



HALL OF DOORS

WEBLEY  
AND THE  
WORLD  
MACHINE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
ZACHARY CHOPCHINSKI

# Webley and The World Machine

Zachary Paul Chopchinski

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# Webley and The World Machine

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# Praise For Webley and The World Machine

“It’s Bioshock meets Sucker Punch with a side of Wild Wild West”

**-Kacey Abels, *The Reading Tree Book Blog***

“I’m completely lost in the World Machine. It’s my new happy  
place!”

**-S.J’s *Book Blog***

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Anyway, I love you all dearly, and here is to many more adventures.

# Dedication

To my best friend and love of my life; my wife.

Layla, you started this adventure for me. As I grow and develop, it is only due to the support and nurturing that you give me. All that I am as a man and an author is thanks to you. You make me better, and I will always love and cherish you for all that you have done. Until the day the world ceases to turn, and forever past. The world for you, Mama Bear.

*“Get action. Seize the moment. Man was never intended to become an oyster.”*

*–Theodore Roosevelt*



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# Prologue

*2,400,000 B.C, The World Machine*



Cog rolled end over end across the platform, tumbling like a rag doll. The brass surface was slick with oil and gears from fallen soldiers on both sides.

His brother had gone too far this time. His damn machines were proving a little too difficult to kill. Though Cog had always considered himself a master inventor and a skilled warrior, his winged pack was scarcely a match for the mechanical monstrosities his traitorous brother had created.

The world exploded around him as airships and mechanical creatures circled overhead. The smell of gunpowder and copper filled the air as brother fought brother and friend fought friend. All for what? Power? Freedom? Greed?

One of his fellow soldiers flew into a massive girder, spun and collided with a brass beam. The force of the explosion pushed Cog to the ground. Remnants of the battleship landed amongst a giant set of gears that rotated in a feeble attempt to power the furnace that kept everyone alive.

His brother had orchestrated this attack, and the boss ordered him to protect the furnaces at all costs. The thought of failing tore at Cog as he collected himself and drew his trusty pistols, firing wildly at any mechanism that flew past.

As he swatted one of the insect-like mechanical creatures from the sky, several more took notice of his attack. They turned their attention from an airship and swooped down, their bladed appendages barely missing Cog's head. He ducked, unleashing another barrage of shots from his weapons.

The cold chill of fear rippled through Cog as his instincts warned him he needed to get to the furnace. He sprinted the length of the platform, the metallic surface clinking beneath his feet with every step. As he neared the giant turning gears that powered the World Machine, towers of fire and smoke billowed from its gargantuan pipes. The same winged monstrosities that had nearly gotten the best of him were doing their worst to the exterior of the furnace.

An airship thundered overhead. One of his. Captain Silny shouted to his men as the ship's guns fired upon the furnace's attackers. A litany of small explosions scattered the enemy soldiers. At that moment, Cog realized what would happen if the airship continued to shoot at the creatures.

He opened his mouth to protest, but another explosion flattened him as shrapnel launched into the sky above. Terror caused Cog to lose himself briefly to the blackness.

When he pushed the sludge from his brain, the great ship had vanished into a cloud of fire and smoke, and the furnace's warmth and light had extinguished.

Cog looked at the silent heart of the Machine in disbelief. In the deep crimson smoke, the outlines of those damn flying things still whizzed with triumphant victory. They didn't even know the depth of what they'd done. With a scowl, Cog retrieved his pistols from the platform near his feet. He couldn't let those bastards win.

Without the radiant heat and power from the furnaces, the World Machine would suffer, and all the Dwellers would die. His friends. His family. His love. They would all perish unless he did something. Even if it required killing thousands, he had to save the Machine.

# 1 | Mr. Smooth

*Present Day, Germany*



Adal shot from his bed and surveyed the room as sweat trickled down his forehead. It didn't help that, when the hot morning sun peeked over the horizon, it poured right through his window.

“Damn!” Adal turned his panic-filled eyes toward his alarm clock. He was running late. Today he would present his grandfather’s story and family history to his senior class. He hopped from his bed. As he did, his foot tangled in his sheet, causing him to fall face first to the floor.

He caught himself with his arms and leveraged himself back into a standing position. He paused for a moment and looked around his room, ensuring no one had seen him take the tumble. Coming back to reality, he scoffed and rolled his eyes before jogging to his bathroom.

He stumbled through his morning ritual as quickly as he could, taking only a few minutes to stare at himself in the mirror. Adal made it a point to look as good as he could before he left his room. He had long worked on his stylish reputation and wouldn't let something as trivial as being late jeopardize it.

Once prepared for the day, Adal took a moment to appreciate his appearance before leaving the mirror. His low-cut, white t-shirt dipped just far enough to show the crease between his pecs that he'd spent months chiseling with track and field. His hair

and fade lined up perfectly, and he ran his hand over his neck. Smooth as ever.

After giving himself a wink in the mirror, Adal slipped his sneakers on and hastened for his bedroom door. As he grabbed the handle, he froze and smiled. He turned around and grabbed his notebook off the desk near the door. In all the morning rush, he nearly forgot the report on his grandfather.

Swinging his bedroom door open, he ran through the hall and hopped down the stairs to the first landing. Collecting himself, he walked down the last three stairs, then made a dash for the front door.

“Adalwolf Stein. You get your butt over here right now,” his father’s voice bellowed from the dining room. When his father used his full name, Adal knew he was in it deep.

Adal rolled his eyes and turned around, walking into the dining room. His father and grandfather were seated at the table, eating. Grandpa Lawrence was reading the paper, as he did every morning. His mother poured coffee and beckoned Adal toward the one empty seat with a plate already set for him. His father sat at the head of the table, a stern look on his face as he peered impatiently over the frame of his glasses at his son.

“Boy, are you running late again?” Adal’s father leaned back in his chair, sipping his coffee.

Adal reluctantly walked over and plopped into the empty chair, setting his notebook on the table next to a pitcher of orange juice.

“Well, the boy wouldn't be so late if you didn't stop him from gettin' to school. Pick those fights, Son,” his grandfather chimed in, not even lowering the paper that covered his face.

Adal smiled. He knew his grandfather was trying to conceal a laugh as he hid behind his morning paper.

“Dad, now’s not the time. The boy is becoming an adult, and he needs to be thinking about his future, about what he wants to do with his life. He has to get himself together and learn to be organized,” Adal’s father said.

This time, his grandfather remained silent.

Adal’s father had drilled into his head every day for as long as

he could remember the importance of getting into university and getting a good job. *Don't follow those lazy friends of yours!* Adal's dad had said so many times that he could mimic both the tone and inflection of the lecture.

"Dad, it's not my fault. I was up all night working on my report for history. I forgot to set my alarm!"

"That's the problem, Adal. You need to listen to your father. We raised you better than that," Adal's mother joined in as she wiped the counter with a paper towel.

Adal sucked on his teeth and sank into his chair. They weren't about to hear him. They never did. His parents were always 'A+' parents. You could bring home an A, and they would ask why it wasn't an A+.

He knew they loved him, but he wished they showed it in ways other than riding him all the time. That's why, over the years, Adal had grown so close to his grandfather. Ever since he was little, his grandfather had been the only one with any chill.

The story was always the same when he asked his dad why he was so hard on him all the time. Being raised in Germany, the mixed-race son of a black American and a white German, Adal's father was always an outcast. That drove him to move to Africa where he'd met Adal's mother.

When Grandma Ursula died and Grandpa Lawrence needed help to get around, they moved back to Germany. That adversity made his dad proud, strong, stubborn, and driven. Adal had inherited his father's strength and pride, but he had a personality to go with it.

"Look, I get it. I screwed up. My bad. Can I go? I really *am* going to be late for my presentation." Adal stood and grabbed his notebook before his parents could argue.

His mother sighed, and his father sipped his coffee. "You can go, Adalwolf, but we will talk about this when you get home. Things are going to change around here. I expect a decent grade on that report today, and I want to see your teacher's notes on it too." His father slid his glasses back up his nose to signal that he was done speaking, and Adal turned on his heels.

"Adal," his grandfather called, putting the newspaper down.

With age, his grandfather's hair had turned white, offering a sharp contrast to his dark complexion. He never called Adal "Adalwolf;" he was the only one in his family who respected Adal enough to know he hated his full name.

"Are you doing the report on our family? My story and how we got here?" he asked, nodding to Adal's notebook.

"You know it!"

"Then let the boy alone. Quit being so hard on my grandson all the time." Lawrence nudged his son in the shoulder, producing a smile from Adal and a frustrated snort from his father. As a rule, you did not speak to an elder with disrespect in their home. It took Adal a few strikes on the back of the head growing up to learn that lesson, but it took nonetheless.

"Thanks, Gramps." Adal chuckled, pointing to his grandfather and nodding toward the ceiling.

"Damn, I remember that day like it happened this morning." Grandpa Lawrence leaned back in his chair, the familiar memories of war playing across his face. "We arrived at the outskirts of the bunker where that son of a bitch, Hitler, was holed up, just as the sun was peeking its head over the hills. We'd marched all night and, let me tell you, my feet were so blistered I couldn't take a goddamn step without popping one of those bad boys." A guttural laugh escaped the old man's lips, and Adal knew he would really be late.

"The tanks rumbled as I walked with my machine-gun. Oh lord, that was the most empowering moment of the war. We knew what we were gettin' ourselves into, and we were ready to be heroes. We were the 761st Tank Battalion. Our motto was *Come Out Fightin'*. Being a mostly Colored unit, we were always given the suicide missions. Damn army didn't care about us."

"Gramps I love this story, but I'm gonna be late." When Grandpa Lawrence didn't stop talking, Adal leaned against the wall by the kitchen door. Adal's father rolled his eyes, no doubt having heard the story a million times.

"We reached our rally point. The tanks quit rolling, and we all gathered in formation. They called my unit the 'Cutters.' We carried the BAR, that was the Browning Automatic Rifle."

“Yeah, we all know that, Dad,” Adal’s father chimed in as he turned the page of his newspaper and took a sip of his coffee.

“I’m tellin the boy!” Lawrence snapped before continuing his story. “Anyway, we kept those Krauts in check with heavy fire while our tanks did what they came to do. We had a little bet going with the Red Army, so we weren't waitin’ for anything. You see, sometimes in war, you gotta make a game out of it, you know...to keep out the dark thoughts that you killin’ a bunch of people. We entered the clearing, and our tanks opened fire. BOOM! We fired, moved, fired, and moved killing as many of those Kraut bastards as we could. You shoulda seen their faces. Hitler’s final stand outside his goddamn compound and there we were, a battalion of black men showing those Arian bastards what real warriors were.” Lawrence paused to take a sip of his coffee and shovel a piece of Brötchen into his mouth. Bread crumbs and drops of coffee stuck to the stubble on his face.

“When we got inside the compound, we mopped up what was left of the enemy. I’ll admit, the Germans weren’t stupid; they had some good defenses. I personally fought with three SS soldiers in a hallway for almost five minutes before I remembered I still had a grenade remaining. Like to say they went out with a bang.”

Adal laughed. He’d heard the story at least a dozen times, but this part always made him laugh. Grandpa Lawrence was the coolest guy he knew, and Adal had always wanted to be like him.

“The Russians were already in, working the Germans from the other side. Damn, they’d got in there fast. Like a bunch of goddamn magicians. After I don’t even know how long, we finally made it to the bunker only to find that the coward had killed himself and his wife.” Lawrence pounded his fist on the table, his anger resurfacing as he told the story.

“The Russians took credit for the entire raid. Those sons of bitches.”

“Gramps, I got to go. I’m really going to be late.” Without even waiting for a response, Adal slipped out of the kitchen. He ran to the front door, opened it and slid outside, accidentally slamming it behind him. He flinched at the loud bang and knew he would hear about that when he got home. Leaping through the air, Adal



cleared the steps of his front stoop and landed silently on the sidewalk.

He hurried toward the school. Adal didn't want to run because that would make him sweat, and he couldn't show up to school looking sloppy. That wasn't his style. Besides, he still had seventeen minutes to get there, according to his watch, and it was only a few blocks away. No worries. He could still make it.

Other teens followed the same path but, even though he didn't run, Adal passed them. At six feet three inches, he had a long stride and, walking as fast as he could, he easily matched the speed of some of his classmates while jogging. A few said hello as he passed, but Adal was lost in thoughts of his parents.

“Why does he have to always be in my business all the time?” Adal mumbled, rounding a corner. The school was almost in view—only five blocks straight ahead—he should be there in a few minutes.

## 2 | Smart and Beautiful



Still lost in thought, Adal didn't notice he had gained a follower. A sharp pinch on his shoulder nearly made him drop his notebook.

Catching the book midair, Adal turned to confront the person. He was ready to pour his morning frustrations on the newcomer when he saw who it was. He sighed and shook his head.

“Well, looks like you aren't always as together as you'd like to think,” teased Arija as she nudged him in the arm. She tossed her straight raven hair over one shoulder and giggled as she adjusted her backpack. Arija had done these sorts of things to get under his skin ever since they became friends ten years ago. As the two had grown, they only became closer and, in the last year, they'd become inseparable.

Arija was the smartest girl in their class, but she also had the heart of a fighter. Adal considered her too good for any of the boys at school. She deserved a man. Someone who would take care of her and treat her right. Though they were only friends, Adal had to admit that she looked good.

Adal's other friends made fun of him for not going after Arija, but he was too cool to be considered taken. He liked the attention he got from other girls. A girlfriend would cramp his style. Adal knew Arija liked him; he could see it in the way she'd bat those big hazel eyes at him. But she was his best friend, and he didn't want to do anything to screw that up.

“Girl, you almost messed up my presentation. You do that,

don't think I won't make you write me another one!" Adal tugged at his shirt, smoothing the imaginary wrinkles she'd caused.

Arija snorted an unimpressed laugh at his attempted bravado.

"You act like I don't already do half your homework so you don't flunk out and get kicked off the team. So the way I figure it, you kinda owe me more favors than you have thoughts in the day." She turned her nose up at him and picked up her pace, gaining several steps ahead.

Arija was cute when she pretended to be mad at him, and Adal let a wide grin crease his face as he picked up speed.

"You know I appreciate that. Besides, you also keep my old man off my back." Adal put his arm around Arija's shoulder and pulled her to his side.

She smiled, pushing away from him. "Don't think just because you're Mr. Smooth you can butter me up. I only need you to pass so we stand a chance in the competition. I have the girls' team covered, but we need you on the boys' team to keep them in the winning circle. It's strictly business; get yourself together." They always played this game, pretended they didn't care about each other, but Arija kept him in check and, for that, Adal was grateful.

"Oh, you know you can't resist my charms. No girl can!" Adal ran ahead of Arija and turned to face her, so she couldn't get past him.

She stopped. He grinned as he leaned down, touching his forehead against hers so they were nose to nose. Arija may have been several inches shorter than him, but she never let his height intimidate her. Eventually, Arija laughed and pushed him away but, Adal had to admit, he liked messing with her.

A scraping sound came from behind Adal and, before he knew what was happening, his foot landed on something slippery and slid out from under him. His feet flew into the air as his back slammed into the ground.

A chorus of laughter erupted from a gang of boys leaned against the wall of a small coffee shop just next to them.

"Smooth landing, Adal!" one boy cackled, stepping over him.

He snatched up his skateboard.

