worth it for a bit of adventure,’ Lerrin replied.

‘They don’t bott you for…’ Skyler seemed unsure, ‘a keen interest in history.’

‘Zero tolerance, little sister. That’s what it means.’

‘Ryl Black would not bott us.’

‘He’s my Dad,’ I said. ‘Of course he would.’

Skyler and Lerrin fell silent. I was used to that happening whenever the conversation turned to my father. It was just another constant in my tiny universe.

‘Sorry Zander,’ Skyler said.

‘C’mon,’ I said. ‘We’re going into that library.’
Ryl Black was feared or awed by everyone in SkyCity. To me he was an embarrassment. Part of me hoped he did catch us, but us. At least everyone would see his true colours then, instead of treating him like a saviour.

Crawling along the rest of the way, we slowed as it turned sharply and led us over the top of the guard station at the library entrance. There was room to move, as several chutes intersected and ran off to other parts of the city. Peering through the vent I could see the entrance to the library, and the small table and chair that served as a guard station just to the side of it. Empty.

‘There’s no guard,’ I whispered. ‘Practically every public door in SkyCity is guarded, yet this one isn’t. I don’t like it Skyler. Who told you about this place?’

Skyler hesitated.

‘I found it in some archives,’ she hesitated. ‘I only told you because I knew your mother had maintained the library.’ She hesitated again. ‘I thought you might like to see something of hers.’

‘Who cares how she found out?’ Lerrin said. ‘There’s no guard. They could be back any minute. Let’s get in there.’

‘What if it’s a setup?’ I said.

‘A setup?’ Lerrin did the eye-rolling thing at me. ‘Of what? For whom?’ He threw his hands in the air. ‘We all know why we’re here, Zander - because nothing ever happens here. Now come on,’ he pushed his way through to the lead. ‘This little adventure might actually turn into something interesting.’

Skyler and I watched as he headed down the chute running over the library.

‘I didn’t know your mother was a librarian,’ Lerrin called back. ‘Come on. I want to see if it’s in the Dewey system. We all know the Black family are sentimental fools.’

‘You know, if my father doesn’t have you botched, I swear one day I will.’
Lerrin’s laugh echoed and bounced along the cold metallic chute walls.

‘It will be nice to see something of my mother’s,’ I said, turning to Skyler.

Skyler smiled, but she didn’t look particularly happy.

‘What’s the Dewey system anyway?’ she whispered.

‘I have no idea,’ I answered, and began following Lerrin down the chute. In moments we’d found the drop down, prized it open and made our way into the centre of the old library. Hardly a book still lay on its shelf. Every one had been torn down and discarded. The ground was littered with open pages, broken spines and torn remnants. Not a shelf was untouched.

‘What happened here?’ Skyler picked up a book and placed it carefully on a bare shelf.

‘I don’t know,’ I said, picking my way across the carpet of pages. I turned slowly, trying to take in the room that lay under the mess. Row after row of metal shelves made their way down two long halls that stuck out from either side of the circular central area we’d dropped into. The walls in the central area were different. They were lined with timber shelves, obviously brought here by the original inhabitants – from Earth. No wonder my mother had loved it here so much. I ran my fingers along the shelves. It felt alien against my skin, so used to the cold lifelessness of the metal and plastic that pervaded the city. This felt nothing like that. It had been alive. The lines that marked the timber’s surface were testament to it.

‘It’s the Renmark library,’ I said without looking up.

‘The Renmark library? I’ve never heard of it,’ Lerrin said.

‘This library stood in my ancestors’ house on Earth – my mother’s family. I’ve read the history. They took it to pieces and rebuilt it here after The Demise.’
‘Amazing.’ Lerrin sounded anything but amazed, but then he got an idea. ‘So why would somebody rip it apart? I mean, if this is an artifact why doesn’t anyone know about it?’

I made my way around the circle of shelves, picking books up and placing them carefully back. It seemed disrespectful to do anything else.

‘I don’t know. Maybe my father did it after she disappeared.’

‘That might explain why it’s restricted,’ Skyler said, following my lead and replacing the books on the shelves.

‘No it doesn’t,’ Lerrin said. He sat on one of the smaller piles, flipping through books and tossing them onto the next pile. ‘I mean, I understand the lashing out in anger thing, but this is rare stuff. And it’s been kept completely secret.’ He tossed another book.

‘Doesn’t that seem a little strange?’

‘What then?’ I watched him toss another book. ‘Stop that, will you?’ I snapped.

‘There might be something of my mother’s here.’

‘Exactly!’ Lerrin stood up. ‘Something someone else was hoping to find.’

‘You’re looking for excitement where there isn’t any, as usual.’

‘Am I?’ Lerrin was suddenly serious. ‘This place is a mess. The guard station is unmanned. I say we start searching now.’

I turned a book over in my hands. His theory was nuts, but so was the fact that this place was even here.

‘C’mon. There’s got to be something here.’ Lerrin said. ‘Skyler, you take the right wing. I’ll go left. You can cover the central area, Zander.’

‘But what are we looking for?’ Skyler was already picking her way across to the allocated area.

‘I guess we’ll know when we find it,’ I said, placing the book on the nearest shelf.
‘You know, if you’re intending to tidy the place - whoever did this is going to get suspicious when they come back.’ Lerrin trod heavily across to his own area. ‘Didn’t your mum leave any clues?’ He leant casually against the first shelf, pulling at the joins in the metal as though they might hold some secret information. I flicked through the pages of another leather-bound book trying to disguise my irritation.

‘I barely remember what she looked like. You think I’m going to remember some secret about a stupid library I’d forgotten even existed?’

‘Repressed memories,’ Lerrin said. ‘They get triggered by stuff like this.’

‘So you’re an expert now.’ I kicked a book aside. ‘Just go see what you can find.’

Lerrin lazily made his way down the library wing. ‘Triggers, Zander. Triggers.’

I was too distracted by the carved woodwork to let him get to me. Most of the shelves were plain in design. A practical requirement for a bookshelf I guessed, but I knew there was something more. It was as if the wood had been left to be appreciated for itself.

Placing my fingers on the ancient timbers, I could feel the tiny ridges bumping against my skin: strange yet comforting. My mother’s face formed in my mind more clearly than I’d been able to make it for years. I didn’t move for fear of losing her. She was an historian, not a librarian: and I’d been here with her.

‘This is the key to our future.’

I shuddered. Her voice was so clear in my head. My mind raced around the memory before it faded away, but she was already gone.

Squatting down on the floor I rummaged through the piles, picking up and discarding the books in rapid succession. Something made me stop. I turned to the timber-lined walls. The urge to search the shelves themselves burned inside me. This was
madness. I tried to fight the instinct that was quickly overcoming me. This was SkyCity. I was first tier SkyCity. We didn’t work on instinct.

A long panel of intricate carvings ran the length of a pillar at the end of the shelves. Fairies, minstrels, and humans played by rivers, under trees: the depictions repeated themselves the entire height of the pillar. At the top, a single tree was carved. I used the shelves as a ladder to get within reach of the tree. I felt excited and ridiculous at the same time. When I reached the top, I placed my left hand flat on the surface of the tree. Pressing hard, I clutched the shelf with my right hand. The carved tree slid in, then moved quietly sideways to reveal a book hidden inside.

I breathed in deeply, trying to quiet my own fear. This should not be happening. Hidden doorways, secret books, timber carvings for that matter: they were not part of SkyCity. And yet here I was staring at a book, hidden in a compartment in a library that was older than the city itself.

The spine revealed nothing, so I prized it out. There was another quiet clicking sound as the panel closed over and the tree resumed its place amongst the carvings. I tucked the book inside the front of my shirt, and carefully made my way back down the shelves and to the floor.

I looked around. I could hear the odd book thudding heavily to the ground in the direction Lerrin had gone. There was only silence from Skyler’s end. Sitting carefully, I inspected the book. Its cover was light tan leather, worn in spots. There were no words on it, just a single handprint indented into the leather surface. I turned it over quickly, checking the back and spine again. Nothing. I stared at the cover. A left hand, so perfect in detail it was as though the leather had somehow been peeled from a mould. I held my own hand over the top without actually touching it. The urge to press my hand into it was
as great as the instinct to press the carved tree had been. It frightened me, so I pulled my hand away and opened the cover instead. Nothing.

Flipping through the book, I turned the pages almost carelessly in my eagerness to find something. Not a single page had been marked. I slammed the book shut in frustration.

*What an idiot. You’re a first tier, Zander. You know better than to fall for instinct. Use your head!* I jammed my hand into the print on the cover, daring it to go against the facts I knew to be true: that this was a stupid book my mother had kept for some reason, and out of weakness I’d turned it into something more.

Then it did dare to go against the facts, as a series of letters began to rise out from the unmarked leather.

I snatched my hand back. The book fell to the floor and the letters faded away.

‘Zander?’

I jumped.

‘Don’t sneak up on me like that.’

‘I didn’t,’ Skyler said. ‘I just…’ She saw the book. ‘You found something.’ She went for the book, but I wasn’t ready for anyone else to see it yet.

‘Don’t touch it.’

‘Why not? What have you found?’ She sat down awkwardly on the pile next to me.

‘I don’t know.’ I was acting strangely. I knew it. I had to get myself under control if I was ever going to find out the mystery of this book. ‘I remember this book. It was my mother’s.’

‘That’s good, isn’t it? It’s what you were hoping for.’
'Yes, but no,' I said. 'It’s not exactly what I was expecting.’ I tucked the book inside my jacket. For all its bulk it seemed to fit there snuggly. ‘I don’t want you to tell anyone about this yet. Not even Lerrin, okay?’

Skyler shifted uncomfortably, the smile draining from her face.

‘Zander, you’re scaring me. What’s in the book?’

‘Nothing. You have to trust me on this. Just swear to me, you won’t tell anyone.’

She didn't move or speak. ‘Swear it, Skyler.’

‘Okay,’ she said, turning away from me. ‘I swear.’

I knew she wasn’t comfortable with it, but I didn’t care. I needed time to work this out. Time to get the book back into hiding if necessary.

‘C’mon. Let’s go,’ I said.

‘I’ll check the guard hasn’t returned,’ Skyler said, heading for the door. ‘You get Lerrin.’

I didn’t have to go far. He was already heading into the main section.

‘Find anything?’ I said, trying to look casual with a book shoved down the front of my jacket. Lerrin shook his head.

‘Those shelves go on, and on, and…’

‘The Committee Chair and his aide are headed this way!’ Skyler was panicking, but nobody moved. ‘We need to leave. Don’t just stand there. C’mon. I saw another door down the end.’ She ran down the wing of the library she’d just come from, not bothering to check if we were following. I steadied the book with my hand. I couldn’t shake the feeling that this book was what whoever had been here was looking for. Skyler was already trying the door when we caught up. Her face was ashen.

‘It’s locked,’ she said. ‘We’re trapped in here.’
‘What do you mean we’re trapped? Try the door again.’ Lerrin shoved her towards the door.

‘I’m not a locksmith.’ Skyler pulled the handle for effect. ‘And don’t shove me. We’re supposed to be having fun.’

‘Yeah, and now we’re stuck here with The Committee Chair outside – our only way out.’ He pulled the handle himself. Still nothing.

‘Let’s just hide,’ I said. ‘The reading bays at the end of the shelves. They might give us enough cover.’

I turned and started making my way to the closest reading bay, not waiting to see if they’d follow. There were voices outside, leaving no doubt where The Committee Chair and his aide were heading. Skyler and Lerrin shuffled in behind me and we silently arranged ourselves to take advantage of the adjoining row of shelves for cover.

We heard the entry door open. The Committee Chair’s voice inched towards us but I couldn’t make any of it out. Our own breathing was so loud I was sure it would give us away.

I pulled my knees to my chest and wrapped my arms around them. If we were caught, well, I didn’t want to think about us, but let’s just say the book would be gone. They’d find it for sure and my mother’s book, whatever it was, would disappear just as quickly as she had.

‘Where is it then?’ The Committee Chairs’ voice crinkled its way down the racks.

‘This is the place sir,’ a nervous voice followed. ‘I had the room searched thoroughly. The information we intercepted from the Twins could have been flawed I suppose. Perhaps there was a mistake.’

‘The Twins. I should have rounded them up long ago and confirmed the book’s whereabouts. A rare mistake.’
Slow, thoughtful footsteps followed. Then…

‘Vasius, was the door sealed when you entered?’

‘I…’ Vasius hesitated. ‘I don’t know sir.’

‘The book could still be here. We cannot risk it being found. Have the door sealed and a guard placed. I want every inch of this place gone over again. You’ll have to do more than rip a few books from their shelves.’

The Committee Chair strode out of the library followed by Vasius’s compliant feet. The door slammed, its lock clicking loudly into place. Nobody moved. Nobody spoke.

‘You know,’ Lerrin said, breaking the silence. ‘I would have bet anything on your father being the bad guy – not mine.’ He stood and began searching around for an escape.

I looked down at where the strange empty book sat under my jacket. It was my mother’s. There was no doubt. She’d left it for me. I was sure of it, but its meaning escaped me. It was obviously based on some ancient Earth laws. My father always said she’d had a soft spot for eclectic mysteries (his euphemism for ‘unfounded’). But somebody else had wanted me to find this too. It had all been too easy. Did they think I was too stupid to recognise the setup?

‘We’re not crawling out of here,’ I said, picking another book at random from the nearest pile. ‘We’re going out the front door.’

‘Did you not hear my father?’ Lerrin looked at me, incredulous.

Quickly picking my way through the mess I reached the door and flashed my i.d. band across the handplate that released it. It silently slid open. I turned back to make sure Skyler and Lerrin were following.
‘Don’t just stand there,’ I said. ‘Look like we’re meant to be here.’ I waved the book at them as if it explained some plan I had in mind. ‘If anyone asks, we were just borrowing.’

‘Are you crazy?’ Skyler said. ‘There’ll be a guard here any minute and they’ll know just who they’re after, now you’ve used your i.d. band.’

‘Not if we’re fast,’ I stepped through the door, ‘and you write me out of the system in time.’ Lerrin glared at her.

‘You told him you could do that?’ Lerrin accused. Skyler shrugged guiltily.

‘That’s the last time I teach you anything really cool.’ He turned and headed out with me, and then we were all headed down the corridor as though it was completely natural for us to be there, with my ‘borrowed’ book in my hand and my stolen one tucked into my shirt.

‘You think it was a coincidence the library was unguarded?’ Lerrin said.

‘What are you suggesting?’ Skyler replied.

‘That I was right, of course,’ Lerrin replied.

‘Not the conspiracy theory again,’ I said. Only I wasn’t sure why it made my skin turn cold thinking about it, or why I felt like I was being watched from everywhere – and why I suddenly knew that I had to remember everything I could about my mother, a woman no one had seen or heard of for nine years.
CHAPTER TWO

We never did see a guard. Who knows if one even came? The rest of the day was so uneventful I began to wonder if it had all even happened. But then there was the book. I still had it tucked into my shirt, too scared to remove it, but I could feel it there. Lerrin had insisted we all continue as per normal – just in case someone was watching. That meant virtual training, hanging out, keeping out of the way of just about every adult in case our obvious youth reminded them of their own eventual mortality.

Science hadn’t been able to work out everything yet. Most of the adults in SkyCity were hundreds of years old by now. None of them could be sure how long the longevity treatments would keep them going. That’s why a small number of children were still allowed. The fertility lottery had been in place since the early 22nd century – one every thirty years. I was the result of the year 2200 lottery. We were the back-up population. A fallback against SkyCity’s unavoidable mortality. Preferred unseen, and unheard.

I made my way back to the apartment, long before Ryl was due back from The Committee. I wasn’t ready to deal with the book yet, so I began searching the place for some evidence of my mother. Our apartment was larger than most. A large recreation area was at the centre with a sleeping bay, wash area, and relaxation room on either side – one my father’s, the other my own. My father also had an office, which I never entered, directly off the relaxation area. Between our two separate areas was an eating bay, but we only ever passed through there despite it being large enough to entertain a number of people. I’d never really thought about our living quarters. Plentiful daysim panels in the ceiling gave off light and warmth. Sage green wall panels provided a break from the stark metal and grey plastic of the rest of the place. It was homely, I guess, but nothing compared to the feel of those timbers in the library.
There weren’t a lot of places to keep mementos either. Most SkyCity inhabitants simply recycled their lives as they went along. Memories were for databases, not to be stored away in hard copy. Still, I knew I wouldn’t find much of my mother in any database. Ryl would have made sure of that. Nobody ever spoke of my mother, hadn’t done for years. But I was sure Ryl would have kept something hidden away somewhere. He was weird like that.

His career had been made, and his days were spent, making people forget their existence for a few hours in the patch labs. Yet when I’d snuck into his study years ago, I’d found a locket of my own hair in his desk drawer. At first I’d thought it could have been a sample for any testing he wanted to do without me knowing, but there’d been other things in there too. Keepsakes. Now I just had to find where he kept my mother’s.

‘Father?’ I called out, walking from room to room and peering inside. The last thing I needed was for Ryl to come back early and catch me out. There was no sign of him. I stood at the study door, willing myself to push it open. There were no locks inside the apartment, but I knew Ryl’s study was off limits. I hadn’t been in there except for that one time, which was years ago now. My left hand moved to my chest. I could feel the book underneath. I had to know what it meant, so I jabbed my right hand forward before I could change my mind, and I entered Ryl’s study.

It was dark at first and my eyes took a few seconds to adjust. I passed my hand over the lighting panel and a soft glow slowly began lifting the room out of the darkness. The study was just as I remembered. Ryl was well into his hundreds, even if he did look only forty-five: how could he stand the fact that nothing around him ever changed?

Stop wasting time, I scolded myself. If Ryl was ever going to change his habits, it would be just my luck that this would be the day. I needed to get out of here long before it was time for him to return. Following the same path as I had last time, I headed round the
desk and began opening drawers. There in the third drawer was the locket of my hair.

Still. I’d felt special last time I’d seen it: like he actually did care. Now I just wondered if he’d perhaps put it there years ago and forgotten all about it. I slammed it shut in anger.

The drawer slid, then bumped as it reached the back, and finally sat slightly ajar.

I knelt down and slid the drawer slowly out of its tracks and placed it on the floor beside me. The desk was an old timber relic from Earth – I hadn’t remembered that. There were no fancy carvings, or anything like the library shelves. It was just a desk. The space inside the drawer cavity was too dark to see, but the drawer had jumped for a reason. I slid my hand down into the slot. It was as deep as my arm was long, so I reached in up to my shoulder and began feeling around.

My fingers ached as they inched along the sides, searching out a cause. I pushed and pulled at any little thing, and then I found it. A round catch almost flush with the side. The metal moved slightly under my finger as I ran it over the top. I reached back in, slipped my nail under it and pulled it out. I heard something drop, then felt something further back that hadn’t been there before. Another drawer. I reached for the handle and slid it out. Inside was an i.d. band. My mother’s.

I grabbed it and shoved it into my pocket. This was too much to think about now. If I did I’d cry, and I wouldn’t know why because I didn’t know her and she was gone anyway - if that makes sense. Panic came over me. I had my prize and now I had to get out of here without Ryl knowing I’d been here or realizing what I’d taken.

The drawer slid back in and sat there, hanging down. There was no secret system that pulled it back up to wherever it had dropped from. Now I could feel my pulse racing. I had to get the drawer back in. I pulled on the latch that had opened it. Nothing. My arm jabbed about desperately, willing something to make it disappear. Nothing worked. I
picked up the drawer with the locket of hair and tried to make it close, but with the hidden drawer still down it wouldn’t quite go in.

Instead, I began searching the room for something I could use. On the top shelf I saw my only hope. It was a long, flat sword in an ornamental case. I climbed up, lifted the lid and pulled the thing from its resting place. Then I jumped down, swinging it like some storybook pirate, and raced back to the desk. The sword slid under the drawer with an ever so slight ring sounding from its blade, as it drew across the surface of the timber. I lifted the blade and the drawer slid back into its compartment. Then I grabbed the original drawer and slipped it in under the sword. If the sword was thin enough, I should be able to get the drawer in while keeping the sword in place. There was no precision in this old desk and the wood would give a little if I pressed down on it.

The drawer clicked into place and I slowly slid the sword back out. It stayed. It all stayed.

I took my time putting the rest of the study back into place. The sword was up high, but still visible. Ryl would notice if I didn’t get it right. He noticed things like that. People, no: crooked swords, always. I looked over the room one final time before I closed the door. Nothing was out of place. Then I went back to my room and passed out on the bed, book still tucked into my chest and now a bracelet in my pocket. I had no idea what either of them meant, just a sense that something had begun. Something that needed me to bring it to an end.

The next day was group learning, which was good because it meant I could avoid hanging around the apartment, waiting for Ryl to notice that I’d been in his office. Group learning was also good because Lerrin had taken a liking to me about a year ago, and things had been more interesting since then. I’d always stuck to myself before that and I
still didn't understand exactly why he'd suddenly started talking to me. I'd never fit in, and every first tier kid knew it. Group learning had filled me with dread every week. The others were all stronger, faster, better. The only way I ever beat them was by using my instincts – or luck, as they liked to call it. So did I, at the time.

Now the dread feeling had returned. Or perhaps it was the weight of the book against my chest. Why hadn’t I just found somewhere to hide it?

More likely it was the announcement of our allocations making me nervous. During our sixteenth year we were allocated to a section of the city for work or research duties. Our preferences had been submitted to The Committee for consideration over a year ago. Mine had been blank. I had no idea what I wanted to do for the rest of my life.

There were eighteen of us in a room that was huge: a leftover from the days when SkyCity was overrun with new families. Before the fertility lottery had been introduced. The number of children had been dropping for decades. It was strange to think the fifty-odd chairs around me had once been filled. A bank of screens, displaying appropriate learning material for our group, banded the room. Group learning was something we did only once a week. More than that and we might begin to socialise, to plan, to cause trouble.

I was the first to arrive at class. Not because I was eager or anything. More to get out of seeing my father, and hopefully to fill the seat next to me with somebody other than Lerrin. I was out of luck. Skyler was the first person through the door. Skyler - the other person I’d been hoping to avoid.

'Have you got it with you?' she asked.

'Don't ask me about it now.'

'We're the only ones here,' she protested. ‘I knew you'd come early. You're trying to avoid us aren't you?"
'Not you,' I lied.

'Lerrin then,' she confirmed. 'I don't blame you. He's being a pain. He knows something's going on.'

'What do you mean he knows? Did you tell him anything?'

'Of course not.' She hesitated. 'You asked me not to.'

Turley and Johnston entered the Learning Centre, too engrossed in conversation to notice we were there. Others followed them in and eventually Preston de Souza, The Committee-loyal Coordinator of the Learning Centre, followed. Lerrin hadn't shown at all, which was surprising. Preston de Souza was instantly aware of our missing member, once he deemed to raise his head from his tab and look us over.

‘Your accomplice?’ De Souza stared in our direction. He had an annoying way of asking questions so that you weren't exactly sure you were being asked anything at all.

'Committee Member de Souza?' Skyler said. She was being brave today.

'Well, where is he?''

'I'm not sure Member de Souza. Perhaps you should ask his father. I last saw them together earlier this morning.'

De Souza stiffened slightly at the mention of Lerrin's father.

'Well, why didn't you say so, Skyler? The Committee Chair's needs obviously rise above that of the Learning Centre.'

‘The Committee Chair will be glad to hear it, Member de Souza.'

De Souza changed from stiff to inflated.

'I am always his faithful servant.'

I whispered through unmoving lips. 'He's such a suck.'

'He would be glad to hear it,' Skyler replied without missing a beat.
De Souza quickly moved on, eager to get away from anything that might attract The Committee Chair's ire. Then, as if on cue, Lerrin entered and rolled into the chair next to Skyler.

'Did I miss anything?' he asked.

'Skyler just informed us you were working with your father. Glad he could spare you, as I have your allocations to announce.'

A murmur went through the class at the mention of allocations. I glanced over at Skyler whose face had dropped into her hands at the mention of allocations.

'Don't worry,' I said. 'You'll get flight crew.'

'And if you don't,' Lerrin said leaning over, 'I'll have my father make them take you.'

Skyler glared at him. She could handle Lerrin’s superiority most of the time. When it came to questioning her own skills though, she didn’t hold back.

'I won't be needing your father's help. As I’m sure you won’t need his help to get into the lab programme. They like to keep the freaks in there.' Her head returned to her hands as I busied myself with my tab.

‘You know I’ve read that females will often feign dislike when actually…’

‘Don’t say it.’ Skyler’s head lifted briefly, to deliver the blunt warning.

Lerrin turned to me, dismissing Skyler from the conversation. ‘What about you Zander? What are you hoping for?’

'I don't know. I didn't have a preference. I'm sure they'll come up with something suitable.' I said it without meaning it. I hadn't put a preference in because I had no idea what I wanted. I didn't know if I was of any use to the various work teams that kept this place circling the Earth, instead of plummeting back down into it.
As de Souza began announcing allocations, my mind wandered back to the book. I wanted a chance to really look at it, find its secret. Because I knew it was keeping one. I just knew it.

'Skyler,’ he paused. ‘Flight deck.’

Her body slumped with relief and Lerrin patted her on the back despite their arguing. De Souza continued down the list.

'Lerrin.’ The pause again. ‘Gen-lab.’ Lerrin smiled knowingly, and I wondered if he had done it on his own or if his father had something to do with it. Who was I kidding? Lerrin and Skyler had been so gen-enned they couldn't possibly fail. The announcements continued until my name finally came around.

'Zander,’ de Souza stopped and looked up at me, confused. 'Organics?’

My world fell apart. Organics? De Souza was right for once. His look had said it all. How does any first tier get placed in organics?

'What did you do?’ Lerrin asked, not even trying to hide his disgust.

'Shut up Lerrin,’ Skyler said. 'Don't worry. We'll get this fixed.’

She meant it of course, but I knew it didn't matter. This was another one of those things my father was doing for my own good. Just as he and my mother had decided it was for my own good to have my genes minimally engineered. It was another of their social justice stands that made them feel good, and me suffer. And who was my father to even pretend at social justice? He’d written the book on social injustice, with his zero-tolerance, botting policy – and then made sure nobody cared about it by turning them all into patch lounge addicts.

Organics. The plant room. I’d be managing the botts as they cared for the plants that purified our water and air, and generally cleared the rubbish from the system. Skyler would be a flyer within the year, running missions to the moon biodomes, and Lerrin
would find new ways to enhance our bodies so that we might actually live forever. Great. Running the plant room forever. Babysitting bottles for time immemorial. Supervising sewage for eternity.

'Your allocations begin immediately,' de Souza announced. ‘Information has been uploaded and your bands will give you the appropriate access. All the information you need is now transferred to your tabs.' He jabbed his finger at the screen of his own tab with a theatrical flourish, as though magically granting us a wish. The words 'Organic Allocation' flashed onto the screen of my tab. I stared at it, unable to feel any sort of response.

'I have to go,' Skyler said touching my arm, like I was some pathetic loser. 'Meet me after second cycle. We'll work something out.'

She turned and left the room quickly. I watched her go and the distance between us seemed to be even more enormous.

'The Pavillion Deck,' Lerrin added, as though finishing her thought. '1600. Okay?'

'Yeah, 1600.' I answered. Then I slowly picked up my tab and pulled up a directory of the first tier. I didn't even know where to find the plant room. Nobody did.

'An interesting allocation, yes?'

Great. De Souza felt sorry for me too. Even Committee-loyal de Souza could see the injustice of this one.

'We'll see,' I answered.

'Good luck Zander,' he said. It was almost sincere.

The screen flicked up a diagram showing an entry point almost directly across the other side of the city from the residential zone The Committee members occupied. I had to take the long running track that made its way around the inner circumference of the city, then work my way through a series of corridors.
'You've found it then?' I hadn't noticed de Souza still lingering.

'Yes, I'd better get going.' I tucked the tab under my arm and headed towards the door. ‘It’s not exactly local.’

'The Committee doesn't do things without reason, Zander. They obviously have big plans for Organics in days to come.' He smiled as he said it, which only helped emphasise the fact he didn't believe what he was saying for a second. Still, the guy had to keep the faith somehow I guess. I turned and headed for the running track, despite having no plan to run. As far as I was concerned the longer it took me to get to Organics, the better.

A chime rang out from my tab and I lifted it, knowing my father's face would already be there.

'Yeah.'

'Did you get your allocation?'

'Like you don't know,' I sneered. ‘Of course I got my allocation.'

'Where?' he asked, ignoring the accusation.

'The plant room, Dad.' Finally I felt the stirrings of a reaction. I'll be managing the botts as they go weed picking in the sewage. Are you happy now, Dad? Yours and Mum's dream finally coming true? The genetically inferior kid arrives just where your decision put him. I may as well have been born a fourth-tier.'

'Zander, this is about the future. Watch yourself.'

'Why Dad? You think it can get any worse?'

Ryl’s face blinked away as I flicked the power off. There would be hell to pay later. I picked up my pace towards the walking track. I didn’t want to walk, I wanted to run. The fury was building and I felt like I'd explode any minute. I hit the track and pounded my way through the crowd. It must have looked odd. I wasn't exactly dressed for
a run and was soon sweating despite the temperature-controlled fabric. The book was slipping about inside my shirt, so I stepped off at the nearest vacant alcove and placed it more securely. Mid-morning runners stared at my red face. First tiers didn't get red faces, didn’t get upset, or burn off steam. Not on a running track anyway. Patch lounges took care of that.

‘Ultimate escapes – the relaxation you deserve.’ I could see one of my father’s patch lounge signs sliding across the atmos-screen that ran the entire length of the running track. Random scenes of old-Earth environments: Alaskan mountains, rivers filled with fish and flanked by wild bears, vast deserts with wind whipped dunes. Today’s theme was waterfalls. Not a particularly good choice I thought. Running horizontally, while water falls vertically alongside you could be disorientating. Still, what better inspiration to go trick your cells into a happy state at the nearest Patch Lounge. We wouldn't want to see anyone upset after all. We were first tiers.

The runners kept running. One stopped and asked if I was all right. I stared without answering and he quickly jumped back to the safety of the track and his morning exercise. First tiers didn't deal with other people's emotions.

I stood and began walking alongside the track. My breathing was calm and the redness quickly disappeared from my face. I was calm. Calm, because I wasn't brave enough to stand out from the crowd for too long. Instead I made my way to the plant room, checking the tab every now and then, to make sure I was headed in the right direction. There was no message from my father. No further contact chimes. I was definitely in trouble.

Standing outside the entry to Organics, I could have been anywhere in SkyCity. The door was nondescript, with only a small silver panel on the sidewall to tell me where I was.
That, and a scan pad for my i.d. band. I raised my arm to scan the band. The thought of actually entering this place was sheer horror. I stood staring at the open door. This was the end. The rest of my life. My allocation.