Arija's face scrunched in anger as she helped Adal to his feet. The other boys remained with their backs against the wall, but the one that spoke stood next to Adal, holding the skateboard that had put him on his back to begin with.

"And to think, they made you team captain? Can't even stay on your feet while walking. Lucky, *she* was here to help the little boy up. What are you supposed to be again, anyway, his groupie?" the boy teased.

"What the hell was that, Elias?" Adal shouted, thrusting both of his hands into the boy's chest and shoving him back into his group of friends. The group righted their leader and stalked toward Adal, Elias in the lead.

"Just testing your skills, man. I mean, you're supposed to be the best, ain't you?" Elias was so close, Adal could smell the bully's rank breath. Arija stood next to him as the other boys attempted to form a half-circle.

Adal's jaw sawed back and forth as Elias spoke. "You want me to show you the best? Normally, I reserve that for your mother, but if you want a piece too..." Adal swelled his chest and pressed it to Elias' nose. When Adal stood straight up, he was four or five inches taller than Elias, and his muscles were more defined.

The smug grin left Elias' face, and his expression went cold. "Don't think for a moment I'm intimidated by some big golem. Maybe it's time someone taught both you and your girlfriend a lesson." Elias spat at Arija's feet.

She reared back to swing at him, but Adal caught her arm and lowered it, shaking his head.

"You see, now, that's the problem we have here, Elias. You keep insulting my friend, and she's a much better fighter than all of you put together. I think you owe her an apology." Adal gestured to the group, sliding into the limited space between Arija and the rest of the boys. He wasn't worried about her getting hurt; he was more worried about her hurting the rest of them and getting them all expelled.

"An apology? Really? Well, Mr. Captain, I think you're going to

be disappointed,” Elias snapped, looking over his shoulder to his friends.

Adal rubbed his hand over his mouth, producing a wide grin and a single chuckle. “Well then, looks like I’m just going to have to show you.” Adal glanced at Arija; the two shared a knowing smile, as if they were having a telepathic conversation.

“Show me what, exactly?” Elias asked, pressing his chest into Adal.

Adal leaned in to speak into Elias’ ear, adrenaline rushing through his veins. “These hands,” Adal whispered.

Elias’ expression dropped, but it was too late for him to react. Adal threw his open palm upward, hitting Elias in the throat and causing him to stumble back into two of his friends.

One of the other boys avoided the impact and moved around Elias, swinging at Adal. Anticipating what the other boy would do, Adal stepped backward, and the hook flew wide. The boy recovered and went for another hook with his other fist.

Arija lunged forward and grabbed the boy’s arm. Before he could react, she pulled him to the ground and wrapped her arms around his upper body in a near textbook armbar.

Though she had been on the track and field team for years, Arija preferred wrestling, presently holding several school records.

The boy screamed in pain. Arija applied just enough pressure to his arm to make him suffer, but not enough to break the delicate bones in his wrist and forearm.

Elias fell to his knees, coughing, as his two remaining friends turned their attention from Adal to Arija. The two boys kicked at Arija’s back and ribs as they tried to pry their friend loose.

Adal grabbed one of them by his collar and yanked him backward. At the same time, he brought one of his feet up and kicked the second boy in the stomach. Adal could hear the air leaving his lungs with the powerful hit.

Elias recovered, hooked his hand upward from his kneeling position, and caught Adal in the side of his ribs. Adal fell backward, and Elias stood, bringing his fists up.

Arija held onto her original attacker, still applying pressure, while the second coughed for air on the ground next to her.

Elias squared off with Adal throwing several punches faster than Adal would ever give him credit for. Adal dodged the first one, but the second and third caught him in the jaw. He brought one hand up to the spot the punch landed and moved his jaw from side to side, assessing the damage. Then he followed with his own barrage of strikes, most of which found their way to Elias' chest and face.

The boy he'd pulled off Arija charged at Adal while Elias swung at him. He collided with Adal's waist and tried to lift him into the air for a body slam, but Adal was too heavy. Adal slammed both fists into his new attacker's back and kned him in the chest. Then he grabbed the boy by both shoulders and rolled him away, turning once more to face Elias.

"Enough!" shouted a voice from the coffee shop.

Elias turned on his heels while Adal kept his pose, looking over Elias' shoulder. An older woman with graying blonde hair came out of the shop and stood just outside the doorway. She wore a black apron, and her face was splotchy and red.

"I cannot believe you would fight in front of the family shop, Elias! What's come over you?" The woman shook her finger at the pile of boys on the ground. When Elias scoffed, she appeared next to him and slapped him.

"Ey! Sorry, Mama! They started it!" Elias flinched under the second slap, which popped his hair up in the air.

"I do not care! How dare you embarrass us like this! Wait until I tell your father!" The woman looked from Elias to Adal, then to Arija on the ground. Adal had to stifle his laughter. Arija still had the boy in her grasp, and the look of pain on his face was truly priceless. Elias' mother walked over to her, waving her hands in the air. "Girl! Let him go! That isn't necessary!"

Arija looked at Adal and, when he nodded, she sighed, released her grip on the teen and kicked him away from her. She hopped to her feet and brushed her legs off. The boy rolled away and slowly stood, groaning and rubbing his arm.

"You two, go to school!" Elias' mother barked at Adal and Arija. "The lot of you, in the shop now! I want a few words with you."

The boys groaned as they lined up and marched their way into the shop. As Elias reached the door, he turned to face Adal. "Next time, you're mine!" he snarled and spat at the ground before walking into the shop.

"Next time, don't bring your mom to a fist fight!" Adal shot back.

"How about next time, he actually gives us a fight and not a little slap fest?" Arija added, laughing.

Adal and Arija stood and looked at one another for a moment. Then they both smiled and brushed themselves off as they laughed. "Thanks for having my back. Oh, and thanks for not snapping off that guy's arm." Adal picked up his notebook and brushed the street soot from its cover. Then he looked at his reflection in the shop's window and adjusted his shirt. He extended his knuckles toward Arija, and the two bumped fists.

"Anytime," Arija replied, punching Adal in the shoulder. "Just so you know, you fight like a girl."

"Hey, if fighting like a girl means fighting like you, I'll take that compliment all day long." With that, Adal looked at his watch. "Shit, girl, we're way late for first class!" Panic replaced Adal's confident pose, making Arija giggle.

"Well then, let's see why they made you captain of the boys' team," Arija teased as she bolted. Arija was nearly half a block away before Adal registered she'd started running.

## 3 | Bad News



Adal sat in class and ran his tongue over the inside of his split lip. Most of the soreness had gone, but it would take a few days for his lip to heal. He would never admit it aloud, but Elias had gotten a nice punch in.

A round of clapping pulled Adal from his thoughts. He sat up and offered three light claps. The presenter wrapped up, and the look on his face washed with relief. Adal drew a deep breath through his nose as the teacher moved down the row and locked eyes with him. As the clapping subsided, the student took his seat next to Adal.

“Next presenter is Adal. Let’s hear some encouragement for him,” the teacher announced, lazily clapping his hands.

Adal sighed and momentarily slouched in his chair before scooping up his notebook and standing. He walked past the row of desks and stood in front of the board facing the class. Adal tugged at his shirt and adjusted his pants.

He peered toward the windows that looked over the quad. Arija sat perched on the top of her chair with her feet on the desk drawing in her notebook, as usual. Adal couldn’t help but smile as he watched her black pen glide across the page like an ice-skater. Of all her strengths and hobbies, Arija fancied herself an artist most of all.

When she noticed it was Adal’s turn to speak, she slid the pen into the notebook and settled back down in her desk. Her full attention was on Adal, and she was smiling.

Adal smiled back and looked down at his paper. Finding the



first line, he glimpsed at the teacher from the corner of his eye, then opened his mouth for the first word.

“CkhhmpwaWERFERmhmhrm!” a forced cough interrupted with a not-so-hidden insult buried in the middle.

Adal’s blood boiled as he looked to the back corner of class and saw Elias and one of his friends. As their eyes locked, Elias smiled widely. A piece of paper thwacked Elias in the corner of his eye, causing him to wince. Adal traced its origin to see Arija closing her notebook once more.

“Enough horseplay!” the teacher interjected, addressing the entire class. The room turned deathly silent, the air thick and uncomfortable. Adal glared at Elias for a moment before looking back to his page and finding his place again.

“You need this grade. Don’t let him trip you up,” Adal whispered to himself before clearing his throat.

“For my family history, the person I interviewed was my grandfather. His name is...”

“CuhDICKcuhcuh!” came another taunting cough from the corner of the room.

Adal’s concentration snapped. He looked up and, in one motion, he tossed his book to the floor and charged at Elias.

But Arija was one step ahead of him. She leaped from her seat and climbed over the desk next to her to get to Elias.

Adal rushed past two rows of awestruck students who slid out of the way of the oncoming train. In any other situation, he would only have responded with his own snide retort. Possibly something along the lines of, “your mother’s favorite pastime?” Elias, however, was talking shit about his grandfather, and that was not going to fly. Not today.

Elias had an ear-to-ear grin on his face as he and his associate rose from their seats, hands in the air. Just as Adal reached out to grab Elias by the collar and teach him the lesson he’d missed that morning, Arija broke his stride.

She placed the heel of her foot against the second boy’s desk and shoved hard. The desk slid into the one beside it, tripping Elias and making him fall back into his own chair. In the same movement, she stepped in front of Adal, and he collided with her.

Arija grunted from the pressure of his body against hers. She grabbed both of Adal's wrists and clenched, pushing him away from the fight.

"Chill out, Adal. He isn't worth it. Not here, anyway." Arija grunted as she fought to prevent him from getting past her and snapping Elias in two.

"No, screw that. He wants a piece, he can have the whole thing!" Adal pressed harder against Arija.

Elias leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest.

Shocked silence died as the students cheered the fight on. Several stood on desks and yelled taunts while others gathered in a circle around them, pumping their fists in the air.

"Everyone sit back down," the teacher yelled, but no one listened.

Heat radiated from Adal's face. Tension built in his fists as he tried to push past Arija to get to Elias.

Adal had lived his life relying on words to get him out of situations like this. Arija, on the other hand, had always needed to be the toughest person in the room.

In Israel, women were required to serve in the military, and Arija's mother had been no exception. But the once fierce and proud warrior began to look at life a little differently when Arija was born. Aliza Rapp wanted more for her daughter than constant war so, when Arija was two years old, they left Israel and moved to Germany. Arija idolized her mother's strength, a resolve which hardened after her mother died from a brain tumor. Adal knew he was lucky to be her friend. He never wanted to know what it felt like to be on the receiving end of her wrath.

"Adalwolf Stein!" shouted a deep and raspy voice from behind Adal. It was a firm and authoritative tone, not the meek and lazy drawl of the history teacher. As the voice echoed from the concrete walls of the classroom, the students fell silent, and Adal backed away from Arija. Even Elias sat up in his chair, the smile gone from his face. Adal turned to see the headmaster, Mr. Muller, standing in the doorway.

Mr. Muller had proven over the years to be a stern but fair

man. He had a soft spot for the athletic teams and their members. Adal always found this ironic, as he was a large man and could hardly walk from one end of the school to another without stopping to catch his breath.

Adal pulled his hands from Arija's grasp and huffed a sigh. He looked at the headmaster in silence and waited for Muller to say something. He'd been caught trying to start a fight on school grounds, and Adal knew the headmaster would call his father. He ran through the scenarios of the different lectures he was bound to hear when he got home.

The class had all turned their attention from the fight and Mr. Muller to their books. They didn't want any part of the discipline that would follow. Muller had made a name for himself with unique punishments. He once made a student work as a janitor for a week after they were caught smoking on the grounds. Rumor had it he even gave the regular janitor the week off to really set the tone.

"That's quite enough of that! Step away from that boy and come here!" Muller pointed to Adal and then to the floor at his own feet.

Adal huffed loudly and turned to Elias, glaring at him and gritting his teeth. He was so close.

Arija tugged at his sleeve, making Adal turn to her. She shook her head and motioned to the headmaster.

"As in today, Mr. Stein!" barked the headmaster. Adal lowered his head and started toward the doorway with Arija right behind him.

"Can I help you, young lady? I don't think I asked you to join him, did I?" Muller snapped at Arija, pointing over her shoulder to her empty seat by the window.

Arija looked at Adal, then at Mr. Muller. She slowly turned and walked back to her desk, taking a seat.

As Adal reached the headmaster, the large man turned and motioned for him to continue into the hallway.

The door closed with a metallic slam as Muller followed Adal into the hall. As soon as the two were alone, Adal turned and tried to reason with him.

“Mr. Muller, Elias started that mess! I wasn't doing anything wrong! He was egging me on, and the teacher wasn't about to do anything, so I just...” Adal trailed off as he looked at the expression the headmaster wore. It was not the stern glare that had previously covered his chubby face, nor was his face particularly red anymore. Rather, Muller now looked like he might throw up.

“What...What's wrong? Aren't you supposed to be drilling me about fighting on school property, disrespecting my class, calling my parents, and so on?” Adal didn't mean to come off sarcastically, but the ordinarily prickly headmaster's expression made him uncomfortable.

“Son, perhaps we should take this to my office,” Muller interjected. Motioning for Adal to turn, he continued walking. A sinking sensation formed in the pit of Adal's gut as the headmaster shoved his nail-bitten hands into his pockets and walked toward his office.

“Why? What's wrong? This isn't about the fighting, is it? You aren't about to kick me out of school, are you?” Adal called after Mr. Muller, panic and confusion lacing his words. Adal rubbed his hand across his forehead. If he got expelled, he'd be kicked off the team, his old man would kill him, and Arija would never forgive him. The more he thought about it, the more his stomach churned. Adal rubbed his sweaty palms together for a moment before he shot down the hall after the headmaster.

“Son, please. This isn't the place for it,” Muller continued, not bothering to look over his shoulder at the sound of approaching footsteps.

“Look, please don't call my parents. The fight was my bad. I need this grade, Mr. Muller. My old man will kill me! Please don't call my parents ...Please,” Adal pleaded as he sped up to walk next to the headmaster. Adal had never in his life begged for anything. His grandfather had taught him better than that. But now, as he faced the consequences of the longest lecture of his life, followed by his old man riding his case until he died, Adal had no other option.

“Adalwolf, stop. I'm not going to call your parents. Your

parents called me!” Muller interrupted, putting his hands on each of Adal’s shoulders. The headmaster pulled a loop of keys from the badge reel clipped to his pants, and shoved one into the lock on his office door. “Please come in, Adal, we need to talk.”

Adal looked from the headmaster to the brightly lit office.

“My folks called you? Why would they do that?” he asked, stepping away from the headmaster and into the office.

The man frowned and turned away from Adal. He shut the door and shuffled over to the large wooden desk that seemed out of place in his unusually small space.

“Mr. Muller, why did they call you?” Adal demanded, raising his voice and stepping toward Muller’s desk. Adal’s heart pounded in his chest like it was trying to force its way out.

Muller shuffled papers on his desk as he tried to avoid eye contact with the frantic teen. After a few moments, the headmaster brought his eyes up to meet Adal’s and extended one shaky hand toward the chair that faced his desk.

“Please, Adal, sit down. We need to talk.”

“No! Not ‘til you tell me what’s going on. Why did my parents call you?” Adal’s jaw tightened, and he clenched his fist as if he were preparing to beat the truth out of the headmaster. Adal didn’t know why, but he had the heart-stopping impression that something was desperately wrong.

Muller sighed and clasped his hands on the desk in front of him. “Your parents called because they are at the hospital. Shortly after you left for school, your grandfather collapsed. It was his heart.” Muller swallowed as a bead of sweat plummeted from the tip of his nose. “He didn't make it, son. I’m sorry.”

Adal stumbled back, knocking over a potted plant near the wall.

“That shit ain’t funny, man! Don't say that to me! Don't you tell me he's dead! Don't you do that!” Adal yelled, not caring who could hear or what they would think.

“Now, calm down, please. There isn't any reason for that language.” Muller pulled himself up and walked over to where Adal stood stunned. He placed a hand on Adal’s shoulder and squeezed.

“Don’t touch me!” Adal shouted, shoving the old man back. Adal didn’t care how much trouble he would be in. Rage, grief, and confusion had taken over. Heat engulfed Adal’s face as he thought of his grandfather, the one person who understood him, the person who taught him to be strong. He would never see Grandpa Lawrence again, would never hear another of the old man’s war stories or stay up late eating ice cream and playing poker. Who would defend him to his parents now?

Muller stumbled back into the chair in front of his desk.

The room was closing in, and Adal was suddenly so hot, he wanted to peel his skin off. He slammed his fist into the side table next to him, leaving a small crater in the cheap wood.

Adal was suddenly overcome with an urge to run. Something awoke inside him, and he knew he needed to get out of Mr. Muller’s office. Adal turned on his heels, and sprinted from the office down the hall.

## 4 | The Seal



Adal wasn't sure how he got home. He sat in silence in his grandfather's room, clutching a picture of Grandpa Lawrence from his time in the war. His parents weren't home yet from the hospital. They probably couldn't bring themselves to come back to where it happened. Adal knew his dad didn't deal well with death. When Adal's grandmother died, his dad didn't speak for weeks.

The grim silence of the house rang in Adal's ears as he cried. His eyes danced back and forth over the texture of the wall, searching for answers. He wished he had never left that morning. Grandpa Lawrence's words danced at the forefront of Adal's mind, *Are you doing the report on our family? My story and how we got here?* Adal squeezed the picture in his hands until the glass of the frame groaned and threatened to shatter. *Quit being so hard on my grandson all the time.*

Adal tossed the picture on the bed. Damn him for being in such a rush to leave this morning! He was in such a hurry to get out of the house and avoid his father's droning lecture that he hadn't really had the chance to say goodbye. He couldn't tell his grandfather he appreciated how he backed him up when his father rode his case. Adal slammed his fist into the soft bed, leaving a smudge of blood from his knuckles. When had he cut his hand? The last few hours were such a blur that he couldn't remember. The vague memory of punching the wooden desk in Muller's office crept into his head.

"Couldn't have stayed, could you?" he sneered to himself, pressing his eyes closed. Two more tears escaped. "You could have done something. You know CPR. You left him, and he

probably died while you fought that asshole ...”

The phone rang in the distance, causing Adal to flinch and stand. He wasn't going to answer it, but he looked through the open doorway and listened to it ring. As he glared into the empty hallway, something caught his eye. On the dresser, next to the door, was an envelope with a crudely tied bow around it. Adal looked at the package for a few minutes before he walked over and picked it up. Snooping through his grandfather's things was wrong and, on a normal day, Adal would have let the man have his privacy. But this was no normal day, and something about this package called to him.

There was a little weight to the envelope. Turning it over, he noticed a neatly printed name: *ADAL*. His heart sank as he recognized his grandfather's handwriting, and he immediately ripped the bow away and opened the envelope, pouring the contents into his hand.

A folded letter slid from the envelope, along with his grandfather's lucky coin; the one he'd found during the war. Adal rolled the large metal piece in his fingers and admired the carved hammer and gears before putting it into his pocket and opening the letter. The fresh pain of sadness flowed through his chest as he read the simple note.

*Adal,*

*Sometimes in life, we lose track of the big picture because we are looking too closely at the small things. I found this coin in Hitler's bunker. I want you to have it as you prepare for your next adventure in life. May it bring you all the clarity it has brought me over the years. Oh, and no matter how today turned out, I'm proud of you.*

Adal crumpled the piece of paper in his hand as hot, angry tears welled in his eyes and spilled onto his cheeks. How the hell did he know to write this letter? Why was he always there when Adal needed him and, yet, Adal could never return the favor? Why didn't he get to say goodbye?



The questions burned in his thoughts until another sound from the other side of the house caught his attention. This time, it wasn't the phone ringing but the doorbell. Adal sucked in a breath and waited. Again, someone rang the bell and knocked on the door.

He gritted his teeth and marched down the hall, taking the stairs one at a time, stopping with each step as he slowly made his way to the front door. The frosted glass offered a vague outline of a person broken up by the intricate etchings, but Adal couldn't tell who it was. With the bell still ringing, and the unknown person now pounding on the door, Adal grabbed the handle and yanked the heavy door open.

"There you are! Don't you know I've been trying to get a hold of you? Adal, what the hell is your problem?" Arija barked as she stepped through the doorway. She followed up on her verbal assault by rushing him, and throwing her arms around him as tight as she could.

Adal stood with his hands in the air for a moment but, as the warmth and familiarity of her body pressed against him, the ice that covered his heart began to melt. He lowered one arm, placed it across her back and ever-so-gently squeezed.

"I am so sorry about what happened," she breathed into his chest, her warmth running up his torso. Adal squeezed tighter, closed his eyes, and finally allowed his body to relax.

Arija pulled her face away from his chest and began drilling him once more. "Do you know what's happening? The headmaster called your parents and a truancy officer. I think your parents arrived at the school a little more than an hour ago. I had to wait for class to end before I could find you. The school is throwing all sorts of shade about you having a breakdown."

"I don't care! They can all kiss my ass as far as I'm concerned. Who cares what they think!" Adal had grown tired of constantly being judged by everyone he met—his parents, his teachers, the track team, Elias. He was in the middle of dealing with his own shit, and everyone else could just fuck off. Except for Arija. She was now the only person left that accepted him without judgment.

“I know. Hey, I came here to help you, remember? So, you can yell all you want, but how about you calm that down a little when talking to me?” Arija’s sass made Adal smile. She wasn't a pushover, and she could throw back whatever was thrown at her. She was stronger in that way than anybody he had ever met.

“All right. My bad.” Adal threw his hands in the air. He looked down the vacant street, then back into the house now full of emptiness and forgotten memories. He thought of his parents and the truancy officer and how he had no intentions of dealing with any of that mess when it came for him.

“You know what?” Adal asked, turning and closing the door behind him. “Let’s get the hell out of here.” He walked past Arija and down the steps.

Part I:  
The Machine

## 5 | Into the Dark



The two friends walked down the street in silence. When they reached the end, they turned the corner and just continued walking. Arija gave Adal all the time he needed to reflect on what had happened. It reminded her of her own experience when her mother died. How everything hurt, and there wasn't any combination of words able to take that pain away.

After nearly an hour of walking the city streets in silence, Adal cleared his throat. "You know what the worst thing is? At first, I didn't even think about the fact that he's dead. I wasn't sad about that. I was pissed he left me alone. He was the one who had my back, and I was too busy worrying about myself to even acknowledge that he's gone." Adal maintained a distant stare at the horizon, not looking at Arija when he spoke.

She let his words settle as she considered the best response. "Well, that's because you have an ego the size of a small bus. I'm surprised you can even fit it through the door." Arija let the joke hang in the air for a while before she continued. "It's not your fault, I just haven't been keeping you in check enough lately," she went on, trying to keep a straight face.

When Arija's mother died, Adal was the only person who could make her laugh, who could make her feel human. It was her turn to bring him back to the world of the living.

"Girl, you know you love it. Just admit it." Adal laughed, pushing Arija's shoulder and causing her to stumble a half step.

"Keep dreaming. I only keep you around because, next to you, I look like the Virgin Mary and my R.B.F isn't as obvious."

Arija laughed and slugged him in the shoulder as hard as she could.

“Damn, kid! Watch the guns!” Adal rubbed his shoulder, his face scrunched in mock pain, but he was smiling.

Arija fluttered her eyes and looked away. “Look, I know this sucks. The world feels like it’s crumbling around you, and you think you’re all alone. I’ve been there, remember? Things will get better. They did for me, and they will for you. Just remember that your grandfather wouldn’t want you to be down about it, would he? I know that old salty bastard, and I guarantee he would crack a joke or throw in one of his depressing war stories because that’s what ‘men’ do. So, quit thinking about yourself and man up!”

After a moment of silence, Adal changed the subject. “Damn, my hand is killing me!” He shook his hand like it was on fire.

“Didn’t we just have a conversation about ‘manning up’? Jeez, no wonder you’re failing half your classes,” Arija teased as she snatched Adal’s injured hand and examined it.

“Yeah, this looks pretty swollen. The cuts aren’t deep. Not sure if you broke anything or not, though. Note to self, if I ever get into a fight with a wooden desk, you’re the guy to call.” She slapped the top of his hand, making him wince.

“Girl, one day, I’ll get you into the ring, and we’ll see what’s up.” Adal examined the injured hand for a moment before dropping it back to his side.

Arija had known where they were going from their first turn off Adal’s street. Sometimes she knew Adal better than he knew himself. This was the place he would go when he needed time to himself, but Arija also loved these woods. Her favorite part was the small area in the center of the park’s trail that had a running brook and several small caves, where they played when they were younger.

The entire area was riddled with underground caves and, when they were kids, Arija and Adal had set out to explore them all. Of course, that didn’t happen. Many of the caves were so deep, they couldn’t reach the end. If she knew Adal—and she did—he would find his way to that area whether or not he consciously meant to.

Within a few minutes, the two had made their way to the wooded path that started the trail. The sun was cresting over the tops of the trees, and the warm summer air was giving way to the chill of the night. Just as they started on the trail, the light at the entrance to the path flickered on. A few seconds later, the other lights that lined the trail blinked on.

Adal paused and turned to Arija. "I just want to say two things. First, I appreciate you having my back and all. I know sometimes I'm not the easiest but, then again, you sure aren't either, so there's that." Adal gave a toothy grin.

"Yeah, okay. What's the second thing?" Arija tried to hide the smile that threatened to push its way across her face.

"I still owe you from this morning ..." Adal trailed off and, before she knew what he meant, he was off and down the trail ahead of her.

Arija hopped forward and threw herself into a full sprint after him. The two had raced this path many times, but they were evenly matched. With his head start, Arija would have to teach him a lesson in fairness.

The trees whispered past Arija as she ran, hinting at secrets they couldn't tell. Adal pumped his arms by his side, laughing, believing he had the upper hand. But after only a minute or two, Arija covered the distance between them.

"I ...thought...you...owed me ... one," Arija panted as she strode alongside Adal. The air stung at her lungs as she ran. She still held the school satchel she kept her drawing supplies in and it flapped behind her as she ran.

The trail curved ahead. The bend hooked around a large chunk of the forest then opened into a small park where Arija liked to hang out.

"Think ... you have ... me beat?" Adal gasped, as Arija slowly pushed her way ahead of him. "Well ... how ...about... a shortcut?" Adal veered off the path down a steep slope that led to a small ravine. At first, he stumbled as his feet hit the slope covered in fallen branches and dead leaves. Throwing his arms out, Adal regained his balance and sprinted down the hill.

"Oh, what the—?" Arija shouted behind him.

These woods were dense, with low branches and fallen limbs. It made the run both difficult and dangerous.

Adal slid and stumbled as he made his way over stumps and rocks. He managed to maintain his lead as he propelled himself over many of the smaller obstacles in his path. Adal glanced over his shoulder.

Arija slid under as many branches as she could and jetted around those she couldn't.

“What’s the matter? Can’t hang?” Adal teased as he put one foot on a stump and leaped into the air. He grabbed a tree branch in front of him and swung forward.

“What’s the matter? Can’t beat me in a fair race?” Arija yelled back, but she wasn’t sure he could hear.

“You think ...”

“Adal look out!” Arija’s eyes widened, and she pointed in front of him.

Adal turned, but it was too late. A low-hanging branch from a tilted tree created a perfect bar at shin level. He didn’t have time to react before both of his shins slid straight into the obstacle. Adal rolled down the hill, his body colliding with trees and rocks as he bounced all the way down.

He skidded to a stop at the edge of a creek that flowed into one of the many small caves in the area.

“Adal! Are you all right?” Arija shouted, coming to a sliding stop near him.

“I’m good,” Adal coughed into the ground. He groaned as he rolled to his side and looked up at Arija.

She stared down at him with concern and amusement. “Can you move? Is anything broken?” She made her way to his side and put her hand on his shoulder, examining him.

Adal swatted her hand away and forced himself into a sitting position. He looked to his once pearly-white shirt that was now covered in dirt and grass stains. Hissing, he brushed his chest and lap clean and examined his clothes.

“I’m good. Other than ruining my outfit,” Adal insisted, picking a small twig out of his hair.

Arija stood and lowered her hand to help him up, a smirk on

her face. “Way to stick the landing.”

He pushed himself to his feet. “Hey, it will take a lot more than some fall to put me out. Besides, you distracted me. I had this race won until you messed me up.”

Arija rolled her eyes and shook her head. “Whatever helps you sleep at night, Adal.” She pursed her lips and pinched his chin like a mother cooing at an infant.

He turned his head away and adjusted his clothes once more. “Where is it?” he shouted, frantically looking on the ground around him.

“What are you talking about?” Arija asked impatiently as Adal crawled on his hands and knees around her feet, brushing leaves away.

“My grandfather’s coin! I had it in my pocket! It has to be here somewhere!” He looked from the ground to the small creek to the massive hill he’d just rolled down.

“Calm down. We’ll find it. It couldn’t have gone too far.” Arija pulled a small flashlight key-chain from her bag and turned its head, activating a faded beam of light. She fanned it back and forth around the ground at their feet.

“Damn it. I will not calm down. This will take forever. I’m not going to stop until I check this entire hill. I can’t believe this is happening. It’s the only thing I have left of him.” Adal threw a pile of sticks and leaves as hard as he could, but they gingerly floated back to the ground. Seconds later, he sprinted away from Arija again.

“Wait, where are you going? What about the coin?” she yelled as she took off after him.

Adal leaped over a small body of stagnant water and landed on the muddy banks of the other side. Arija jumped to follow him, but collided with his back and sent him stumbling forward. Adal fell to his hands and knees at the mouth of the cavern with Arija lying on top of him.

“What did you stop for?” she barked as she pushed off Adal’s back and pulled herself up. As she stood, her head spun, and she almost fell right back down. A sweet, metallic taste trickled into her mouth, and she brought her hand up to feel the place where



she'd bitten down on her lip as her chin collided with Adal's shoulder.

"I remembered that I saw the coin flash in the light right after I hit the ground. I think it rolled into this cave," Adal said over his shoulder, pushing off the ground and bringing himself up. His normally pristine clothes were muddy, and blood and dirt were smeared across his face. With the panic etched into his features, he looked like a raging lunatic that had escaped from an asylum.

Adal squinted in the dim light. What remained of the sun peeked over the hill, and the mouth of the cave seemed like a black void. Slowly, he made his way over to the opening. Wild dogs lived in some of the caves and there were many rumors of people going in and never coming out.

"Let me see your flashlight," Adal said, walking over to Arija and snatching it from her hands.