I walked away, across the corridor, and slunk down by the wall and stared. Perhaps my Dad did know about the trip to the library and was punishing me. I didn't know. I wasn't even sure if anyone had ever been allocated to Organics. It was the realm of all the bots my father and The Committee had created. Social malcontents who'd been caught out, for dissent mostly, and rendered 'not a problem' through genetic manipulation. What was I supposed to do with them for the rest of my life?

I punched up some info on my tab. The screen jumped to life with information about my allocation. I was under the supervision of somebody called McCarthy Green. I'd never heard of him. No doubt because anyone placed in the plant room was of little consequence to The Committee, or anyone else in SkyCity. At least I'd get plenty of time to study the book. I felt for it. Still there. It seemed to be getting lighter. So light I'd almost forgotten it was tucked into my shirt.

Scanning the corridor, I noticed how deserted the place was. I hadn't realised it until now, but nobody seemed to be around. The running track continued around the entire tier, I knew, but I'd never been this far on it. I'd usually just turned around and headed back to wherever I’d come from on the two-way track. Nobody seemed to come this far.

I headed down the hallway to see what else was around. A series of similarly nondescript doors opened out from the main corridor. They all had the same small silver plaque by their side and a scan pad for entry. The names meant nothing to me. But didn’t names on doors usually mean those people were inside the doors? At least some of the time. This was a work cycle.
I listened at the first few doors. Not a sound came from any of them. I began
walking down the corridor, knocking and jiggling the locks as I went. Nobody answered.
No door opened. I walked past at least a dozen doors on either side, before the corridor
bent sharp left and opened onto a central area with a single grey door at the opposite end.
In the middle, a circle of empty chairs were arranged around an ornate planter box filled
with a mix of exotic plants that I’d only ever seen in Committee Chambers. They seemed
an odd waste of resources, especially in this seemingly unused area. In fact, their only
purpose seemed to be to obscure the grey door from anyone who happened to wander
past.

The grey door began to open. I jumped back towards the nearest office and threw
myself at the door, my arm stretched out across the scanner. The door opened. Somehow I
managed to fall silently inside, which was pretty surprising in itself.

I held the door ajar, and watched as The Committee Chair emerged, talking with
someone I couldn’t see.

'I want it found. Soon.' Was all I could hear. The Committee Chair headed out
around the planter and towards the corridor. I had to shut the door as quickly and quietly
as I could to avoid his attention. His footsteps sounded eerily familiar as he passed the
office door. I decided to wait a moment before venturing back into the central area.
Pressing my back against the door, I slid down until I was sitting on the floor.

Looking around, I could see that the office was empty except for a small desk and
a wooden bookshelf just behind it. More wood. On a space station. Obviously a first
inhabitant’s office, and obviously things had been different back then. The shelves were
empty. Nobody had been in this office for a long time. I stood up and turned to listen at
the door. Quiet again. I slowly pushed the door open and peered out. The central area was
empty.
The silence that had drawn me down here had settled over everything again. All I could hear was the hum of the city itself as it spun constantly. I needed to get a look at who the office belonged to. Walking towards the door seemed to take forever and there was no big enlightenment once I got there. 'Scientists of God', was all that was written on the tiny plaque. Who were the Scientists of God, and what was The Committee Chair doing dealing with them in a silent area surrounded by empty offices? He'd been in the library only yesterday. A restricted zone. None of it made any sense, but the book was throbbing at my chest and I knew it was all somehow connected. I thought of entering the door, as though by accident, to see what was inside. The emptiness of the place suggested unexpected visitors weren't a regular occurrence. Then there was the fact that I was scared. First tiers followed the rules or faced the consequences. This wasn’t some dare.

This was breaking the rules. I began pacing around the circuit of the waiting area, reading the names on the doors as I passed. Granger, Vodich, Mullins, Black. I stopped. Dr J Black. I stood staring at it.

‘The Committee Chair has requested it.’

My head snapped round. Two figures stood at the entrance of the Scientists of God office. My knees collapsed under me instinctively, hiding me behind the planter. I had to get out of here. Silently crawling toward the corridor my mind fixed on one thing – I wish I’d just gone to the plant room today.

I was still running when I reached Organics. I forced myself to slow to a walk. My allocation meant reporting to the plant room today, but nobody would think it strange if I'd gone off to sulk, or just never turned up. Besides, they didn’t have any pressing need for me. It wasn't like Skyler being trained to pilot transports to moon biodomes, or Lerrin solving the puzzle of fertility that plagued us despite years of genetic manipulation. Let's face it, once my allocation had been announced I was practically invisible. And I knew
my father either had something to do with it, or worse still, knew about it and didn't care enough to stop it happening. What do you know? He'd managed to bott me in every way but literally.

There were terminals on the Pavilion Deck where I could access information without being logged into the system. I headed towards the central walking track. It was the quickest way back, and the only way I knew from here.

Walking along the long corridor, I wondered at how little I did know about the city I lived in. I'd done exactly as my father had told me and never questioned him. Hated him yes, questioned no. I'd never moved below the three decks of the first tier, never skipped classes, never done anything really. Lerrin's dares had been the only rebellion I'd ever experienced and they were mostly fun until now. In a matter of days I'd managed to outrun a security team, steal a book from a restricted area and now, spy on The Committee Chair.

When I reached the Pavilion Deck, I quickly scanned the area and headed for the most secluded terminal I could find. Tucked between an array of chairs and some planter boxes, I'd be able to search in privacy. It was now mid-morning according to the lighting grid. I wondered briefly about what it would be like to look up at a sky and know what time of day it was. Where had that come from? No wonder SkyCity was virtually windowless. I’d only seen a few plants and I was already wondering about a dead planet, Earth. I shook myself off and kept heading towards the terminal.

The Pavilion Deck was only lightly filled, but not empty enough for me to look suspicious. I slid into the chair and began tapping instructions onto a holo-touch keypad.

SCIENTISTS OF GOD. THIRD TIER, LEVEL ONE, AREA C72.
AN ORDER DEVOTED TO THE MEETING OF SCIENCE & MYSTICISM
That was it. Nothing else. I scrolled down and re-entered my searches. Nothing.

*Third tier, level one, area C72*. It would have to do. I pulled up a map of the third tier and quickly tried to memorise as much of the way to C72 as I could.

‘Master Black.’ The Committee Chair stood over me. I was halfway standing, my finger still on the keyboard. I slowly pressed my finger down over the quit key, not daring to look back and see if the holo-screen had disappeared.

‘Committee Chair.’ My voice was small. I hated that I couldn’t force it any louder, but right now, I was too afraid.

‘Searching for directions to your new allocation?’ He lifted his chin slightly, trying to peer at the screen.

‘Yes,’ I blurted too quickly. ‘Yes, Committee Chair.’ I forced myself to slow down. ‘I have no idea where Organics is.’

He stared at me for a moment. I remembered I was still half crouched and gingerly stood myself straight in front of him.

‘That is strange.’ He paused. ‘I was sure I saw you in that direction earlier this morning.’

My gut twisted. The old guy had me and he hadn’t even had to try.

‘Yes, Committee Chair,’ I replied without thinking. ‘I headed in that direction but quickly became lost. I thought it best to retrace my steps and start again once I’d looked up directions.’ I stood, not daring to move my eyes from his, as he decided what to make of this.

‘Very good then,’ he replied. His eyes flicked away from me as though he’d already forgotten I was there. ‘I’m sure there is much to be done in Organics, Zander. Hurry along.’
I didn’t waste a second; quickly taking his advice, I headed back to Organics for the third time that day. When I got to the door, this time I stepped straight through. Too much had happened already. I didn’t want to tempt fate into another run in with The Committee Chair. Fate? *Why did everything keep leading me back to things like instinct and fate lately?* If Ryl heard me talking about fate I’d be… well, I was trying to think of the worst thing that could happen. Except it already had.

Inside Organics, I made it as far as the entry hall. A bott sat at a desk that I assumed, from the body scanner attached to it, was a kind of security check point for the workers.

‘I’m here to see McCarthy Green,’ I said. The bott continued staring at the same spot, just slightly in front of his face. ‘Hello?’ I waved my hand in front of his face.

‘He’s not here.’ His voice responded, but his face and body were unchanged. ‘Said to give you this.’ His arm pushed an envelope across the desk, leaving the small white square for me to pick up. I picked up the envelope and turned it over in my hands. *He’d written me a note?* I pushed the folds apart and pulled the slip of paper out. The letters were joined and difficult to decipher at first, but I managed to make out that I was to go home and study up a number of files he’d linked to my tab before I would be allowed to enter Organics itself.

‘What?’ I said a little too loudly. ‘Who does he think he is sending me home?’ All the tension of the morning coalesced inside me and burst forth on the unsuspecting bott in front of me. It didn’t concern me: he was just a bott after all. I could rant as much as liked in front of him – so I thought.

‘He’s the boss!’ The bott jumped from his seat and was now staring at me, eye to eye, shouting at me. ‘He’s the boss – and if he says you don’t get in, then you don’t get...
in.’ He was a foot taller than me, standing over me, but his speech was finished now and
his face had already returned to its blank stare as he calmly returned to his seat.

‘O-kay.’ I said, not wanting to admit that I was shaking inside. I’d just been
shouted at by a bott, and my new supervisor thought I was so hopeless he’d mailed me
instructions. Why was the whole city suddenly going nuts?

I walked back outside and sat by the door for a long time. I sat there till it was
time to meet Lerrin and Skyler. Then I got up and quietly walked away. There was no
way I was telling either of them about today.
CHAPTER THREE

The Pavilion Deck was packed with first tiers coming off their work shifts. None from a shift in Organics. Unlike earlier, conversation was everywhere as the tables and chairs filled. I sat at a table at the rear of the Pavilion, looking out into the mass of people. Sitting anywhere around the perimeter allowed you to look down over the first level; something not many people seemed to do. This was a place for relaxation, not observation.

A long rectangular entertainment area, the Pavilion Deck sat between the second and third levels of the first tier, with a completely open space above it, that reached all the way to the top of the first tier. Artificial light poured down brightly in parts and filtered through in other sections, where smaller, private entertainment decks were suspended from above. I’d only ever been on a private deck once, for a Committee function of course. From below they seemed to hang in mid-air and were covered with the most expensive foliage, providing their occupants with seclusion and opulence at the same time. Some were big enough to hold functions with large groups, while others were made for more intimate gatherings.

I watched the tables around me as if for the first time. I’d only ever noticed the first tiers with their excited, interesting conversations. Now I couldn’t help but notice the second tier hospitality crew, entertaining as they served and hoping to win favour and standing. Two tables away a group of first tiers talked loudly, as the second tiers buzzed around them serving drinks and food. They smiled as they did it, but there was really no need. The first tiers never acknowledged where the food that appeared before them had come from. It was as if they didn’t even notice and I knew I’d been guilty of the same thing myself.
My eyes lifted towards the giant entertainment screen that hung across the room. There was some sort of sport session playing. Hover-ball, I thought. A banner pulled through the bottom of the screen reading ‘The Committee – working to make lives better’. It could have read, Second tiers, working to make our lives better.

At least they had the botts to help them clean our tables and sweep our floors. I watched a second tier clipped a table, spilling the contents of a tray all over the floor. He called a bott over and walked away, while the bott began cleaning the mess. That was the way things worked. And nobody had noticed, but me. We'd always been taught that first tiers worked for the betterment of the whole city. Made it what it was. Or were we only making our lives better? Second tiers served us and hoped to be elevated – one day. Botts did everything nobody else wanted to do, because they had no choice. They were virtually slaves.

The third and fourth tiers? I’d never seen one. I doubted many on the first tier had. The third and fourth tiers were the discontents, the troublemakers; at least, they were according to my father and The Committee. I guessed they were also places where organizations like the Scientists of God could flourish. And now I knew I had to get there. Something was happening in SkyCity and nobody on the Pavilion Deck had a clue. The Committee Chair was part of it. Maybe even my father was part of it. And my allocation? The book? Could they have something to do with it? I didn’t have a clue, but I knew what I had to do next. I had to find out more about the Scientists of God.

'You're early.' Lerrin pulled out a chair and slung himself into it. 'Plant room's on the other side of the city. How'd you make it here so quickly?'

‘You know where Organics is?’

‘Future of the city.’ Lerrin pointed at himself. ‘I know it all.’
‘Liar.’ Skyler sat down in the last chair, turning it away from Lerrin as she did. ‘I saw you look it up before. Did you speak to your father about your allocation?’ Her voice lowered as she leaned in towards me.

‘No,’ I answered. ‘Supervisor wasn’t there, but he left me a heap of reading.’ I felt guilty about lying to her before the words were out. ‘I just read all day and then came straight here.’

’Want to know what I did?’ Lerrin interrupted.

’No.’ We both answered.

’The system is pretty amazing.’ I continued, trying to sound upbeat.

’Yeah. Feed plants poo. Plants eat poo. Plants make air instead of poo.’ Lerrin put his feet up on the table, chuckling at his own joke. He stabbed a foot into Skyler's chair in the process. She punched him without looking.

’I had a look around before I got there.’ I said. Skyler’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. ‘Okay, so I got lost. Anyway, there are heaps of offices over there and they're all abandoned. They were something to do with the 'Scientists of God' - whatever they are.’ Lerrin's face twisted into a smile. ‘You know what they are?'

’You mean you don't?’ Lerrin pulled his feet from the table top and pulled in close.

’Not the future of the city.’ I said, pointing to myself. ‘I know nothing.’

’You're not serious?’ Skyler asked.

’Should I know about them?’ I wondered out loud, as I thought of how sheltered an existence Ryl had maintained for me.

’The Scientists of God are just the biggest sect in the whole of SkyCity,’ Skyler said in disbelief. 'And we are definitely going to pay them a visit.'

’But the offices are empty.'
'They got kicked out of the first tier years ago,' Lerrin said. 'The lower tiers love them though, so The Committee couldn't exactly get rid of them. Make them too powerful.'

'So why would we visit them?'

'They're mystics, pretending to be based on science,' Skyler said. 'They prick your finger, take some blood and then come up with a way out message about your higher purpose.'

'How can they tell your higher purpose from your blood?'

'They can't of course,' Lerrin said. 'It's a scam. They take a bit of blood, tell you what you want to hear and claim it's all scientifically proven. It’s in your DNA.' He leaned in closer. 'But let's face it. No third tier's ever setting foot up here without a security detail.'

'I don't get it.' And I genuinely didn't. 'If these Scientists of God tell people they're destined to become a first tier, won't that make them an even bigger problem?'

'It keeps them hopeful,' Skyler said.

'And if they're hopeful,' Lerrin added, 'they can be controlled.'

'Oh.' I said, although it was only slightly clearer. 'So why ban them from the first tier?'

'Because a first tier who thinks he can do better would be a problem,' Lerrin said, rolling his eyes at me. 'A first tier who thinks he can do better would try to get onto The Committee, and that would be a threat.'

'Or they could form an alternative,' I added.

'See,' Skyler said. 'You're thinking of conspiracies already. I think we should definitely go check it out.' She seemed eager despite our last adventure.

'We've been before,' Lerrin whined, stretching out to look bored.
'Really?' I tried not to sound too excited. 'What did they say?'

'Nothing interesting. Nothing I didn't already know.'

'I dare you to go.' Skyler said more urgently. She was staring at me more intently than usual.

'I’m not sure. Ryl would kill me if he found out.’

'Really?’ said Lerrin, suddenly more interested. ‘Then I double dare you.’

'Isn’t your Dad keeping watch on you after the whole library thing?’

‘He has no idea we were there.’ Lerrin scoffed, his confidence overflowing. I didn't know what to think. Skyler was acting weird and I couldn't help feeling she knew more than she was saying. But that was instinct talking, and I was training myself to stop listening to instinct. And anyway, this was exactly what I’d been hoping for. If I found out more about the Scientists of God, I could find out more about my mother – and possibly The Committee Chair as well.

‘Okay.’ I said, nodding repeatedly. ‘How do we do this?’

We spent the following hours working out our plans to get there and coordinating our different schedules. Mine was no problem. I was on general duties. As long as I completed the required hours each week, nobody cared where I was or what I was doing. This allocation could have its advantages. Skyler and Lerrin were not so easy. Their schedules were strictly enforced and had them on a rapid training program. It would have been nice to be sharing that sense of importance, but in Organics that just wasn't going to happen.

'So we go on the next shift change,' Lerrin said.

'A month from today,' Skyler confirmed.

'A month from today,' I agreed.
We headed back to The Committee apartments for the evening. I wasn't sure what would be waiting for me when I got there. Ryl had been silent all day. It was likely he was furious. I opened the door to find him staring straight at me.

'Sometimes life doesn't take us down the paths we assume it would.'

I closed the apartment door and looked across to where Ryl was sitting, his tab on his lap. He must have been waiting for me, but the philosophical welcome was not his normal style.

'What?' I blurted out.

'Your allocation,' he paused. 'It wasn't what you expected. I understand your disappointment.' He calmly placed his tab on the side table and sat forward, forearms resting on his thighs. His uniform was gone, replaced with a physical training suit. Had he been working out? I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen him out of the strict black uniform of The Committee, let alone in a PT suit. He seemed uncomfortable. Not knowing where to put the suddenly mobile parts of his body, usually contained within the harsh, straight-lined suit.

Taking the opportunity, I wandered over and sat in the chair opposite. If he wanted to discuss things, fine. It was better than his usual approach – losing it.

‘You think The Committee's punishing you?’ I knew better than to act dumb. He must know about the library, and he wasn’t angry. He was after something.

'Wouldn't all three of us be punished?'

'Perhaps,' he said. 'The Committee Chair does have ultimate authority though.'

'And everyone knows you're second to him.' Was I pushing it too far? 'If my allocation is a punishment, the fact that it’s only me being punished would suggest it was from you, not The Committee.'
He sat back and seemed to think about it. Then he was up and walking across the room to his office. ‘Or maybe The Committee is unaware of whatever you and your friends are feeling guilty about. Maybe there is a higher purpose to this allocation.’ He opened the office door, then turned and stared back at me.

‘There’s no higher purpose, Dad. You and Mum took care of that before I was born.’

‘Stop feeling sorry for yourself.’ His voice revealed his contempt for me. ‘You sound like a patch lounge junky sometimes.’

‘You created the patch lounges,’ I shouted back. ‘I’m sure the clients who line your pockets wouldn’t be too happy to hear the way you talk about them.’

‘I created the patch lounges to deal with the weak. Is that something you aspire to?’

‘I don’t need to aspire to it,’ I yelled back. ‘You made sure I was weak. If I sound like a patch lounge junky, it’s your decision that made me that way.’

‘This is pointless, Zander.’ He shouted in frustration, turned and beat his fist against the wall. I’d gone too far and now I would be dealt a fitting punishment. I waited, scrunching my own fists into tight balls as I kept my mouth shut and tried to avoid further punishment. Ryl’s jaw clenched and unclenched as he reigned in his fury. Then he slowly turned back to me, revealing a face that was no longer furious but so very tired.

‘Just don’t get into trouble,’ he said. Then he entered his office and closed the door behind him.

That was it? Ryl Black, second to The Committee Chair, creator of the bott class says, ‘don’t get into trouble’? Nobody would ever believe it.

I swung around in the chair and pulled out my tab. May as well start my reading. There was nothing else to do, and it would definitely keep me from ‘getting into trouble’.
I yawned as the information scrolled up in front of me. Plants. Pages of them. This was the worst allocation ever.

* * *

I woke up cramped and cold in the chair, the tab closed down in front of me, and instantly wide-awake after a dreamless sleep. A thermal hung lazily over the ends of my legs and feet, its slick silver surface slipping away as I moved. Typical Ryl, couldn’t even throw a thermal over me properly. I put the tab on the small table beside me and stretched my entire body out. It felt good, except for the book inside my shirt digging into my ribs. There was no point getting it out here. Too risky. I had to find somewhere safe and unfortunately I knew just the place nobody would ever look.

Arctic mountain scenery passed by me, as I made my way along the walkway towards Organics. Snow capped mountains, icebergs floating past, seals sliding into freezing waters and polar bears sitting alone in an endless expanse of ice. I felt cold, but the feeling only went so deep. I wondered what it would be like to actually feel cold: to stand alone, nobody as far as the eye could see. The thought made me shudder, even though I knew nothing would ever be real except the inside of this floating, circling city.

By the time I reached Organics, a gloom had settled on me like snow cover. I made a mental note to lodge a suggestion with Aesthetics. It wasn't wise to keep the Arctic scenery for too long.

I passed my i.d band over the scan pad and waited. If it opened, I guessed I'd passed whatever test it was this, McCarthy, thought all that reading was.

The door slid noiselessly open. The stifling heat of Organics hit me like a wall. I quickly forgot the Arctic scenery on the aesthetic screens, as the warmth folded me into
its welcoming grip. The intense quiet was peaceful. I realised it was the first time I'd felt calm for ages. This was another world: my world now.

Who was I kidding? Lerrin was right: Feed plants poo. Plants eat poo. Plants make air instead of poo.

I checked the room. This was one of the smaller end bays, housing row after row of end-line purification plants. There was nobody around. But the soft air current that flowed through the place was already playing games with my hearing, as it created the tiniest of movements amongst the leaves. The system was largely self-regulated, so it wasn't like a night crew was necessary. I wouldn't have any angry bott trouble like this morning. I headed for the only console in the room and pulled up my familiarisation file. From what I'd seen it was all plant species and care requirements. I had no intention of going over the file. There were other things I wanted to find out.

Looking around, I made sure I was alone, then I pulled my mother’s bracelet from the inside pocket of my jacket. She’d worn this. It had sat against her skin, as it now sat against mine. I felt strangely aware of how much I didn’t miss her. Holding the gold band, I suddenly wanted to. Wanted to have some sort of reaction, other than a vague mental image of what she looked like. I couldn’t even be sure if the face I saw was right.

I held the section of the bracelet with the flower etched into its surface against the scan pad and let it begin churning its way through the database to see what it would find. It was a starting point, and it made it look like I was doing something if anyone should find me here.

That done, I pulled the book out and lay it in my lap. I hadn’t really looked at it much until now. Random thoughts of Committee security details bursting into my room, or jumping me in the middle of the Pavilion Deck had filled my mind every time I even thought of taking it out. No matter how securely I was locked inside our apartment.
Organics was another world though. One forgotten by everyone I felt threatened by. I guessed that was why the anxiety didn’t overwhelm me as I turned the book over in my hands.

The book seemed smaller than I remembered: the edges of the hand print almost reaching the sides of the cover. Was it shrinking? My fingertips brushed over the rough surface, tracing their way around each finger and then down to the bottom of the palm. The urge to thrust my hand inside the moulded imprint made my hand tremble, so that I had to snatch it away and throw the book open instead. Inside, the empty pages stared out at me again. I couldn’t work it out. There had to be something more. Or was I clutching at a memory of a mother I never really knew?

‘Working late already?’

I leapt back from the desk, startled. It was too late to hide the book, so I left it on my lap and draped my arm across the top of it.

'Sorry. Didn't mean to alarm you.' The voice came from a grey haired old man, who was obviously stealthier than his years suggested. I couldn't take my eyes off his wrinkled face. Deep lines ran from one side of his forehead to the other. His eyes sat deep inside his head, so that the brows cast enough of a shadow over them to hide whatever he was thinking. The skin that should have stretched smoothly over his cheekbones and jaw, sat lazily atop the bones like an old, haphazardly spread rug. I knew people like this existed, but I'd never seen one before. An Old, like a mythical creature, had appeared before me.

'I see you've noticed my age,' he said.

'No. No.' I must have sounded pathetic. 'I mean, you're old, I can see that. But, you just startled me.' *Brilliant save*, I thought, and decided it would be safer to just be quiet.
He stared back, examining my face as though I was the strange one. Then he perched himself on the table, probably too old to stand for very long, and continued staring.

'You must be pretty unhappy with this placement.'

'Yes.' There was no point lying. Even the most out-minded bott could work out the answer to that one. 'Who are you?' I blurted, with a kind of disgust. 'I mean, if you don't mind me asking.' There was no reason not to be rude to him – he was old – but I guess my own deficiencies had me feeling sorry for him.

'Name's McCarthy Greene. I'm your supervisor.'

'You're my supervisor?' My mouth hung open in disbelief, as I noticed the familiar grey jumpsuit of the bott class under his long coat. 'But you're not even a first tier.' It was harsh, I knew. So much for feeling sorry for him. But whoever heard of a lower tiered supervisor? Exactly how bad could this placement get? I hadn't done anything severe enough to warrant this sort of treatment.

'You know just how to say all the wrong things, don't you kid?' I didn't think he wanted me to answer so I shut up. 'Interesting flower you're looking at there.'

'Yeah,' I answered quietly. I didn't know how much I wanted to give away, or whether he actually needed me to give anything away. He seemed to have it all worked out already.

'Not many reasons for a kid to be interested in this flower.' He paused for effect. My stomach sank in dread. 'Care to tell me yours?'

'I... It's on my mother’s bracelet. A family heirloom,' I said, shoving her band towards him. 'Been in my family for generations. I thought I'd find out what it was.'

He looked at me, sizing me up, but didn't say anything. Instead he slowly lifted himself from where he was perched on the desk.
'Don't stay too late,' he said and turned to walk away. 'That flower used to be the symbol of the Mutineers.' He turned back. It felt like his eyes could stare right through me, like he knew all my secrets with a single look. 'On your mother’s bracelet?’ He paused again. ‘Why do you think that’d be?’

I lifted my shoulders in a slow shrug. McCarthy nodded in reply before his stare finally loosened its grip on me. ‘And that book you’re trying to hide,’ he added casually. ‘You need to stick your hand in it.’ He turned. ‘It’s waiting for you.’

I watched him walk between the plantation bays: noticed the stiffness of his walk and the slow, measured steps he took. The rise and fall of feet that measured time in a way mine never would. It was only when he finally disappeared that I realised I’d stopped breathing.

The book began its familiar pulsing. What did it think I was? Some sort of pet? Or was that just my excuse for ignoring it?

‘All right,’ I said. ‘So you’re waiting for me.’ My head nodded idiotically. I was talking to a book. ‘Okay then. Let’s do this.’ I said, and thrust my hand into the imprint. At first there was nothing, then a strange pressure, as though my hand was being sucked against the cover. Because it pulled, I pulled. The book held fast for what seemed like forever, then it let me go. My hand slapped back against me with the force. I opened the cover.

Writing. There was writing on the first page I opened.

‘Mallika lives, Skydweller,’ I read out loud. I flipped the page. ‘Mallika lives, Skydweller.’ Again. ‘Mallika lives, Skydweller.’ I flipped through the rest of the pages. The same three words on every page.

‘Aaargh!’ I screamed in frustration. My voice echoed briefly then disappeared. I slammed the book shut. ‘What does that mean?’ I shouted at the book. Perhaps I was
going crazy. Because what sort of person, what sort of first tier, talks to a book and expects to be answered?

‘No.’ I said, trying to calm myself. ‘It must mean something. It has to.’ I thought for a second. ‘So Skydweller. Is that me? You’re talking to me?’ There was no answer. The words didn’t change, or disappear. ‘Well the name’s, Zander. Just for future reference. I don’t like nicknames.’

I turned to the terminal and tapped Mallika onto the screen. ‘Mallika. What’s Mallika?’ I sat and waited. ‘And why do I care?’ Why was I talking to myself?

The screen filled with line after line of information. I scanned it. More plant information – of course. Then I saw the picture. A flower, the same flower etched onto my mother’s bracelet. My stomach felt about to make its presence known. Saliva filled my mouth. Words enunciated themselves without a sound. *Known as ‘Mallika’ in Sanskrit.* Jasmine. Jasmine was known as Mallika in Sanskrit. Jasmine was the flower etched onto my mother’s bracelet. Jasmine was alive.

I jumped up as my body threw itself forward in a series of involuntary shudders: my stomach expelling whatever it could find. I gripped the edge of the planter bay, waiting for it to pass.

Jasmine Black was alive. Dr Jasmine Black. It couldn’t be. My mother couldn’t be alive.
‘It’s too soon,’ Skyler argued for the hundredth time. ‘Your Dad must know we were in the library.’

It was only a day since we decided on our trip to the SoG. But a day ago I hadn’t known my mother was alive. A day ago I was just curious. I had to convince them to go earlier, but the Pavilion Deck wasn’t the place for an argument. We’d found a table tucked around the back so as not to draw attention to ourselves. A woman at the nearest table shifted her chair, not wanting to look at us directly. Like everywhere, we were allowed to be here, we just weren’t very welcome.

‘Did he mention the library specifically?’ Lerrin asked, countering her.

‘He didn’t mention anything specifically. He’s too smart for that.’ I replied.

‘Then he doesn’t know,’ Lerrin concluded. ‘He’s trying to psyche Zander out as usual. Only this time,’ he turned his attention to Skyler, ‘it’s working on you.’

‘He asked him if he thought his allocation was a punishment.’ Skyler retorted.

‘How much more specific do you need it to be?’

‘We were there too.’ Lerrin said. ‘We didn’t get the worst allocations in the history of SkyCity.’

‘It’s not that bad.’ It sounded pathetic, even I knew it.

‘Of course it is.’ Lerrin looked at me like I’d just been botched.

‘Of course it is.’ Skyler gave me the same look. ‘And while we’re on the subject,’ she turned to Lerrin. ‘I thought you were on my side. We agreed to wait.’

‘Why don’t we vote?’ I said. The argument was dragging on. They had to come with me to the Scientists of God, and I wanted to go now. If the book was right, my mother was alive. And the SoG was the only connection I had.
‘No!’ Skyler said. ‘We made a decision. The three of us. We stick to the plan.’

‘Or we could settle this with a dare.’ Lerrin raised an eyebrow, his fingers formed a point under his chin.

‘Yes! A dare.’ I agreed. It would probably involve my complete humiliation, but I was willing to risk it. Since Lerrin’s discovery of parkour, yet another 20th century curiosity to add to his collection, dares usually involved feats that stretched my meagre genetic enhancements to their limits, while merely highlighting the extent of both his and Skyler’s.

‘No,’ Skyler said. ‘We made that decision for a reason. Are you both forgetting the trouble we’ll be in if we’re caught?’ Neither of us had an answer, but she knew she hadn’t convinced us not to go. She seemed to be considering her options. ‘Well I’m not willing to risk my allocation just so you can defy your father.’ She threw her chair back noisily as she stood.

The response around us was immediate. A series of cold stares. Skyler sat down quietly.

‘If you children can’t behave I’ll call security.’ It was the woman at the next table, glaring at us. The look played havoc with her face, so unused to anything upsetting her existence. I checked her uniform, as we always did in these situations. No Committee badge on the collar. Without the familiar, C, with its joined horizontal bar across the top to represent ‘The Committee’, we knew she wasn’t an immediate threat. Still, she might call Security if we upset her routine too much and Skyler knew that too.

‘My apologies,’ Skyler said, sitting back down. ‘It won’t happen again.’