"Sure thing. Anything else?" Sarcasm dripped from Arija's words, but she understood why this was so important to Adal. When her mother died, Arija had been crying in the study when she found her mother's sketch pad. The first drawing inside was one of Arija playing in the grass. That sketch pad had never left Arija's side since that day. She kept it in her bag, right next to her own. She thought if she could draw the beautiful things in life, her mother would somehow be able to see them.

Adal focused the beam and passed it over the cave. After a pause to check for movement, he ducked and slowly made his way into the opening. Arija scoffed and followed her friend, placing her hand on his hip to avoid slipping on the damp stones.

The dull light from the tiny flashlight danced over the stone surfaces. Dull-green foliage crept over the opening to the cave and ran several feet into the dark. Adal kept the beam focused on the ground but, occasionally, the light reflected from small puddles and illuminated the area above their heads. The salty fragrance of wet rocks was overwhelming as the two made their way further into the cave. Arija thought she might choke on the thickness of the air.

The rock ceiling was only about an inch over Adal's head and a few inches over Arija's. A wave of claustrophobia took hold of

Arija, making little beads of sweat form at her hairline.

“There it is!” Adal shouted, pointing the beam at the base of the wall several feet away. A glint of gold and bronze shone back at them as the light moved over it. Adal leaped forward and ran to the coin, scooping it up and squeezing it in his hands.

“There, you have it. Can we get the hell out of here now?” Arija demanded.

“Yeah, yeah, we’re good. Let’s ...Wait what?” Adal took the light from under his arm and focused it on the coin in the palm of his hand. He brought it close to his face. “Hey, look at this.”

“What?” Arija took a step closer, peering around Adal at the coin in his hand. The beautifully etched gears on the back of the coin now seemed to be turning as if the coin was an old machine coming to life.

“Man, I must have hit my head harder than I thought.” Adal squeezed his eyes closed and then opened them.

“I don’t think so, because I can see it too,” Arija interjected, touching the cold metal with her finger.

Adal brought the coin closer to his face, jabbing it with one outstretched finger. The second his finger touched the coin he yelped and jumped, letting the coin fall back to the ground.

A sharp ping rang out as the metal struck the stone floor and rolled away from them.

“What was that?” Arija grasped unsuccessfully at the stagnant air as she tried to grab the coin.

“I don’t ... I don’t know. I think the damn gears pinched my finger! Shit!” Adal waved the light around the pitch-black cave.

Arija noticed a glint of metal as the coin rolled down a corridor, deeper into the cave. She pointed. “There it goes.”

Adal kept his light shining on the coin as they ran down the tunnel after it.

## 6 | Cannonball



The slapping echo of Adal and Arija's feet joined the high-pitched ringing of the coin as they chased it down the cave tunnel. With the light trained on the small object, Adal was able to catch up, and quickly scooped it into his hands. He turned to Arija and smiled. They both panted heavily for a moment as they tried to catch their breath.

"I got this," Adal huffed between gasps, flicking the coin into the air. Arija sighed and rolled her eyes. As the coin came back down, Adal took a step backward to make sure he caught it. But the ground was uneven in this part of the cave. As he stepped backward, his heel found a downward incline, and he lost his footing. Adal tried to shift his weight, but it was too late.

He wind-milled his arms in an attempt to regain his balance but, before he could get control of the situation, his back slammed against a rock wall and he slid down a slope. The flashlight flew into the air and crashed at Arija's feet.

As Adal descended head-first down the natural ramp, the light from Arija's flashlight grew smaller and dimmer, until it disappeared altogether. He kicked his feet and flailed his arms trying to snag something in the abyss, but there was nothing to grab. Smooth rock walls followed him. As Adal slid in the dark, his clothing became soaked from water hidden in little pockets.

Suddenly, a chill filled the air around him. The rock ledge separated from his back and he entered free fall. His stomach felt like it would rip its way out of his mouth. Every muscle in his body clenched in anticipation of impact. He imagined he was

going to die a splatted mess on a stone floor in the eternal darkness of an unexplored cave. Something strange took over and Adal felt a calm set in. If this was how he was going out, he could at least enjoy the fall.

“Cannonball!” The exclamation ripped past Adal’s lips as he hurtled through the darkness. Even if no one heard his last words, he wanted them to be epic.

Just as the thought occurred to him, a cold shock washed over him as he crashed into a massive body of water. His head plunged under the liquid, and his lungs filled with water.

Bursting back to the surface, he coughed to clear his chest of the liquid fire. The strange coincidence of falling into a body of water after yelling “cannonball” made him laugh, and a laughing-coughing fit soon overtook him. As he rubbed his eyes, Adal heard a distant sound, almost like a plane taking off. The sound quickly grew louder, until he realized it wasn’t a plane; it was someone screaming.

“Oh no!” Adal pushed himself through the water, to clear the path. “Hold your breath!” Adal yelled up to Arija.

As he swam toward uncertainty, the screaming stopped and Arija’s voice took its place.

“Adal! I’m going to kill you if I don’t die first!” Arija shouted as she crashed into the water in virtually the same spot Adal just evacuated.

Panic took over when he didn’t immediately hear her return to the surface. Adal swam over to the area where he thought he heard her hit. He was floating in the dark, desperately splashing at the water, when he saw a small light bubble up from under the water. Arija came crashing to the surface, coughing and wheezing.

“Arija, are you all right?” Adal asked as he swam toward her.

She splashed in place for a moment, until she got her bearings, and searched for Adal with the light. She turned around and shone the light directly into Adal’s eyes. With fear and relief fighting for control of her features, Arija swam over to Adal and threw her arms around him. He squeezed her back, happy to be alive, until the palm of Arija’s hand slapped the back of his head, sending a sharp pain down his neck.

“What mess have you gotten us into now? I swear to God, Adal, if you get us killed, I’m resurrecting your ass so I can kill you again,” she coughed.

“Ow! Hey, I wasn't shooting for this place, you know?” Adal splashed in the water and tried to get a little distance between them. “I can’t believe you followed me down here! What were you thinking?” he barked back, bobbing in place.

“Oh, yeah, like I was going to just let you slip away into some unknown cavern and disappear. First off, I have no idea how to explain that one to anybody. Second, and most importantly, I have told you before that I am not about to let you have all the fun.”

Adal laughed and splashed a little water in her direction. As Arija bobbed next to him, the flashlight’s beam washed over her features and made her look like a demon with a wicked grin.

“Can I ask why we are still floating in this dark pool when we have no idea what’s in it?” Arija asked as she pointed the flashlight down into the water.

“Actually, good point. Let’s see if we can get out of this stuff. I’ve seen that horror movie, and I’m not about to be the brother that dies first.” Adal sloshed in place and looked around suspiciously.

## 7 | The Black Lake



Arija scanned the light around the cave and saw what appeared to be a walkway and an embankment a few feet away.

They splashed and kicked toward it, then crawled onto the cold stone shore. Adal flopped to his side and coughed the remaining water out of his lungs.

Arija crawled a little further and continued to shine the light around. “Well, I don’t see a way out. What are we going to do?” Arija was trying to put up a good front, like they could be home in time to get their asses chewed out by their parents but, inside, she fought the urge to cry. They were deep inside a cave that no one ever went into and no one knew they were here. She didn’t see this ending well.

“My bag!” Arija’s voice gained an extra octave. “Adal! My bag is soaked, and my sketchpads are ruined!” Arija dropped the flashlight and took her dripping drawings out of her bag, laying them flat on the ground. The half-erased image of the tree she’d been drawing earlier folded in on itself, the pencil marks smeared over the soggy pages. Arija dropped her head and tears took over as she pulled out the ripped pages of her mother’s sketchpad. The ink ran and bled as the pages soaked up moisture. Arija laid the pads out on the ground and dumped the rest of the contents of her bag onto the floor. She shook the water from her bag and tried to dry the various pens and pencils as best she could.

“I’m sorry ...” Adal spoke softly, looking into the abyss from where he lay on his back. He grunted as he rolled to his side and stood. “I’m so sorry about your drawings. This is my bad, but we aren't going out like this. Let’s look around and see what we can find. Stick close, though. Not about to have to look for you in the

dark.”

Arija picked up the flashlight, rotated, and pointed the light in his eyes. “Sure. Like it’s my fault we ended up down here? You and that coin of yours.” Arija didn’t blame Adal for where they were or what happened to her sketch pad. She wouldn’t be there if she didn’t choose to follow him; she just liked giving him a hard time. It was familiar and comfortable to joke with Adal and, as she rubbed the tears from her eyes, she realized the important thing was that they were alive.

She stacked the still dripping sketch pads on top of each other, placed all the contents back into her bag and stood. There was nothing she could do about them now, she might as well take them with her and see if she could find a way to salvage them.

“Speaking of the coin, where is it? Hand it over,” Adal said as he held out his hand.

“I don’t have it. I thought you had it.”

“You have got to be kidding me!” Adal shouted as he searched the ground around him for his grandfather’s coin. “I don’t see it! Is it in the water?” Adal ran over to the pool of dark liquid and pawed it like a kitten.

“Adal, there is no way either of us is getting back into that water! Think about it.” Arija walked over to him, placing her hand on his shoulder.

“You don’t understand. I need to find it. I can’t lose ...” Adal’s words fell away as a ping echoed from behind them. It sounded like something bouncing off a metal beam.

Arija whipped around and scanned her light in the direction of the sound. What else was down here in the dark with them? Images of rabid wolves and demonic, blind cave dwellers filled Arija’s mind as she swayed the weak beam of light from side to side.

Adal stepped around her, and the two stood shoulder to shoulder, frozen in place, waiting for something to happen. Adal reached out and grabbed Arija’s hand, squeezing it so hard she almost expected to hear bones snap. A second ping came from beyond the shaky beam of light. Arija shot a glance to Adal only to find him looking back at her.

“What is that?” Arija asked in a whisper.

“I don’t know. I can’t see anything with this piece of shit flashlight.”

Arija rotated the light again, but all they could see was the stone wall and a bunch of boulders littering the area in front of them.

A third ping sounded.

“What are you doing?” Arija asked as Adal released the vice grip on her hand and took several steps toward the sound.

“Just keep the light steady. I’m going to figure out what that sound is,” he said over his shoulder, continuing to walk toward the sound.

Arija wasn't going to let him get himself killed while she stood there and watched. She scoffed and jogged up next to him.

“Stick together, remember? Let’s not let this situation get any worse than it already is,” she said.

The two took another pair of cautious steps before another ping sounded. They stopped. The sound was coming from directly in front of them, but they were standing less than twenty feet from a smooth stone wall.

Arija moved the light over the wall and a small glint of gold flickered back from its base. Adal inhaled so deeply that Arija thought he’d seen something she hadn't. He darted to the old coin and snatched it up.

“That’s what’s up!” Adal yelled, a large smile on his face as he admired the coin in his hands. “Man, I have to quit dropping this! Hey, what’s wrong with you?” he laughed, bringing his attention back to Arija.

Arija stood in silence and held the light on the coin. “Adal ... how did that get over here?” A chill ran the length of Arija’s spine like the boney fingers of death. They had landed in the middle of what she could only guess was an underground lake. Yet the coin managed to end up over one hundred yards away, against a wall.

“Chill. It must have flown out of my hand as I fell.” Adal leaned against the stone wall and tossed the coin into the air.

The deafening sound of gears turning echoed through the chamber and, in an instant, Adal disappeared in a cloak of



smoke.

## 8 | Time To Go



Arija dropped her flashlight and ran toward where Adal had been standing.

“Adal!” she shouted, rushing into the cloud of smoke. Immediately overcome with the smell of wet air, she realized the smoke was actually steam. Something rolled in front of her feet. Arija toppled forward and landed face first on something soft. Adal was lying on his back, and he wrapped his arms around her as she fell on him.

“You all right?” Adal squeezed her tightly so she couldn’t flail and hit him. She buried her face in his chest and, for a moment, the sweet scent of musk and deodorant filled her nose. Arija fought the urge to smile and pushed herself upward, so she could look into his eyes.

“What was that?” she asked as she searched his face for answers.

“I don't know. The wall suddenly opened, and I fell in—?”

Arija rolled off Adal and looked around the area. It was a small, perfectly square room, like a hidden chamber within the cave. The only light came from the flashlight that had rolled a few feet away. Arija slowly stood with Adal and took a step toward the opening, reaching for the light.

At that moment, a soft ‘click’ emerged from the dark. The two froze in place, wide eyes searching the dimly lit room.

As another ‘click’ came from the dark, and an orange glow formed around them. Adal and Arija slammed their backs together as if waiting for a fight.

“What is this?” Arija asked, pressing against Adal.

“Yeah, like I know!” Adal shot back.

Arija’s heart pounded in her chest as the orange lights grew brighter. As the eerie glow illuminated the walls, she realized they weren’t made from the smooth stone of the cave, but bronze or copper. Rivets the size of fists ran in straight lines from floor to ceiling, and huge gears protruded from all four walls. Only half of each gear was visible, the other half disappeared into the floor.

“It almost looks like we’re in a still or something. Or maybe an oven ...” Arija’s curious nature took over; she inquisitively walked over to one of the walls and ran her hands down its smooth surface.

“Oven? Nope! Time to go!” Adal grabbed Arija’s hand and pulled her toward the doorway. As he neared the entrance, Adal stopped. There was a symbol emblazoned in the heavy brass next to the door. He slowly reached into his pocket, pulled out his grandfather’s coin, and held it up to the etching on the wall.

“No way!” he and Arija said in stereo as they looked from the hammer and wrench design on the coin, to the door with the exact same design.

“How is that possible?” Arija asked.

“I ... I have no clue. What is that?” Adal reached out a finger and inspected the center of the design. There appeared to be a hole with some small gears turning. “No way ...” Adal lifted his coin. The gears on the back were still turning as he held it up to the hole. It was a perfect fit.

Cautiously, he slid it into the niche. A small ‘click’ came from the coin as it seated itself in the middle of the design. A barrage of clicking followed.

Adal and Arija stepped away from the design and huddled in the center of the room while the ground rumbled beneath their feet.

“So ... time to go?” Adal turned to Arija.

Her mouth was hanging open as she looked around the strange room. “Yeah. Let’s go,” she replied, not able to take her eyes off the mesmerizing gears. Adal grabbed her by the hand once more and stepped toward the opening.

Suddenly, two heavy doors slammed closed before them, trapping the two friends in the bronze chamber.

Arija's heart pounded. She ran to the obstruction and smashed her fists into its metal frame.

"What's happening?" she shouted, kicking it as hard as she could.

## 9 | The Lift That Falls



Adal slammed both fists against the solid doors in his own attempt to save them. But he couldn't punch through metal either.

"Damn! What are we going to?" Another loud bang echoed in the small room as four giant gears began to turn. The two friends stepped away from the walls and back to the center of the room.

The entire place shook. Arija squeezed her eyes shut and wrapped both arms around Adal, burying her face in the bend of his shoulder. A sudden weightlessness overcame them. Adal slammed his eyes shut and held onto Arija. The butterflies in Arija's stomach were suddenly in her chest, then almost out of her mouth as the room began its downward descent.

"Are... Are we in a lift?" Arija asked. "Are we going faster?"

"What's happening?" Adal shouted. He tried to pull Arija to him as they drifted up until their backs touched the ceiling.

"Adal, if I die in here, I'm going to haunt the shit out of you!" Arija extended her hand and intertwined her fingers with Adal's.

After what felt like hours, Adal tugged at her sleeve, and motioned for her to look down. The same design from the wall and the coin was also etched into the floor.

"What is that? What the hell is this place?" As if in answer to his question, they slowly started to drift back down to the floor.

"We're slowing down!" Arija squeezed Adal's hand as the image on the ground grew bigger. As if being carefully placed on the ground by an invisible giant, Adal and Arija floated down until their feet firmly touched the metal floor. The ground was still vibrating, so Arija assumed they were still moving, but they must

have slowed enough to allow them to stand.

“Do you think this will ever—” A vibration interrupted Adal and the two were bounced into the air, then slammed back down onto the metal floor.

“...stop...” he groaned.

“Adal, I think I’ll definitely have to kill you for getting me into ... whatever *this* is.” Arija groaned in return as she pushed herself off the floor. A loud crack made them jump to their feet as the massive doors creaked and squealed open.

Arija and Adal stood shoulder to shoulder with their hands out in front of them, ready and waiting for whatever could be coming next.

“Whatever happens, we got this,” Adal reassured Arija, who scoffed in reply.

“Yeah, I’m sure. We just rode a mysterious elevator to who knows where, and I’m sure we can totally handle what’s waiting at the bottom.”

The doors finished opening and Arija found herself staring at another dark corridor.

After waiting a moment, the two walked over to the doorway and cautiously peered outside. Arija couldn't be certain, but she thought something was moving in the darkness.

As Arija stuck her head out the door and placed the edge of her foot on the floor, another loud snap made her jump. Lights sprang from the dark, fully illuminating the space ahead of them. They stood at one end of a long hallway lit by large bulbs with intricate filaments.

Arija was lost in the design of an Edison bulb on the wall next to her when Adal tapped her shoulder. She turned and realized that the walls of the hallway were moving. Thousands of gears and pistons of all sizes turned, whirled, and pumped, making the walls come to life.

“What is this place? Are we inside some sort of machine?” Arija took several steps into the large hall, her curiosity conquering her fear.

“I don’t know, but this place is dope!” Adal said as he spun around, admiring everything. “Let’s keep going and check this

place out.”

He stopped and turned to face Arija, who was watching him. This was one of the most amazing places she had ever seen, but one of them had to stay collected, or they would both end up in even more of a mess. Arija tried to hide her excitement by forcing a hesitant expression.

“Aww, come on, don't be like that. I *know* you're itching to see what the rest of this place looks like,” Adal taunted.

Arija couldn't help herself; she let a wide grin crease her face.

“Nice! All right, let's go. Oh, just one thing...” Adal ran past Arija and leaned into the lift. He popped his grandfather's coin from the wall and slid it back into his pocket. Adal hopped from the doorway and jogging up to Arija. A loud slam echoed down the hall as the doors to the lift closed. A sheepish grin appeared on Adal's face.

“Well ...We were going to go deeper anyway.”

“Adal, if you don't quit touching things, I'm going to make you walk with your hands in your pockets!” Arija snapped. She wasn't really mad, she just liked giving him a hard time. But at the rate he was going, he was going to get them both killed.

Adal laughed, and they were off down the hall. For a while, they moved in silence. The dull hum of machinery encouraging Arija to muse about what this place could be. Every so often she would pause and run her fingers over a particularly interesting cog or gear, but she couldn't figure out what they were meant to do.

Another set of large brass doors waited at the end of the hall. Cogs and gears spun in place up their face, but they didn't seem to connect or serve a purpose. Two large, copper poles ran the height of the doors. Adal reached out and wrapped his hand around one.

Arija reflexively slapped it away. “Seriously?” she shot a glare at him.

“Hey, I thought you were down for this. Why else are we here?” Adal replied matter-of-factly.

“Yeah, I know, but think before you just do things, please. I can't bail you out of everything.”

“Girl, you worry too much,” Adal teased as he looked back at the door. He reached out to grasp the pole again, but paused for a moment. The muscles in his chest flexed as he gave a mighty tug at the metal handles. To Arija’s surprise, the doors didn't budge.

Adal let a nervous chuckle escape his lips as he turned to Arija. She looked around the hallway for something she could use to help him. Something caught her eyes just off to the side of the door, and she had to stifle a laugh.

“Psst!” Arija whispered. Adal turned to her as she leaned against the wall. She pointed with her thumb above her head. There was a large switch on the wall near the door, resting in the up position. Holding her gaze sarcastically, Arija reached above her head and pulled the lever downward. Two loud clanks sounded, followed by the two bars over the gap between the doors sliding aside.

“I would ask what you would do without me, but the thought of what would actually happen to you terrifies me.” Arija pushed herself away from the wall and stood next to Adal.

He pursed his lips and rolled his eyes as he grabbed the handle and gave it another hard pull.



# 10 | A World of Metal and Steam



To Adal's surprise, the heavy doors gave way easily, and a warm wave of air washed over them.

"Oh. My. God!" Arija gasped.

Adal said nothing but allowed his mouth to fall open as he stumbled forward. They were standing on a large platform that opened into what looked like a whole other world. Girders, gears, pistons, and other mechanical oddities stretched into infinity. Adal rubbed his palms into his eyes until he saw spots but, when he released them, the strange mechanical world was still there.

Beams crisscrossed through the spacious room, winding around tall buildings that seemed to float in mid-air. As Adal took a step toward the edge of the platform, someone swooped down along the beam right above their heads. Adal jumped back, grasping his chest and panting as a man holding two metal bars slid down the beam toward the buildings like he was zip lining.

The stranger looked over his shoulder to yell obscenities, and Adal's eyes bulged. He took a reflexive step back. The zip liner's face was half leathery skin and half bronze, his tan skin too tight, as if stretched over a face too big for its size. A black leather cloak rippled behind the mechanical man as he pulled what looked like a pocket watch out of his burgundy vest pocket and waved it in the air.

Adal stared wide-eyed, then took another few cautious steps toward the edge of the platform. There was a layer of fog several feet below them that Adal couldn't see past. He thought for a

moment they were above the clouds before he remembered that they were actually underground. An orange and yellow hue washed the entire area, almost reminding Adal of the sunset from his bedroom window.

“What. Is. This?” Adal allowed his eyes to dance over this strange new world. As he squinted at the mechanical town, he could vaguely make out what looked like people walking along the beams. Several of them swung to small platforms just underneath the floating buildings.

Arija opened her mouth to respond when a flock of birds burst from underneath their platform, making both Arija and Adal jump back.

“What was *that*?” they asked in tandem. Adal pointed past Arija to a railing several feet away where one of the birds had landed and was looking at them inquisitively. They slowly crept toward the mechanical bird, unable to tear their eyes away from the creature.

The little bird had wings of bronze, and each feather appeared bolted into place by micro-rivets. It had two small rubies where its eyes should have been, and countless small gears turned along its stomach. Arija reached her hand out to touch it. The little bird squeaked and fluttered off in the direction its friends had flown.

“Was that even a real animal?” Adal asked.

“I don't know what is real anymore.”

“Yeah, no kidding!” Adal turned so he was facing the edge of the platform again. “Do you hear that?” From somewhere beyond the platform, Adal could hear distant rumbling, like thunder rolling in off the sea.

Arija stepped away from the railing and looked around.

“Look! There!” Adal shouted, pointing to the left of the railing. At first, it was difficult to see. It was just a strange shape moving somewhere off in the distance but, after a moment, the object began to take a recognizable form.

A large, antique-looking train moved incredibly fast towards them. It was suspended from a track attached to one of the beams. Adal wasn't sure where it came from, and it looked

vintage, like something out of the 1920s. He looked around the platform and realized the train was going to stop where they stood.

“I think it’s coming here!” Arija yelled.

Adal searched for a safe area to hide, but there was nowhere to go. He considered running back into the hallway. But the only thing in there was the elevator, and it didn’t have any buttons or anything they could use to make it go back up. At least if there was a person on the train, maybe they could find a way to get out of the cave.

A loud screeching erupted from the tracks as a large railcar came to a sudden halt right above the edge of the platform. With the train this close, Adal could see there were wheels on both the top and bottom of it. The wheels on the bottom were just touching the edge of the platform and, with a loud *thunk* and a plumb of steam, the wheels on the top of the train released.

The train was deep black with copper rivets covering its ancient back. Windows adorned one entire side of the car and, by the looks of it, there was no one inside. With a jolt, the two sliding doors on the side opened.

“All right, now I know what you’re gonna say, but—” Adal began as he craned his neck to see inside the elaborate train car.

“Let’s check this thing out!” Arija finished.

The best thing to do in this situation was to find a person and hope they could help the two of them get back home. After all, a person had to have built all this.

Adal and Arija ran to the side of the car and peered inside. Beautifully polished wooden benches ran along either side of the car. Deep, earthy leather adorned the sitting surfaces, neatly held in place by polished brass knobs.

Adal cautiously stepped inside the car but, as she looked around, he realized something was off. Everything inside the train was much larger than he expected.

Arija walked down the center aisle toward a control panel at the other end.

“Man, this joint keeps getting weirder and weirder,” Adal said as he hopped up to sit on the edge of one of the benches, which

came up to his waist. The hammer and anvil symbol from the coin was carved into the floor.

“Adal, look,” Arija called, walking over to the controls and sitting on the stationary stool that sat in front of them. Buttons, levers, and gauges completely covered the surface of the control panel. She delicately ran her hands over each one until she came to a particularly large lever.

“Hey, this lever says ‘Home’ and ‘Away.’ I wonder what that means?” Arija examined the ornate calligraphy.

“Well, let’s see what ‘Home’ looks like then, shall we?” Adal said as he rotated on the bench towards her.

“All right. Let’s see what this is,” Arija grunted, pulling the heavy lever from the “Away” side to the “Home” side.

The two doors slid closed. There was a click, then a loud screech, like the sound of hydraulics. Then the train rose a few inches. Adal grabbed the side of the bench to stop himself from falling at the sudden, jerky motion. Then the train sped off in the direction it had come.

The force of the acceleration almost tossed Arija from her stool. It did roll Adal on his side but, when they both regained their composure, the ride was like a roller-coaster.

“Where do you think this is going?” Adal asked, hoisting himself up and looking out the window.

“I’m not sure, but we seriously need to be careful. This is like something out of a fairytale, and I’m not sure if you’ve ever actually read a real one, but they don’t usually end well.” Arija hopped off the stool and, after steadying herself on the nearest bench, she made her way to Adal and plopped onto the bench next to him.

“Don’t worry, girl. I got this. Nothing down here I can’t handle,” Adal laughed as he looked back out the window. They sat in silence and watched their surroundings fly past in a blur of copper and steam.

Flocks of what appeared to be mechanical birds fluttered by on several occasions. Every so often, Arija would point to something strange moving in the distance but, before Adal could look, it was gone.

Thousands if not millions of girders the width of tree trunks and walkways the width of streets rolled past them. Occasionally, the car would take a sharp turn around a bend and Arija would be pressed into Adal.

“Look at that!” Adal shouted, pointing below them. Arija leaned over him and looked out the large window. They were flying over a massive farm. Crops rolled on as far as Adal could see. Row after row, the emeralds of the foliage stood out from their orange and bronze surroundings. He couldn't quite tell, but it looked as though people were working in the fields.

“Is that ...? Are those ...?” Arija questioned, leaning closer to the window.

“Man, this place just keeps getting weirder and weirder,” Adal responded.

Shortly after the large fields crept into view, they disappeared in the distance, and the train came to another screeching halt. This time, Arija and Adal were caught off-guard and rolled sideways from the bench, hitting the floor. Adal landed on his back with Arija on top of him.

“You know, you keep falling on me like this, you’re gonna owe me dinner,” Adal joked, winking at her.

Arija dropped her elbow into his stomach making him cough as she rolled off him. “You wish!” she laughed, extending her arm to help him stand.

Adal pulled his hand from hers and tugged at his shirt, adjusting the wrinkles. In all the excitement, he had forgotten that he was still soaked to the bone.

“Check that out,” Arija pointed, walking past Adal to one of the windows on the other side of the car. The train had come to a stop at another platform, only this one opened into a walkway that led to a cottage. The sun glistened off its metallic surface, and steam poured from three chimneys on its roof. Large, circular, frosted glass windows looked back at them like eyes, and a row of steps led from the platform to the large brass door.

“Maybe whoever lives here can help us get back home?” Arija said. They stared at each other in silence for a moment before they made their way out of the car and toward the house. As they

stepped onto the platform, the doors of the vehicle slammed behind them.

Adal let his eyes run over the sleek, polished walls surrounded by running tubes and moving parts. To the right of the building was an enclosed spiral staircase that looked like it led to a glass atrium.

Once they were close enough, Adal realized just how large the cottage truly was. The door, like every door he had come in contact with since he'd arrived in this strange place, was oversized. The windows were too large to be standard windows, and even the potted plant that sat on the doorstep was much larger than he would have thought it should be. He listened to the best of his ability for the sounds of movement inside the home as they reached the front door.

"So, do we knock?" Adal asked, looking at Arija, who only shrugged.

"I got this, but be ready to run if anything happens." He put his hand on the doorknob, which looked like a giant bolt.

"Yeah, and where are we running to, exactly?" Arija replied as she glanced back to the train that still sat on the edge of the platform.

Adal shot her a look and turned the knob, slowly pressing the door open. He stopped when he saw there were lights on inside the house but, when he didn't hear any sounds, he pushed the door open and walked inside.

Arija followed him into a large room that looked like it was both a kitchen and dining area combined. Large copper pots and pans hung from the ceiling over a center island that was bigger than Adal's bed, and iron appliances with gold leaf etchings ran the length of the opposite wall. Centered in the room was a table with four chairs. As Adal and Arija walked over to the table, Adal was surprised to find that the top was a few inches above his head.

"Ok, I'm just going to say it; since we've gotten here, everything is too big. I can't be the only one uncomfortable with that," Adal whispered to Arija.

"No kidding. It's like all these things were built for a giant. A

giant that scares me beyond thought,” she finally said. “At least there doesn't seem to be anybody home for now. So, let's figure out what our next move is. Looking at this place, someone definitely lives here.”

“So, should we keep going?” Adal asked as he ran his fingers across the smooth metal surface of one of the chairs.

“I don't see why not. I have to see the rest of this place. I wish I could sketch some of this.” Arija turned her bag upside down and produced the soggy pile of paper. Embarrassment warmed Adal's face. He knew how much those sketch pads meant to Arija and it was his fault they were ruined.

# 11 | The Intruders



“Let’s try that door,” Adal pointed to a partially open door across the room. It was made of similarly fogged glass to that of the observatory above them, but it had designs etched into it.

Arija took a step toward the door when movement from the other side made her freeze in place.

“Calm down. I don't hear anything. Besides, if someone were home, they would probably have heard us already.” Adal’s award-winning smile lifted some weight from her chest and Arija let out a low exhale.

Just as they started to walk across the room again, the low rumble of voices made her stop and turn toward the front door. At first, Arija couldn’t make out anything but, after a few minutes, she realized two people were standing just outside the door, talking. Arija and Adal looked at one another, fear marring their faces.

“...don’ ye joke with me. I know what’s what in my machine. There are Topsiders here. I can smell ‘em. How they find their way here in the first place, I cain’t say. You send ‘em my grip car?”