The first tier’s face returned to its normal state. She was happy to get back to her drink and her friend and their aimless chatter, as though we didn’t exist.
‘Right then,’ Lerrin whispered, as he got up with a mock attempt at super-quietness and moved silently toward the ledge behind us. ‘Now as I was saying, before we were so rudely interrupted.’ He pulled a face at the first tier woman, and I couldn’t help grinning. ‘A dare: to jump from the Pavilion Deck, down to the first level. Classic parkour.’

‘That’s impossible.’ Skyler interrupted. ‘I don’t care how enhanced you are. If you’re on my side, just say so. Don’t try to kill us all.’

‘No, it is possible.’ I said, carefully getting up to join him. ‘We can use the in-service entertainment decks, over there.’ From where I was standing I could see two entertainment decks hovering, one behind the other and slightly apart, at a service bay door below the Pavilion. Second tiers scurried in and out of the closest deck, stocking the interior with all the food and drink requirements of its next function. The second one sat empty on its hovers, waiting its turn.

I checked the distances. It wouldn’t be an easy jump. Standing on the ledge of the Pavilion, it would take a near impossible leap to get the distance for a roof landing. The second deck was attached by a tether, but its hovers hadn’t been lifted to the level of the service bay yet. Sliding down the tether, it would be possible to drop down to the first level from the bottom of the deck – as long as nobody stopped us before we got there. It was possible: just barely possible.

‘What’s going on over there?’ Skyler said. She stood beside me now. If she’d got up to have a look, she was at least interested. I stifled the smile and instead turned to see what she was talking about.

‘Patch Lounge protest.’ Lerrin answered.

‘It’s their second one this week: non-Committee first tiers complaining about anti-
humanist activities. They’re all my father talks about these days,’ Lerrin added with
minimal interest. ‘Between them, and whatever that book is he was looking for in the
library, the man’s completely obsessed.’

‘Why’s he so obsessed with the book?’ Did that sound casual? I didn’t know.

‘Who knows?’ Lerrin had already lost interest and was scanning every inch of the
jump instead. Skyler seemed more intent on scanning me with her irritated glare.

‘Let’s do this.’ I said, not wanting to lose my courage. Not wanting to wait any
longer to check out the SoG.

‘Or we could just agree to stick with the plan.’ Skyler argued.

‘No backing out now Skyler.’ Lerrin was already up and balancing on the ledge.
‘Let’s do this!’ His feet had left the ledge before the sentence was finished. Watching him
fall towards the first deck, he made it look easy. He was over six feet tall, yet his body
was graceful. The standard issue grey jumpsuit fluttered against his sides: a giant grey
bird dipping towards the deck. Then he pulled up, his legs curling under him as he met the
ground. A quick tumble across the roof, and then he was running towards the second.
Picking up speed with each step. There was a chorus of shouts from the service staff, as
the deck jostled about under the shifting movement of Lerrin’s weight across its roof.

Several first tiers had made their way to the Pavilion Deck ledge. They looked
irritated. Not at us, at least. They were further down and staring at the protest that had
grown enough in size for the noise to carry.

‘We’d better do this,’ I said. ‘They’ll notice us next and call security.’

‘Or we could not do it at all,’ Skyler said.
‘I can make it,’ I said, and stepped onto the ledge, staring down. Lerrin rolled across the floor and landed heavily on the first level, before turning and waving back at us. Skyler stepped up onto the ledge next to me.

‘All right, but we do this together.’

I smiled at her, but it wasn’t returned.

‘On my count.’ She paused. ‘Go.’

She leapt ahead of me, making sure she had a couple of seconds, just in case. Just in case she needed them to save me from plummeting to my death. Her body was pulling away fast, falling forward in a graceful arc that, from here, looked as though she was standing still while the floor below rushed up to meet her. Closing my eyes, I tried to shut out the sound of my pounding heart and let the fall happen. I put Skyler out of my mind.

My legs tensed, ready to push away from the ledge with enough force to send me in the direction of the deck’s roof. My weight began slowly falling forward.


‘Going somewhere?’

Security. I was definitely about to be botched.

‘There’s a girl!’ I pleaded desperately, searching over the side in time to see Skyler being caught by Lerrin as she completed the jump. ‘She was falling. I tried to catch her,’ I added pathetically. He peered over the side, disinterested.

‘Looks like she’s found her knight in shining armour already, and it’s not you. Give it up, youthful. I watched you get up together.’ He was enjoying this. Nobody in SkyCity wanted us around. Youthfuls. Children. We were too big a reminder of the
mortality they couldn’t yet beat. Not one of the guests on the Pavilion Deck, already
distracted by the protest, thought to do anything as the guard roughly pulled me down and
began shoving me towards the exit. It didn’t matter that, technically, I hadn’t done
anything yet.

‘I didn’t do anything.’ Another shove.

‘You thought about it. You were going to.’

‘So you’re the thought police now.’

He ignored me, marching me through the exit and down the walkway to the first
level, where the esplanade led to the security corridor. I didn’t bother arguing. There was
no point.

Passing the Patch Lounge, I could see the protest had grown in number.
Somebody was shouting – “Posthuman is not human”. Others held a large banner that
read “H+, not a plus”. I didn’t know what any of it meant, but there was a nervous
energy that seemed to radiate from the huddled group. Whatever they were doing, they
knew it was dangerous.

Inside the Lounge, rows of people reclined on comfortable couches, tapped into a
subconscious paradise through the two patches placed either side of their foreheads. Thin
wires fed discreetly from under the patch, to behind their ears, under their hairline, and
then to a machine hidden in the soft padded layers of the headrest that cradled them to
sleep. They were unaware of the crowd just outside the door. As I watched them through
the frame of the protesters, they were no longer the familiar of my everyday. They’d
become players in a freak show. I only felt pity.

The security guard grabbed my arm again, as we brushed past the perimeter of the
crowd. They were moving as a single entity now, spilling out into the corridor. We would
have to pass through them to reach Security.
‘Don’t get any ideas, youthful.’ The security officer gave me another shove, just to remind me. I didn’t need to try anything though, because the peaceful protest suddenly became a riot. A large guy, one of the rioters, seemed to take offence at the security officer passing through. His arm swung around. I ducked without thinking, even though he was never going to hit me. The security guard took it squarely on the chin. His grip was wrenched from me, and suddenly I was forgotten, as he reached for an immobilizer hidden inside his uniform coat.

The sight of the weapon sent the protesters around him into hysteria. Just participating in something this risky had them on edge. Now their nerves snapped. My own skin prickled and twanged against the heat of their fear. The security guard, realizing his mistake, called urgently for backup.

Their fear was contagious, their movements erratic, as they crushed closer together. People cried out from the centre, as they were caught between the ebb and flow of those who thought it safer to be inside the Patch Lounge, and those eager to get away from the place. The crowd shifted, pressing the security officer against me. I slammed against the side wall, his weight pinning me to it. My cheek crushed against the cold metal, but my skin was on fire. It felt like forever. Then I felt the book against my chest. Not warm this time, cool. A strange coolness that dragged the exploding embers from my skin.

The crowd shifted. Its weight lifted from me and released me. The guard had released me too. He stood in front of me facing the crowd.

‘Stand down!’ he shouted. ‘Stand down!’ Others were arriving, and with them the crowd’s panic increased. The chanting increased. The whimpers from the centre grew more urgent. The guards were all shouting now. Shouting and pulling out their weapons.
It was clear that security had no idea what to do with a crowd that seemed determined to defy their instructions. So they did something I’d never seen before, something I thought no first tier had seen before: they attacked. They were fast, and brutal. A trained attack. *They were trained for this?* The security officer who’d pulled me back from the ledge led the assault. At first his blows were hard, disabling. The protesters flailed their arms uselessly. A woman went down hard.

I turned my head away as another protester fell, head bouncing against the ground. The sound alone stabbed into my stomach. Or perhaps it was the smell of blood lingering in the air that brought the taste of bile to my mouth. At my chest, the book radiated a strange coolness that kept me calm, but it couldn’t take away the horror of what I was witnessing.

‘And that security guard thought *you* were trouble.’ Skyler appeared beside me, as I swiped away a tear that was forming.

‘Let’s get out of here. I can’t stand to watch anymore.’

‘Something’s going very wrong in this place,’ she said, as we turned and quickly moved away from the riot.

‘I’m surprised you noticed,’ I blurted out, not dropping my pace for an instant. My emotions raw from what I’d just witnessed. My mind had replaced the grizzly scenes of the protest with Lerrin catching Skyler. I held onto the image. Not knowing where else to send my anger. Lashing out at Skyler was wrong, but it made me feel better somehow.

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘I saw you and Lerrin. Since when have you needed assistance with a landing?’ I couldn’t stop myself now that I’d started. ‘Still, I guess you have to start thinking about a pairing. Lerrin’s the way to go. You couldn’t get a better genetic match.’ I spat the last words out.
Skyler stopped and stared. I came to a halt too, puffing hard. The sad expression I’d caught glimpses of over the last week settled across Skyler’s features.

‘You really are stupid sometimes,’ she said.

‘You think I don’t know that?’

‘No. I don’t think you know half as much as you think you do. Otherwise you’d know I have no interest in Lerrin – or you.’ She looked back at the crowd. We hadn’t gone far. I couldn’t look, so I stared at Skyler instead. Her eyes didn’t move from the crowd, her expression was unreadable. My anger had passed, now I just felt stupid. Stupid and sad.

‘They’re probably Mutineers.’ What? There was that word again. ‘Lerrin says his father thinks the Mutineers are on the rise again.’

A cold shiver passed over my skin at the mention of the Mutineers. Skyler misinterpreted.

‘Sorry.’ She rolled her eyes, thinking me childish. ‘Didn’t mean to mention Lerrin.’ I let her think it. It would be worse if she knew what was really happening. Worse if she realised my mother was a Mutineer. An alive and well Mutineer, if the book was right.

More blows were swapped as the riot continued. The man who’d taken the first punch took his last hit and flew across the floor, landing just outside the rim of the fighting. Security spared him no more than a glance. Registering his unconscious state they headed back into the group of protesters. Few protesters had any fight left in them. But it didn’t stop the brutal assault of security.

The crowd had been unprepared for this aggressive treatment. The protest was long gone, and their resistance quickly subdued. But security were determined to take revenge for this lack of compliance. Skyler began running towards the downed protester.
‘What are you doing?’ I screamed.

‘He could be hurt,’ she called back. ‘We have to help him.’ I started running too.

The man groaned as Skyler knelt at his side.

‘Help me drag him out of the way.’ She was already grabbing one of his arms. I automatically moved to the other.

‘What do you want to do with him?’

‘Get him out of the way of those thugs.’

‘Skyler!’

‘It’s true. C’mon.’ She yanked at him and we both began pulling him toward a narrow corridor that must have led to a service area. ‘Security’s just using them now. They’re blood sport. The protest’s over. Why not leave them alone?’

She was near tears. I could hear it in her voice.

‘Skyler?’ She wouldn’t meet my eyes, so I concentrated on getting the guy somewhere safe. He was heavy. I didn’t want to drag him too far. Seeing an alcove I headed in that direction. When we got there we tried to prop him up against the wall. I pulled his heavy body up from under the arms. His sleeve stretched tightly as it moved up his arm. Far enough up to reveal a tiny tattoo on the underside of his forearm. A small flower: the same as the one on my mother’s bracelet. I tugged his sleeve back down, his secret hidden.

‘We’d better get out of here.’ Skyler was already up and checking the corridor.

‘Security will have run out of protesters to beat up soon. You don’t want to be around when that one remembers where he left you.’

‘What about this guy?’

‘They won’t notice him down here. We’ve done enough.’

‘Funny. It doesn’t feel like we’ve done anything.’
‘You saw what they did to the protesters,’ Skyler snapped at me. Her eyes were bright with fear. ‘Do you really want to get involved? Like this guy?’

‘It just seems wrong, what happened to them. That’s all I’m saying.’

She went to speak but was interrupted by the sound of a security communicator. We panicked. Frozen to the spot. There was nowhere else to go. How were we going to explain our own presence, let alone an unconscious protester?

Skyler grabbed my arm, and swung me around towards the sound of the approaching security officer. Her hands gripped my shoulders. Her body pressed against me. I moved my hands to her hips. It felt awkward. Strange. Even knowing that it was just her plan to make the guard think we were up to other things.

‘Here he comes.’ Her voice was urgent. Her eyes stared down the corridor. How was I supposed to kiss her with her head twisted off to the side? I moved hesitantly, feeling ridiculous as my head jutted in short pecking motions towards her face. The guard was getting closer. I brushed my lips against her cheek.

‘What are you doing, you idiot?’

I pulled back. She glared at me like I’d just been botted. Then her grip on my shoulders tightened and she threw me down across the path of the approaching guard.

The guard stopped. Skyler had thrown me just far enough that he’d be stopped before seeing the protestor lying quietly where we left him. I dropped my head back against the floor. The pain was good. It distracted me from the complete humiliation I was feeling.

There was a familiar harsh tug as the security officer grabbed my arm and pulled me up. He grabbed Skyler with his other hand and ripped us away from the darkness of the alcove toward the light of the corridor. Skyler’s plan was clear only minutes too late to save me from humiliation.
‘Youthfuls.’ The guy spat the word out, like saying it somehow put a bad taste in his mouth. ‘There’s a riot going on and you waste time arguing in corners.’

‘I apologise, Committee Security Member.’ Skyler’s eyes were down as she spoke. I took my cue from Skyler, lowered my own eyes and mumbled an apology.

‘We were just practicing,’ Skyler raced on. ‘We saw the riot. We didn’t know where to hide. Are they taking over the first tier?’

Skyler’s voice was rising, heading towards hysterics.

‘Stop your rambling, girl.’ He shouted at Skyler. She quickly quietened, not wanting to test his patience.

‘Please Committee Security Member.’ We had to get out of here fast. ‘My father is Committee Member Black. You must help us return to The Committee Executive quarters.’

The security officer’s face fell as he realised who he had caught. His desire to be heavy handed with us obviously battling the problem of our status.

‘All right. I’ll help you.’ His gaze moved from us to the corridor behind us. He would miss the fight. ‘We need to take an alternative path.’ He doubled back and then right down an adjoining corridor. We ran along behind him. It was about another hundred metres to the end, where it came to a T-junction. ‘Follow this corridor to the end.’ He pointed towards the left. ‘It leads back to the group learning area. You will easily find your way from there.’

‘Thank you. Thank you.’ Skyler continued her scared and helpless act.

‘I have to get back to the protest and you must return to your parents. You must tell them of your indiscretion and that I returned you safely.’ Skyler raised an eyebrow but he was too busy attempting to ingratiate himself with the upper echelons of The Committee to notice.
‘I will be sure to mention your name,’ I leaned in to read his name patch, ‘Security Member Dean.’

‘Yes, we both will,’ Skyler enthused. ‘Please, don’t let us to keep you any longer.’

He gave us an official salute, then turned and hurried back to the riot. When he finally disappeared, a nervous laugh escaped my lips.

‘I can’t believe we got away with that,’ I said. ‘If only Lerrin had seen it. You were amazing.’ I touched her arm with my hand. She flung it away.

‘Now you wish Lerrin was here.’ Her eyes were burning with anger.

‘I didn’t…’

‘Don’t bother, Zander.’ She turned and began walking away. ‘Just don’t speak to me for a while, okay? Cause I really don’t like you very much at the moment.’

I watched her walk away, unable to say anything in response. Now she thought I was a pathetic, love-struck puppy. Lerrin would never have made such a mistake.

Romantic loser – another genetic flaw my parents had failed to fix.
CHAPTER FIVE

The following day, it was as though nothing had happened. Ryl was gone by the time I got up. Not knowing what else to do, I got ready for a day in Organics. I ate, showered, dressed, stared in the same mirror I had every other day of my short life. Nothing ever changed, even when it had. When I walked to Organics I took a different path, one that led me past the alcove where we’d left the protestor, past the patch lounge that had been the scene of yesterday’s riot. The entertainment decks were still sitting where Lerrin and Skyler had made the jump – a jump that probably would have broken both my legs, had I actually attempted it.

I stood outside the patch lounge and watched as people began shuffling in. Crisp black first tier uniforms. Everyone the same. Enter through the grey arch, check in with the smiling clerk, find your cubicle, step in, patches on, you’re there.

I’d never understood until now. They came here searching for ‘themselves’. Patched in, they could become anyone they chose, wear anything they liked, go anywhere. In the patch lounges, the subconscious ruled. You could commit crimes, rebel against the system, even die and move on if you felt like it. That’s why they thought Ryl was a hero. He’d empowered them. Given them their dreams – even if it was for only a few hours at a time. They never realised it was just another Committee control method. Give them a little, so you can take the lot.

A chime sounded. The next cycle was beginning, which meant I was late. I headed to my allocation, but I didn’t run.

McCarthy Greene led me around Organics, familiarising me with its every detail. We trudged down the endless aisles that ran between long tanks filled with recirculating
water, and the plants that made it all possible. The beginning of the whole system was the worst. My stomach finally gave in and I spun around searching for somewhere to heave. McCarthy pushed me toward the edge of the tank, forcing my head over the edge. Vomit mixed with effluent, food scraps and who knew what else. The swirling grey, brown mass, momentarily disturbed by my addition, quickly churned the evidence away. The ever-present botts shovelled it all along without comment. I pushed my way towards the end of the section, slapping back the thick plastic curtains that separated one section from the next. Two giant fans blasted out from above the curtains. As we passed through, the sound of the fans dissipated. The air wasn't much better, but a blast of cool air from the next set of fans pushed towards me as I entered, sending the worst of the stench back into the previous section. A fat water droplet fell down hard from the high ceiling and burst open on my cheek like a slap. I looked up to see the condensation collecting until it was too heavy to hold, and a finer spray of water particles sitting in the air between us. I smiled – it could have been rain.

I turned and pressed my face against the plastic, the cool air hitting my back as I stared at McCarthy ordering the botts. There were hundreds of them lined up along the sides of the reticulation tanks. I'd never seen so many together. They were harmless, of course; incapable of anything other than a basic range of emotions. But seeing so many of them together made me feel scared. McCarthy finished his ‘motivational’ speech and joined me in the bay.

‘I saw a protest yesterday,’ I said, attempting conversation before we got too far and the fans drowned me out. ‘Turned into a riot.’ No response. ‘The Committee’s Security team skipped straight past restraint and beat them up. I’ve never seen anything like it.’
‘Perhaps you should look up some history one day. There’s plenty of violence there.’

‘The Committee has led through non-violence since the inception of SkyCity.’

‘I’m not talking about history according to The Committee. I’m talking about human history.’ I wasn’t sure what he was talking about, but I knew enough to know he could probably be botted all over again with this line of conversation.

‘There was a protester. He collapsed in front of us.’ McCarthy still showed no interest. ‘We moved him out of the way, and I saw a flower tattooed on the inside of his wrist. It was the same flower that’s on my mother’s band.’ He kept walking, not missing a step. ‘They’re back aren’t they? The Mutineers are back.’

‘The Mutineers are dead. They’ll stay that way until people are ready to reconnect with the Earth. And from your own reaction to being placed down here, I don’t think that’s going to happen anytime soon.’

‘If they knew more…’

‘This place is lost.’ He paused and stopped walking. ‘We’re all lost.’ His old eyes stared straight into me as though they saw everything I was, even though I didn’t know it myself. ‘We don’t want to know who we are, just how long we can have. How much life we can have. How long we can cling to it.’ His voice dropped to a whisper. ‘Sad, isn’t it. Holding onto life so tightly that we sucked the living right out of it.’

He began striding along the bays again, conversation over. I fell into step beside him. We hadn’t gone far when McCarthy reached across and shoved a bott towards his work area. It was so sudden I nearly slammed into his back. He stood over the man saying something I didn’t have a hope of hearing over the fans. The bott stared back at me with pure contempt. That was impossible, wasn’t it? McCarthy leaned into him, and the way the man cowered; there was obviously a threat. I still found it hard to think of McCarthy
as one of them, and obviously he didn't consider himself part of their kind. He headed back towards me. I stood aside and fell in step with him. We headed for the booming fans and the heavy plastic strip curtains that would lead to another bay only one step up in sanitation levels from this one.

'What was that about?' I asked, still trying to shake the fear I knew I shouldn’t be feeling.

'Nothing you need be concerned with.'

'What am I supposed to be concerned with then? It's pretty obvious you don't need me down here.' I was a first tier and McCarthy was still a bott. I had a right to ask questions, but I didn't feel it as I followed him along, one pace behind.

'That's right. We don’t need you. So why are you here?' He didn't want an answer. 'Is somebody punishing you?' He paused thoughtfully. 'You haven't done anything that bad. So no. Then is somebody protecting you?' McCarthy stopped his steady pace, nearly collecting me in the process. He raised his hand and pointed his finger until its tip pressed against my chest. 'Or is it something you have?' he added, slowly and quietly.

It was too weird. How could McCarthy know where I kept the book?

'What do you think I've got that needs protecting?' I asked quietly, despite noticing the botts had all busied themselves in other sections as soon as we'd entered. Could they smell the fear on me over the stench of the tanks? McCarthy began laughing.

'I don't think. I know you've got something that needs protecting,' he said. His fingers ran across a spread of small bright Duckweed leaves that I recognised from all the reading he’d given me. 'Word spreads around here,' he said. It didn’t explain anything. I decided not to push this particular argument any further, and thankfully he started pacing his way towards the next plastic curtain, which meant the smell would shortly begin to
ease. Looking over my shoulder, I couldn't even see the previous section curtain. We'd made a lot of ground.

'You didn't answer me, McCarthy.'

'Ask me a real question. I don't like steppin' round the truth.'

I decided to risk it. The guy was a b**t. If he did talk, nobody would believe him.

'I asked what you think I've got that needs protecting.' He stopped walking, looked at me expectantly, daring me to say it. 'Okay,' I said quietly. ‘Why does The Book need protecting?’

A smile slowly unravell**d across his wrinkled old face. 'So you do know how to trust. I'm glad. Now you might learn something.' He slammed the plastic curtain back and marched through, holding it open for me. 'Come on. We don't have all day.' The racing pace began again, and I could only shrug my shoulders and follow.

'You know you still haven't answered my question,' I said.

'If you haven't worked out the answer yourself, that's good. Means they don't know you've got it yet.'

‘They? Who’s they?’

‘That’s no easy question,’ he paused. ‘Could be any one of a number of groups.’

‘Okay,’ I said, even though things were no clearer. ‘And what happens when they find out I’ve got the book?’

'That's when they start trying to kill you,' he said, with no more interest than if he was reading the daily sludge pit breakdown.

We headed towards McCarthy's office, at the opposite end of the reticulation system. It took us nearly fifteen minutes to walk there. We did the rest of the way in silence. The number of botts watching the line dwindled as we progressed along the system. The
cleaner the water became, the less work was required, which was a shame for the bott
workers. Their end was filled with grime, and rot, and decay, while this end was the
closest thing to nature you could find in SkyCity.

‘Here’s my office,’ McCarthy stood in front of a thick wall of some kind of
flowerless creeper. If it was beyond this shrub, there was no way we were getting through.
The foliage was lush and deep. Thick, dark green leaves the size of my palm spread out
evenly, forming an impenetrable barrier. I couldn’t see past it or through it, anywhere. It
reached across from the edge of the last tank to the outer wall. Looking back down the
bay of tanks, I realised we’d have to double back to the end of the last tank where a
walkway ran over the top to the other side.

‘Why’d you bring me all the way up here? Now we have to go right back around.’

‘Perhaps you didn’t hear me.’ He raised his hand and brushed it against the wall of
leaves. ‘I said here is my office.’ Even as he said it, I could see the leaves separating,
moving back to form a narrow passageway. When it was just wide enough and high
enough for McCarthy to fit through he moved his hand away. ‘Come on then,’ he said as
he walked through. I quickly followed him. Whatever genetic modification he had used
on these plants was beyond anything I’d ever seen. The thought of being left out here
alone seemed unwise.

The inside of the office was not what I’d expected. The wall of foliage continued
around on three sides, completely dividing it off from the rest of Organics. The fourth
side, opposite where we had entered, was a low ledge about waist high. Above it was an
opening that allowed for an uninterrupted view of the final, most amazing section of
Organics. This was the end of the line: a huge area running the full height of the three
levels of the first tier. I walked across and leaned on the ledge. There were trees, some
extending to the full height of the room. These were tethered at various points, no doubt
due to a root system that had to spread wide rather than deep. Water outlets from the reticulation bays cascaded out in small waterfalls that ran into a system of tributaries. There were flowers of various colours. I recognised a patch of small white jonquils, their fragrance so potent I began sneezing. I could hear birds and other creatures so clearly, I had no idea if they were real or atmos.

'Not bad for a bott?' he said, guessing what I was thinking.

‘No,’ I replied, still staring into the forest before me. 'But you're not just any bott are you?' I would have liked to see his reaction but my eyes were busy taking everything in.

'No,' McCarthy replied. 'In fact, I'm no bott at all.'

'What are you saying? You chose this classification?'

‘No, I was botted.’ His eyes seemed to lose focus as he stared into the forest before him. ‘It’s not such a bad thing if you know the right people. If you know the right people, and they get the procedure just right, you can make your way back from a botting, eventually.’

‘So all of them…?’ I indicated back with a tilt of my head.

‘Don’t worry. They’re bots. No mistaking it.’ He paused. ‘It’s not an easy procedure. Risky for the recipient, riskier for the one doing the procedure. I’m guessing I’m pretty much one of a kind.’

‘But why would someone take that risk for you?’

‘Somebody had to look after all this.’ His hands came down onto the ledge next to mine and we both stood, leaning into this curiously alive part of SkyCity. ‘You want to walk in it?’

‘Can I?’

‘You can.’ He paused. ‘It’s illegal, but you can.’
‘Illegal?’

‘Committee doesn’t like the idea of the population getting too close to nature. Imagine if everyone knew this was here?’

I imagined it. I imagined first tiers coming here, instead of going to the patch lounges. Then I realised what McCarthy meant. Ryl Black would not like that.

The forest had me transfixed. I stared up to the very top, where the light from a large dome filtered through the leaves, throwing dappled shadows everywhere.

‘The light’s strange.’

‘It’s sunlight.’ He waited for a reaction. I’d never seen sunlight. I didn’t know how to react. I stared at the dome instead. ‘There’s a walkway up the top. Nobody’s used it for years. You can look down over the whole forest.’

‘Is that illegal?’ I wanted to step into the forest so badly, but somehow it seemed worse than the dares I’d done with Skyler and Lerrin. With them, I felt safe. Here, were there was nobody, I couldn’t force myself to take the steps required.

‘Nothing illegal about looking.’ He folded his arms over his chest and seemed to consider me for a moment. ‘No walk then?’

‘Maybe another time,’ I answered. But I was immediately overcome with a sense of missing out.

‘So you’ve kept this place a secret all these years? How do you get away with it?’

‘Truth is, know the right people you can get away with just about anything.’

‘So why show me?’

‘Because you’ve got the book.’ He paused. ‘And if it turns out your mother was right, then someone needs to teach you how things really work. God knows, your father hasn’t.’

‘What do you know about my mother?’
'Your mother was a Mutineer.'

'Yeah, the bracelet kind of gave it away,' I interrupted. 'So if you know my mother was a Mutineer, I guess that means you were a Mutineer too.' I sat on a small stool on the opposite side of the room and leant forward expectantly, hoping he'd take the invitation to tell me more.

'No.' He seemed to soften as he remembered things from long ago. 'Just a sympathiser. But that was enough. I was caught out providing information to the mutineers. How they could better utilise the plant networks. That sort of thing. The Committee Chair scheduled me for botting, but somebody took pity on me. It took years before I regained full control. This was a good place to spend that time. I've been here ever since.'

'What's that got to do with me and the book?'

McCarthy didn't speak, just smiled. He seemed to be somewhere else.

'You've got the book with you.' It was a statement not a question. 'Take it out.' He must have seen the hesitation on my face. 'Don't worry, I won't take it from you. I'm too old now. The book's for somebody else to deal with, not me.'

I slowly raised my hand and untucked the book from where it sat close to my chest. It seemed hot, but I assumed it was from being stuck between my shirt and my skin in the humid Organics’ climate. McCarthy sucked in a breath as I produced it. He leaned back a little. Was he scared, or had he been waiting for the book to reappear for that long? The leaves of the walls began to rustle as though a strong breeze were blowing where none existed. Impossible, I knew, but the sound was getting louder. McCarthy placed his hand against the leaves and the noise dimmed slightly.

'What's going on?' I asked, watching the room around me. Not knowing what it would do next.
'You really have no idea what you're holding, do you?'

'It's a book,' I blurted. 'A weird one I know, but not that weird.' I pulled the stool away from the wall. These plants were starting to creep me out.

'You have nothing to fear,' he said. 'They're just excited to see an old friend.'

'Okay.' I paused. 'What's going on, McCarthy?' I looked from him to the walls that flickered like luminescence on water. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. 'What is this book?'

'That book was made from the bark of one of the great trees from the original Earth forest. It is connected to all things. These plants can feel it.' He rubbed his hand along the wall again. 'The connection to the Earth forest is very weak from here, but it can feel these plants, and they can feel it.'

'So what?' I began pacing about, feeling trapped in McCarthy's strange office.

'Plants communicate with each other. I've heard that before. It's no big deal.'

'They don't just communicate with each other, Zander. They communicate with us.' He paused, readying himself. 'We are connected to the plants. To all of the Earth. We just don't hear them anymore. Haven't for millennia. That's what the Mutineers were about, what your mother was about. We're not meant to be orbiting the Planet, tweaking our genes and doing as we please. We're part of the Earth. The Mutineers wanted to return us to Earth, and your mother was the connection. Her. This book. The Earth itself. But then she disappeared, just as things reached their worst, and everyone lost heart. Lost hope. You are the new hope, Zander.'

'No.' I backed away from him, not wanting to hear anymore. I made for the door but it seemed to have disappeared. The walls felt like they were closing in around me.

‘I’m nothing. Genetically inferior.’
'She kept the book a secret for a reason, Zander. She thought she might be killed. Knew they would try to stop her somehow, and they did.'

'I don't understand. Who did?'

'The Committee. They don't want this. They don't want to lose power, lose their control. That's why you need to learn about the book, how to use it, how to set us free.' He stopped and I dropped to the floor, not able to stand and think anymore.

'Is my mother still alive?'

'I don't know, but if she is, you and that book can find her.' He handed me some water and I gulped it down eagerly.

'How?' It all seemed so hopeless sitting here in this tiny room. The Committee Chair had been in power since SkyCity was formed.

'You need to learn everything you can about the book as quickly as possible.'

'I don't know, McCarthy.'

'There are people who will help. You just have to find them.'

'Can’t you help me?'

'I’m not a part of this anymore. And I don’t want to be.' His voice rose angrily. 'I’m too old now,' he was shaking his head. Turning away. The fire in him quickly dying.

‘You need to find the others. They’re out there.’

'I don’t know if I can do that.'

'Well, what else have you got to do?' he said, exasperated by me. ‘You think I really need your help down here?'

'No.' I began thinking again, not just reacting. If McCarthy couldn’t help me learn how to use the book then I’d do it myself. I'd stay here and learn everything I could. Then I'd be able to work out what to do next.
'This is too much for you to take in.' McCarthy wasn't used to talking, let alone showing compassion, I could tell. It was the way he seemed to think about these things before saying anything. Like he was reminding himself how to deal with human beings, after a lifetime spent talking to plants. 'Rest here until the end of the shift. You'll be safe, and less suspicious.'

'Where are you going?'

'Botts are naturally lazy creatures,' he said. 'If they think they're not being watched they'll just sit there. I spend most of my day doing circuits of this place, just to keep them working.' He turned and walked out. The entry had somehow reappeared, as though nothing had ever changed in this room. I knew otherwise. Despite that, I felt secure here, so I lay down on the small cot in the corner that probably doubled as McCarthy's bed. It wouldn’t surprise me at all to find out he lived here. If nothing else, it was safe. I slept until the chime in my armband woke me at the end of the shift. McCarthy was nowhere in sight. My hand grabbed at my chest. The book was gone. Then I remembered where I’d dropped it.

I reached for the book and placed my hand on it. It felt so familiar now. It felt good to be using it in this room. I couldn’t deny it. Opening the pages, I wasn’t ready for what was inside. One word. Betrayal. I slammed it shut and tucked it away. Betrayal. But who?

* * *

_Betrayal_. The word lingered in my mind the next day, as I met Lerrin and Skyler at one of the unused study areas we often retreated to. It was a good place for making plans, or just hanging out, mostly because nobody used them these days. Rooms like this had dotted the landscape of SkyCity in the early days, but there weren’t a lot of them
now. We’d found this one and made it our own, closing the door and fixing it with our own code to ward off any unwelcome visitors.

I guessed the original inhabitants had envisaged these as places for contemplation of great scientific issues. Space had been kept to a minimum, to encourage intimate meetings. A terminal sat along one wall. An afterthought, when space had become the issue, not contemplation. Two long lounges, more comfortable than most, sat in the centre of the room. They faced each other and sat adjacent to a large screen that covered a self-illuminating plant, which gave the room a constant soft glow without the need for daysim. It had probably been beautiful in its day, but was now overgrown from lack of care. I slid the screen back and began pulling away the dead leaves, as I’d seen McCarthy do, dropping them into the bottom of the planter. Perhaps I could get this looking right again: make a difference, at least to this small site.

Lerrin and Skyler entered, in the middle of a noisy discussion.

‘Oh look. It’s the gardener.’

‘You can be a jerk, Lerrin,’ I muttered, closing the screen as I did.

‘He’s very good you know,’ Lerrin continued to Skyler. ‘But rude. I think he feels he’s above his station.’

‘He definitely has issues,’ Skyler added, her tone still frosty. The word ‘betrayal’ jumped into my head and I quickly pushed it aside. The book was wrong. They were my friends. They wouldn’t betray me.

Lerrin leapt over the side of the couch, and in moments was lounging. I sat on the ledge, leaving the second couch free for Skyler.

‘Don’t tell me you two are arguing,’ Lerrin asked, without waiting for an answer.

‘It’s like the whole place has gone completely crazy. My Dad’s going nuts about some
book missing from that library. If only we’d got there earlier. We could have caught them with it.’

‘Why would your Dad get so upset about a book?’ Skyler asked with a quick glance in my direction.

‘It’s not just the book. There was the riot as well. He went ballistic over that. Personally, I don’t know what all the fuss is about. So a few low level, non-Committee first tiers ended up with concussion. It was a nice diversion for Security. I thought we were gone when that guy grabbed you.’

‘You know those low levels you’re talking about just want to be free to think for themselves,’ I said. ‘Isn’t that what this whole city was designed for? A haven for free thinking and scientific ingenuity?’

‘Free thinkers? That was money-raising propaganda. It was built as a safe haven for rich science boffs and their rich friends.’ Lerrin adjusted himself for maximum comfort. ‘And it turned out they were right. They’d never have survived the Demise.’

‘So you think Security was right to beat them senseless?’

‘It got us out of trouble.’ His eyes squinted suspiciously. ‘What’s going on with you? You’re not seriously sympathising with those protesters?’

This was dangerous territory. Lerrin would allow me some ‘eccentricities’, as he saw them. He also wouldn’t hesitate to hand me over if he thought I held any views contrary to his envisaged future of the city.

‘Of course not,’ I hesitated, too afraid to stand up for my own views. In that moment I truly did sympathise with the protesters, because I finally realised what they had overcome and what they were risking with their actions. ‘I just think there are better ways than my father’s Patch Lounges.’
‘Those patch lounges made your father one of the wealthiest in the city.’ Lerrin sat up, his eyes narrowing.

‘Well it hasn’t helped me much.’ I tried to sound as petulant as possible.

‘Yes, let’s argue about who’s the poorest little rich kid,’ Skyler interrupted. ‘That would make for such interesting conversation.’

Taking care of me: that’s what she was doing, again. But this time I was grateful. Getting on the wrong side of Lerrin was dangerous, and stupid. Thanks to Skyler, his attention was now on her. He pulled his spider-like legs down and around to the front so that he sat facing her.

‘You know you’re going to have to partner with one of us poor little rich kids eventually.’ He batted his eyelashes at her playfully.

‘Please,’ she said. ‘If you two are my options I’ll just have to settle for the quiet life, and partner a fourth tier for love.’

‘Great.’ Lerrin smirked. ‘I’ll start growing you a second head for the partnership ceremony.’ He checked his band. He’d forgotten something. ‘I gotta go.’

‘You just got here.’ I said.

‘I have a collection to make.’ His eyebrows lowered as he leapt up and headed towards the door. ‘Something special for our trip to the SoG.’

‘The SoG?’ I repeated.

‘We made the jump. That was the deal,’ he replied. ‘Why wait?’

‘The deal was that we all jumped,’ Skyler looked alarmed.

‘We did all jump.’ Lerrin said. ‘Zander just happened to land in the arms of a Committee Security guard.’

‘What are you up to?’ she asked.
‘You’ll see.’ He was already heading out the door, not bothering to turn to answer. Skyler and I were left in awkward silence.

‘What do you think he’s up to?’ I asked. Suspicious of everything, thanks to the book.

‘Who knows?’ She shifted uncomfortably. ‘Zander. You don’t think that book he mentioned could be the same one you found?’

‘What?’ I was caught unawares. ‘No. I told you. It’s my mother’s journal. I remember. Besides,’ I blustered on defensively. ‘There’s nothing in it.’

‘Nothing in it?’

‘Yeah, it’s empty. You saw it.’

‘Then how can it be the journal you remember her using?’ I’d thought of this myself, before I knew its secret. I gave her the only excuse I’d managed to come up with.

‘She must have had a collection of them, and she hadn’t got around to using this one yet.’ Skyler didn’t look convinced. ‘Like Lerrin said, the Black’s are sentimental fools. She probably liked writing in the same type of book. You know, kept a whole lot of them.’ My voice was rising. I had to calm down. ‘Why would you think it’s the book they’re looking for? Are you trying to get me botted? Is that what you want?’

‘No, no.’ She shook her head, a sadness descending over her. ‘Forget it. I just don’t want you getting into anything you can’t handle.’

The words infuriated me. Did she always have to point out my deficiencies?

‘You know, you’re just like him.’

‘Like who?’

‘Lerrin. You both think you’re so superior. I’m sorry I’m not up to your genetically enhanced standards.’ The words tumbled out, one over the other, but I couldn’t stop myself.
‘If there’s one genetic enhancement I really wish you had,’ she said, standing and pacing in what I assumed was an attempt to contain her own frustration. ‘It would be to have that giant size chip taken from your shoulder.’

I stood silently. There was nothing to say because she was right. Skyler planted herself firmly against the wall on the opposite side of the room. Her arms were folded. Her lips drawn into a tight circle. I guessed she was no longer speaking to me – again.

My thoughts turned back to Lerrin. We were going to the SoG.

* * *

‘Here they are boys and girls.’ Lerrin entered the room holding three small vials of what could only be blood. ‘The final pieces for our little puzzle.’

‘Blood samples?’ Skyler screwed her nose up.

‘Why do we need blood samples?’ I asked.

‘Because it’s not much of an adventure if we get our own blood tested.’ Lerrin resumed his position on the couch. ‘I thought we could test them. Surely if the SoG are as good as they say they are, they’ll realise that you,’ he passed a vial of blood to Skyler, checking the label as he did, ‘are a 20th century domestic cat.’ He held another vial up and inspected it. ‘You,’ he handed me the vial, ‘are a common mouse, as still found throughout SkyCity.’

‘Thanks.’ I pocketed the blood, unimpressed.

‘And I am a genetically modified lion from the short lived SkyCity Zoo.’ His smile was so broad and self-important that he actually did look like a cat.

‘And what happens when they do work it out?’ Skyler seemed at a loss to work out the point of his grand experiment.
‘We demand they redo the test, give them our own blood and they spend the rest of the day doing equipment checks.’ As usual he had it all worked out.

‘And if they don’t work it out?’ I asked.

‘Ah,’ he looked at me seriously. ‘Then we expose them for the frauds they are. Cause a crisis of faith at the lower levels and change the course of SkyCity history forever.’

‘Hmmm, pure genius,’ Skyler remarked. ‘I have to go. I’ll meet you both at the start of the next cycle.’ She tucked the vial into her pocket. ‘As long as I don’t get caught by Security for carrying illegal blood first.’

She walked out of the room not waiting for a response, as I studied my own vial of blood with suspicion. Was this the betrayal? Was it really Lerrin?

‘What’s wrong with her?’ Lerrin asked.

‘You think I know?’

‘Well you’re both acting weird. I thought it might be some sort of mutual madness.’

‘There’s no madness to be mutual.’ I sat on the seat Skyler had vacated. I was going for a “couldn’t care less” look, but probably came across as sulking.

‘So let’s go shoot some hoops,’ Lerrin said.

‘Shoot some what?’ Why did he always have to talk in riddles?

‘Hoops. 20th century sport I recently discovered. I’ve set it all up. Let’s go.’

I followed Lerrin out. There was no point arguing, and a week ago I would have gone happily. Now, though, the book had said betrayal. And everyone was a suspect.

We walked in silence to the recreation room, passing through the first tier crowd like shadows; neither of us drawing attention to ourselves. Inside the rec-area, Lerrin
headed across the room, grabbed an orange coloured sphere and threw it at me. It raced through the air like a hover-ball, only bigger, then began arcing slowly downward to the floor. I watched with disappointment. What was the point of a ball that fell to the ground? It hit the ground with a hollow sound, but instead of sitting there it sprung up violently and shot towards me. My hands leapt to my face, grabbing it as its rough skin brushed against my face, burning the surface of my cheek.

‘What is this?’ I screeched; adrenalin surging through me. Lerrin was laughing too hard to speak. It only made me angrier. ‘You nearly took my head off.’

‘I know.’ He was doubled over with joy. ‘I never expected you to catch the thing.’

I threw it back towards him and watched the strange ball drop, then spring back in an odd twisting arc. Lerrin ducked out of the way, the ball scraping his shoulder. He turned and retrieved the ball, rubbing his shoulder as he returned with the ball tucked under his arm.

‘How do you do that?’ he asked.

‘Do what?’

‘You’re the least engineered of any of us,’ he said, casually spinning the ball on his hand. ‘But you caught the ball. Just like that,’ he clicked the fingers of his free hand. ‘Instinctively.’ There was something threatening in his voice. Was I being too suspicious?

‘Yeah, with my face.’ I pointed to where the ball had grazed my cheek. I could feel the heat from it still, so I knew it would be red. Lerrin paused for a moment, then threw the ball high into the air, where it hit a large board with a square painted on it and a hoop sticking out. It dropped away from the board, bouncing a couple of times before he picked it up.
‘C’mon then,’ Lerrin said. ‘Let’s see if you’re as good at shooting.’ He tossed me the ball and I caught it awkwardly. I aimed at the board, as I’d seen Lerrin do. Then I moved my aim just slightly to the left of the square and threw.
CHAPTER SIX

McCarthy had me spend the morning in the very end bay of Organics. Somewhere a pipe was blocked. So I stood with a small group of botts, on one of several floating pontoons, hauling a long stick up and down through the rotting water like a gondalier on a festering river. It was halfway through the day before one of the botts stirred up the particular piece of knotted vine and garbage, which had made its way through the grated pipe and blocked the system.

We guided our pontoons back to the side to disembark. I couldn’t wait to get out. I’d adjusted to the stench hours before, and the nausea had long since passed. But the inescapable humidity made my clothes stick and every inch of me felt filthy. My pontoon bumped against the edge. I steadied myself with the stick, then stepped one foot onto the ledge as I’d seen the others do.

Behind me, another pontoon slid in silently, jabbing into the back of mine so that it bounced off the edge and back out into the water. I dug the toe of my shoe into its surface, trying to keep it close. But my body was already precariously balanced between the ledge and the pontoon, and there was no hope of staying upright. My leg plunged into the murky water, as I grabbed the ledge with one hand and stabbed out with the stick in the other, trying to keep from going in completely.

I was panting desperately, as a bott’s hand wrapped around my right bicep. He held me, suspended for what seemed like ages, over the water. I stared at him, wondering what he planned to do. But he wasn’t looking at me. He was looking at the bott who had done this. The same one I’d seen McCarthy pushing into line during my first day in Organics.

‘Thank you, my friend.’ It was McCarthy, his hand on the botts shoulder guiding him to lift me out of the water. He did so with no effort. I hung from his grip like a wet,
rag doll. ‘Take care of this,’ McCarthy ordered quietly before turning his attention to me.

‘Let’s get you cleaned up.’

I moved without a word, following McCarthy to a shower room, where I cleaned myself and dressed in a grey bott uniform he gave me. There was a lingering stench and I couldn’t work out if it was real, or only imagined. When I was done, McCarthy led me back to his office.

‘Stay here for a while,’ he said. ‘At the end of the shift you can let yourself out.’ I nodded, unquestioning. Something was going to happen to the bott. I didn’t know what. Only knew that it was something to do with me.

There was nothing to do, so I took out the book to see if it held any answers. Placing my hand on its cover, I concentrated on the face of the bott. Picturing his face in my head. Why does he hate me? Why does he hate me? The phrase repeated in my head like a mantra, but the pages remained empty.

I closed the book, holding it pressed between my palms. ‘Why does he hate me?’ I asked out loud. I asked again, to be sure, then slowly prized open the pages. Nothing. ‘Why does he hate me?’ I shouted.

The chimes that marked the end of the shift sounded. I looked across to where McCarthy had left, but of course there was no doorway there now. The last thing I wanted was to be stuck here. I stood in front of where the door should have been. My arms crossed over my chest, pressing the book into my ribs. My head hung slackly above it. I’d had enough. I needed to get out.

‘That wasn’t so hard, was it?’

‘What?’ I looked up to see McCarthy standing in front of me; the doorway opening out before him. ‘But I didn’t do anything. I couldn’t make it work.’

‘The doorway opened,’ he said. ‘That’s not failure.’
I walked out of the office feeling only slightly better. McCarthy handed me a bundle of leather that looked similar in colour to the book.

‘What’s this?’

‘It’s a satchel they used to use up here, when they had to carry a lot more equipment,’ he said, helping me slip it over my head so that it hung across one shoulder and across my chest. Another strap fitted around the waist like a belt leaving a small satchel at the front between the two straps. He took the book and tucked it inside. ‘There’s a compartment at the back. You can keep it hidden.’

I looked down to see the satchel lying flat across my chest.

‘Sometimes the best place to hide, is right under people’s noses,’ he said.

‘Is that part of the lesson?’ I asked.

‘I told you, I’m too old for giving lessons,’ he said.

‘Okay,’ I said, starting the long walk out of Organics. The botts were gone. Night had arrived quickly and tomorrow I was going to the SoG.

* * *

We exited the transport chute on level three of the third tier and walked into a crush of people. The smell of bodies invaded my nose: sweat, perfumes, food leeching from their skin. Tears filled my eyes and quickly disappeared again.

‘What’s going on down here?’ I said.

‘The lower you go, the tighter the squeeze,’ Lerrin replied.

‘And this is only halfway,’ Skyler added.

I didn’t want to think about what the lowest levels looked like. Instead I concentrated on sticking close to the others. We made our way through the crowd to a series of boardwalks that led out to various areas of the third tier. The boardwalks were
set a few steps up from the main floor and seemed to pass through a field of plants. They were the same as those I’d seen in the plant room of the first tier. Two of the boardwalks were sparsely populated, with the odd third tier wandering towards or away from the central area. The third seemed to carry a constant stream of traffic in both directions. It was the third that we were headed for, and as we stepped onto the boardwalk I saw the water that flowed beneath us, and was the reason for the raised boardwalks. The third tiers had turned their water treatment system into a stream that ran directly through the central gathering area.

‘Look at this. It’s amazing,’ I said, leaning over the railed edge.

‘Totally inefficient,’ Skyler said. ‘The pollutants from these walkways alone would mean a water facility almost twice the size of our own.’

‘Hence, the tight squeeze,’ Lerrin said. ‘Besides, I could spit right into it if I felt like it.’

‘It’s recycled effluent,’ I said. ‘Like they’d care about your spit.’

Lerrin shrugged and Skyler started pushing more aggressively through the crowd. I would have been happy to stay and discover more of the third, apparently less advanced tier, but we were on a mission.

At the end of the boardwalk we entered a section more like I was used to. A series of doors led off from a wide central corridor that was free of plants, water or any other distraction.

‘It’s not far,’ Skyler said. ‘I can see the entrance already.’

None of the doors stood out to me. I had been expecting something similar to the stream and the boardwalk. This was just bland grey, plastic and steel, like anywhere else I went every day. We stopped not far from the entrance.

‘You look ill,’ Skyler said.
‘I don’t know about this.’ I said, happy to let them think it was this place making me nervous rather than their company.

‘I’ve warned you about these repressed memories,’ Lerrin said. ‘So Daddy scared you years ago and told you to never come here.’

‘Shut up Lerrin.’ Skyler barked.

‘No he’s right,’ I admitted. ‘This is dumb. Let’s just do it.’

‘Okay,’ Skyler smiled and headed for a door. Lerrin wrapped his arm around my shoulders and led me through.

‘Never know,’ Lerrin whispered, ‘we might meet some nice third tier girls while we’re waiting.’

‘I can hear you Lerrin. You’re disgusting,’ Skyler said. ‘Besides, we have an appointment. We won’t be waiting.’

Their bickering went on, but I didn’t hear any of it. We’d entered the first door, walked through another short corridor and entered into a huge room filled with people. Now I knew why there’d been such a steady stream of traffic along the boardwalk. They were all here. The crowd was as thick as in the main entry but far more subdued. A reverential group whisper seemed to be happening. People sat mainly, in groups playing cards, dice and other games they’d brought with them. Or on their own, quiet and contemplative.

At the far end, a series of ornately decorated doors ran along a wall. Colourful neon tubes ran around one door. Some had flowers, some were painted - each one was unique. And at each door a keeper sat, getting up only to escort people out and allow the next waiting person in. It was the second time I had been amazed in this place. It was something I could barely remember feeling before.
‘I’m going to book us in,’ Skyler said. ‘Wait by the door, and don’t upset anybody.’ She looked at Lerrin. He shrugged innocently and Skyler disappeared into the crowd.

‘To the door,’ Lerrin said.

‘Which one?’ I asked.

‘That one,’ he said, and pointed to a plain door at the end of the row.

‘That door? Why isn’t it like them?’

‘That door is the reserve of the first tiers. The lower tiers line up in front of the door they find most appealing and wait.’

‘So why do we get that door?’

‘Because that’s the only way the first tiers will let them keep this crazy joint open - we get preferential treatment.’

Lerrin knew everything about the corrupt activities of SkyCity, because his father controlled most of them. This wasn’t exactly common knowledge, but neither was the fact that Lerrin could squeeze himself into any sort of ducting, if he thought there was the possibility of gaining information he might use later. I felt privileged when he divulged it to me. Sharing somehow made it less valuable, I thought.

We headed for the door, the crowd mostly making way for us. Our first tier uniforms stood out against the colourful variety of clothing everyone else wore. Down here, we were foreigners. There was an element of fear, more than respect, as we pushed our way forward.

A large crowd had gathered not far from our door. They were waiting for the adjacent door, which seemed to have a dark purple theme supported by a woven surround of flowers and crystals. There were colourful feathers too and bands of bright neon tubes snaked around its edges. It made our door look all the more plain. The group was loud;
their conversation sprinkled with laughter and the short shrill sounds of some sort of whistle being played. Lerrin walked straight through the centre, pushing a large man aside in the process.

'This is a place of respect.' It was a statement not a challenge, but Lerrin snapped around. It was what he'd been hoping for - a reaction.

'Then show the proper respect, third tier.' My stomach turned at his words. The man stepped forward, meeting Lerrin's stare. As the smile left his face I realised I’d seen him before. This was the protester Skyler and I had pulled into the corridor.

'Respect is earned, not demanded from above.' I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Didn't he know who Lerrin's father was? Or was he some type of professional troublemaker?

'Is that what the mystics told you?' Lerrin sneered. The room seemed to go quiet around us. 'Ask for a refund if they try to spin you that story again.' He turned and stalked toward the unadorned door without a second glance, leaving me in the midst of the group. My feet turned to lead, refusing to move.

'I apologise for my friend,' I said, before I could think.

'Then there is hope for you yet,' the protester replied. His eyes continued to stare at me as though he was assessing me somehow. 'My name is Finn.'

'Zander,' I said.

'Be wary of the company you keep Zander. Friendships can betray you.'

'I'll keep that in mind,' I replied. The book’s message was screaming inside my head. Paranoia sprouted inside me like a forgotten weed. I pushed it aside and raced to catch up with the others. By the time I caught up with Lerrin, Skyler was waiting at the door.

'Where were you?' she asked.
'Lerrin insulted some guy from one of the groups and left me standing in the middle of them.' I wasn't about to recount the event, or the fact that I recognized Finn from the riot. Not in front of Lerrin anyway.

'I thought you were following me,' Lerrin laughed. 'Come on. Let's do this. I'm getting bored with this place already.'

As we entered I turned back to see Finn still staring at me. He nodded. An acknowledgement of something? I didn't know, so I nodded back. It seemed the right thing to do. Then I closed the door and forgot about him.

Inside, a small ante-room was filled with a soft couch and a small table laden with fresh exotic fruits and sparkling water. The doorman, in his beige robe with its blood red sash, had followed us in and was pouring a glass for each of us. Lerrin had made himself comfortable with his feet up on the table as usual. Skyler and I sat together at one end.

'Whenever you are ready, please proceed,' the doorman indicated a second door at the back of the room before discreetly making his way back outside.

'I'll go first,' Lerrin said, as he quickly peeled a rambutan and popped it into his mouth. 'Don't eat all the fruit.' He disappeared through the door.

'What do we do now?' I asked.

'Relax I guess. I've only done this once before and I was by myself.'

'You came here alone?' I asked, incredulous.

'Of course.' She bit into a crisp red apple. 'I wasn't going to tell anyone.'

'You seem to know a lot about the place – for only one visit.'

'My father is sympathetic to the ideas of the Scientists of God. So are a lot of Committee members.' The apple surrendered to another attack. Skyler was nervous. 'It's very political. That's why I didn’t want to come today. My father has regular meetings with the SoG. I don’t want to be caught down here.' She paused. Her voice lowered. 'If
my father shows up we won’t find out anything useful.’ She looked in the direction of my chest.

‘I thought this was a bit of fun. What are you thinking?’ I whispered back.

‘Just eat something,’ she tossed the savaged core back onto the platter. ‘And don’t tell Lerrin anything. Don’t use that stupid blood vial he gave you either.’

‘He’ll want to know what they tell me.’

‘Say they told you your allocation will be altered. That you'll soon be promoted to science crew.’ She picked up an apple and shoved it into my hand. ‘That's the sort of stuff they tell people. Now be quiet and eat.’

I obediently bit into the apple and sank back into the couch, lost in thought. Whatever I'd stumbled upon was far more significant than I'd imagined. I reached up, adjusting my jacket and the book strapped beneath it. The longer I wore the book, the more it seemed to disappear. I barely felt it there anymore.

After about twenty minutes Lerrin emerged smiling.

‘Future ruler of the entire city.’ He held up his left index finger to show us. ‘Blood prick test to prove it.’ He ambled over and collapsed onto the couch next to me.

‘But who is the real future ruler of the city? You, or the lion king in that vial?’

‘Didn’t get a chance to switch.’ He sounded disappointed. ‘He was all over me. Trying to be helpful. Sycophant.’

‘I’ll go next.’ Skyler was already getting up. She entered the room and we sat in silence waiting for her to return. When she did she looked even emptier than before.

‘What's up?’ Lerrin asked. ‘They find out you've got liquid mercury running through those veins of yours?’

Skyler just glared in reply.

‘Your turn Zander,’ Lerrin continued. ‘Let's see what's in store for the flora king.’
'Don't push it,' I said. He laughed of course. Then stuffed a huge bunch of dark purple grapes against his face and began picking them off with his teeth.

'Hurry up,' Skyler nervously picked at the fruit. 'The seers don't like to be kept waiting.'

'I thought they were scientists,' I muttered, then opened the door and went through. And then I understood. The small room was simply adorned with soft material covering every surface, including the ceiling, in order to give it a relaxed feel. It felt exotic almost and my nose sensed some sort of incense lingering in the air, but there was no sign of burning oils. An olfactory stimulator no doubt – they really were old fashioned. The seer waited calmly, seated on a large cushion behind a low table. I got the feeling he wouldn't care if I'd never walked through the door. He would have just continued sitting there regardless. On the table, laid out in front of him, were the tools of his trade: various instruments to extract a small blood sample, a centrifuge, glass plates that would have been used under an old fashioned microscope. Instead of a microscope though, there was an ornately carved rosewood box. Its markings were similar to the panel where I'd found the book. Why not just use a blood reader I wondered. Much simpler. But then, if I was learning anything it was that nothing about SkyCity was simple.

'My workwear interests you?' he said, indicating I take a seat on one of the many cushions. I obediently sat. 'The first tiers are always interested by our lack of technology, but we find there is more truth in simpler instrumentation.'

'Oh,' I said. My mind drew a conversational blank.

'Give me your hand and we will begin the process.' I extended my upturned left hand and received a quick stab to the finger for my trouble. The seer squeezed my finger and a small ball of blood appeared. How Lerrin expected any of us to swap the blood samples I didn’t know.
I watched the thick red drop make its sticky roll off my finger and onto the small rectangle of glass. The seer then smeared it across with another. It seemed completely barbaric and trivial. Was I supposed to believe anything that came from this 'test'? He placed the glass inside the box and peered into two small eye pieces at one end.

'What is it you seek?' he asked, making adjustments to various dials and slides on the sides of the rosewood box.

'If I knew the questions, I could answer them myself.' I said.

'Really? What makes you so sure?'

'Because life is not that changeable. We are given our allocations, and that is what we do. We are paired, and that is who we are with.' I thought about my life for the first time. 'Questions complicate everything.'

The seer sat back from his screen, swallowed hard and seemed to search for what to say next. I couldn’t read his face. It seemed to lurch from shock to fear with each twitch.

'I have had questions too,' he paused and looked up at me. 'Today, one has been answered.'

'What do you mean?'

'You are genetically...’ He was looking around, distracted, searching urgently for something in the drawers that ran along the underside of his table. He pulled out a small disc and dropped on the table. ‘No. No.’ He muttered to himself. His eyes darted from the desk to the drawers to the curtain behind him.

'What do you mean?’ I asked. ‘Genetically what?’ His behavior was creeping me out. What had he seen in my blood?

‘Nothing. Nothing.’ His voice was shaking now. He patted the small disc. ‘I must check with a superior. Check with a superior first.’ He lifted the disc then put it back
down, carefully. ‘Must check first.’ He turned to me then, finally remembering I was still there. ‘I must get a superior.’ He stopped. Thinking again. ‘The equipment could be faulty,’ he stammered. ‘I will return shortly. Please, do not move.’

He pulled the curtain behind him across, revealing the grey wall and door behind, and slipped through it. I was alone in the room. What was wrong with my blood?

A burning sensation shot through my chest. I grabbed the book, yanked it out and threw it down on the table. It was completely cool, but the imprint glowed red inside.

There was no point wishing it would come up with a different means of getting my attention. I placed my left hand in the imprint and opened the book. Change Skydweller.

The disc caught my eye: a holographic flower played across its surface. Mallika.

I felt my heart begin to pound in my chest. Change. I had to move now, before the seer returned. I grabbed the book. Stuffed it back inside my shirt. Scanning around, I didn’t know where to begin with the equipment. The glass. I needed more glass. Leaning across, I slid a drawer out. It was filled with little glass rectangles and squares. I grabbed one and fumbled through my pocket to find the vial of blood. My hand was shaking. I tapped a droplet of blood onto it but it ran messily across it. I stuffed it inside my pocket and grabbed another, placing it carefully on the table this time. A drop of blood fell neatly onto it and I capped the vial and put it away.

Slowly. Slowly, I thought. Don’t rush or you’ve had it.

The smaller glass square was tricky, but I held it carefully and dragged it across as I’d seen him do. The door clicked. I placed the slide on the table, as two men, the seer and another, entered the room arguing. My eyes flicked to the slide. Two slides. I stood and slammed my hand over the original. They turned to me, their argument silenced. What was I going to do now?

‘I demand to know what’s going on.’ I said in my best version of aggressive.
'It’s nothing. Nothing.’ The original seer smiled weakly. ‘Please sit. Be still.’

I took the opportunity and slowly slid my hand, and the tiny glass slide under it, back along the table until I could get my thumb under it and slip it back into my pocket. Relief washed over me, but it wasn’t over yet.

‘I am the Seer Supreme.’ The new one announced coldly. Then he waited, as though I should be impressed. Perhaps I should have faked it, but I was kind of busy trying to conceal an ancient book and a blood sample.

‘There has been an anomaly with your test.’ He forced a smile. ‘I am merely here to confirm my estimable,’ the smile faded, ‘colleague’s interpretation.’

‘Good.’ I replied. ‘Let’s get this done with.’ If he thought me an arrogant first tier, there seemed no reason not to act like one. I sat silently as the Seer Supreme picked up the sample and slipped it into the strange box. He watched me the entire time, not looking away until he put his eye to the viewer.

‘As I suspected.’ He lifted his head and his eyes were on me again. The tightness of his lips left me in no doubt that I was in serious trouble. ‘You’ve been taken for a fool by an over-indulged first tier child.’