Arija could tell it was a man’s voice that spoke, but it was unbelievably loud, as if she was stuck inside the speaker of a stereo. She shot a glance at Adal at the word “Topsiders.” She didn’t exactly know what it meant, but she knew it referred to them.

“Now don't be silly, Webley! You know right well that I sent the car for them. They are guests and it's best that we treat them as such. Haven't seen a Topsider in these parts in quite some time. Furthermore, don't play surprised. With your mischief,



sometimes it's a wonder that you don't have more curious creatures running about," a second, softer voice responded.

As the voices grew louder, Arija looked around the room for a place to hide, or a weapon to fight with. Anything was better than standing in the middle of the kitchen waiting for the voices to come inside.

"Reckon they made their way inte' the 'ouse?" the heavier voice inquired.

Adal mouthed some expletives while Arija tried to figure out a game plan. Things were about to get a whole lot trickier.

"Well, I suppose the only way to know is to find out."

Panic seized Arija, and both she and Adal started to pace as they desperately looked for somewhere to hide. Adal snapped his finger and got Arija's attention. He pointed at her, then behind where the door would open.

She looked at him in curious alarm. He held up his fists in a boxing stance and nodded at her. She bobbed her head in agreement. Springing to her toes, Arija quietly ran over to the wall so that, when the door opened, she would be able to get the drop on their visitors.

Adal walked to the center of the room in line with the door and waited, fists raised.

At that moment, the door jingled slightly. Arija knew it was sure to open, and at least two men were going to enter.

Adal hopped up and down on his toes, rolling his shoulders and neck. He gave one more fleeting glance to where Arija hid. Revealing a shooting beam of the midday sun, the door opened into the kitchen, and the fight was on.

## 12 | Webley



Adal shouted at the top of his lungs as he charged at the door. He reared his fist back and let loose several punches, but they didn't seem to have any effect on the giant standing in the doorway.

"Lively lot, aren't ye?" chuckled the giant as he reached for Adal.

Adal ducked and stepped back, still throwing rapid punches.

"Aha, and a quick one te boot!" The monster stepped toward Adal with his hands out.

"Now, Webley, remember they told us there was a second one. Must be around here somewhere ..." came a second voice from behind the giant.

Arija faltered a half step when she saw the sheer size of Webley, but Adal needed her to back him up, so she pushed her frozen feet back into motion. She jumped forward and grabbed on to what appeared to be overalls made of dark, dense leather. She scaled his muscular back and pulled at his long, hazel hair on the way up. Webley smelled of cigar smoke and oil, but there was a sweet undertone that she couldn't quite put her finger on.

"Careful, Webley. She seems like the one to watch out for," the second man warned.

As Webley entered the house, the other man stepped into the doorway. Arija didn't have the chance to steal a look. He didn't appear willing to join the fight, so she didn't see him as a threat. Once she made her way to the top of the giant, Arija pounded her fists into the top of his massive head. A thick leather strap held

what looked like a pair of bronze goggles around Webley's forehead and Arija pulled them up and then let them go, snapping them on his head and causing the giant to wail in pain.

"Thanks, Cog. Kinda figured that one out!" Webley replied, reaching up to address Arija's attack.

Adal jumped up and grabbed a hold of Webley's long beard, which hung down to his stomach. He pulled with one hand, and punched the giant in the stomach with the other, but his hits didn't seem to be doing any damage.

"Not the beard! Tha's just rude!" Webley swung his arms, grasped Adal by the back of his shoulders and shook him. Webley's hands were the size of dinner plates and his arms the size of tree trunks.

Adal squirmed, but couldn't get free. Arija shouted and yanked two full hands of Webley's hair.

"Ouch!" the giant bellowed and brought his attention back to the fierce warrior sitting on his shoulders. "Now tha's enough o' tha!" And with another swoop, Webley scooped up Arija and brought her down off his shoulders. Webley held them both out in front of him as they fought and squirmed, trying to get free.

"Let her go!" Adal shouted, pounding his fist into the hand that held him.

"Yeah, let me go so I can keep going at you!" Arija clawed, bit, and kicked at the hand that held her, but the strong fingers wouldn't let go.

Webley responded with a howl of laughter, his whole body shaking. A figure appeared next to him as he held the two in the air, and Adal and Arija quit fighting as they looked down at the thing Webley called Cog.

Cog looked to be a little smaller than Adal. He was shaped like a man, but there was nothing human about him. He wore a black leather vest with small, white pinstripes running lengthwise. He had pressed black slacks, with a white button-up. The top two buttons were open and the sleeves rolled up. What Arija could see of his skin was sleek and bronze, like almost everything else in this strange place. He had small rivets over his body that connected each piece of metal, but his face looked like it

was one solid piece of polished brass. As the strange robot looked up at her, he tipped his black-leather newsboy cap.

“Hiya there,” Cog’s voice was soft but demanding. He stared at Arija for a moment before removing his monocle, which looked like half a set of welding glasses. He rubbed the glass on his vest then replaced it on his face. Arija stared in awe at the strange creature, noting that a polished gear outlined his other eye.

She brought her attention back to Webley, who also wore a white button-up under his overalls. Two glowing, emerald eyes studied her from behind the tangled mess she’d left. Arija couldn’t help but think the giant’s eyes looked soft and, coupled with the wide grin and rosy cheeks, she almost thought he seemed friendly.

“Now, do you see why we should have knocked instead of just coming in? Topsiders aren’t always the brightest, Webley. You obviously scared them ...”

“Hey!” Arija interjected, but she didn’t have anything else to say.

“Knock on me own ‘ouse? Tha’ll be the day. Sides tha’, wa’nt this a bit-o-fun?” Webley chuckled some more, shaking Arija and Adal as he did so.

“Well, all that aside, the fun is over, and maybe we can go about meeting our guests formally. Besides, it is nearly dinner, and it has been quite a day. I am sure their little heads are buzzing with the new sights.”

“O’ all right!” The grip on Arija’s neck tightened as Webley brought them closer to him.

“Look ‘ere you two. If I let ya down, ya going to stop all this yippin’ an fightin’?” Webley’s look was stern as he spoke.

Adal and Arija nodded in silence.

“Ha! Fantastic! We ‘an getta know one-another!” Webley swung the two about, taking two steps toward the big table in the center of the room. He plopped Arija in one seat and Adal in another before going to his own chair and falling into it. The entire area shook under his weight.

Arija was stunned. She couldn’t think of anything to say or a way of justifying what was happening.

Cog walked over to the table but did not sit down. “Ah, much better. Thank you, Webley. Apologies, fine guests. I am sure this day has proven a bit, well, interesting for the two of you, to say the least. Allow me to break some of the tension. My name is Cog.” Cog removed his hat and bowed toward the table.

Arija let her artistic eye run over Cog as he sat next to her. Cog even had ‘hair’ that appeared to be small, spiral, bronze shavings neatly parted and bolted to the side.

Adal arched one inquisitive eyebrow at Arija. She gave an ever so slight shrug in response. Arija couldn't find any reason to continue to be scared or fight. Fighting hadn't really worked out so far and, besides, there really wasn't anywhere to go. Maybe Webley or Cog could help them get back home.

“My name’s Arija,” she said softly, looking from Cog to Webley.

“Ah, Arija. Hebrew in origin. Lioness of God. No doubt you embody the meaning of your well-deserved name.”

Arija’s face softened in shock.

“Might I inquire as to your last name, Arija?”

“Rapp. Arija Rapp.”

“Ah, wonderful. Something that is Raven-like. My, what a befitting title for a young Topsider such as yourself. What about you?” Cog turned his attention to Adal.

“Adal...,” he replied bluntly.

“Adal. Hmm, not entirely familiar with that title. By chance, is it short for something?” Cog leaned forward slightly, interested.

“Adalwolf Stein ...” He sighed.

“Ah, a wonderful title indeed! Adalwolf, or the ‘noble wolf,’ and Stein being ‘that of stone.’ A strong title.”

Adal and Arija looked at Cog in shocked silence.

“My apologies. I like to spin tales and create. A strong name is the keystone of every creature destined for greatness. Sort of a hobby of mine.”

“Your name is Cog. Like what you find in a machine, right? Because you're a robot or something?” Adal asked.

The corners of Cog’s mechanical mouth turned down. “Actually, it is short for Cogsworth, and I am no machine. I am a

Dweller just like everyone else here,” Cog spoke in a matter-of-fact tone.

Arija snorted and shook her head. She couldn't believe Adal would ask such a question and Cog's response amused her.

Adal shrugged with a “What?” look on his face.

“Well, Arija and Adal, I'm Webley. Name don' really mean much. Jus Webley, I guess. Welcome to the World Machine!” Webley spoke with excitement and tenacity. It was as though he had been waiting for visitors for his entire life.

“The World Machine? Is that what this place is called?” Arija asked, finding some comfort in the introductions.

“Yes, Miss! This is my land, my home, my machine. Built it meself, ya' know.” Webley's chest swelled with pride.

“Wait, you built this ... place?” Adal asked in amazement. “How is that even possible?”

“Wha' ye mean? I'm a Creator. It's wha' I do. Everything ye see about ye, all that is 'round here, made it meself.” Webley shifted in his seat and interlaced his fingers together on the table.

Arija and Adal looked at one another in shock. Not only was this place inhabited by mechanical beings, strange machines and bizarre technology, Webley, the friendly giant, built it all? Any other time, Arija would call a bluff, but this was not something she wanted to challenge. This was happening, and she had to go with it. She looked over at Adal, whose face lit up like a Christmas tree.

“Pardon my intrusion in the conversation, but it is growing quite late. I am sure that the two of you have so much more to ask, but perhaps dinner could be in order?” Cog asked, turning from the table and making his way over to the kitchen area. It wasn't until that moment that Arija realized her stomach hurt with hunger.

“So, this is all real, then? We didn't die in that cave or hit our heads. This place is an actual thing, and we are in it?” Arija blurted as she watched Cog fill a large pot with water.

“Can assure ye tha this is all real. Like I said, built it all meself. On tha note, do ye still 'ave it?” Webley asked, holding his large hand out to Adal expectantly.

“Have what?”

“The key. ‘Ave ye still got the key?” Webley repeated, shaking his hand in anticipation.

“Key?” Adal asked, shaking his head.

“The coin, I think,” Arija interjected, pointing at Adal’s pocket.

Adal pulled out the coin and extended it. “This?” he asked. “This isn’t a key, this is my grandfather’s coin. He gave it to me.”

Webley’s face lit up, and he scooped the coin out of Adal’s hands. “There it is!” Webley shouted, turning to Cog and flicking the coin into the air.

Cog merely shook his head without turning to look at Webley. He continued to work over what resembled a stove, but with more compartments and knobs than Arija could figure out. There were multiple levers and chambers that resembled pressure cookers. On occasion, the hiss of steam releasing from one of the containers filled the room.

“I told you that you had misplaced it. All these years and you insisted you knew exactly where it was. One day, you should learn to be more careful...” Cog cautioned without looking up from his cooking.

“I knew ‘xactly where it was! Right where I left it.” Webley flicked the coin into the air and snatched it back into his palm before it fell to the table.

Arija stared at the coin as Webley flicked it and caught it over and over until her senses were overwhelmed with whatever Cog was cooking. “If that’s a key, then how did Grandpa Lawrence get a hold of it during the war?” Arija asked, trying to slide the heavy chair closer to the table and failing as her legs came nowhere near the floor.

Webley spun the coin on the table; it pinged as it hit and hopped all over the intricate, worn surface. “Not sure ‘bout tha’. I tend to misplace things from time to time. Long ago, I spent a lot of time an’ energy on a very special bracelet tha’ I was gonna use for a bit o’ fun. Not sure where that bugger ended up either. Curious tale, tha’ thing ...” The coin still spun and hopped on the table and Arija watched it, mesmerized.

Adal's stomach growled and, as if on cue, Cog started plating food next to the stove.

"So, you're a 'Creator'? What sort of things do you create? How did you make this place?" Arija asked.

"Well, I create anythin' really. Ya name it, I can create it. That's what a Creator does, doe'nt he? As for this place an' my story, not gonna bore you lot with that tonight. Ah! Supper!" Webley broke from their conversation as Cog appeared beside the table, and slid four plates to each of the four chairs.



# 13 | Dwellers Do Not Consume Other Living Things



Steam and a succulent aroma wafted into Arija's face. "This looks wonderful?" Arija didn't mean for it to sound like a question, but she could never have guessed what would pass as food here.

The platters were almost comically large—nearly the size of her bedside table at home. Webley had already begun to wolf down his dinner, but Arija and Adal just stared, dumbfounded.

"What is the matter? Are you not a fan of ratatouille?" Cog asked as he reached out to grab the plate back from Arija. "I can whip you up something else if it isn't to your liking."

"No, not at all! I love this dish. I just haven't had it in years," Arija replied apologetically.

"This smells great," Adal said, picking up his fork.

"Then dig in!" Webley smiled, speaking through a mouth full of food.

"To be honest, this wasn't what I was expecting. You eat food like us?" Adal asked.

"What were you expecting, might I ask? Oil soup?"

"I mean, kinda ..."

"Adal!" Arija snapped. She hoped he could feel the heat from her glare.

Adal quickly apologized, but that was always his problem—Adal never could let a question just sit in his head. Not that Arija didn't understand that he needed answers, but she wished he

would silently wonder rather than blurt things out that could be offensive.

Cog and Webley both laughed.

“Well, there is oil in this. Vegetable oil. Also, you will find that the Dwellers of the World Machine all enjoy their fruits and vegetables. Very healthy and good for us all.” Cog took another bite of his dish.

“What about meat? What do the Dwellers eat for meat?” Adal asked as he shoveled another forkful into his mouth.

Webley and Cog both stopped with their forks in mid-air and glared at Adal as if he had just insulted their mothers.

Arija watched, amazed that a being made of metal somehow managed a full range of facial expressions.

“Dwellers do not consume other living things. We eat only vegetables and fruits we raise and grow. Consumption of a being after death is forbidden here.” Cog held his look for a moment and then smiled. There was something strangely sinister about the mechanical man, but Arija couldn’t quite put her finger on it.

“Ah, no need ta get so serious. Cog ‘ere is the best cook in the Machine. Ya’d be surprised ta see what he can make!” Webley sucked a lingering vegetable from his fork and then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

Adal shrugged, scooped up a forkful of vegetables and shoveled the hot mixture into his mouth.

Arija sat in silence, watching Cog eye Adal, Webley slurp down more veggies, and Adal look shamefully into his bowl. She was taking everything in and wanted to make sure she could bail them out of whatever trouble Adal’s mouth got them into.

With a lull in the conversation, Arija scooped some onion and eggplant onto her fork and took her first cautious bite of dinner. As soon as the warm, comforting taste touched her tongue, she closed her eyes. Memories of her mother cooking in the kitchen while she colored at the table flooded her mind.

For the remainder of dinner, the group sat in silence with only the clinking of their forks to break the void. As Arija licked the remaining broth from her fork, Cog rose and collected the dishes. Webley stood and stretched, emitting a barrage of

exhausted moans. The cracks from his joints sounded like tree limbs breaking.

The orange hue that filled the air outside had turned to a navy and purple glow.

“Well, looks to me tha’ it’s ‘bout time te’ rest for a bit, then be off to bed. Come, ye two, an’ let’s be off to the study. Cog, would ye mind bringin’ the coffee?” Webley motioned to Arija and Adal to follow him. He walked past the two and guided them into the next room.