‘What?’ The seer was distraught. He rushed his eye to the viewer. ‘But…’

‘No excuses,’ he sneered. ‘It is clearly animal blood. Genetically unmodified, yes. Human, no.’

‘But I saw it.’ The seer refused to lift his eye from the viewer.

‘A pity you did not see the markers that clearly indicate animal blood.’

What had he said? Genetically unmodified. That’s what he’d seen in my blood: genetic purity. I wasn’t even moderately enhanced? My skin began to burn with anger.

‘Look all you like. You’ll have plenty of time to contemplate while you sit with this one and wait for Security.’ His threat was lost on me. I was too furious to care.
‘Don’t even try to go anywhere, youthful. I will have…’

Our doorkeeper burst in behind me. His serene demeanour replaced by fear.

‘Master. Come quickly. There is trouble outside.’

‘Trouble?’ He seemed perplexed. This wasn’t his usual day. ‘What do you mean trouble?’

‘A riot,’ he panted. ‘You must come quickly.’

All three of the seers rushed past me and out through the ante-room. I was lost in my own thoughts and a riot (uncommon, despite the fact this would be my second in a week), held little interest for me. They’d lied to me. My parents had lied to me.

‘Zander, come on!’ It was Skyler, leaning in through the door. ‘We have to get out of here. There’s another riot, but bigger. Much bigger.’ When I didn’t move, she came over and grabbed me by the arm. ‘Look, I don’t know what’s just happened, but if we get caught here we’re in big trouble. Come on.’

I moved with her, but nothing registered. Not my feet on the ground. Not her hand on my arm. Not until we stepped out into the main foyer to find a jumble of bodies. The noise snapped my senses back into focus. This was different from the other riot. There was no security team beating everyone senseless for a start. The room that had been filled with reverential looking followers had morphed into an angry crowd, fighting amongst each other and taking out their anguish on the surrounding structures. Neon tubes were being stripped from doors. Decorative flowers lay squashed under foot.

A hand wrapped around my arm. I sighed heavily, thinking security had arrived and spotted me already. Then I heard Lerrin’s voice.

‘Get your hands off me. Do you know who my father is?’
‘Yes we do.’ It was Finn. ‘And while your breeding is exceptional, your timing is lousy. So be quiet. Be a good hostage. And you can return to your first tier opulence in no time.’

They pushed the three of us away from the crowd towards a secluded exit. The crowd continued pushing, as we formed a tight hub in the middle of a circle of rebel Mutineers, determined to keep us from disappearing back into the crowd.

‘Give me the vial,’ Lerrin whispered to me.

‘What?’ ‘Wasn’t that the least of our worries?’

‘Just give it to me and don’t let them see. Get Skyler’s.’

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the half empty blood vial. The rectangular square was still in my pocket, so I pulled it out and dropped it to the floor. The shouting of the crowd drowned out the sound of it crushing underfoot. I nudged Skyler and opened my palm to show her the blood vial. She looked confused, but a few silent expressions got the message across. She handed hers over and I passed them on to Lerrin.

‘What are you doing with them?’

‘Enough talking.’ The order came with a shove. How could my father have bottled so many, and there still be thugs like this around? We continued on in silence, the hostile sounds of the riot gradually dissipating as we turned into a passage, herded down like cattle. When we’d walked so far that the riot was a distant memory, Finn began making a series of turns. The pace didn’t slow. I tried memorising the sequence, even though Lerrin would know it down to the steps between each turn.

‘End of the road, first tier youthfuls,’ Finn said. He pulled us all roughly into a lineup with the help of another protester. The others formed a guard, staring down the passage we’d just come through.
‘Great. We’ll be on our way then.’ Lerrin sounded smug as usual, but there was a distinctly nervous edge to his voice now.

‘You don’t know when to stop, do you?’ Finn sounded like he was addressing a bug that continued to hover at his ear. Then he pulled a weapon from under his jacket, aimed it at Lerrin’s head and fired.

‘Lerrin!’ Skyler screamed, as he dropped to the floor in a crumpled heap. The weapon appeared at my face. Looked me between the eyes.

‘You’re next.’ I heard the click, the weapon engaging.

Weird how time slows when you least want it to.
Darkness surrounded me. You know when you wake up too early and everything’s still black, and for a moment you’re entirely alone in the universe? Except I knew I couldn’t be alone, because the splitting headache was a big reminder of exactly what company I was keeping.

Lerrin.

‘Lerrin?’ I whispered, afraid of drawing attention to myself. ‘Skyler?’

‘I’m here.’ Skyler’s voice was low but she didn’t sound afraid. She was dealing with the situation. ‘They gave Lerrin a pretty big blast. But he was still alive when I last saw him.’

‘When you last saw him? Where is he?’ I rubbed at my temples. ‘I thought they’d killed him. And me.’

‘With an immobiliser? I don’t think so. And I don’t know where he is, but I’d say he’s close.’

‘Are you okay?’ I asked, wondering why she was conscious. Was this what betrayal had meant? Did Skyler have something to do with this? I shook my head in the darkness and willed myself to stop questioning everything. The only thing I’d ever had was my instincts. All this suspicion had rendered them useless. Finn must have taken mercy on her for some reason?

‘Yeah, I’m okay. I think that weapon lost power with each hit. I woke up as they were locking us in here.’

‘Where is here?’ I asked.

‘Who knows? We could be in the very depths of the fifth tier. I want to know why they took us and I want to know what they intend to do with us.’ Her voice cracked with tension.
‘I want to know where the light is.’ I said, squinting and hoping to make my eyes see.

‘Now that I can accommodate.’ A voice, tinny and distant, crackled around us. My head spun around, searching the darkness. A harsh metallic grating sound followed a thin sliver of light, emerging behind us. A tall figure crouched at the hatch-like doorway. My eyes snapped shut against the harsh brightness as the door opened. It was Finn. He closed the hatch. My eyes relaxed and opened – the glare replaced by a soft green luminescence. It was just enough to see the small room we were in. It must have been an old food storage bay, as the walls were all lined with shelves. Empty shelves. Finn stood hunched over, the ceiling too low to contain him. In his cupped palm was the light source.

‘What is that?’ Skyler asked.

‘It’s a glow plant.’ He answered, holding the tiny thing with great care, as he swung his huge body down and sat on the floor with us.

‘Glow plants? Not a very reliable light source,’ she answered.

‘No, but that is the mark of the third tier – not very reliable. And The Committee is only too happy to keep it that way.’ He said. ‘We’ve learnt to make do.’

She let the subject slide, her brow lifting disinterestedly before she began scanning the room again.

‘Where’s Lerrin?’ she demanded instead.

‘He’s fine,’ Finn said. ‘We thought it safer for everyone to separate him.’

I tried to remember the few times I’d spoken to Finn. He’d been reasonable before. Perhaps he still could be.

‘I’ve seen you a few times now,’ I began. ‘Am I allowed to ask where your home is?’

He laughed heartily. I didn’t think I’d said anything funny.
‘A diplomat like your father.’ My face hardened. ‘You wish to know which tier I belong to,’ he said, ignoring my reaction.

‘I was trying to be polite.’

‘I’m a third tier.’ He looked down towards the glowing plant, seeming to think about what to tell us. ‘But my affiliations run throughout SkyCity. Low and high.’

‘So why bring us here?’ Skyler interrupted. ‘What’s your purpose?’

‘You pulled me away from the riot.’ He looked first at Skyler then me. ‘Then you both appeared at the SoG Hall.’ He paused. We waited silently, as he knew we would. ‘I believe in fate, and for some reason ours are being drawn together. I wanted to see why.’

‘So what do you intend to do with us?’ I asked. ‘If it’s fate you believe in, what purpose does locking us up serve?’

‘I’m not locking you up.’ He stood as he said it. ‘This is the best accommodation I could find on short notice,’ he smiled as though he meant it. ‘Come.’ He turned to the door and unlocked it. ‘Let’s see if I can influence your fate just a little.’

With that he walked out the door, Skyler and I obediently following.

A guard closed the door as we exited. He was holding the strange weapon I’d already been hit with. Skyler said it was an immobiliser, but I wasn’t so sure. I could only hope Lerrin would behave enough to be conscious whenever we came for him.

‘I’m Finn, by the way. I know we’ve met before, Zander. But your friend…’

‘It’s Skyler,’ she interrupted. ‘The pleasure’s all mine.’ Her tone let him know it was no pleasure at all.

‘Two Committee children.’ He smiled back at us as we walked down the tiny corridor. ‘I couldn’t be in more esteemed company.’ Skyler snorted. I said nothing. ‘Come now. No need to be like that. I’m about to give you a tour no first tier’s ever enjoyed.’
‘What do you mean?’ Skyler sounded interested. The Committee and the first tier controlled all of SkyCity. There was nothing the first tiers didn’t know.

‘The first tier wiped their hands of us long ago.’ He stopped at an old style hatchway, and began turning the heavy tumble release. The door protested noisily as he swung it back. ‘They hoped we’d fade away. Kill each other in desperation, or wither away from hunger.’

We followed him through the door to a long, wide room. It was dark except for the soft halos of row after row of glow plants. Each was held, almost reverentially, in the palm of a single keeper. Skyler turned away, her body shaking for a moment before she gathered herself and turned to face the horror once more. A weariness seemed to settle over me; making my skin sag across bones that were filled with the weight of their despair. It was a treatment area, a hospital of sorts. Antiseptic mixed with bitter medicinal plants, burning our lungs and staining the air with a smell like wet circuitry.

Around each of the light keepers sat groups of various sizes. Patients? Guinea pigs? I’d never seen anything like it. Tubes filtered into bits of old machinery that chugged away noisily, doing what, I didn’t know. The patients, if you could call them that, were connected to the machines. Others had bits of machinery grafted directly onto their bodies. Bits of old food recyclers, air treatment systems, even electronic gadgetry, pulled apart and reassembled to provide an arm here, an artificial kidney there.

I stared down the length of the room. It was at least as long as one of the bays in Organics. Filled with row after row of sick, probably dying, people.

‘The third tiers are some of the oldest inhabitants of SkyCity,’ Finn explained. ‘All of us have the longevity gene. We can go on forever. But The Committee deemed resources too tight decades ago. There are no more fix-ups for a third tier. You damage a
part, there’s no more re-grows. You get sick, they hope it kills you.’ He paused, his eyes seemed to drift off. ‘You hope it kills you.’

‘This is barbaric!’ Skyler spat.

‘But necessary.’

‘Why? I don’t understand.’ I asked. ‘What happens that a person needs a…’ I searched around, looking for something I could take in. ‘…an old heating coil for a leg?’

‘A leg is easily lost when your job is to maintain the functioning of the city.’ Finn announced casually. ‘In fact, it’s often preferable.’

‘You’re not making any sense.’ I added.

‘Then there’re the old diseases. More of them return with every generation.’

‘Diseases? You’re lying.’ Skyler shouted angrily.

‘This one is arthritis.’ He walked over to the nearest pod and placed his hand carefully on the shoulder of an otherwise healthy looking man. ‘Sy’s body is racked by arthritis. People used to get it on Earth, usually with age but sometimes not. It inflames the joints, twisting them, causing constant pain. Not so bad when you only live to eighty. When you’ve already made it to 180 – that’s a lot of pain to deal with.’

‘No more pain now.’ Sy slowly lifted his arms, jiggling the various tubes that fed some unknown substance into his body.

‘That’s insane,’ I cried. ‘Just turn off the arthritis gene.’

‘They did.’ Finn patted Sy’s shoulder and turned to me. ‘One hundred and twenty years ago. Viruses can interfere with genes, switch them off or on more easily than we do. And that’s just one variable.’ He stopped again, then signalled Skyler and me to follow as he strode through the crowd of half-made people. We did as we were told. I was happy to be moving past, and hopefully away from, the nightmare of this room.

‘Where are we going? Where are you taking us?’ Skyler demanded.
‘What? Not enjoying the tour so far?’ His voice was filled with contempt, but none of it made its way to his face as he smiled and let his hand fall upon everyone he passed. He was smiling at them, warmly. These half-made freaks that I could barely keep my eyes on for more than a few seconds.

‘First tiers might have the best of everything, but they don’t always get it right. Nature still has its grip on us. And nature has a way of breaking through. We think we’ve solved something, then nature comes at us from a blind side and suddenly we’re right back where we started, without a clue about how to deal with it.’

‘The Committee wouldn’t do this. The Committee’s purpose is to improve the lives of every member of SkyCity.’ I repeated the mantra, straight from a text. Even I didn’t believe me. This was just the sort of thing The Committee would do. Just the sort of thing my father would do. Keep the best resources for himself.

‘If this is all so bad,’ Skyler grabbed Finn by the arm and swung him around. ‘How is it that you don’t seem to have any problems?’

‘Nature can be cruel, and kind. I’m a throwback. A genetic anomaly.’ He turned and continued on down another dimly lit corridor.

‘Why is everything so dark down here?’ I attempted to change the subject. I didn’t want to think about my own genetic heritage.

‘We try to keep this place as off the radar as possible. If the power consumption is kept to a minimum, The Committee doesn’t notice it. We like it that way.’

‘Then why show us?’ I asked. ‘You know who we are. How dangerous we could be.’

‘You’re right.’ He paused. ‘But perhaps I intend to kill you.’
‘You couldn’t kill us if you wanted to.’ Skyler seemed defiantly bored. ‘You all have anti-homicide genes.’ She stared at Finn and smiled mockingly, reminding me more of Lerrin than herself. ‘Not that we don’t believe all third tiers are model citizens.’

Finn stood back now, weighing up Skyler’s words. He’d been caught out playing a bluff. I wondered where he’d go from here. And I breathed easier with the relief of knowing that he couldn’t kill me.

‘You surprise me,’ he said. ‘I really thought The Committee would keep you less informed.’ There was something about the way he held himself, so confident, that told me this wasn’t over. ‘But then, you’re putting all your trust in The Committee. And that’s not very informed at all.’

‘What are you saying?’ Skyler asked, all trace of her previous boredom gone.

‘I’m saying that nature has a way of dealing with mistakes. I already told you I’m a throwback.’ He smiled again, almost childishly. ‘Still, there should be no need for you to test if I’m telling the truth. And really, what help would it be? I’d have to kill you to prove it to you.’

‘You’ve made your point,’ I interrupted. If what he was saying was true, then neither of us was safe down here as long as Skyler kept harassing him. ‘But you still haven’t answered my question. Why bring us here?’

‘I apologise.’ Finn was looking at Skyler still. ‘Sometimes it’s difficult to follow through with your own beliefs.’ He turned and continued striding down the tight corridor. We followed in silence. There wasn’t going to be an easy answer anytime soon.

We arrived at another tumble lock door. A third tier with an immobiliser weapon stood on the other side.

‘Hatch,’ Finn greeted the guard with a warm shoulder pat. ‘Take the girl back. We’ll continue on alone.’
‘What?’ I sounded too nervous as usual. ‘Why are you sending her back?’

‘Don’t worry.’ Skyler replied, already turning to head back to the cell. ‘I’m sure it’s all part of his great plan. I’ll be fine.’

Hatch swung the heavy door closed behind them, leaving me alone with Finn – and wondering if this was when he’d answer the question of whether his anti-homicide gene worked or not. Instead he turned to me and smiled the same hearty smile he’d given to those closest to him.

‘Come on. Now you will see something no first tier has seen for a very long time.’

He took off down the long corridor at a pace that had me puffing. It seemed to arc in a long curve. It wasn’t obvious, but I had a sense that we were slowly heading around and down. At least there were no more hatches to pass through.

Finn finally came to a stop when the corridor ended at a large storage room. It was filled with junk as ancient as the city itself. Tubing, pipes, and all sorts of electrical cords and cables sat in giant tumbled piles. Behind the piles were more piles filled with old screens and keyboards. The piles were as tall as me. In a small alcove to the side, two neat coils of tubing were laid out. A pair of old space suits sat on top, looking like a couple of passed out patch junkies.

‘What is this place?’

Finn looked around. He seemed to be searching for whatever it was that had me so stunned.

‘Oh this?’ He realised. ‘This is the junk room. Old components and stuff that The Committee deemed worthless. It all gets shot out as space junk, but we salvage it for parts.’

‘Parts?’
‘Don’t act dumb, Zander.’ He sounded offended. ‘You saw our people in the hospice. If we can use this stuff to help them, we will.’

‘Sorry.’ I looked away from him, ashamed of my own ignorance. ‘I wasn’t thinking.’

‘Don’t worry.’ He headed into the alcove and began slipping one of the old space suits over his clothes. ‘Not many first tiers are thinking. At least you admit it.’ He zipped the suit so the top half fell lazily from his waist. ‘Here.’ He grabbed the other suit and tossed it to me. ‘Put this on. We’re going out.’

My gut twisted. Behind Finn were two heavy metal doors surrounded by thick seals and heavy clamps to hold it all in place. It wasn’t an alcove. It was an airlock. And he intended for us to use it.

‘Are you crazy?’ I shouted. ‘You want to go outside in some old spacesuit? No way, Finn. This is nuts.’

‘Nuts?’ He laughed. ‘This from the kid who was going to make a crazy jump from the Pavilion Deck.’

‘I would have made it,’ I defended myself lamely. ‘How do you – ’

‘Would you?’ He seemed pretty sure he knew the answer to that one. ‘Your friends would have broken their legs for sure, if they weren’t so modified to make it near impossible to break anything.’

‘How do you know? You were too busy starting your little riot, and pretending to be a first tier.’ I lashed out angrily.

‘Yeah, right after I alerted that guard to the stupid stunt you were about to pull.’

‘You were watching me?’ The need to feel angry with him was only worsened by the realisation that he was probably right.
‘I’ve been watching you for a while.’ He slipped his arms into the top half of the suit, zipped it firmly, then slapped shut a heap of seals across its front. ‘Now stop arguing and get the suit on.’

‘I’m not going anywhere with you.’

‘Fine.’ He hit a pad on the wall and the door between the junk room and the airlock began sliding shut. I should have made a run for it. Instead I stood, frozen, and watched it slowly lock into position. I held my hand against my chest. The book was strangely silent.

‘In a few minutes I’m going to open the airlock. So you decide. You want to be in the suit, or out of it,’ he said, then paused. ‘I’m happy either way.’

I looked from the door behind me, to the wall. My foot slammed angrily into the pile of tubing, but made no impression on the thick heavy stuff. I wanted to beat my fists against Finn’s grinning face. But I was a first tier and we didn’t do that kind of thing. Instead I snatched the suit up and slipped my legs into it, tugging angrily at the zips and seals.

‘Can you give me a hand?’ I shouted. ‘It’s not like I do this everyday.’ My hand was shaking on the zip, as Finn pushed it out of the way and began fixing the seals.

‘I threw up in the suit, my first time.’

‘You did?’ I obediently placed my arms inside as Finn directed. My heart was pounding as the neck seal clipped into place.

‘It’s a scary thing.’ He wrapped the seals around my wrists, then held out his own for me to do. ‘Your friend – she’s flight crew isn’t she?’

I nodded.

‘Ask her how much training she has to do before they let her step foot out of the city.’
He slipped a large dome like helmet over his head: a fish bowl of clear plastic. He handed another to me. I slipped it on. It felt stuffy, but air soon started streaming out from where the tube connected to it. There was a reassuring hiss. Luckily, I’d spent some time in confined spaces with Lerrin lately, so the claustrophobic feeling wasn’t too bad.

‘You know the flight crew fly blind?’ Finn said. ‘The flight pods are just like SkyCity – no windows. Why do you think that is?’

‘I don’t know,’ I answered, my voice swirling in a soup of fear and confusion.

‘You will know,’ Finn said, as though it was an explanation.

Finn checked my seals, then it was time to go. He pressed a button that depressurised the bay, then another to open the outside door. Light beamed in from outside, and my eyelids tightened, afraid of what they might see. As my eyes slowly opened, a smile spread across my face. I couldn’t help it. Something primal came across me, and I was again reminded of the book tucked inside my shirt, pulsing warmly now. Not in the harsh way I’d come to expect lately. This was more a feeling of recognition; of seeing an old friend.

There was so much blue. So much white. And most spectacular of all were the large greeny brown patches that represented land. I realised I’d never even imagined what Earth might look like. Never thought about it. Never considered it. Because that was what I’d been told to do. Earth was a dead rock we happened to orbit around. But this was no dead rock. It was the most singularly beautiful thing I’d ever witnessed.

‘Now do you know?’ Finn’s voice was crackly, but close, through the suit’s communication system.

‘Yeah.’ I turned my head slowly in the cumbersome suit. The realisation dawned on me as the words formed. ‘Yeah, I do.’ And then my gaze seemed to head back towards
Earth without me even thinking about it. ‘It’s because nobody would want to stay in SkyCity if they got to see this all the time.’

Finn let me stare for a while, then his hand slowly closed around my arm.

‘Time to take in the rest of the view.’

I felt myself being turned away from Earth. The desire to stay was strong, but I didn’t want to go against Finn now. Everything had changed somehow. If there was something else he needed to show me, then I knew it had to be important.

‘We need to get some distance for this. Push yourself off from the ledge. Not too hard though. You want the air-line to stop you, not you pull it out.’ He smiled cheerily.

‘That wouldn’t be good.’

‘Not if you’re intending to take me back.’ I said.

‘I’ll take you back, don’t worry. Just head for that old satellite and you’ll get the direction right.’ He pointed to a piece of space junk floating in the distance. There was a lot of junk around, but it was the biggest so I gathered it was the satellite he was talking about.

‘I’ll go first,’ he said. ‘Just do like I do and you’ll be fine. No harder.’ My eyes were fixed on him as he gently bent his knees and pushed his feet away from the edge. He was a big man, as tall as Lerrin but much wider across the shoulders and chest. In the outdated spacesuit he seemed about to burst its seams. And yet there was a grace to his measured glide into the distance. The air-hose and security line trailed behind him.

I got my feet ready and prepared to follow him. Knees bent, feet pressing away softly. I lifted off, my body starting to spin slowly as I did. I tried to correct it. The sudden movement made it worse. I panicked.

‘Zander!’ Finn’s shout echoed around my helmet. ‘Don’t panic. Stick your arms out! Over your head. Do it!’ I could barely hear him over the heaving of my breath. My
arms shot up above my head. Well, in my head they shot up. In reality, they moved slowly towards making a straight line above my body. As they did, I felt the spinning slow, and realised I was still heading in the right direction.

‘I didn’t realise,’ I spat out. ‘I didn’t know I had to keep my arms up.’

‘You don’t,’ Finn returned. ‘I had to do something to make you stop flinging them around. You’re obviously not much of a hover-ball player.’

‘No. I’m not assigned for sport. I guess I know why now.’ Actually I knew exactly why – I didn’t have the genes for it. What’s the point of playing a sport you’re not great at?

‘Sorry Zee, I forgot you’re new at this.’

Zee? Had he just called me Zee? Great. Floating in the vacuum of space and I finally get my first nickname.

‘So what are we looking for?’ I asked.

‘Not for – at,’ he said. ‘I’ll turn you around when you get here.’

I floated along, slowly bringing my arms down to my side so I didn’t look like some ancient super hero. I watched the Earth below me.

‘Okay. If you can drag your eyes away for a few seconds.’ Finn’s hands gripped my arms again, as I realised how clumsy I was in this suit and how many times he must have done this before in order to be so skilled. ‘Here it is my friend. SkyCity as you’ve never seen it before.’

I turned to find myself staring at the underside of SkyCity. It was nothing like the pictures I’d seen. Pictures that showed a shining metal city, twenty stories high, and surrounded by eternal darkness. An enormous disc that turned constantly, to create the artificial gravity we lived in.
Finn and I were at the end of our lines. I could almost see the curve of SkyCity’s sides, or maybe it just looked that way from down here. Vast expanses of metal spread out above me, the blackness of space surrounded me and below, the Earth, beautiful and inviting.

My eye followed the lines back to the airlock we’d come through. It couldn’t have been more than a few hundred metres. I was nowhere near the edge of the city yet.

The more I looked at it, the less familiar it seemed. Instead of following an arc smoothly down to the bottom end and the beginning of the Skylift, the city had developed what looked like unsightly cancers that grew in all directions and sizes. The surface was mottled with the pitting of solar damage. Marked by debris that had clashed against its sides.

I began to recognise shapes amongst the hundreds of lumpy metal growths that sprouted from the sides. A dilapidated entertainment deck from the Pavilion was closed in with wrinkled sheets of metal and attached to the city’s side. Next to it, an old planter bay formed the base and part of the sides of another large metal construction that clung desperately.

‘What are they?’ I asked, unable to take my eyes from them.

‘They’re people’s homes.’ Finn replied, his voice quiet, almost reverential. ‘Box-holes.’

‘I don’t understand. Why would people live like this? Why would they choose this instead of the city?’

‘Because living like this is our only safe option,’ he said.

I’d begun counting. There were twenty already, directly in front of me. Who knew how many more were built along the sides of the city?
‘We salvage the scraps, build a box-hole against the side of the city and then cut our way through,’ he paused. ‘A box-hole isn’t covered by SkyCity’s laws. Technically, we’re not part of SkyCity. It’s our only shot at freedom, until we find a way out of this damn place.’

Perhaps it was the look on his face, or maybe it was the desperation of his actions so far, but I believed him. And I could understand a desperation so great you’d choose this, but I didn’t think I’d have had the courage to do the same.

‘You could have killed me before, couldn’t you,’ I said, only now realising the seriousness of Finn’s actions.

‘Could have killed you. Have killed others.’ He said it so casually, I shivered inside the hot suit.

‘You’ve killed others?’

‘I’m not proud of it.’ He turned to face me – the city and its cancerous township reflecting in his helmet. ‘You have to know though. If you’re going to make the change, you have to realise what we’re all capable of - when they let the real us get out.’

‘How many of you are there?’

‘Not many. Most of the third tier do as they’re told, live in squalor and tight conditions. We choose to live beyond The Committee,’ he paused. ‘Our numbers grow as The Committee tightens its hold.’

‘You keep talking about change. About me, and change.’ I paused, trying to work it out before I said it. ‘I’m a kid. I just got my placement - in Organics. I can’t help you change anything.’

‘You’re already changing things.’ Finn said with certainty. ‘Once that book got out, that was it. You don’t have any choice.’
‘Wait a minute.’ I sounded confused, because I was confused. ‘What do you mean? What book got out?’

‘The book. The one you’ve got hidden away.’ He frowned at me. ‘We’re floating out in space, with a bit of rope, and a hose to keep us alive. I think the time for mistrust has passed, don’t you?’

He was right of course. All I could do was shrug, which didn’t really show, thanks to the bulky suit.

‘We’d better get back.’ He grabbed hold of the two lines attached to his suit and pulled himself around. Immediately he began moving hand over hand and I realised this was how we were to make our return. I followed his lead. ‘I figure you can stay for perhaps a few days until we have to get you back. Any longer and they’ll start ripping the lower tiers apart searching for you. It’s not long, but I can help you learn about the book.’

‘How do you know about the book?’

‘I worked with your mother.’ His hands came to a rest. ‘It was a long time ago. We can talk when we get back to the bunk. We should hurry now. There won’t be too much air left.’

My hands began moving along the line in time with Finn’s. It was harder than it seemed. Not because of the weight, but rather the slowness of our progress. The lines never seemed to tighten and I hadn’t realised how far out we’d come.

Then the line tightened – pulled fast. I felt it run through the fingers of my gloves. Then I was moving. Fast. I looked up towards the bay. Two suits, hauling me in. Behind them, behind the airlock doors – Committee Security. Before, I would have thought I was saved. Before, I would have wanted them to give Finn everything he deserved.

Now I was scared. Scared for Finn, not me.
CHAPTER EIGHT

I didn’t struggle. There was nothing I could do. I’d have to appeal to my father. Appeal for Finn’s life. Kidnapping Committee kids was definitely a botting offense, but I had to try.

One of the security guys had his hands on me, dragging me into the airlock and tossing me inside. Worthless space junk, in the way of the real prize – it was Finn they wanted. The second security guard, broader shouldered and shaking with his eagerness for action, made for Finn’s line. It wouldn’t take long to drag him in, and then what? I had to think.

The bright flicker of a laser cutter started up. The playful light, festive against the discolouration of everything else in this forgotten end of the city. The flicker sparked, as it hit the floor, slicing its way through Finn’s lifeline. He was cutting him loose.

‘No!’ I screamed, twisting away from my captor and lunging desperately for the line I never had a hope of catching. The air-hose twisted, its contents slowly spilling out in an invisible wave. I watched the safety line snake away in another direction. He’d be dead as soon as the emergency air-pack ran down.

Security grabbed me again, pulling me back, the force of my lunge having sent me in a slow spiral back towards the outside.

‘Zee, let it go.’ Finn’s voice was calm inside my helmet. ‘Don’t ruin things for yourself.’

I slammed my free foot into the security guy’s face. His hands slipped. The force of my kick sent me drifting away from our slow motion fight. The floor was too far away. I unclipped the safety line and the air-hose from my suit, as I floated toward the top of the air lock opening. Grabbing the rim of the metal surround, I pulled myself outward as hard
as I could. A quick adjustment as my feet passed the edge, and I was on my way, flying towards Finn. No safety line or air-hose. And really hoping these air tanks had more than a few minutes of stale air in them. Finn wasn’t some rubbish, to be discarded. I had to force them to bring us both back.

‘Don’t do this, kid!’ Finn screamed. ‘You’ve got more important things to worry about.’

‘I need you to teach me,’ I yelled back. ‘I can’t do it alone.’ I stretched out and grabbed him. There wasn’t much in it, but my aim had been good enough. ‘Not yet.’ We kept heading outward, away from the city again.

Security had no choice but to bring us in. They scrambled, desperately trying to grab Finn’s lines which danced about before them. I felt the lines tighten. They’d caught them, thankfully, and we were slowly being towed back towards the city. I stared up at the cancerous outer surface, as we made the journey in silence. It would probably be the last time I’d see it. I wanted to remember it.

‘Thanks for rescuing me, Zee,’ Finn’s voice interrupted. ‘They’re not going to let me go you know. The Committee. They won’t allow me to walk away from this.’

‘There are things you can do,’ I said with an authority I didn’t feel. ‘If you know the right people. McCarthy told me. You know the right people, don’t you?’ I pleaded and he seemed to consider me for a moment.

‘I suppose I might.’

We continued the slow haul back into the space dock. Finn said nothing. I didn’t know what else to say. Then we were close enough to see the faces of the two Security guys. They didn’t look happy. Finn began to whisper.

‘Take a long look Zee. This is probably the last chance you’ll get for a while.’
The Skylift was all I could see without tilting my head. I followed its long line of nanotubes down until they disappeared into the Earth. Then I followed it back up to the tattered underside of SkyCity. Thirty six thousand kilometres down to the Earth; another thirty six thousand up to the giant asteroid that tethered SkyCity in place. An umbilical chord, connecting us to the Earth – a dying foetus that nobody had cut free.

‘The Committee stopped using the Skylift centuries ago. They were afraid of retaliation from the Undercity survivors.’

‘Undercity survivors? What’s Undercity?’ Finn laughed at that. ‘There are no survivors. The Earth is dead.’

‘The Earth is far from dead,’ he said, the words beginning to rush. ‘There’s a whole city down there full of people, in who knows what condition. The Committee ran their initial genetic experiments on them. Convinced them they were looking for cures to diseases brought about by The Demise, when really, they were perfecting the longevity gene.’

‘So nobody’s contacted them for over a century?’ My breath caught. I gripped onto Finn even tighter, as I began coughing. The air was running out. ‘Does the Skylift work?’

‘Oh it works. Your mother went down there ten years ago.’

‘My mother? So she is alive?’

‘Nobody ever heard from her again. But that’s where she went.’ The Skylift disappeared beneath us. We were seconds away from security. As much as I hated them, I wanted to breathe. ‘I believe she is alive. You have to get down there – find her. Take the book to her.’

‘I’m just a kid, Finn. Nobody’s going to let me go to Earth.’

‘Promise me you’ll try.’ His voice was urgent. ‘Promise.’
The security guys grabbed both of us, shutting the bay doors immediately and not letting go until the red warning light turned to green. I ripped my helmet off and shoved the security guard in the chest before he had a chance to grab me.

‘I just saved your skin!’ I gasped. ‘This guy just kidnapped me. You think my father’s going to be pleased if he finds out you got your hands on this third tier scum first?’

‘It’s nothing to do with you, youthful,’ he said, grabbing my arm. I yanked it back with everything I had.

‘And it’s even less to do with you, second tier,’ I sneered. ‘Take him to my father.’ He couldn’t argue with that. Instead, he grabbed Finn and shoved him to the floor.

‘Get the suit off, Mutineer scum.’ Security slammed his foot into Finn’s ribs. ‘I tried to give you an easy out. You can thank your little captive here for what you get now. You’re already scheduled for botting.’

Finn turned to face me. His movements slow and deliberate. ‘Thank you,’ he said. Then he nodded, once, as though I’d already completed the task he’d asked of me. He finished pulling the suit off and stood, shakily, ready to be shoved down the same maze of tunnels and corridors that we’d made our way down less than two hours ago. I pulled at the seals on my suit, desperate to escape the immediate claustrophobia.

‘You’re coming with me,’ said the second security guard. ‘My orders are to return you to your father.’

‘I’ll find my own way,’ I said, stepping out of the suit. I tossed it down, and headed back through the piles of garbage that were destined for use as anything from human parts, to make-shift homes. The need to get out overwhelmed me. I ran.

Images flowed into my head. I weaved my way through what had seemed like a labyrinth coming down. The book pulsed. There was a pattern to it that I followed,
somehow, back to the room we’d been trapped in. Lerrin was still there; conscious.

Smirking as though he’d done some great thing. Skyler stood in the corner, arms folded.

‘Where’s your guard?’ I asked.

‘Hatch?’ She shrugged disinterestedly. ‘I don’t know. Committee Security intercepted us here. He ran for his life.’

‘And they just left you here?’

‘I guess they were pretty eager to find their first victim,’ she said. ‘They’ve been too busy rounding up third tiers ever since – I guess we’re safe.’

‘Of course we’re safe,’ Lerrin said. ‘And you can thank me for it.’

‘Why can we thank you for it?’

‘I used the vials to leave a blood trail,’ he announced proudly. ‘Took them longer to get here than I thought. And not one of them’s thanked me yet either. I’m going to make sure it goes on record. They’d still be wandering the first tier, scratching their simpleton heads, if it wasn’t for me.’

‘So you led them straight to us?’

‘Brilliant. I know.’ He didn’t seem to notice that nobody else was excited by the outcome.

‘You’ve got no idea what you’ve done.’

The smirk left Lerrin’s face. He stepped in closer, peering down at me.

‘I saved your neck is what I’ve done. You should be grateful,’ he sneered. ‘What’s going on with you anyway?’

‘Nothing.’ I snapped. ‘I’m getting out of here.’ I turned toward the door. ‘I can’t stand waiting around while Security beats innocent people. Surely that’s not a crime yet.’

I began walking, and hoped I could find the way. Somehow I knew it wouldn’t be a problem.
I’d rounded a second corner when I heard running behind me. I swung around.

Skyler.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said.

‘What for?’

‘I don’t know,’ she paused. ‘Everything.’

‘Okay, let’s just get out of here.’

We didn’t speak the rest of the way. That was okay with me. I needed to concentrate on the images floating into my head. Three steps. Two steps. A corridor.

Right. We made it safely back to the apartments without a word.

‘You’d better go.’ I said.

Skyler hesitated. She seemed scared. Only I wasn’t sure, because I’d never seen Skyler scared before. Then she kissed me. Gently. On the cheek. Then entered her apartment without a word. Before, I would have been beside myself at that kiss. Now, I just turned and walked away. I needed to see my father.

‘Is there anyone you won’t bott?’ I screamed, as I entered The Committee office of Ryl Black. The only offices on the first level of the first tier.

‘Don’t start, Zander,’ Ryl said, calmly closing his tab. ‘You’ve got no idea what’s going on. Don’t come in here throwing your youthful judgments at me.’

‘My judgments?’ I laughed. ‘You and The Committee impose your judgments on everyone, every minute of their lives.’

‘Yes. That’s right.’ He sneered back. ‘And your friend would be dead if it wasn’t for my judgment.’

‘He might prefer it to botting,’ I said, but Ryl didn’t react. He stood, paced, his hands clenching and unclenching.
‘He got into your mother’s head too.’

‘They were friends. They had similar views,’ I said. Somehow it sounded hollow, as I delivered the words here in Ryl’s office. What did I know about their friendship?

‘They were friends because he orchestrated their friendship.’ Ryl stopped pacing and turned to me. ‘He put all the ridiculous ideas in her head that led to her disappearing. That led to you.’

There, he’d said it. My mother had made the decision to leave me this way. Unengineered. No genetic enhancements. My genetic inferiority disgusted him. And he disgusted me. He should have fought her. Made her allow the changes. I couldn’t stand to look at him any longer, which was probably how he’d felt about me my whole life.

‘Don’t worry. I won’t be around much anymore.’ I turned before he could say anything else, intent on getting out of here. Ryl followed me out into the corridor.

‘What are you going to do?’ Ryl quietly inquired.

‘Pack.’ I didn’t even bother to look at him.

‘Where are you going?’ Still the quiet voice. What was that?

‘I don’t know,’ I lied. ‘I’ll stay in Organics. There’s room and it’s quiet. And I’d rather be anywhere but with you.’ My words sounded harsh. It wouldn’t matter to him. He walked back into his office, opened the first drawer and retrieved an item I couldn’t see.

‘I’ve got something for you,’ he said. ‘Before you leave.’ His voice was calm. I hadn’t expected that. When he reached me, he held out his hand. Inside it sat a small black pouch.

‘What is it?’ I asked, refusing to reach for it.

Instead Ryl reached out to me, taking my hand inside his own like I was a small child again. Then he placed the pouch inside my palm.
‘A family heirloom,’ he whispered. ‘Put it away. Keep it safe.’ His eyes stared into mine and his hand pressed firmly for the longest time. He seemed about to say something, but he never did.

A single electronic pip sounded from his office. The Committee was calling him. Strangely, he lingered for a second. Then he dropped my hand, and headed back into his office. I stared after him, listening to the muted babble of his voice and the electronic one on the other end. Then the door slid shut.

I turned and left. Not to Organics though. The truth was here somewhere. Finn had shown me the beginnings of it. His version. I was going to find my own. But first I needed to rest. Now that I had time to notice, I realised my head was throbbing. Bottings were always scheduled for the beginning of a cycle. It would be hours before Finn was gone. I needed to clear my head. I could go back to Ryl and try again; make another appeal.

I went to our empty apartment, and stripped off my suit. Lying on the bed, I reached under and slid across a loose panel below, and tuck the book inside. It was the best hiding spot I could think of. Then I slept.

My head filled with images of stars, of endless night. I turned and felt a bright light hit my eyes. The Earth, but not as I’d seen her. She was covered in dark ugly lumps. I knew what they were instantly. I had to look away. But when I did, there was SkyCity. Pristine. As I’d always imagined it looked. Metal shining. Sun reflecting. But then the lumps began to appear, to grow. And soon SkyCity looked as tarnished and stricken as I’d seen. I turned back towards Earth. The lumps were disappearing. Diminishing across the globe. She was healing. I knew she’d be all right. We had created the sickness that almost killed her, and it had followed us here.

It had only ever been a matter of time.
When I woke, the apartment was still empty. I showered and changed. Normally I’d have checked my tab, but it didn’t seem worth it now. I knew that whatever was there was a lie of some sort. Standing in the middle of my room, I realised I had no idea what to do.

*Get to Earth.* That’s what Finn wanted me to do. But this was my reality. A kid in a room, with no idea how to do anything. Do as I was told. That was what I knew. But not for too much longer. I grabbed the book, strapped it into place, and headed to Organics. Genetically inferior or not, I could learn about the book. I had to get McCarthy. Had to make him teach me.

Walking through the security checkpoint, I felt the strangely calming effect of Organics. There was the humidity that warmed you like no heating device ever could, combined with the breeze of the giant fans at the end of each section. It felt – natural.

The botts worked at the various bays, picking at the plants in some order that eluded me completely. I didn’t know what was a weed, a plant, or whatever else was kept in the bays. Others trudged slowly along the bays taking samples of the water, or cuttings from certain plants. The monotonous regularity of their work didn’t seem so different to my own life. At least, up until the last few days.

They all ignored me, as I made my way to McCarthy’s office, pushing through the last doorway of thick plastic panels. There was nobody around. Not a single bott. But then these bays were the end of the line, and there was never much to be done here. No doubt that’s why McCarthy’s strange office was hidden away at this end. I walked up and stood in front of the wall of leaves. The doorway we’d passed through was nowhere to be seen. Walking along the outside, I didn’t discover any opening.
‘Okay,’ I called out to the wall of greenery. ‘I’ve got this,’ I said, pulling the book from inside my shirt. ‘Open up.’ No response. Not a rustle. ‘McCarthy, I need to talk to you. Let me in.’ Again, nothing. I stuck my hand into the embossed print on the cover, and felt the familiar tingle. ‘May I come in – please?’ I asked, as humbly as I could manage. There was rustling, and then a space opened. I walked through it – McCarthy wasn’t inside.

The office was as sparsely furnished as I remembered, but I managed to find a place to sit that I didn’t think would upset the old guy, if he caught me in here without his okay. There was nothing to do. No tab to check. I’d forgotten mine and naturally, McCarthy didn’t have anything normal like a terminal in his office. I wanted to know what was happening to Finn. Wanted to make sure McCarthy could help him. Tell him who the right people were.

I opened up the book for lack of anything else to do, resting the cover over my palm. Words slowly appeared. Safe. Rest. Find the light.

‘Safe. Finn’s safe?’ I asked. I wanted a guarantee. ’Rest. I know. I’m tired. I get it. But what does find the light mean?’ I hadn’t slept for long at the apartment. I’d probably missed a whole sleep cycle by now. And Finn was safe. That’s what it said. McCarthy would be back soon. ‘Sleep and rest. I can do that,’ I said, lying down on McCarthy’s couch. I was asleep only seconds after I put down my head.

I woke to find McCarthy’s face staring into mine.

‘Finn’s been botted.’

‘What?’ I jumped up. The book slid off my chest and hit the floor. ‘But he’s safe for now. That’s too fast. I was going to talk to my father again.’ I was still trying to wake up, make sense of it all. Talk to my father. What good had that ever done? It wasn’t like he’d bend the rules for me, let alone a complete stranger.
'It had to be done.' McCarthy’s voice was all matter-of-fact.

‘No.’ I leapt off the couch, but the feeling of uselessness overwhelmed me before I could even contemplate some sort of action. ‘Can’t we do something? You got past the botting process. How did you do that? You knew the right people you said. Did Finn know the right people?’ My words tumbled over each other.

‘It’s all right. Finn knows the right people. He’ll make it back someday.’

‘Someday?’ Confusion turned to anger. ‘Someday? You think someday is good enough?’

‘Finn knew the risk. He wanted to try anyway. It was his choice.’

‘What do you mean McCarthy? Did you know about Finn’s plans to kidnap us?’

‘Of course not. Nobody shares a plan. It’s a sure way to get yourself caught out.’

My face twitched between suspicion and anger. ‘He’s a Mutineer. That’s what I know. I knew it was him behind the protests too, because it’s just like him to rush things.’

McCarthy wandered over to a chair and slumped into it, looking every one of his many years. ‘What’s the point of living this long, if you’re always trying to rush things?’

‘Did my mother rush things?’

‘She always knew best. Just like Finn,’ he paused. ‘She had you. Got you through your early years, until you could look after yourself, and then she took off to follow her crazy ideas. You were her back-up plan. You and that book.’ He pointed to the book, still lying on the floor. I picked it up and sat it on my lap.

‘What do you mean?’

‘She needed a copy of it. She convinced me to grow one for her. In case the original was discovered. If I’d known it was because she was relying on it to change the plan, I’d never have done it.’
‘Wait.’ A million things screamed through my head, and I tried desperately to find the right one to ask him. ‘You mean you can just grow yourself one of these books?’

McCarthy looked at me like I was stupid. ‘It’s a plant. Of course you can. Tear out a page. Plant it with the offspring of the One Tree and it does the rest.’

‘That sounds scientifically impossible.’

‘It’s not science kid. It’s nature. Nature’s about the impossible.’

I opened the book and tore a page at random. Leaves rustled madly. McCarthy looked as though he’d just watched me open an airlock.

‘Then do it.’ I demanded.

‘You can’t just rip out a page,’ he shouted at me. ‘You’ve gone crazy after a single afternoon with Finn.’

‘You said that’s how it’s done,’ I protested.

‘Give it to me.’ McCarthy snatched the page, cradling it in his hands, and raced to the planter box behind his desk. ‘I said that’s how it’s done. I didn’t say do it. You have to respect the plant, treat it properly.’ Parting the leaves, he made his way down to the soil, which was hidden by the lush foliage that burst out from it and surrounded us to form the office. This was the heart of his office. Laying the paper flat, he covered it in a thin layer of soil that he scraped carefully, almost lovingly, from the surroundings. Once he’d finished, he allowed the leaves to fall back into place. It was as if they had never been disturbed.

‘Will it be okay?’ I asked tentatively.

‘Yes. But you might find it’s not speaking to you for a while,’ he said, jabbing his gnarled finger in the direction of the book.

‘But you’ll have a spare now,’ I said. ‘If anything happens to me.’
‘If anything happens to you?’ McCarthy’s eyebrow rose inquisitively. ‘Now why would anything happen to you?’

‘Finn told me about Earth. He told me I have to go there. I have to find my mother. Give her the book.’ Confusion swirled in my head, as I listened to myself. ‘Only, I don’t get that now. Why would she need the book if she’s got her own?’ McCarthy looked at me for a long time before he answered.

‘After she left, nobody ever heard from your mother. Finn believed that something happened to the book. That it was lost, stolen, destroyed. Anything but the fact that she rushed in, and probably didn’t make it.’

‘What if he was right? What if she does need the book?’

‘Finn was in love with your mother. He let it blind him to the truth. When he knew you’d found the book, he started his stupid campaign.’

‘McCarthy, she is alive.’

‘I know you want to believe…’

‘No.’ I patted my chest. ‘The book told me. Mallika lives, Skydweller. That’s what it said.’ McCarthy was speechless. ‘Mallika is Jasmine. I worked it out.’

‘I know what it is,’ McCarthy snarled.

‘Skydweller’s me – that’s what it calls me.’ My voice faded out, as I realised how stupid it all sounded.

‘It gave you a name?’ McCarthy’s eyebrow was raised again.

‘Look, are you going to help me, or make fun of me?’

‘I’ll help,’ he said. ‘But under my own terms – no rushing.’

‘Fine.’ If all old people grew to be this grumpy and slow, was it any wonder they invented anti-aging drugs. ‘And while you’re taking your time thinking about things, I’m going to see Finn. I want to let him know I’m going to try to help him. Even if he can’t
understand a thing I’m saying.’ I made for the door before he could object. ‘You know it wouldn’t hurt you to remember what it was like to be young, once in a while,’ I called back.

‘And it would be wise for you to think about what it is to grow old,’ he replied.

* * *

Finn sat in a bed in the hospice that formed part of The Committee’s first level lair. He stared vacantly at the food tray in front of him. Beside the bed was a chair. Nothing else. Not even a door. The room was devoid of colour. His vibrant third tier clothes had been replaced by a plain grey jumpsuit. The off-white walls were the only things that stopped the grey chair, grey bed and grey man, from disappearing altogether.

I knocked on the wall in an old fashioned gesture of privacy. Finn didn’t respond.

‘I can’t make a promise like that,’ I whispered. ‘I’ve got no enhancements. None. And you know that.’ My voice caught in my throat. ‘I’m even lower than you. I can’t do what you want.’ I swiped away the tears.

Then I turned and walked away without ever entering. I wanted to kill him.
CHAPTER NINE

‘Master Black, how strange to see you twice in as many cycles.’

‘Committee Chair, I’ve been to see my father,’ I replied. He didn’t need to know about my hospice visit.

‘And checked on our newest bott,’ he said.

‘Yes.’ He’d been watching me then. I wondered how long. ‘I wouldn’t have felt safe, unless I’d been able to see for myself,’ I lied.

‘I do hope you were pleased with your father’s work.’ Of course, he saw my father’s work as a noble pursuit. I had to be careful. I couldn’t afford to give him any hint of how I really felt. I was in danger. The book, radiating stinging heat at my chest, left me in no doubt about that. The Committee Chair was after something, and I didn’t have a clue what it was. I had to be careful.

‘My father is a loyal servant of The Committee,’ I said. ‘I’m sure all of his work is of an exacting standard.’

‘Yes. Your father’s loyalty has always remained unquestionable.’ He gave me a haphazard pat on the shoulder, and turned away towards The Committee offices. Then he reconsidered, as though he’d remembered some minor detail. ‘Still, unquestionable loyalty could be considered questionable in itself – don’t you think?’

The burning at my chest stopped, replaced by a cool, calming pulse. What did that mean? Why had it changed? I slowed my mind. Halted the panic that was building, and instead concentrated on the calm feeling.

‘You cannot judge my father by my mother’s actions, Committee Chair,’ I said, as my mind cleared. The Committee Chair only stared, the skin around his eyes contracting tightly. For a moment, a collection of tiny wrinkles congregated at the corners of his eyes.
The dimple in the centre of his chin sank, then refloated. I decided to push him further.

‘The Mutineer told me about my mother before he was taken away.’

‘Told you what about your mother?’ His voice was quiet. There were secrets here. Secrets, The Committee Chair, needed to know had been kept concealed.

‘That she was a Mutineer.’ I let the words gush out, as though completely innocent; too naïve to understand the importance of what I was saying. ‘That she tried to start a return to Earth, against The Committee’s wishes.’ The Committee Chair’s face remained tight. ‘He was after a book she had. He thought I had it. Thought he could make her plan happen.’

Mention of the book, stirred something in him. He seemed distracted now. His mind no doubt darting, one by one, over the implications of the information.

‘You told him you didn’t have it of course,’ he said. I nodded. ‘How did he respond? Was he convinced you had it, or did he mention other possible locations?’ He grabbed my arm. Leaned in towards me, as though my answer might hold the key to everything.

‘I thought he was making it up. Trying to trick me for some reason,’ I said. ‘She didn’t really have a book worth kidnapping for, did she?’

‘No.’ He dropped my arm, and waved his hand distractedly. ‘Of course not.’

‘He said she was involved with the Scientists of God too.’ I was trembling inside. Hoping I hadn’t gone too far. Hoping his reaction would confirm or deny my suspicions.

‘Your mother was never involved with the SoG,’ his voice rose then fell again. Had The Committee Chair just lost control? ‘I wouldn’t have allowed it. They are a troublesome collection of heretics, making their fame from false misconceptions. You must never repeat such an accusation.’
‘Yes, Committee Chair,’ I muttered quickly, my eyes downturned. He must have believed my fear to be real, as his voice quickly returned to its usual calm.

‘You must excuse my emotion Master Black,’ he smiled. ‘Groups like the SoG represent a threat to our way of life. To hear your mother spoken of in this manner,’ he paused. ‘Let me just say, it raises great emotion within me.’

‘My apologies if I’ve distressed you, Committee Chair.’ The book had gone quiet again. I couldn’t feel anything there. ‘I thought you should know the accusations he’d made.’

‘Very good, Zander. You show more potential than your father gives you credit for.’ His mind was wondering again. Sorting through the implications. He seemed keen to move on.

‘If you’ll excuse me, Committee Chair, I must get back to my duties.’

‘Yes,’ he replied slowly. ‘As must I.’

I turned and began walking away, checking after a few seconds, that The Committee Chair was doing the same. He’d dismissed me totally; his quick stride suggesting he had bigger things than me to think about. Good. Let him. The Committee had messed with so many people, this felt like a small amount of revenge for what they’d done to Finn.

Thanks to The Committee Chair I had a direction now at least. He was lying about the SoG. I’d seen him there – and seen my mother’s office. There were secrets to be discovered. I could only hope my mother’s office might reveal some of them.

* * *

The place gave me the creeps – it was quiet like the old library we’d found, but the lobby of the first tier SoG precinct felt like something evil could leap from any one of the closed
and locked doors at any moment. The soles of my shoes made annoyingly loud sounds.

Everything echoed - even my breath. I stopped in every doorway, checking the path ahead. Then came to a halt at the entry to the central zone before the SoG office. This was not a place I wanted to get caught.

A hand touched my shoulder. I jumped and turned, stumbling onto my backside. 'Skyler!' I said, standing up and feeling the heat rise to my face. 'What are you doing here?'

'I've been following you,' she admitted without hesitation. ‘I knew you’d do something stupid once you found out about Finn.’ She stopped and looked about. ‘Where are we?'

'I found this the other day. Lots of empty offices, locked, and at the end is one for the Scientists of God.' I waited for a reaction, but she said nothing; just stared at the open area before us. 'The Committee Chair came out of that office last time I was here,' I added. ‘He was talking to somebody about “wanting something found”, and he wasn’t happy about waiting for it.’ Skyler just kept on staring.

'It’s the book, isn’t it?' Skyler said. 'That book you found in the library.'

‘Don’t be stupid,’ I answered. ‘Why would he want my mother’s empty book?’

‘Why do you carry it around with you all the time?’ she asked.

‘How’d you…?’

Skyler didn’t hesitate. She stepped forward, inches from my face. My cheeks were burning again, as I realised her hand was pressed against my chest. ‘I checked when we were caught in the corridor after the riot, and again after we got away from Finn.’ A smile tilted at one side of her mouth. ‘You are so easily distracted.’

I batted her hand away. ‘I keep it with me because it’s special. And I don’t want my Dad finding it,’ I paused, not knowing if she’d believe my story. ‘And because there’s
an office, just round this corner, with my mother’s name on the door. These are SoG offices. If you’re so smart, tell me why The Committee Chair would be after my mother’s empty journal, and why did my mother have an office in the SoG precinct?’

She stared at me a moment, thinking.

‘Okay. We’ll do this your way.’ She poked her head around the edge to the SoG area. ‘There’s nobody around. Let’s take a look at the place.’ She stepped out into the open area. I grabbed her arm and pulled her back.

‘These are empty,’ I said. ‘Those,’ I pointed toward the SoG offices. ‘I have no idea about.’ Skyler didn’t look so confident now. ‘I do not want to get caught in there,’ I said. ‘Whatever’s going on, I don’t think anyone will appreciate finding us here – least of all, The Committee Chair. He got really angry when I told him Finn said my mother was in with the SoG.’

‘Finn told you that?’ Skyler asked, her voice rising in alarm.

‘No,’ I looked around the corner, checking we were still alone. ‘I made it up. You know, for someone having secret meetings with the SoG, The Committee Chair was very keen to distance all of The Committee – including my mother.’

Skyler’s face softened. Maybe she realised the risk at last. ‘So, we sneak then?’

‘We sneak,’ I agreed.

We made our way around to the office, crouched low, Skyler leading the way. If anyone exited from the SoG office they wouldn’t see us for the large central garden. We stopped in the third doorway along, sitting silently, backs against the door, resting our heels. Making sure no one else was coming. My stomach tightened, but now I trusted the feeling. It meant fear – there was something here. And that meant we were heading in the right direction.
After a minute, I signalled to Skyler to head to the third doorway along, and then we were off again. Crawling on our hands and knees.

Skyler reached up for the i.d. panel when we got there. Nothing happened. I let her sweat for a second, before I pulled my mother’s band from my pocket, and passed it across the dull metal surface. Something clicked, and the door opened noiselessly. We were in, but the room revealed nothing.

A desk with writing instruments, a clean ream of paper, and an odd shaped rock sitting on top, as a weight. A tab had been fitted into the desk surface, but the screen was bare. Dull walls surrounded the desk. The only thing breaking the monotone grey was an old style recycling station fitted into the wall behind the desk.

'There's nothing here,' Skyler announced. 'Like absolutely nothing.'

'That's strange, right?'

'Definitely.'

I knelt down and looked across the surface of the tab. It was clean. Not a mark. Obviously it didn't get a lot of use. Skyler picked up the ream of paper, flicking through the pages that were all as white as each other. Finding nothing, she dumped it and began inspecting the paperweight instead.

'I don't think anyone's been here for a while,' she said, tossing the rock from hand to hand. She wandered round the back of the desk and peered behind the opaque screen of the recycling unit. 'Recycler's clean,' she paused. ‘This whole place doesn't make sense. I wouldn’t be surprised if we were the first people in here since your mother disappeared. It’s a total waste of resources.’

‘Somebody's up to something,’ I replied. ‘Why leave it sitting here under everyone's noses?’ I stared at the surface of the tab, willing something to come up as I
stared into my own reflection. *Why did she leave me this mess to clean up?* I thought. *And now The Committee's ruined any hope of Finn helping me.*

'Maybe I'm just kidding myself,' I paused. ‘Thinking I could be involved in something more important than Organics.’ I grabbed a piece of pristine white paper from the pile, scrunched it into a ball. ‘Maybe this is exactly what it looks like - a dumb, empty office.’ I aimed at the back of the door. The paper ball hit its mark and dropped away ineffectually. Skyler said nothing. I turned and saw her staring at the tab, its glow reflecting off her skin. The tab. It was lit up.

'Remote access,' I said, racing over to lock the door.

'What are you doing?'

'Someone's on their way here and I think they might notice a mysteriously unlocked door.' I was already heading back. ‘Get under the desk.'

'And guarantee we get found? That old recycler's our best chance,' she said, staring over the ledge into what was basically a long, metal chute. She looked uncertain.

'Come on,' I said. ‘It was your suggestion.’ I lifted my leg over the edge and stepped in, carefully placing my feet against the sides to keep from sliding all the way down.

'Okay,' she said. 'But we're not going to last long in there.'

I was already edging down into the chute. Back pressed against one side, feet slowly lowering me down on the other, arms stretched out trying to keep the whole thing balanced. I only went far enough to allow Skyler enough room to remain unseen.

'Go further,' she whispered. 'I don't want them grabbing me out of here.'

The office door slammed against the wall. Neither of us was going anywhere for a while. My thighs were already beginning to ache, and my hands were sweating. I wedged my feet into the corners of the square chute, pressed my back into the sidewall and
quickly wiped my hands on my pants. It didn't help much. Looking past my legs, the chute dropped away into darkness.

A male voice seeped through the recyclr door, down into the chute. I wondered what he was talking about, and hoped he wouldn't be long. Who knew where this chute ended. There was more scrabbling about. Then silence. Footsteps. *What was he doing wandering around?* The door opened. We waited to hear it close. Nothing. Then the door slammed again. Skyler's head dropped back against the chute wall.

‘I guess that means he’s gone,’ she said, crawling back up and stretching a leg up and out of the chute. She carefully stretched herself across, and sat astride the opening - half in, half out. Reaching down, she offered me a hand.

Before I could take it she jerked back, the smile disappearing from her face. Her head smacked against the top of the chute as someone grabbed at her. I pressed my hands to the sides. I had to get out. Sweat made them slip away, like mercury on metal. I jammed my feet into the sides to stop my fall. I’d only slipped a few feet. I wiped my hands and tried to make the climb again.

There was a thud as someone slammed against the desk. I climbed as fast as I could, but my hands were cramped and slow. As I got close to the top I saw Skyler staring down.

‘Are you all right?’ I whispered. She said nothing. Her face was stony. She reached her right foot over the ledge, and kicked me square in the chest. The blow sent me tumbling down the chute. I stabbed out desperately with my hands and feet, dragging them against the sides trying to slow my descent - to grab hold of something. It was no use. Skyler’s face disappeared, along with the light, as I slammed, hard and fast, against the chute walls. My face smacked against the metal, pain bursting through my head and
the taste of blood and the wet feel of it pouring from my nose into my mouth. The exposed skin on my hands burnt and tore, as I flailed about blindly.

Either time slowed, or my thinking sped up. I relaxed into the fall and tried to bring myself right way round; desperate to remember everything Lerrin had taught me. If I could slow down enough before I stopped, I might not end up a crumpled heap at the bottom. My feet stuck out either side and I let my arms up so they could drag and slow me. A finger was broken; I could feel it. My head was exploding. I spat blood, trying to stop the choking feeling that made me panic and lose control of my descent.

The chute began to curve round slightly. It helped slow me down enough to breathe. It was a long way down. I had no idea how far I’d already fallen. But the curve was becoming more pronounced the further I fell, eventually leaving me in a fast but easy slide. You didn't have to be a genius to work out what the curve was - I was rounding the bottom of the city. How was I going to find my way out of one of the lower tiers? What if I'd gone all the way to the fifth tier? Just what I needed - a whole lot more bots.

I kept my hands over my head and my legs out straight. This thing had to end soon - if I was going to save myself I needed to be ready for a tumble. My hips still slammed against the sides of the chute. I could feel the bruises sprouting. Then I was out.

I burst from the chute and headed towards - what? I opened my eyes, still mid-air. Blur. Light. Colour. Something touched my skin and I instinctively fell into a roll, banging against whatever was in my path. There was shouting, screams, the unmistakeable sound of bodies cracking against each other, as I tumbled to a stop in the lap of a large, male bott, who stared down at me as though I'd appeared out of thin air - which I guess I had. My breath was coming in short, sharp, bursts. I didn't bother attempting to get up. I could feel every bump landing on me at once. I must have looked
bad. Blood soaked face and clothing. Nose smashed. Skin, black and torn, hanging from
the surface of my bloodied hands.

The bott's mouth hung open over me.