Arija stopped as she entered a study lit by a large fireplace and accented with dark wood. The study itself looked like an antique library. Arija’s mouth dropped open and her eyes bulged as she looked around possibly the coolest room she’d ever been in.

Built-in bookshelves lined every wall, and an iron ladder on tracks ran along the shelves where thousands of books sat framed in every crevice. She gazed up at the vaulted ceilings and thought the room had to be two to three stories tall, as it dwarfed even Webley.

The sweet smell of old books tickled Arija’s nose. She was home. If nothing else came from this journey, being in this room was enough.

One wall directly across from them was without books. A skeletonized clock the size of a small car ticked quietly as its huge gears turned. Hanging above the brick fireplace was a large gun and a giant metal tool that had a wrench on one side of the long handle, and a hammer on the other.

Adal walked to the large sofa next to the fireplace. He ran his hands across the tough leather fastened in place by small copper rivets. Across from the sofa were two chairs, one significantly bigger than the other.

“Please, ‘ave a seat,” Webley requested, motioning to the sofa.

Adal plopped down and Arija walked over to join him.

As she settled into the strangely comforting couch, the door from the kitchen burst open. Cog came into the room, balancing four huge cups in his hands. The cups may have been normal for Webley but, to Arija they may as well have been bowls.

Cog sat in the seat next to Webley, taking a huge sip from his cup. Adal picked up one cup and peered at the black liquid inside. He closed his eyes and took a sip of the steaming substance.

“It’s coffee!” he said as he turned to Arija.

She picked up her cup, holding the large mug with both hands. The steaming hot aroma of roasted beans wafted into her nose and she sank back into the sofa, closing her eyes. This was a perfect day for Arija Rapp, sitting in the most unique and beautiful library she’d ever seen, and sipping coffee on one of the most comfortable leather couches she’d ever occupied. The only thing that could make this any better would be to have her sketch pad, so she could document everything she saw. The thought of her ruined sketch pad brought a frown to Arija’s face. She took another sip of her coffee, letting the hot liquid sooth her broken heart.

“Hope ye like it. I roast it m’self down in the furnace. Really gives it the ol’ smokey and fiery tones.” Webley took a large gulp of his coffee.

The comment pulled Arija from her thoughts. She had to agree that this was some of the best coffee she’d ever had. Even Adal, who would normally fill his coffee with more cream and sugar than actual coffee, gulped down the dark liquid.

“I don’t want to be that guy, or anything, but can I have my coin back?” Adal asked out of the blue, nodding toward Webley’s pocket. When the group had risen from the table, Webley had snatched the coin up and tucked it away.

Cog looked from Webley to Adal as if he were waiting to see what Webley’s response would be.

Arija smacked Adal’s thigh. She knew if he kept this up, their friendly host could crush them with one hit.

“The key? I don’ think I can give ye tha’, Adal. Kinda important, ya know.” Webley took another sip of his coffee.

“Look, that may be your ‘key’ and all, but my grandfather gave that to me. I want it back.”

“My, ye are a feisty one. I think we can be friends. Well, the both of ye, really. Hasn’ been often tha’ I get te meet new folks. You two seem like a couple o’ decent Topsiders. Tell ye wha’, ye

stay 'ere with me for a while and let me show ye about my machine, and ye can 'ave it back. How's tha'?"

In all the events of the day, Arija hadn't even had the chance to consider staying. She had been so focused on getting home, but she couldn't leave a place like this without exploring.

"You cool with that?" Arija asked Adal, but his ear-to-ear grin already gave his answer away.

"I suppose we could make that work." Adal took another sip of coffee.

Webley jumped up from his seat and threw his gigantic hands into the air like a little kid who'd been told he could go to the park. "It's settled then! Ye will stay with me for a time an', in return, ye get the key back!"

Arija flinched at his explosion of enthusiasm, but she couldn't help but smile. Something about Webley's larger-than-life aura was contagious.

"Cog, can ye do me a favor an' prepare two of the guest rooms? Think our new friends might appreciate a comfy bed after a day like this one!"

Cog nodded and downed the last of his coffee. "All right, then. Just give me a few moments and I will have those ready." Cog stood and disappeared up a spiral staircase hidden in the corner of the room.

Arija gawked. How had she missed that when they first came into the room?

"Well, as much fun as it 'as been ta' meet ye both tonight, I think tha' I will be off for the evenin'. Got to prepare my machine fer visitors an' all. Sleep well an' be ready for a grand time tomorrow." Webley stood, finished the rest of his coffee, and moved back out the door to the kitchen. A moment later, Arija heard the front door open, then close.

"What's going on?" Arija blurted as soon as the door closed.

"Well, we are staying, aren't we?" Adal asked, confusion wrinkling his face.

"Obviously, we are. This place is amazing, and I have to see it, but what's going on? This can't be real, but it is. We're somewhere underground ... far underground. There are machines

and mechanical 'Dwellers' everywhere, a giant man named Webley ... I mean, what's going on? How are we going to explain all of this to our parents?"

Arija battled her true emotions as she spoke. She wanted nothing more than to stay and study this place. She wanted to catalogue, understand, and draw all the amazing creations in the World Machine, but she was also the responsible one. Adal was usually the one that chased crazy ideas. Who knew where they would end up if she didn't ask these questions?

"Look, this place is dope. There's no way we can't stay for a while and check it out. Especially considering I want my coin back. So, we'll stay, figure out what this place is, get my coin, and return to our boring lives when we are done. My old man can give me attitude, and you can go off to rule the world under the fear that you put into ... well, everyone. Cool?" Adal raised his eyebrows, waiting for a response.

"Fine. Just, let's be clear, we need to really think about everything we do here. At the first sign of trouble, we are back in that railcar and out of here. Deal?" Arija narrowed her eyes at him.

"Yeah, yeah. Fine, deal. What's the matter? Think I can't handle things down here?" Adal asked, stretching his arms, then flexing while he yawned.

Arija rolled her eyes. "Sure, you can handle yourself. Until Webley decides that he's tired of playing with you like some giant cat and pounds you into the ground with one hit."

A sound from across the room made both Arija and Adal jump. They turned to see Cog standing at the base of the stairs, looking at them. He had a strange smile on his face, and Arija knew he had heard everything.

"I just wanted to let you two know your rooms are ready. If you wouldn't mind following me, I can get you settled in."

Adal and Arija slid from the couch and walked over to Cog. He smiled wider, shaking his head.

"I also want to say, before you turn in, that I can appreciate your caution. I admit, if I found myself in the world of Topsiders, I wouldn't be too inclined to trust anyone either. You find safety

and security only in what is familiar to you. It is your nature. Believe me when I say, you have nothing to fear here. Especially from Webley or myself. He values life and creation more than anything else. If there is any point when you are uncomfortable, or if there is something I can do to ease your minds, please let me know.”

Arija thanked Cog for his kind words while Adal silently nodded. Cog, having spoken his peace, turned and walked up the stairs with Arija and Adal in tow.

# 14 | Steam, Showers, and Garter Belts



Adal drifted awake to the sound of soft music. He wasn't sure where it was coming from, but he knew the piece by heart. The music was one of his grandfather's favorite works: Bagatelle No. 25 in A minor, or Fur Elise as he would sometimes refer to it.

Adal's stomach dropped at the thought of his grandfather. The pain of loss settled in his mind, causing fresh tears to well in his eyes. Adal focused on the coin. If he could get that back, everything would be all right.

As the beautiful music lulled him in and out of sleep, Adal slowly opened his eyes and looked at the ceiling above him. A painted mural covered the entire surface. Two mighty hands wielded a hammer and tongs over an anvil. The wielder was hidden behind a veil of smoke and fire, but the smith was forging what looked to be a coin.

Adal rubbed his eyes and sat up. The comfortable bed was almost coma-inducing. He didn't remember falling asleep, but it was the deepest sleep he could recall experiencing in his life. He hadn't even dreamed. The thought crossed his mind that he should be grateful for that. With everything that happened yesterday, his dreams would likely have turned to nightmares.

The music continued to play, and Adal looked about the room for its source.

Above his head was another large, skeletonized clock that took up half the wall. Just below the clock was a spinning tube with small notches plucked by brass bars. It took Adal a moment



to realize that the entire wall was a music box and an alarm clock rolled into one. The time on the wall was 6 a.m., and Adal scrunched his face in disgust. Next to the rotating drum was a lever. Adal reached up and pulled it, silencing the music.

“Webley wasn't kidding when he said first thing, was he?” he rolled from his comfortable bed and took one last look around the room. It reminded him of a museum. Glass cases held an assortment of mechanical oddities and, just next to the bed, a large telescope pointed out the window. He wasn't sure the point of this, as they were well underground, but he was sure plenty of things were going to confuse him today.

With a final stretch, Adal stood and walked to the washroom on the opposite side of the room. The room was not disproportionately sized for Webley. In fact, nothing on this floor of the house was. Other than that, the washroom was relatively standard to what he was used to, though everything inside looked antique—a large clawfoot bathtub, a Victorian sink, and a high tank toilet. The reservoir for the toilet was near the ceiling and connected by copper piping that bent and twisted into beautiful knotted designs. Just inside the door sat a small table with a stack of clothing and a small note.

*I took the liberty of fashioning you some new clothing. Judging by the wet and dirty attire you arrived in, I think you will find this helpful. When ready, please come down to the library.*

-Cog

Adal looked from the clothing to the shower and shrugged. Upon inspection, it seemed the shower worked the same as his back home. Adal turned up the hot water and let the room fill with steam.



Arija's eyes fluttered open and then slammed shut again. Her face was swollen, and her eyes stung with exhaustion. As she pulled the heavy comforter back over her head, she silently cursed herself for staying up all night. Arija had examined every square inch of her room. All the strange machines, inventions, and pieces of art. She was fascinated with it all.

A beautiful song pierced her ears, but Arija was not a morning person and she angrily shoved a pillow over her head. After a few angry minutes, during which she considered chucking something hard at the alarm, Arija pulled herself into a sitting position. She forced herself to put down the pillow and slid out of bed, shuffling over to the wall alarm and calmly shutting it off. She leaned against the wall and sighed. Life would be better after a shower and some coffee.

Arija had already checked out the bathroom the night before and found that it was fitting for the house she was staying in. Next to the clawfoot tub was a small vanity with an assortment of brushes, combs and containers. Arija had already discovered that the small bronze containers held various bits of makeup, but she wasn't the makeup wearing type. Seeing the containers again this morning, before she had time for coffee, only roused another bout of anger.

"Even mechanical men think it's all about appearances. If anything, these things should be in Adal's room." Arija laughed as she turned up the hot water and stepped into the tub for a much-needed shower.

Fifteen minutes later, she stepped out of the shower and over to the vanity. She inspected the neatly folded pile of clothing as she picked up one of the boar-hair brushes. She ran the brush through her hair and left the bathroom with the pile of clothes. Arija fanned the outfit out on the bed and her lips curled into a scowl.

“Note to self: watch that creepy robot guy,” Arija said, wondering how Cog knew her size. She had never seen stitching and designs like these before, aside from maybe in her history textbooks. She picked up a leather corset by one of the straps like it was garbage. Arija had never worn one before. These sorts of “doll clothing” (as she often called them) weren't her style.

“This will be fun. Take me an hour to buckle this bad boy up,” Arija scoffed as she dropped the corset back onto the bed and picked up the skirt. She ran her fingers across the material and wondered what it was made of. It felt like leather, but it was much lighter and more flowy than any leather she'd ever seen.

She shrugged and slid the skirt on before noticing a pair of black leggings sitting on the bed. She put on the leggings and then buckled herself into the corset.

As Arija started to walk out of the room, she noticed a pair of tall leather boots sitting next to the door. She grabbed them and sat down on the edge of the bed to put them on. After buckling the boots up to her knees, Arija stood and admired herself in the full-length mirror.

“All right, I guess I don't look too bad in this outfit.” Arija grabbed the brush she'd set on the bed, opened the door, and stepped into the hall.

# 15 | And So It Begins



Adal stepped out of the shower and admired himself in the fogged mirror as he did every morning. He ran his hand over the stubble on his face and reflexively looked for his razor before he remembered where he was. Next to the sink was a straight razor, but Adal didn't know how to use one. He let his hand hover over the shiny metallic object before he decided he didn't want to cut his throat trying. He got dressed instead.

"Well, there goes that," Adal said, stepping back and looking at his outfit. Adal loved the old-style outfit Cog had left for him. In fact, he would probably make it his new style when he went back home. He eyed the leather vest in the mirror. Adal had never worn a vest before; he'd always considered them to be nerdy. But this vest was dope and, with the chains that ran to the pocket, he thought he looked more like a biker than a nerd. Tugging at the ends of his shirt, pleased with what he saw, Adal made his way into the hallway.

Unlike when they initially came up last night, the corridor was bright and warm. Adal looked up to find the entire ceiling was a glass dome, like in the train stations back home. Warm, radiant rays of light pierced the glass and washed over Adal's face.

The walls in the hall were lined edge to edge with painted pictures of an assortment of strange things Adal didn't recognize. Some looked like blueprints, others like paintings of landscapes and Dwellers. As Adal stopped to eye a particularly confusing painting, a door down the hall opened and Arija walked out.

The two stood in silence for a moment, looking at each other. Adal tried to suppress the grin that spread across his face, but he

was unsuccessful.

“Stop staring,” Arija said as she looked Adal up and down.

“Sleep well?” Adal managed, trying to break the awkward silence.

“Yup. You?”

“Yeah. Deep. So, these clothes?” Adal laughed, pulling his coat open and turning in a circle.

Arija sighed and let a small laugh escape her lips. “Right? Not sure if I can get used to these. I mean, they look good, especially on me, but not the most comfortable. Have you ever seen what passed as Victorian underwear? It’s almost like a romper.” Arija adjusted her corset and tugged it upward.

“Is that an invitation?” Adal smirked.

Arija gasped dramatically and slugged him in the arm. “In your dreams! In fact, not even there,” she barked, trying not to smile but failing. “Let’s get downstairs. I’m sure they’re waiting for us by now.” Arija turned and headed down the hall with Adal in tow.

“Hey!” Arija called over her shoulder. She paused and tossed Adal a brush.

“Thanks, girl!” Adal ran the brush over his hair as they continued walking.

“Yeah, I know you have to be the prettiest one in the room, so I figured you’d need that more than I do.”

Adal paused, scowling at her. “Hey, don’t hate because I look great all the time. You ever need advice, I got you,” Adal said as he continued to run the brush through his thick hair.

“Just keep moving before I bruise that pretty face of yours,” Arija sneered.

When they got to the library, Cog was waiting for them. He stood in the center of the room and wore the same outfit as the previous day. Adal wondered if the Dwellers ever had to change their clothes. Recalling the assortment of odd, and mildly insulting, questions he’d already asked—and would likely ask in the future—he kept the thought to himself.

“Good morning! I hope you slept well. Ah, I see you chose to wear the clothing I made you last night. I hope they fit all right. I did the best I could in assessing your sizes,” Cog said, with a smile.

“Actually, these look great and fit me just right,” Adal began. “But Arija is having some problems with her unde—”

Arija brought her elbow into Adal’s stomach, stopping him mid-sentence.

“They are perfect. Thank you for the trouble you went through,” Arija said, shooting Adal a look from the corners of her eyes.