'Hi,' I said. It sounded nasal, mucousy. The bott didn't respond. I looked around. There were more of them. A room full of botts, all picking themselves up from where they'd been scattered during my landing. They began to crowd and stare. I'd landed safely, but how was I going to get myself out of this? A murmur began at the back of the crowd, and slowly worked its way towards me. They were turning, separating; something was coming. I wanted to move, to see what it was. What they were all looking back towards. But I could barely lift myself. The bott, whose lap I was in, suddenly regained his powers of thought and lifted me to a sitting position.

As he did, I caught sight of the thing making its way through the crowd. Or rather, the crowd parting before it. Black hair, black eyes, contrasted sharply against pale white skin and a pure white smock. Two legs that held up a body as twisted as an old tree trunk. Disfigured by the burden of carrying two people instead of one. Conjoined twins. How was it possible? They were an oddity even here, standing out from the dark greys of the botts’ clothing, and the grey light, caused by the too low ceilings and the lack of daysim light.

I didn't know whether to flee, or fall under their obviously powerful spell. They slowed to a halt before me. Their bodies seemed to be fused together at the shoulder, their heads on a slight outward angle so that they seemed to be constantly battling to be apart. Their eyes were too black, and still, and deep, to read anything. Their faces however, gave a clearer indication. The one on the left sat serenely upon their shared torso. His face was smooth and soft, with an almost childlike cushioning to it. The other had to turn slightly to see me. His brow carried deep lines, and his face seemed much older than his brothers.
He was definitely the more menacing of the two. These were the Twins that The Committee Chair had referred to in the library.

‘Zander Black – the Mutineer’s son,’ said the menacing one, inspecting me as though I was the oddity.

‘This is very unexpected,’ added the other, smiling.

The book came flooding back into my head. I’d forgotten all about it, but now its heat intensified across my chest. I didn’t know whether it wanted to be handed over, or protected from them. And then the realisation occurred to me, that Skyler had pushed me down the chute. Kicked me in the chest, right where the book was sitting, and started this whole mess. It was Skyler, the book had been warning me about. Skyler who’d betrayed me, and sent me down into some weird fifth tier cult. Great. Kidnapping last cycle, betrayal the next.

I was such a fool. I’d thought I was in control. But I’d only ever been playing into her hands. What was she up to? I had to get better at using the book – if I got out of here with it.

‘Who are you?’ I asked, pulling myself up to better protect the book, despite being hopelessly outnumbered. ‘How do you know my name?’

‘We are The One.’ They responded simultaneously, and suddenly the room full of botts seemed like a normal kind of crowd – against the creep factor of these two.

‘You have been known to us for some time,’ said the soft one, his voice like too much warm honey. ‘There is much to discuss. We should leave now.’ He extended a hand to me.

I remembered that I was still on the lap of the bott I’d fallen on. ‘Sorry,’ I said, taking the hand offered. My ribs burned as I extended my arm. The One’s hand had no
strength at all and was a token offer at best. The bott had known this. He lifted me from
behind, taking all my weight. I was glad of the assistance.

‘You don’t seem surprised by my arrival,’ I said.

‘Many things come to us in this manner.’

‘Did my mother send you things?’

‘We have had communications with your mother,’ he replied.

I dusted myself off and gave the bott a nod of thanks. He seemed surprised, for a
bott.

‘Did you know her well?’ I asked. I was beginning to enjoy finding out about my
mother.

‘She was a mutineer,’ the menacing one sneered. ‘There is nothing more to know.’
And with that, his attention returned to leading us through the gathering of botts. I
followed them across the room towards a side entry. They moved slowly. I imagined their
feet sluicing like wet slugs along the floor. The walk gave me a chance to take in the
scene I’d crashed into, now that my eyes had adjusted to the dim lighting. There were at
least thirty botts, sitting on the floor of the cramped space. It was hardly bigger than the
office I’d been in. A central area was laden with cushions, not unlike the room I’d seen the
SoG seer in. It was there the Twins had sat, the botts gathered around them. But why?
They all stared silently back at me, their bodies still facing the Twins 'altar'. Were they
worshipping them, or listening to some sort of teaching? I looked back towards the Twins.
How old were they? How long had they been down here, gathering devotees?

‘So, what do they do when you leave?’ I said, exiting the room and following them
into a small antechamber as I asked.

‘Whatever they please.’ The answer came in stereo.
'And what were they doing before I dropped in?' They were still friendly. I thought I should try some questions. I touched my nose – winced. Pain shot through my face.

'We were discussing the new life that awaits us all,' said the soft one. ‘Even you, Zander.’

The room we’d entered appeared to be a small apartment, perhaps their sleeping quarters. We were standing in a lounge area. I could see another small room through an open door, which must have been a food preparation and dining area. Another two doors along the third wall were closed. The furnishing was sparse but looked comfortable enough. They gestured for me to sit and I obeyed without thinking. My muscles were aching. My hands numb.

'We trust this accommodation will suit,' the soft one said. 'It’s private, and should remain safe for at least a couple of weeks.'

'Safe?' I shifted uncomfortably. 'What are you talking about? I'm not staying here. I'm going home.' I stood up; thinking perhaps now would be a good time to leave.

'I'm afraid that's not possible.' They spoke in unison again. I stood, and made towards the door. I needed to get out of here fast. One of them grabbed my arm and pushed me back towards the couch, pinning me down.

So the limp act had been just that, an act. Clever. Letting me think I could outrun them, overpower them, whenever I needed to. And I'd fallen for it completely, and left myself trapped in this room. I made a half-hearted attempt to free myself from his grip.

'We are not without modifications.' The sweet honey voice dripped from him.

'Yeah,' I tugged my arm and felt the muscle in my shoulder burn. ‘I can see that.’ I flopped back onto the lounge, too pained to hold myself up. His hand released without argument. ‘Perhaps you could start explaining what exactly is going on here.’ They said
nothing but moved, in their sluggish way, to a couch along the far wall and sat. 'Look, just point me in the direction of home and I'll be on my way.'

'As we said, that's no longer possible.'

They could see my defeat, but I didn't care. Plus I wanted information. I needed to know so much more if I was ever going to get out of this mess. The calm exterior had come over them again. All trace of the sinister beings they could be disappeared.

'If you're going to keep me here you'd better tell me your names.'

'I am Orad,' said the soft one.

'Eros,' said the other.

They were identical in their own way, but while looking in Eros's eyes filled me with dread, Orad's had the opposite effect. Eros had grabbed me. Perhaps it was that. Some sort of loser resentment I supposed.

'We had not planned to involve the upper tiers until everything was in place,' said Orad, his face creased with distress. 'Your disappearance could prove an obstacle.'

'Then let me go,' I leant forward in the chair. 'I shouldn't have been in that office. I'm in as much trouble as anyone else if I tell The Committee about this place.'

'The Committee are well aware of our activities, Zander,' said Orad.

'They happily leave us alone,' added Eros. 'We have an understanding.'

'An understanding?' I paused. 'I don't understand.'

'You see, Zander,' Orad smiled. 'Already there is so much we can teach you about the city. I imagine you've led a sheltered life in the first tier. My brother and I understand that. We would never have been allowed to flourish had we been contained in the first tier.'

'You're first tiers?'
'Sadly, our disability precluded us from our parents' affections,' Eros said, though his voice carried something far more sinister than sadness.

I didn't know what to say.

'Enough reminiscing,' Orad announced happily. 'You will stay with us for the moment. In return for our care and protection, you will assist us in our search for the book.'


'The book is the key to everything, Zander,' Orad patiently explained.

'How can he not know of the book,' Eros spat. 'Are all first tier children so ignorant?'

'First tier children are nobodies,' I answered quietly. 'We're told nothing. We do nothing.' I held my stare, despite Eros' obvious anger. 'Be thankful you got out. At least you could make some sort of life for yourself.' I heard the words like a revelation.

Orad stood, lifting his brother along with him. Eros turned away.

'Enough for today. We are all tired, and upset at the mistakes of others.' He turned toward the door. 'Rest now, Zander. We will discuss more later."

Before I had a chance to protest they were through the door. It clicked shut, a second click letting me know that I was locked in and there would be no escaping anytime soon. I searched around the small room, checking the other doors. Both were locked. This was it then. A sitting room, connected to an eating bay.

I suppose it was adequate considering the short notice I'd given them. The smooth white walls seemed clear of any obvious surveillance devices. Thinking logically, they hadn't been expecting me. Skyler's betrayal was opportunity, rather than planning. It would seem suspicious to think the Twins would have a room waiting for any purpose other than their own comfort. I sat on the couch, boredom sneaking up on me – my
stomach suddenly grabbing my attention. I made for the eating bay to see if there was a food recon that worked.

The eating bay was tiny, with an even tinier amenities room at the back. It wasn’t The Committee apartments, but it wasn’t a chunk of metal bolted to the side of the city either.

I tapped instructions into the keypad of the small, square food recon hole in the wall. My broken finger dragged across the keys annoyingly, painfully. The food recon was definitely an older model; for a while I thought it wasn't working. Then a series of noises signalled that something was happening. I slid back the door when the machine finally chimed. A steaming bowl of the most insipid looking soup I'd ever seen, sat inside.

‘I didn’t ask for soup,’ I said, rekeying my instructions for a meat-sim sandwich. More silence, then the noise – another bowl of soup. Stupid broken finger. I opened a drawer, grabbed a knife and bent it over using the bench and my good hand. After some searching I found a cloth I could use to tie it round by broken finger and wrap around my hand.

‘Now,’ I said, and began keying letter after letter with my good hand. Again there was silence, then the noise – and yet another bowl of soup. I wasn’t willing to risk a third attempt.

I sat at the small table that stuck out from the wall. There were two chairs. This must be where Eros and Orad came for breaks between their preaching sessions. I found a spoon and lifted some soup to my mouth. It tasted disgusting, but seemed to ease my muscles.

I thought about the Twins and their strange deformity. I'd never seen anything stranger than the bland expressions of the botts. First tiers did not carry genetic weaknesses, let alone deformities. I'd thought nobody aboard SkyCity did. I ate a second
serve of the soup, and finally felt my stomach fill. I wanted to take the book out. See if it had anything to offer me. It had gone quiet since the Twins left. The room offered little privacy. I could keep my eye on the door if I placed my chair correctly. But if the Twins returned, I'd never have enough time to hide the book again. I sat back in the chair instead, and stared at the walls.

What was I supposed to do now? A second check revealed the lock was definitely on and there was no way out of the room. The ceilings were seamless, which was strange because most of the city was filled with panelled ceilings that allowed access to the various systems that kept us alive. I panicked for a moment, but a quick look behind the couch revealed a grated air vent. At least they weren't going to suffocate me.

The couch was heavy and sat along the wall adjacent to the door. If I slid it behind the door that would give me time to hide the book before the Twins could enter. I hauled it over, then sat back and pulled the book from inside my shirt. It seemed harmless enough sitting on my lap, but look where it had got me. Since I'd found the book I'd been given the worst placement in human history, been kidnapped by Mutineers, discovered my long dead mother was actually alive, and now I'd thrown myself into the hands of weird, conjoined twin cult leaders. I dropped my hand onto the embossed cover of the book, not expecting anything useful. As I opened it a single word appeared on the page - sleep. *Sleep.* Completely useless.

I twisted round on the couch and began hammering my fist on the door.

'Hey! You know my Dad's going to be looking for me.' I yelled. 'My Dad. Ryl Black. Committee member. Supplier of all your little bott followers.' I listened. There wasn't a sound. I thumped harder, stinging my already battered fist in the process. 'Hey! You can't leave me in here.' Still more silence. 'Hey!' I shouted again, knowing nobody
would listen, as usual. I tucked the book away again and lay back on the couch. As if on
cue the lights went out.

‘Great – the fifth tier has a lockdown.’ I lifted my leg up and kicked at the door.

'You can't keep me in here forever.' Who was I kidding? I stared into the dim green glow
of the perpetual algae lamp that sat in the corner. My father might be powerful, but I was
getting the feeling this place might have its own rules. The Twins, I was sure, could make
things very difficult for anyone trying to find me. If anyone actually was.

I closed my eyes and felt my body sinking into the soft cushions.

'Sleep.' I muttered in disgust. 'You know I think I would have worked that out for
myself.' Crossing my arms, I settled in. Part of me wanted to be safely back in my father's
apartment, with nothing more to worry about than how to irritate him more. Part of me
was excited at what might come next. And then another small voice whispered – *this
could all work out very badly.*

And that was the part that scared me the most.

I woke to find the lights on, the glare against the stark white walls irritating my
eyes. A strange knocking sound echoed in my head. The door. It was the door. I jumped
up, checking for the book inside my shirt. I straightened myself up and went to move the
couch. Then it came back to me where I was, and I stopped.

'What do you want?' I shouted.

'May we enter?' A soft voice returned. It was one of the Twins – the soft one –,
which one was he? Eros or Orad? I couldn't remember. What I did remember, was that
with one came the other.
'Give me a minute.' I called back, hoping they'd listen. I went to the eating bay and splashed my face with water, and ran my wet hands through my hair. I'd have no hope with these two if I weren’t at least awake. I went back and pushed the couch aside.

'You can enter.' I said, wondering why they were acting like I had a choice.

The door lock clicked open and the door slowly swung back. The Twins entered hesitantly. Orad was in charge today. Eros was reading a tab, and merely floated along beside Orad. He was so totally focussed on his work, as though he was unaware of where they were.

'Are you rested?' Orad asked.

'Yes. Thanks.' I replied warily, unable to muster a harsher response to his sincere enquiry.

'The food reconstructions are not so elaborate here, but I'm sure you ate well.'

'I did.' I said, wondering at the formal nature of his enquiry. Was he feeling guilty?

'I thought I might take you to see the workings of the fifth tier,' he paused. 'If you understand a little more of our enterprise, you might feel more inclined to assist us.'

So that's why he was being nice. He wanted my help.

'Okay. Will Eros be joining us?' I attempted a cruel joke and instantly felt bad.

'He is busy with other things.' Orad replied, outsmarting me. 'You should eat before we leave. I will return for you shortly.' He turned and exited. Eros seamlessly followed, not paying attention to our conversation at all. The door locked behind them.

There was nothing else to do so I cleaned up, ate, then sat and waited. They were back soon enough, and with a minimum of conversation Orad led me out into the fifth tier. Outside the white room, everything seemed claustrophobic and hot. The plant life seemed to run wild. No discreet algae lamps tucked into corners. Vegetation poured out from old planter bays, wild and completely unchecked. It reminded me a little of
McCarthy's office, but chaotic, random. I wondered if Orad and Eros also had some strange sort of relationship with the plants. Unlike McCarthy, they didn't seem to notice the plants at all. Orad merely moved forward through the plant-lined corridors, contacting them only to push a stray frond aside while Eros continued to work at his tab. The book became warm at my chest, but its pulsing was weak and a kind of sadness seemed to pass through me with each beat.

We passed a number of botts, who tipped their heads in a bow of either reverence or respect. Whichever it was, I couldn't help but wonder how these two had earned this sort of attention. The Twins skimmed past, not noticing anyone, but pointing out the various facilities of the fifth tier as though there was nothing particularly odd about my tour. Recycling stations, communal food halls, and an increasing number of study chambers. The study chambers all housed a number of botts, sitting focussed at old style monitors, as the plant life hung limp and overgrown around them.

‘What are they doing?’ I asked. Orad stopped walking, and briefly peered into the room we had just passed.

‘They are performing their role in the final resolution,’ he said. Then he turned, and continued walking. ‘We all have our role to play. You will learn yours soon enough.’

‘What are you talking about? What's the final resolution?’ I stopped, knowing they would continue leading me around all day if I didn’t put an end to it. ‘Look, I hadn’t been beyond the first tier a week ago. You do things differently in the fifth tier. I get that. But if you want me to help you, to be part of your final resolution, you need to start answering my questions, not giving me a guided tour.’

Eros looked up, his face etched with annoyance. He circled round, suddenly in charge of their direction, and bent his head towards me. His face was so close I could feel his breath on my skin.
'You don't seem to understand, Zander,' he paused. 'No Committee Guards are tracking you down. Your father hasn't sent anyone. Even if he wanted to, he couldn't. We control the fifth tier. The Committee stay in their place, and if they're good and mind their own business, we keep all the angry old botts down here. A little something The Committee doesn't like to let any of you upper tiers know.' He paused, staring me down a little more. 'We, will decide what you need to know, and when. And you will assist us - if you ever want to return to your comfortable life above us.'

He turned and went back to his tab, as though nothing had happened. I wondered if it had. But then I realised I'd been holding my breath, and knew it was all too real. Orad had taken over again, and I ran to keep up with him. His commentary seemed endless.

Whether what they said was true, or not, the Twins wielded power down here, and I didn't like the odds of a bunch of Committee Guards against the botts' mindless subservience.

And then there was the simple truth. That my father was probably glad to be rid of me – expected to be after our last conversation. Eros was right, there was no contingent of Committee Guards on their way to rescue me.

I was in trouble. I had to start playing along; had to find a way out of here.
CHAPTER TEN

The next morning, Orad took me for a quick walk before returning to the room that was to be my home for the moment. Eros continued to act as if he was somewhere else, completely unaware of me. I scanned the room. Nothing seemed to have changed. I figured they wouldn't even bother with security. They were so confident of their own power; it wouldn't occur to them that I might be a threat. And they were right. I had to think.

There was no cycle marker in the room. How long until they'd be back again? I began counting in my head. At least it would give me some idea of time.

I grabbed a chair and swung it against the strange white wall. My arms yanked violently against my shoulders as it struck, bounced back, and sent me into an unsteady stumble across the floor. This was some kind of safe room. All The Committee members had safe rooms off their apartments, as a precautionary measure. I'd never seen one like this. Usually they resembled a box, with room for a door and two people to sit and wait until whatever trouble had caused them to be there was over. I ran my fingers along the wall. The chair hadn't even made a mark.

26, 27, 28. I had to remember to keep counting.

The sink. There had to be a join there. Water was piped in from the organics chambers once it had been processed. Those pipes needed to be accessed, and that meant maintenance chutes. I raced into the eating bay and swung open the storage compartment doors under the sink. If there was one thing the human race could rely on, it was plumbing. There, under the sink, was a mechanism with its origins in ancient Rome – running water. I knocked my knuckles against the wall. A comforting echo replied. This was not the safest part of the Twins’ safe room.
There wasn’t much space. Pipes ran in, to the left of the small cubicle, and a large waste water pipe ran out through the centre. If I could make a hole to the right, there might be just enough room for me to squeeze through. I spun myself around and kicked a few times. The wall flexed slightly under my feet, but not enough to break through. I got up and rummaged through the eating bay, searching for anything I could use to cut through the wall.

The cupboards were stocked with all sorts of long-life foods. There were even large plastic containers filled with water, all dated on their front. These two were prepared – and scared. Frightened they would one day need to use this room. What did they think would happen? I thought back to the riots I’d seen and the behaviour of the Security Guards I’d always thought of as hopelessly incompetent. That’s what the Twins were afraid of. That The Committee had trained their Security teams to deal in violence, and that one-day they would be the target of that violence.

I heard the familiar knock at the door - Eros and Orad. Damn, I’d lost count. They were definitely checking on me though, I guessed it might be roughly hourly intervals. I quickly shut the doors under the sink and tapped into the food recon for more food that I presumed would come out as soup. By the time they entered, I was holding a steaming bowl and wandering in from the eating bay.

'More food,' Eros looked disgusted by me as usual. ‘Do you do nothing else?’

'What would you like me to do? There's not a whole lot of options, locked in here.'

'So typical of your kind.' Eros went on. 'No desire to look beyond the level of your own physical comforts.' He stepped purposefully from one side of the room to the other. 'Locked in a room, and all you can think to do is fill your stomach.'
'Then let me go.' I said. 'In case you've forgotten - this was your idea, not mine. If you want something from me, you're going to have to be more specific. And if you don't, then let me go.'

'Or I could just kill you now, and be done with it.' His voice was low, and I didn't doubt for a second that he was serious. I had never been this afraid in Finn’s hands.

'And then what?' I asked, sounding braver than I felt. 'You know the punishment. Want to end up like one of your loyal subjects? This is SkyCity. They'll find you eventually. There's nowhere to run.'

'Isn't there?' Eros smiled, then seemed to reconsider. 'No one's found you, yet.'

'No one's looking for me, yet. No one cares about a kid. Murderers though? Kidnappers?' I paused. 'They like catching crims. Gives them an excuse to make a few more...'

'Enough!' Orad shouted. 'Both of you.' His forehead pinched with concern. I wondered if they'd been arguing over the sanity of keeping me here. Then Orad raised a hand to the wall nearest him and a bookshelf appeared as if from nowhere. 'Please Zander, read some of the texts while we are gone. I apologise for my brother's behaviour. Your early arrival was fortunate and saved us much time. It has just come a little too early for our plans.'

'What do you mean, “early arrival”?'

'The plan was to make contact with you when we were ready –’ Orad said.

‘Skyler!’ I shouted. ‘She did do it on purpose.’ I was pacing madly. ‘What, did you set her up from the start? Is that why she befriended me? What is it? What do you all want from me?’ Orad cringed as I thrust my face towards his – a twitch nagging at the corner of my eye. ‘What do you want?’
'All in good time,' he whispered. His eyes were downturned. He couldn't bear to look at me. 'We will check on you again soon,' he said. Then he and Eros went back out through the door, the lock clicking into place behind them.

I stood silently for a second, the soup bowl still in my hand. My breath dragged in, slow and heavy. Skyler had betrayed me.

I placed the bowl down and took in another long breath.

The bookcase.

Orad had given me something – the bookcase. Why? I'd never seen anything like it. The wall had simply disappeared. It had to be a force field of some kind, but why hide a bunch of old books behind it? Only if you were really scared of being caught. That was it. Eros and Orad were scared. Whatever they were planning, and no matter how loyal their followers, they required that nobody find out what they were up to.

I scanned through the titles. *Gaia: A new look at life on Earth*. Books The Committee would hate. *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory*. Books The Committee would bott you for. *The Symbiotic Planet*. They meant nothing to me, but I was sure they were a clue: Earth, evolution, planet; they wanted to return to Earth.

A series of books grabbed my attention. Their spines were blank except for a small symbol. Mallika, the flower my mother was named after, the symbol of the Mutineers, was etched into the bottom of each one. There were enough of them to fill almost an entire shelf. I slipped the first volume from its place and opened it. Small, neat handprint marked out the dates, 2126-2130. It was Orad’s writing. I was sure of it. His journal. And it began in 2126, when he and Eros were abandoned on the fifth tier as sixteen year olds. My age. I got Organics, they got the fifth tier.

I ran my finger across the spines, counting. Forty-two. Forty-two volumes covering the ninety years since their abandonment. And here, in the first volume, was a
frightened, but intelligent Orad, documenting the entire ordeal. I closed the book and placed it back on the shelf. I couldn’t read it. Couldn’t feel sorry for him, for them.

My eyes scanned the line. Fingers racing over the volumes. She was here somewhere. Books, pulled, reshelved, until I found it – 2207-2208. He’d written about her. Somewhere in this thin volume, Orad had documented my mother’s disappearance.

I clawed at the pages, searching for the words.

_Eros doesn’t trust Jasmine. He says she will betray us._ What would Eros know? He wouldn’t trust anyone. _Jasmine volunteered herself for the journey, Finn is furious._

_Eros and I said nothing, but I know Eros believes this to be just the beginning of her deception._ Finn? They were all connected. And the Twins were more deeply involved in the Mutineers than I’d realised. _Jasmine says she has finally convinced the father to take the child. I pity him. And I fear she will abandon us as easily as she has her own child._

_Eros was right. We must make our own plans._

She abandoned me.

I wanted to feel something, but nothing came – just, a hollow emptiness.

I’d read enough. I lay on the couch in a huddled ball. The book, pressed safely against my chest, radiated comforting warmth. A heaviness settled over my features and I fell asleep, because there was nothing else left to do.

* * *

‘You’ve been reading,’ Orad said, picking the book up from the floor.

‘As if you didn’t know I would,’ I replied. I didn’t care about upsetting them anymore. Didn’t care about anything. Eros was still acting as though he wasn’t part of the conversation – he held a tab in the arm he controlled, while the centre arm they seemed to share tapped and flicked over the screen.
‘I’m sorry you had to find out about your mother this way.’ He crossed the room and awkwardly perched himself on the couch beside me.

‘Yeah?’ I paused. ‘It doesn’t make any difference. I never knew her anyway.’ Orad dropped his gaze and patted his hand, uncomfortably, against my shoulder.

‘We will leave you to rest,’ he said. ‘When you’re ready, we will show you more of the bio-labs. You might be interested to see our own plans for the future,’ he paused. ‘Might be interested in being a part of them.’ I said nothing. ‘With you to help us locate the book,’ he paused. ‘ – enough. I’m getting ahead of myself.’ He stood and turned toward the door. ‘Once again, Zander, I’m truly sorry about your mother. We of all people, we understand.’

I said nothing; just watched as they passed through the door, Eros still tapping away. Just for a second, the corner of his mouth lifted. The garish, sinister smile I’d seen before like a fleeting shadow across his face. Then it was gone. The door closed. Its lock clicked into place.

It was a setup. Orad had given me the library, knowing what I would find. Where I would look. It was part of their plan to get me on side. Right now we were moving to part two – let me wallow in memories of a mother who didn’t love or care for me. Well I refused to be a part of their plan. Finn I’d trusted. He’d shown me the truth. Not always right or noble, but the truth. I had to get out of here. Had to do it on my own. Lerrin didn’t trust me. Skyler had betrayed me. And my father had never seen me as anything but an ineffective burden.

I strode across to the eating bay, rummaging through the storage areas for anything I could use to hack away the wall. Before long I was sweating heavily, a pile of broken utensils next to me, and a small hole in front of me. If I could kick away at the edges I’d eventually have a hole I could pass through. I worked for what I thought to be
about two thirds of the time they would leave me alone. Then I ate and read from their library. Not the journals. They were only filled with Orad’s deluded interpretations. I read the stuff that had inspired them in the first place. If I had any hope of getting out of here, I had to figure out what they were thinking. This was a start.

They returned as expected; Orad chatting happily, while Eros continued working at his tab as though he wasn’t with us. They led me through a warren of dark, overgrown rooms. Botts everywhere, repeating experiments or scouring illegal archived material. One task each – find a word, mark it; an isolated procedure, repeat it; an outcome, note it.

Then Orad stopped, his face verging on the insane. This stop was obviously the centrepiece of their operation.

‘What you see next will change everything,’ Orad said. Eros sneered, and Orad tilted his head towards him. ‘We cannot expect him to believe in our plan if we do not enlighten his thinking.’ Orad’s comment sounded like a response, but the conversation went no further.

The Twins placed a hand each, on two small panels that sat either side of a large steel door. It was unlike any of the others we’d been through. None of the previous rooms had been sealed at all. We entered a small antechamber with barely enough room for the three of us. The walls bare except for two more panels, which the Twins placed their hands on once the outer door had sealed. Wherever we were going, they didn’t want anyone finding out about.

‘What is this place?’ I asked.

‘This is where we conduct our main research,’ Orad replied, as he stepped back from the door and allowed me to enter. I wished we hadn’t. The room was bright, too bright. One wall was lined with bays of cages and tanks filled with creatures I’d never seen. Each one had a bed beside it with a bott restrained by thick straps about their arms,
legs and chest. Tubes ran out of them, others fed into them, and their heads were covered in electrodes.

‘What have you done?’ I whispered.

‘Don’t be shocked,’ Orad said. ‘They are all volunteers. They realise the importance of our work.’

‘But what have you done to them?’ I repeated.

‘Nothing more than your father and The Committee had already done,’ Eros replied in anger. ‘And the role they fill here is no worse than wiping the arses of self-indulgent first tiers.’

‘Eros!’ Orad tried to maintain his calm appearance. ‘Education is the only way we can hope to make progress.’ Eros backed down. ‘Zander,’ Orad turned to me. ‘I only ask that you put your judgements aside and think about what we are trying to achieve.’

‘Of course,’ I said. I wanted to know what was going on. The Twins were dangerous. I wanted to know exactly what they were doing. Orad seemed excited by my compliance, while Eros had dropped out of the conversation completely. We walked down the length of what Orad described as a biolab, but it was far more than that. They were using viruses as vectors for genetic manipulation. Stripping viruses of most of their genes, then splicing different genetic sequences back into the virus to be injected into the bott. It was a butchered version of the therapies used by The Committee, but it would do the job. The only real difference was the genetic trait they were aiming to replicate. They were trying to enhance the telepathic abilities of the botts. Getting them to communicate with the various creatures attached to them.

‘So you think there’s a gene for telepathy?’

‘We know it,’ Orad was too excited to see my disbelief. ‘Eros and I discovered our ability long ago. It’s taken us years to extract, but now we are in the final stages.’
‘But you can’t read my mind,’ I said. If they could, the book would have been in their hands the moment I arrived.

‘No. Our ability is limited.’ His eyes dropped for a moment. ‘But your mother left us little choice when she stole the book.’

‘I don’t understand,’ I said. ‘What does the book have to do with anything?’

‘The book is a communications device,’ he said. ‘Humans are a mere speck in the history of the Earth. We haven’t even learnt to speak its language. If we had the book we wouldn’t need to. In the meantime, these botts are performing the most noble, yet simple, of cross-telepathic training tasks. We deny them food, so all they think of is food. Several of the subjects have responded according to the bott’s thought patterns, despite being fed a more than ample diet.’

‘Why do this to them? Why not just find the book?’

‘The book is too volatile. If we can perfect the gene, anyone will be able to communicate in this manner.’

‘So you want lots of people to communicate? Lots of botts,’ I said carefully, not wanting to irritate Eros, ‘chosen by you,’ I paused. ‘Sounds like an army.’

Orad smiled, too blinded by his ego to sense my mistrust. ‘You can be a part of it, Zander. If we find the book it will enhance our research.’ I didn’t know what to say.

Silence seemed like the only option. He led me out of the biolab, sealing the doors behind us – unaware of my distaste. I ran to keep up with him, as he took me past long tanks filled with luminous jellyfish, which he happily pointed out. Eros remained dark and distant. I had to break through that hole. I didn’t want to see anymore.

* * *

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No doubt Eros would have enjoyed seeing my face when I finally pushed through. Apart from a small maintenance bay, there was very little that was helpful. I stood inside the small bay and looked around. I could have reached out and touched the wall on either side. I wasn’t sure how anyone could even access the place. Perhaps it had been walled off at some stage.

The water pipe coming from Eros and Orad’s room was thin, and disappeared up into the walls at the top of the bay. A much larger waste pipe, taller than me, filled most of the bay before disappearing behind a wall. A short ladder ran up the side of the pipe to an access hatch at the top.

There wasn't much of a choice. I could remain Eros and Orad's prisoner; I could close the wall behind me and sit here until I was found, or died (not much choice there); or I could open up the waste pipe and use it to make my way out. The thought made my stomach churn, but sitting tight wasn't really an option. I'd have to crawl through the waste pipe and hope it led off to somewhere useful. I slipped back into the room and grabbed a knife, a couple of water tubes and a light. This wasn't the SkyCity I knew. I had to think, be better prepared. I ran back to the library and grabbed Orad’s journal, stuffing it down the front of my shirt. I quickly cleaned the mess I’d made, throwing the debris into the maintenance bay. Then I crawled back through the hole and pulled closed the door to the storage cabinet. The confusion of an empty room, and no evidence of where I might have gone, might give me a few extra seconds. They were due back any minute. I’d need all the time I could get.

It was dark with the doors closed. I flicked the light on and propped it against the wall. A circle of light formed across the surface of the waste pipe. *Perhaps this would be better in the dark.* I pulled at old lock on the access hatch - no touch pad here. It took a while, but eventually it budged, then turned easily until it opened. With each turn the
smell became stronger. Chloroform? I hoped so. At least everything was biodegraded before it got sent down these pipes for re-use as fertiliser in the plant room. The hatch itself was heavy, as I lifted it open. Stepping into the waste pipe, I felt almost happy. If I got out of here I'd be green and stink, but things could have been a lot worse.

My legs and hips floated in the warm, green mass as I lowered myself in. There was algae in the wastewater and its phosphorescence let off enough light so that I wasn't completely surrounded by darkness once the hatch was shut. My fingertips clung to a seam that ran along the top of the pipe. It was slimy, but it didn't take too much to hold my upper body above the water level and allow my lower body to float along.

I made my way along for perhaps twenty minutes, when I came across a sharp bend. The pipe was intersected by another smaller inlet and then twisted hard left, the current seeming to get stronger with the increased water mass. I held tight, my fingers now straining to keep their grip as I began to tire. The humidity of the pool of rotting vegetation left my hair and face wet. I hadn't come across another hatch yet. I panicked. Maybe I'd missed it.

I kept my eyes to the top of the pipe, feeling around every few seconds for a hatch. I had to find one soon. The change in the pipe's direction could only mean one thing, a pump. If I didn't get out of here before I hit the pump, I might never make it out. My eyes were so intent on the space above me, I didn't notice a small section of light until I was directly underneath it. A hatch.

The light blinded me. A hand appeared from within the glow, grabbed my wrist and tugged me toward the hatch. The Twins. How could they have found me? They couldn't know I'd got away unless they'd been watching me the whole time. I pulled back hard. The pump was better than them.

'Let me go!'
'Let you go?' The hand grabbed me again. ‘You damn fool, stop struggling.’

'McCarthy?' I stopped pulling.

'Well who else did you think was going to pluck you out of a waste pipe? You haven’t been to your shift for three days. It’s taken me that long to work out where you were.’ He put his other hand down and gripped the back of my shirt. 'Now stop wriggling, and help me get you out. You're heavier than you look.'

I reached my hand over the lip of the hatch and tried to haul my body up. Thick green sludge stuck to my clothes, making it more difficult. My head popped through, but when I tried to stand my feet slipped on the slick sides of the pipe. I would have knocked myself out if McCarthy hadn't grabbed me.

'Now, perhaps while we're stuck in this precarious position, you could cast your eyes back down that waste pipe and take a look at what your good friends, the Twins, have sent after you.'

What do you mean? They don't even know I'm gone.'

'Oh really? Take a look anyway.'

I sighed heavily and leaned into the waste pipe. There was nothing. The soft green glow of the waste river moved effortlessly beneath us.

'There’s nothing.'

'Good. We have a little time then,' he paused. ‘Stick your head back in and tell me what you hear.’

‘There’s nothing to hear.’ I pulled one of the water tubes from my pocket, wiped the slime off against the wall and sucked down the contents. McCarthy hadn’t moved. He stared at me intently, so I quickly turned and hung my head obediently into the pipe, 'listening', for whatever it was his crazy head had got an idea about. As I cursed the old man, I heard something – a tiny barking sound.
'Okay, what is that?'

'Nothing, of course. That's what you told me, and you know best.'

'McCarthy,' I pulled myself out of the pipe. 'I believe you okay? I'm sorry. Just tell me what that is.'

'That, is the sound of one of the Twins’ many little ventures into biogenetics. Tarantulas are their favourites, or rather, several of the little blighters.'

'Tarantulas? Aren't they a kind of spider? Totally non-venomous.' I couldn't imagine why the Twins would go for anything so tame.

'Normally yes, but they like to mix up their genetics.' He was enjoying this now. 'Probably mixed some Funnelweb in it,' he paused. 'They're poisonous.'

I stared down the pipe. Luminous green shapes seemed to jump all over the place.

'They're glowing,' I shouted. 'They’ve added the jellyfish.'

'That’s handy,' he shrugged. 'Make them easier to spot.'

'McCarthy, we have to get away from them!' I practically screeched.

'Can't do it.'

'What?'

'If you can hear them, they can hear you. They’ll just keep on following you.'

'You're insane, McCarthy,' I screamed. 'You're going to leave me here to be bitten by some bioengineered weapon?'

'Of course not. Don't panic.' He was enjoying this I was sure. 'We'll use this.' He produced a large green leaf, from a bag he had with him, and began wrapping it around my arm. 'You're going to let it bite you, on this. They're slow moving,' he added, seeing the terror on my face. 'I'm, almost certain, you'll be fast enough to fool it. The leaf's thicker than its fangs. The venom will enter the leaf, instead of you, and the spider will return to its master giving the impression that you've been bitten.'
'Why the hell do I care about that?'

'Because it will give us time to escape, while the Twins think you're dead in a waste pipe. You smell like you’re dead in a waste pipe by the way.'

He finished tying the leaf to my arm. Then I leant into the pipe again, and waited.

'This is a dumb idea, McCarthy.' My voice echoed down the pipe.

'You got a better one?'

Green glows shifted and turned everywhere. I saw shapes were there weren't any. The soft barking was getting louder and louder. The idea of fear and the reality of it, however, are a far stretch from each other. When the shapes emerged and formed, my lungs tightened and I could hear my own heart beat, loud and fast. The urge to escape was almost unbearable.

'Stick your arm out!' McCarthy's voice interrupted. 'You want to get bitten for real?'

No, I did not. I shoved my arm out, baiting it, wondering if it would hurt despite the thick bandage of leaf McCarthy had wrapped me in. I wondered if it would even work. The creature stopped, assessing me. Would it strike? Run and grab? I didn't want to give it a chance to think. I flicked my arm out. The spider jumped back instinctively. Fangs clearly stuck out, as bright green sticks at its front. Trained to attack a fleeing victim, it didn't know what to do. I thrashed around, shaking my arms and hoping McCarthy could keep hold of me. It struck. Hard and fast. I barely saw it, but I felt it. Mission accomplished, it turned and began making its way back to its master.

'Did it get you?' McCarthy shouted from above. I stared down at my arm. I couldn’t speak. McCarthy yanked me out of the pipe and began inspecting the leaf immediately. It was shrivelling in front of me.

'Yeah, it got me,' I answered quietly.
McCarthy discarded the leaf and grabbed my arm instead. I watched silently as he inspected the area. Then he looked at me in that serious way of his.

'It's scratched the surface with one fang. Venom could have got in, but there's no blood.' I nodded, already knowing. 'Probably not enough to kill you, but you're going to be in pain.' He pulled fresh clothing from a pack he’d brought with him. ‘Here, change into these.’

‘You seem well prepared,’ I said, stripping off my pants.

‘I know how the Twins work,’ he replied. I opened my shirt and the two books fell out, miraculously dry. ‘Are you starting a library in there?’ McCarthy asked.

'Let's just get out of here.' I slipped the shirt over my arm, which had already stiffened and ached.

‘Keep rubbing,’ McCarthy tucked my clothes under the pipe, out of sight. ‘It will pass.’

McCarthy led the way. I didn't know where he was taking me and I didn't care. So long as he kept us in the right direction, I could concentrate on watching out for more of The Twins’ bio-weapons. The venomous tarantulas had to be only the first round.
McCarth led us back to the first tier, following a circuitous route. Staying away from public areas. Utilising old maintenance areas and other disused or abandoned sections. It was nothing like the disease and desperation Finn had shown me, but it left me in no doubt that SkyCity was dying. The Committee couldn’t stop what was coming.

Wandering through the wreckage of my home, I’d never felt more alone, as a part of me silently wished for the venom to have broken through.

The sound of an approaching security detail broke through the silence, as we entered into the public corridors of the first tier. We had seconds perhaps, before they arrived at the end of the corridor. Seconds to decide which way to go - and then what? There was no way out of SkyCity for me, and the thought of spending the rest of my life hidden amongst the decay I knew lay below was hardly appealing. I was ready to hand myself over. A failure. I'd never find my mother. Never right the wrong that had been done to Finn.

‘Take off your pack,’ McCarthy said. ‘Get the book out. Stuff it in your shirt.’

‘What? What for?’

‘When Security comes round that bend I’m going to shove you, take the pack and start running.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Just fall to the ground and act like I've taken the book. That’s what they’re after. They'll think it's in your pack. There’ll be two of them, and they know they'll need both to take me down. When they follow me, you head to the space docks and get out.’

‘I can't fly!’ I said, already taking the pack from my shoulder and holding it out to him.
'No, but somebody up there will. You're resourceful. You'll think of something.'

The security team entered the corridor. McCarthy shoved me to the ground, pulling the pack from my hands as he did so. I tumbled, quickly clutching my arm to my chest as though I'd hurt it. The two red suits were leaning over the top of me, grabbing at me. I screamed.

'My arm. I've been bitten,' I cried out. But there was no need as they caught sight of the ugly welt on my arm. 'He's got bio-weapons!' I kept screaming. 'One of them bit me. I need medical help.' I added in a whimper, knowing they'd have little sympathy for me. 'You can get your precious book from that thieving b--- later. Take me to a doctor.' I was sounding like a patch junky, but hopelessness seemed my only chance.

'The old guy's got the book,' said one, forgetting me immediately. 'Come on.'

'What about him?' asked the other.

'Forget him,' he said, already heading in the direction McCarthy had gone. I moaned a few more times for effect, and because I was too scared to move just yet. The sound of their boots on the metal floor faded. If I waited any longer they'd have caught McCarthy and realised the book was still with me. My feet began moving, faster with each step until I was running.

Space dock. McCarthy had said get to the space dock. I didn't have a clue where the space dock was. Up. That was all I knew. Skyler had said the pod's shot out from a deck that sat at the highest point above SkyCity.

A maintenance chute was what I needed. I had no idea where I was in relation to the rest of the city. If I was close to the central core there should be an internal chute running along here somewhere. I stopped and forced myself to feel the movement of the city; the slight fluctuations that marked the artificial gravity created by the huge spinning city. There was a familiar tingling as this time, I placed my hand on the book at my chest
and attempted to let it flow through me. This was how the Twins worked, genetic telepathy. I had to connect my mind to the book. I formed a picture of where I needed to be and headed off, without thinking, without hesitation.

I came to a hatch. The door opened easily and I was soon inside. Noise assaulted my ears - air pumps, fans and machinery were all churning away behind the solid walls that held it all in and made it seem like the city wasn't floating in a precarious orbit around an ancient planet. I made my way along its length, trying to stick to a general direction. It wasn't easy. Everything was laid out in a flat, circular plan. I needed to find another chute - a vertical one. The next hatch I came across, I pushed open slowly hoping it wouldn't lead into a security filled corridor. It was empty.

Any other time I'd have grabbed a wall tab and gone for directions. Today I didn’t need to; somehow I was finding the way. The picture in my mind showed me where I was headed, but it was the feeling that went with it that told me how to get there. An intuitive knowledge, like I'd been there before. Yet I knew I hadn't. The longer I held onto the book the stronger my instincts became, or was it a connection to the plant life that was the real lifeblood of the city, that infiltrated every section of it without us being aware of its existence for the most part?

Keeping my connection with the book, I thought it was telling me left. I ran – straight into a dead end. I could see a rail that spread across the end of the corridor. In the distance, another rail marked the edge of the opposite side. The distance from one to the other seemed immense.

I ran through my options. It was either find another way, or make it across the open floor. I couldn’t see the ceiling, but a bank of pipes ran across the centre of the gap. It was just like the day this had all started. I’d made it then. I could make it now. There just happened to be no floor today. And no Lerrin or Skyler to pull me out of trouble. The
book pulsed below my shirt. I started running, not thinking about the drop. I could do this.

I stopped thinking; lent forward, my hand gripping the rail in front of me as my legs pulled up tightly into my chest, then I kicked out with my feet, sending myself into a leap over the expanse and towards the pipes above. I didn’t have a hope.

On a space station, and gravity was going to kill me. At least Lerrin would find it amusing.

The pipes were too high. I didn't stand a chance. Panic overwhelmed me, as my head darted about looking for, something, anything. I quickly reached the top of the arc of my jump, and began to descend.

My mind slowed – distancing itself from my body. That's when I saw a thick, knotted vine hanging in front of me. I reached out, grabbing the vine, wrapped my legs and feet around it. The knobbly vine ripped through my already shredded hands. My broken finger made it impossible to control my fall. I gripped harder with my good hand, feeling the skin rip away as I did. Eventually, I stopped.

Panting breaths came in rapid succession as I swung in an ever-slowing arc, too scared to move. The vine creaked softly under my weight. I hoped desperately that it could hold me. Orienting myself, I looked down to find I was hanging over McCarthy’s forest. This was the observation deck he’d pointed out; the one that nobody used. To my right, the tops of the giant trees formed a landscape of pointed pines. I quickly turned my eyes toward the ceiling, knowing what I’d find. An ocean of speckled darkness behind the clear roof of the Organics’ forest, like a painting in a frame. *Find the light.* I knew what it meant. The light was outside. It was the Sun, the Moon, the stars, the Earth. I was doing what it wanted me to, and it was helping me find the light.

I looked across to the platform again. I might be able to use the vine to swing across. Leaning back I began rocking the vine back and forth. It creaked loudly as my arc
grew. I swallowed hard. You just need to let go, I thought. But somewhere in my head, I
couldn't escape the fact that the distance in front of me was further than the distance
behind. I swung harder, willing myself to make the distance. The vine swung back. Warm
air rushed up against my face and hair. Then I turned and began shooting forward towards
the platform again. I should let go now. My hands loosened their grip on the vine and I
felt myself propelled forward as the vine slackened. I'll never make this! I grabbed back
the vine, clutching it desperately as my body tugged backwards and the burning in my
palms began again. The vine slipped through my grip.

My fingers were sweating. If I didn't get myself to safety soon I was going to
plummet five decks and all the enhancements in space wouldn't have saved me. I
concentrated again, taking in the book and the forest below this time. At first, all I could
hear was the rustling of leaves. Not like before though. These were forest trees, ancient
and huge. I closed my eyes, feeling for them in my mind. Feeling through my chest and
out through the book. The noise grew and then I could feel a shift in the airflow. I opened
my eyes to see the trees leaning out towards me, forming a bridge to the other side. I
clung to the slender branches of the canopy, not daring to let go of the vine until I knew I
could make it. Stepping carefully, I searched out the thickest branches. I’d never felt
safer.

'There he is!' A voice shouted out. It came from the end of the corridor. The
corridor I'd just run down. I clutched and grabbed the rest of the way across, worrying less
about my branch selection and trusting the trees to guide me there. Reaching the other
side, I climbed safely over the rail. Security stood on the other side. They had no hope,
despite their genetic pedigrees.

‘The other way! The other way!’ One shouted. ‘We need to go around.’
I took off, not daring to think about what would happen when I got to the top or how quickly security could catch up to me.

‘Going somewhere?’

Lerrin’s voice was cold behind me.

‘Lerrin,’ I turned to face him. ‘How’d you find me?’

‘Find you? It wasn’t hard. I’ve been watching you ever since your expedition with that third tier Mutineer,’ he sneered, pacing around me, never stopping, a predatory beast marking time before his kill. ‘You’ve changed – suddenly so confident. Who do you think you are?’ He paused, but I knew I wasn’t expected to answer. My eyes followed him, never left him. ‘I told my father you were up to something. We couldn’t have hoped for a better next move than your investigation of your mother’s old office. Did you think my father didn’t know about her office? About her little experiments with the Twins?’ His face twitched as he kept his anger in check. ‘And Skyler. So predictable. Tried to save you by sending you straight into their hands.’

Lerrin had betrayed me. Not Skyler. My face twitched in discomfort as I tried not to react.

‘What are you going to do?’ I asked.

‘Well I don’t know,’ he replied, his voice sparkling with amusement at the situation he’d created. ‘I never expected you to get away from the Twins. Bravo,’ he said, raising his hands in mock applause.

‘At least you still find me entertaining,’ I replied.

‘You’re right. I do.’ He paced a bit more. Thinking now. ‘So I’m going to let you go.’ He stopped. ‘It’d be too boring to end this now. I’ll tell you what. We’ll make it like a game. I’ll count to one hundred and you can run away. That’s a fair head start, don’t you think?’
I took a step backwards, too confused to run.

‘That’s it. Run away. You’re not playing the game very well so far.’

I took another few steps and turned.

‘But Zander,’ I stopped, turning back to face him. ‘I’ll be seeing you soon. Don’t forget,’ his voice was sinister, his eyes deadly. ‘I always win.’

I ran. Didn’t stop. Didn’t think. Turning wherever it seemed right to turn. Too scared to look behind me. Lerrin had betrayed me. I’d got Skyler all wrong, again.

Hidden in another maintenance chute, I finally stopped to catch my breath. Plant life had made its way inside and up the ladder. Thick, green leaves caught under my feet, making it difficult to climb. The larger ones handled my weight. The smaller ones were the worst. They crushed and broke, covering my soles with their slick, slippery insides.

The book kept up its steady pulse, seeming to tell me this was where it wanted me to go. I wondered if anyone realised what went on behind the walls, over our heads, under our feet. I wondered if I knew what was going on.

Trust. I had to trust. The book hadn't led me wrong yet.

The chute opened into a low crawl space that I thought might be the underneath of a floor. I had no idea where I was. The space was claustrophobic and I had to lie down on my back in order to move. I would have pushed out a panel directly above, except the vine had worked its way up and spread out in a thick carpet. I guessed this wasn’t where it wanted me to come out. Instead, I began the slow task of slinking along on my back, to a space where the vine hadn't taken over.

I pushed at the first clear panel I came to. It didn't want to budge at all. I pressed my back against it and began pushing my arms out straight. There was a cracking sound,
as the panel lifted from where it had sat comfortably since the city began. I doubted anyone had had to use the in-between floor space before. It took all my strength to lift the panel up and out of the way. I tried to keep the noise low. There were voices close by, and I had no intention of alerting them to my presence.

On the other side of the panel was a large room, simpler than most I'd seen in SkyCity. Windows lined the walls and I could see the cold emptiness of space outside. Somehow it looked different here than from above McCarthy’s forest. There was no daysim in the room, not even an algae lamp. Standing in the starkly lit room, staring out into the nothingness sent an uncontrolled shiver through my body. I tried to concentrate on the room; see if there was anything I could use. The sidewall was lined with control panels and old style screens set into desks. The largest of the desks sat below an internal window that looked out over a large landing pad.

The room I was in was large. It had probably been a gathering area at some stage, for people about to head out to flight pods that would come and go from the landing pad. Between the two, a large steel door blocked the way to a small anteroom that separated the main room from the landing pad. Last stop between the safety of the city and space. I shivered again, never so aware of how helpless the city really was. I walked over to the steel door and looked through the long, narrow window set into its panels. It was difficult to see inside. Not much light got in. I could make out an equipment storage cupboard and a communications panel, but other than that the room seemed empty.

The voices outside rose and fell. No doubt they were looking for me. The fact they hadn't looked here suggested the room was one of the forgotten places that seemed to be growing in number around the city. I didn't have a clue what to do. There was no way I was going to steal any sort of pod from here. The place hadn't been used for a century by the look of it. Why couldn't the book have led me somewhere useful?
I slumped down against the steel door, slowed my breathing again and placed my left hand against my chest where the book was. A warm sensation spilled over me, comforting me against the cold I hadn't realised had crept over me in this room. Ryl's face flashed in front of my eyes. My hand jumped away from my chest and my eyes shot open. I could hear Ryl's voice, outside. He was talking to The Committee Chair.

'As soon as we have him, you're to schedule him.' The Committee Chair's voice was as harsh as ever.

'I understand.' My father replied. 'He's become too much of a risk. As much as it pains me, I have to agree Committee Chair.'

So my father had just agreed to bott me; I knew the bastard would. I'd blow myself out the airlock before I let him. Before I could do anything though, I needed to get out of here. Not easy with my pursuers waiting outside the door. I searched the room for another way out. Nothing.

The subtle hiss of an opening door broke through my thoughts. Lights blared into action. They were here. I checked I was close enough to reach the door release for the airlock. I'd make it easily before they could cross the room. How had this become my reality?

'Ah, Master Black.' The Committee Chair was wearing a sickly smile, which he obviously didn't bring out very often. 'It appears you've taken a wrong turn and found yourself at the end of the road, as the quaint saying goes.'

'Don't come any closer. I can open the airlock doors and the externals before any of you can make it across the room.' They stopped, the security team's eyes running back and forth making calculations, but nobody moved. 'Where's McCarthy?' I demanded.

'Your mentor? He's a bit old to outrun a security team,' The Committee Chair replied.
'He handed over the book without hesitation,' my father added. 'You may as well give yourself up, Zander.'

A mistake; Ryl Black had made a mistake. They didn't have McCarthy, didn't know the book was still safely strapped to my chest. McCarthy had escaped. Normally I would have been struggling to hide my euphoria - there was still hope. If I could just work out how to make it happen. The room was a dead end. The only way out was the airlock, and that meant death in a matter of minutes. They'd pick the book off my vacuum-dried corpse before the hour was out. Still, I had no other options. I could at least stall them with the airlock. Perhaps find another way.

'Why would I come with you? I know what you've got planned. I know I've been scheduled for botting,' I turned to Ryl. ‘You couldn’t wait could you?’ I stretched my arm across to the door release. The Security team flinched, their fingers tightening around the heavy batons they held.

'What are you going to do, Zander? Go out the airlock?’ Ryl took a step forward. As he stepped out of The Committee Chair's field of vision, I was sure his face changed. I didn't know if it was fear or hope, I couldn't tell. Either way, it wasn't good for me. What did he have to fear if I did go out the airlock? More importantly, what kind of father hopes you will go out an airlock. I pushed my hand towards the release. It seemed to take forever. The reactions of my father, The Committee Chair and the security team played out in slow motion before me. They quickly sped up again, as the hiss of the door cemented my choice. I felt sick. I was going to die.

'Seize him!' The Committee Chair called.

'No!' My father called out, holding a hand out to stop the security team. 'Let him do it. He only complicates things if we bring him in. The lower tiers are unsteady enough without someone around to focus their dissent. He'll fade away in a matter of weeks.'
I'd stepped back into the airlock. The door began making its way back across - sealing my fate. I just stood there. Ryl turned his attention back to me.

'Have it your way then.' The Committee Chair acquiesced, and the security team visibly relaxed. Then he turned and walked away. I was a problem, and I had been dealt with. 'Walk with me, Ryl.' The Committee Chair’s voice like a ghost caught behind the steel. The door clicked, sealed and locked. ‘Of course, Committee Chair,’ I heard my father reply. I pressed my face against the long panel of glass that ran across the door and stared at the group on the other side. I looked at my father's face one more time. He hadn't moved but his eyes were downcast. I took a good look and saw fear. Definitely fear this time, no question. The door closed behind him. The room fell back into darkness.

A computerised voice disturbed my thoughts. ‘Forty five seconds to outer door release.’ It was a pleasant feminine voice. She made it sound like I was going on a picnic, rather than about to be sucked out an airlock to suffocate and die. 'Thirty seconds,' the voice again. Now I was scared. My survival instinct was kicking in. There had to be a way, but thirty seconds wasn't going to let me find it. I needed more time.

The book pulsed madly at my chest. My mind filled with an image of my father handing me the tiny black bag. I didn’t question the image this time. I didn’t have time for it. Instead I rummaged through my pocket for the black bag, pulled it out and emptied a small brass key onto my palm. Confusion overcame me, but then I noticed the number etched into the surface of the key; 216. I looked up to see a series of lockers. One of them was 216.

I raced across to the locker. There had to be EVA gear in it. I yanked the door open. A suit. It wasn't a suit and helmet, like I’d worn with Finn, more like a big set of overalls that covered your head and face too. The whole thing felt like it might rip apart before I even made it outside. There was a small, flat oxygen tank sewn into the suit and a
mouthpiece that clipped into the front. My eyes began to water, as I jabbed my feet into the suit and hoped it was big enough. I heard a hiss. This time there was wind with it - the outer doors were opening. I slapped away the tears and kept working at the suit. Time was up. I needed to get this thing on.

My feet began sliding across the floor as I sealed the suit at the neck. I leaned forward, my right hand grabbing hold of the side rail, hoping to gain a few more seconds. My left hand worked to stuff the mouthpiece into the socket on the head cover of the suit. I felt my feet lifting off the floor and turned to see the door nearly halfway open. The force was incredible. Nothing like the gradual rebalance of air pressure that Finn had arranged. Finally the mouthpiece clicked into place and I could use both hands to hold on. The last thing I needed was to fly out of here before the door was open. If I hit that door I'd be knocked out, or the suit split, and then I'd slowly float away to my death.

The strange sense of calm the book emitted came over me again. The suit was on. Air was pumping in and out of my lungs. I was free; a little too free probably. I realised I was floating more than being pulled now. The pressure must have equalised inside the open bay. I looked down the wall towards the door. There were handrails all along the side, so I began moving myself toward the outer door. Within moments I was outside; the curved blue line of Earth spread out before me. I sat and watched, until a voice inside my head said, 'Do I have to save your butt every time?'
'Skyler?' I whispered.

'Well it's not God, if that's who you were expecting.'

As I listened, a small silver pod slid silently toward me and then hovered barely two metres away from me. It was shaped like an oval, but with a flat bottom. Its surface looked as though it had once been shiny and smooth. Now it was pitted with the tiny pockmarks of life in space, its exterior reflecting dully as though it was as tired of life up here as the people were.

'Are you in that thing?'

'Of course I'm in here. Anyone else would have shot you by now.' I searched the surface, hoping for a window but finding nothing. 'And before you ask the obvious - yes, I'm trying to rescue you. So if you could just swish yourself over this way it'll make things a lot easier.'

I hesitated, hanging onto the side of SkyCity like a third tier box-hole. I was too scared to let go, but there was no way of going back. I put my hand up to the book, hoping for guidance. It remained silent. The decision was back to me. I kicked off the side of SkyCity, disconnecting myself from everything I'd ever known. My hands reached out, grabbing the side of the pod where a space had opened, and pulled myself inside. The interior was filled with a red light that sent an eerie glow. The pod closed.

'Skyler?' There was no reply. I felt my weight return to me and slid down heavily onto a small ledge that jutted out from the sidewall. The light turned to green. I guessed that meant I had air pressure. I unclipped the mouthpiece and pulled back the head cover.

A door opened in front of me. Seconds later Skyler appeared. She was wearing her flight team uniform. It made my EVA suit look like a relic. She looked angry.
'Come on! You think they're going to let us sit outside forever?' She grabbed my arm and led me into a small flight cabin. My arm throbbed at the spider bite site, but I said nothing. There were seats for two at the front, and a small observer’s chair to the side. Three screens sat across the front panel with views from around the ship, including the open airlock door I’d come from. There were no windows. I'd seen the view. I could understand why. It was just as Finn had said; no pilot could fly back and forth to the moon, staring down at the Earth, and not feel some sort of connection.

'Sit down and belt up.' Skyler instructed. I did as I was told, as she tapped away at the various controls. Nerves still played at the edge of my senses. 'Here,' she said, smiling and pointing to one of the screens. I looked up to see an image of Earth on the screen and my nerves were quickly replaced with awe.

'How'd you do that?' I asked, not taking my eyes from the screen.

'This pod was decommissioned before we were born. I've been tinkering with it for months.' She hit another button and I felt the pod begin to move. 'It looks like a wreck on the outside but inside, it’s – well it’s pretty much a wreck inside too.'

‘You’ve been working on this for months?’

‘Hey, it’s a lot harder –,’ she began defensively.

‘No. I don’t doubt your hard work,’ I paused. ‘I’m wondering why you’d be working on something like this if you didn’t know you’d need it.’ I held her gaze a moment. ‘How did you know you’d need it?’

She sighed guiltily, then dipped her head over and began parting her hair.

‘Look,’ she said, pointing the back of her skull towards me. Amongst the strands was an unmistakeable tattoo, the same one I’d seen on Finn’s inside wrist. ‘Do you see it?’ she called.

‘I see it,’ I replied quietly. She flipped her hair back over.
‘What?’ she asked. ‘It’s okay for Finn to be a Mutineer, but not me?’

‘No. It’s not that,’ I said. ‘My father gave me the key to get this suit.’ I stood, suddenly feeling trapped, and thumped my head against the low ceiling. Pain shot through my skull. I pressed my hand hard against the spot, my teeth clenched. ‘He’s one of you, isn’t he? All along he’s been one of you. And I’ve done nothing but hate him.’

‘Sit down,’ she ordered. I obeyed. ‘I’ve got to try to fly this thing into the Skylift now, so don’t disturb me.’

‘The Skylift? I thought this thing could fly.’

‘Fly yes. Land no. Not on Earth anyway.’ She stared at the small screen in front of her, toggling the stick with precise movements. The open door of the Skylift appeared in the monitor like a giant opening mouth, ready to swallow us. ‘The doors are open.’ She breathed a sigh of relief and the danger of this mission, her mission, struck me for the first time.

‘Whose job was that?’ I asked.

‘I don’t know. I’m just glad they could do it.’ She carefully guided us in. The Skylift had to be huge; it disappeared inch by inch on the screen until finally we were in. Skyler sat the pod down on the floor of the Skylift. I barely felt a thing. She switched her monitor to another camera and watched as the giant doors closed behind us.

‘So that’s it? We’re going to Earth.’

‘That’s it,’ she replied.

We sat and stared at the tiny screen, lost in the quiet that comes after too much excitement. The pod didn’t seem to move. I wondered if it could be some sort of elaborate trap.

‘Am I a Mutineer?’ I asked.

‘I don’t know,’ she replied. ‘Should we find out?’
‘No,’ I said. ‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘It doesn’t matter who you are?’ she sounded incredulous.

The pod shuddered, wobbling for a moment then stabilising on its flat bottom. The Skylift began descending.

‘Let’s just go find my mother. See what this book can do.’ I turned toward her.

‘One day I’m coming back to this place. And it won’t be as a Mutineer.’ Her eyes narrowed with concern. ‘Right now, I’ve got a promise to keep. I’m going to Earth.’