“Ah, surely, no trouble at all. Now, I think a quick bite is in order before we set out for the day. Webley is waiting out back and is working on a special start to the day. Might I interest the two of you in an apple and some coffee?” Cog motioned to the table between the sofa and two chairs.

A small tray sat in the center containing two ruby apples and the usual bowls of coffee. Arija grabbed the cup of coffee, scrunching her nose at the apple before taking several large gulps of the beverage. Adal took two large bites of the apple as Arija placed the cup back on the tray. He continued to sip his coffee as he turned his attention back to Cog.

“Well now, shall we?” Cog asked, waving for them to follow him.

Not wanting to waste another minute, Adal put back his still half full cup of coffee and the two followed on Cog’s tail as he led them into the kitchen, then through another door at the other end. Adal’s heart pounded so hard he thought it might break out of his chest and make a run for it as he thought about what they might do today.

After walking through the next door, Adal and Arija found themselves standing at the entrance of a greenhouse. Vaulted, fogged glass ceilings covered the greenhouse. A large, intricate pipe system wound its way across the entire room. Periodic droplets of ice-cold water dripped on Adal as he walked underneath and he extended his hands and looked up, as if expecting a rainstorm. Rack after iron rack of flowers, herbs, small trees, and even edibles, filled the room, making it feel like a jungle.

*Why wouldn't there be so much greenery in this strange home?* Adal thought as he delicately ran his fingers across a strange

spiked plant he'd never seen before. It looked like a cross between a cactus and a palm tree.

Adal's eyes danced from one curious plant to another. One, in particular, made both Arija and Adal freeze as they passed. It was the size of a decorative fountain. Emerald greens spun into a cone shape and the large petals tilted so it could show off its plum-colored interior. As they neared it, Adal closed his eyes and took a deep breath, filling his lungs with all the plant's odors. But as soon as his lungs filled, he was overcome with the urge to vomit.

Without turning, Cog's shoulder shook with laughter. "Careful with some of these, Webley fancies himself a bit of a collector. That particular one is very rare. Even in the realm of the Topsiders. It is called the Corpse Flower. Bloom is very rare, and the smell, well ..." His chuckles faded as they put distance between themselves and the foul plant. "There, have a smell of those. It will cleanse that horrible odor. These, I have been told, smell of honey."

Adal didn't even pause to consider before he inhaled so deeply that several of the tiny, white flowers nearly went up his nose. Arija laughed as she watched Adal desperately try to rid himself of the smell.

The group rounded the corner to a door that led them out of the house and into the openness of the Machine.

Webley's back yard was not large. Rather, the area was quaint, with luscious grass stretched over the surface, strangely beautiful plants scattered randomly across the yard, and a small but elegant bird bath that sat almost directly in the center of the green patch. In the bath, several small, mechanical birds fluttered and splashed in the water, their movements so perfect and realistic that it was possible to forget they were machines.

Adal looked around at the lush grass. Everything they'd experienced since stepping foot in this place was made of machine and metal, but this was organic, healthy, thick grass. The sky was a blue hue, almost identical to the sky from home, although something was slightly off about the color. He hadn't even noticed that Cog had continued walking, or that Arija was about to run right into him.

“My bad!” Adal said.

“You’re all set,” she answered.

On the other side of the lawn, Webley stood on a platform that extended past the yard’s edge. From their vantage point, it looked as though his property dropped off as sharply into the open abyss as the platform where they first encountered the train.



## 16 | Pineapple Leather



From a distance, Arija watched the wonderful blue illumination above them change back to orange. The color reminded her of the street lamps that came on after dark by her house, and she wondered how it could be both daylight and sunset at the same time.

“How is this place lit?” Adal asked Cog, squinting at the sky above them.

“Do you like it? Webley insisted on doing something to make the house a bit more to your liking.” Cog spoke as though they had simply turned a switch on, but something of this magnitude had to be more complicated. Adal glanced over his shoulder at Arija who was already shaking her head.

“Yeah, but how though?” he asked again.

Cog paused and turned to them. “Bulbs. A special type of bulb with filaments hand-forged by Webley. We collect certain gases, and fill the bulbs with both the forged filaments and the gases to draw various effects. These bulbs light the entire World Machine. The ones overhead were made last night to give the appearance of a blue sky for your morning. The rest of the machine, however, is still lit with the traditional bulbs. The only other place you will find these will be over the valleys. Fruits and vegetables also prefer this type of light.”

Adal shrugged, but Arija was amazed that the technology here was so simple, yet vastly different to that used back home.

She wondered if it was possible to bring some of this technology back with them.

“Ah, ‘ere ye are! Mornin’! Been wonderin’ when ye might get up. Come on over, I got somethin’ te show ya.” Webley waved them on, almost as excited as they were. He held two large packs in his hands. From where they stood, the two packs looked to be leather rucksacks. As Arija followed Adal across the lawn, Cog stopped her.

“Please pardon my intrusion but, when we met, I couldn't help but notice your pack. After dinner, you left it at the table and, last night, I took the liberty to examine it.”

Cog’s words caused a heat of embarrassment and anger to warm Arija’s cheeks. Cog had looked through her bag and found a mess of soaked and ruined half drawings and doodles. Adal was the only person other than her mother who had ever seen Arija’s sketches and she’d planned on keeping it that way.

“Excuse me?” she asked, aggravation lacing her words.

“Again, I beg pardon; I too know what it is like to have the urge to make something beautiful. Webley made sure of that ...” Cog paused for a moment, confusing Arija and making her wonder what exactly he’d lost.

“Anyway, I made you something and want to give it to you.” Cog unslung a beautifully ornate messenger bag from his shoulder. It was burgundy and had an etched-lace overlay. Bronze clasps and buckles enclosed the top flap and the emblem from Adal’s coin was burned into the center. Arija shook her head, then took the gift and ran her fingers over the soft fabric. A leather strap bound the flap and she unbuckled it to examine the contents of the bag.

“I have to ask you something. You said earlier that you don't believe in killing living beings. That it’s common practice to admire and appreciate life and its creatures in the Machine. So, why are there so many products made of leather?” Arija asked, pulling a large book from the bag.

“How do you mean? All of our leather is made from pineapple,” Cog responded, confused.

“You make your leather from pineapple?” she asked,

assuming he was joking.

“Yes. It is a process we discovered long ago. If you take the pineapple leaves, you can make a sort of ...” Cog paused, noting the confused look on Arija’s face before adding, “It’s quite durable and soft.”

Arija shrugged and brought her attention back to the large book in her hands. Its cover was dark brown and well worn yet, when she opened it, the blank pages were perfect ivory—soft and new. It was a sketchbook to replace the one that had been destroyed. A small pouch at the bottom of the bag held charcoal sticks and other sketching tools. She was speechless. After a moment of gawking, she mustered a soft, “Thank you.”

Cog nodded and stepped aside, motioning for her to join Adal next to Webley, who was explaining something. Arija couldn’t concentrate on what was happening around her; her head was buzzing, and she itched to sit down and draw some things she’d seen.

“Ye two ready te’ see the Machine?” Webley’s voice was chipper and held hints of amusement. He tossed one of the packs he carried to Adal and the other to Arija who had just enough time to sling the satchel Cog had given her over her shoulder before catching the one thrown at her.

“What’s in this thing?” Adal asked, struggling to locate the clasp that would open it.

“Ye will see. It’s the way we’ll be gettin’ about today. Easiest manner o’ travel in the Machine. I wouldn’t try te’ open it. Jus’ put it on. Tell ye ‘bout it in a moment.” The toothy grin on Webley’s face was a little concerning, but Adal took one last look at the bag and threw it over his shoulder. Arija did the same.

“Comfortable? Well now, Cog do ye mind showin’ ‘em wha’ these are?”

Arija shrugged. The satchels were surprisingly light for their size. In fact, their standard haul of school books weighed significantly more than these. Cog walked between them. He had donned his own pack, similar to theirs, and with a jerk of his arms, the sides burst open and a set of large, scaled wings expanded between them.

Adal jumped backward and Arija threw her hands up to cover her face. Webley howled with laughter and even Cog's shoulders shook with amusement. The wings were gorgeous and reminded Arija of the small mechanical finch from the platform the previous day. Rather than feathers, row upon row of small scales comprised the majority of their mass. Several strips of copper ran their length, like bones that would support a real wing. All this centered around a small, metal box that sat in the center of Cog's shoulders.

"What the...? Wings?" Adal asked, collecting himself.

He cleared his throat and continued in a lower octave. "I mean, of course wings!"

Arija rolled her eyes, but she couldn't help the small smile that formed at the side of her mouth.

Adal looked back and forth over the structure on Cog's back and his expression dropped. "Ah, wait! Wings?"

"The fliegensacks are the best way to get around, I promise," Cog chimed in, turning to face the group.

Arija's heart danced in her chest. She knew heights petrified Adal. Watching his seamless bravado falter forced a laugh from her mouth.

"Oh, come on, Adal. You mean to tell me you got us all the way here and you can't even handle a little flying? I thought you were invincible?" she teased.

"I mean, sure, you can be sarcastic, but do you see an engine on those, uhh what are they called? Flyingsacks?" Adal paused for a moment. "Planning on just gliding and then falling to your death? I'm not."

"Fliegensacks...with a G," Cog corrected.

"Still 'avent got the feel fer the Machine? Ye will learn tha' things are vastly different down 'ere. No need ta fear engines. It's simple." Webley walked over to Cog and brought their attention to the box in the center of the fliegensack.

"In there's a small fork tha' vibrates at a set frequency once started. This frequency transfers ta the small scales on th' wings. They vibrate an create their own form o' lift. Like th' birds on th' surface. There are also calibrated gyroscopic adjusters." Webley

stuck his hand between Cog and the back of the pack. “Tha’ will turn the whole thing in any direction tha’ ye want. Only ‘ave te’ make the slightest movement. All ye ‘ave te’ do is ...” Webley reached over to a small knob on one of the straps and turned it.

Suddenly, the sound of faint vibrations emitted from the wings. Arija and Adal stepped forward and examined each of the scales. They, indeed, appeared to be vibrating, but at such a speed Arija could no longer discern where each individual scale began or ended.

“Wait, are you telling me that something straight out of a science fiction book really works and we’re about to fly through the air on these things? For one, I don’t know how far down the drop is. Oh, and don’t forget all the weird machines and structures everywhere! I don’t think I’m down for this one.” Adal pulled at the straps of his pack.

“I think I agree. I mean, well ...” Arija wanted to agree with Adal. This all sounded like utter madness but, then she said, “I’m going to do it.” Her heart pounded in her ears. This was something she just couldn’t say no to. The science sounded preposterous but, then again, so would this place if she hadn’t seen it with her own two eyes.

“Ah! Wonderful! ‘Ats wha’ I wanted te’ hear!” Webley patted Arija on the shoulder and placed his large arms around the both of them. He led them to the edge of the platform. As Adal and Arija stepped to the drop and looked at the incredible world around them, Arija was rendered speechless.

“Well, Cog, wha’ do ye think? ‘Ere should we go first?” Webley shouted over his shoulder as Cog appeared at Arija’s side.

“I think going into town would be an interesting way of introducing these two to the wonders of the Machine.”

“Ahh! Great idea. Te’ town then.”

Arija examined Webley, noticing something strange before saying, “not coming with us? Where’s your pack?”

“Don’t need one. I have me own ways. In fact ... Race ya there!” Webley bellowed as he leaped into the air.

Adal tried to grasp for him, to keep him from falling, nearly slipping into the open air himself. As Adal steadied himself, Arija

had to stifle a laugh. The poor boy looked like he was going to be sick.

Webley continued forward for nearly fifty feet, until he reached a small beam that ran horizontally between two other beams. His hand clasped the metal from underneath and Webley threw himself into the air with a twist, landing on the flat surface.

“Ye comin’ ‘er wha’?” he shouted back at the group, before turning and leaping from surface to surface, scaling the beams like some gigantic primate.

Adal and Arija looked at each other behind Cog’s back, eyes wide and glossy.

“Well, I do suppose we should be off after him. Trust me when I say he is quite fast and literally knows this machine like the back of his hand. So, for your first time, I recommend leaping. As you fall, turn the knob on the straps once to open and twice to start. These things move quickly and are very responsive to your movements. Just trust yourself and you will be fine. Follow me, and we can still beat him. Ready?” Cog stepped a half step behind the two and placed his hands in the center of their shoulders.

“I ... uh ... I ...” Adal began, looking at the open space ahead of him. He turned to Arija, pleading with his eyes for her to stop this. His face paled and a bead of sweat trickled down his cheek.

Arija felt bad for him, but she knew the only way to get him to jump would be to go first. “Hey.” Arija nudged Adal and held her fist out. He looked at it nervously for a moment before extending his own. The two dabbed their fists together and Arija turned to Cog with a smile on her face.

“Once to open, twice to start, right?” she asked.

Cog smiled and nodded.

Arija let the butterflies in her stomach run wild, turning her head slightly and casting a fleeting glance at Adal. She took a deep breath, crouched, and brought her hands up to her face before executing a textbook backflip over the edge.

## 17 | To Fly or Not To Fly



The heart-pounding sensation of adrenaline and euphoria washed over Arija as she fell. This was the most incredible thing she had ever experienced. Freedom. Skydiving had always piqued her interest, but she'd never had the courage to do it. Now she never wanted the feeling to end. Columns and pillars whipped past, and she became hypnotically lost in the moment. Closing her eyes, she let the air rush past her, feeling the pounding of her heart throughout her body before forcing her eyes open and remembering that she was falling. Arija grabbed for the knob, holding on to it before giving it the necessary two turns.

A jolt tore through her body as the wings sprung from the pack and stopped her from falling. A vibrating hum ran down her back as she hung in the air. Arija's wings shone beautifully in the glimmer of the orange light and, for a moment, she thought they were on fire.

A laugh escaped her lips as she looked down, and the reality of what was happening set in. Her mind was buzzing. Every particle of her body was at full attention. She twisted, and the pack jumped into gear, rotating her in three full circles before she stopped. Arija shook the dizziness from her head and looked down, prompting the pack to drop her a few feet before she caught on and looked up again.

As the buzzing in her head grew louder, Arija realized it wasn't buzzing at all. She looked up just in time to see Adal fly past her, still in free fall and yelling at the top of his lungs.

“Turn the knob!” she shouted.

Arija turned her body to get a better look at her falling friend, and she began to move in his direction. This would take some getting used to. She tested her bounds and found that, if she only turned her head, she didn't move. But if she allowed her body to twist with her, the pack pushed her in that direction. Testing once more, she discovered that, the more she twisted, the faster she turned. So she rotated herself in Adal's direction and zipped off after him.



“Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!” Adal shouted as he fell. Blind panic fogged his mind and his heart pounded so fast, he thought he'd die of a heart attack before he ever hit the ground, assuming there was a ground to hit.

Seeing Arija suspended in the air with her wings out reminded Adal about the knob on the strap he clung to for dear life. Wiping sweat from his hand to better grasp the knob, he gave it a quick turn. With a jolt, the wings expanded, but he continued to fall. Panicked, Adal flailed his arms once more. His heart jumped into his throat as he realized that he was nearing a large tank that sat atop an iron structure.

He kicked his legs and swatted at the wings in an attempt to start them. The tank and platform grew closer and closer. It figured; falling started him on this trip, and now it would end it. At that moment, he heard a voice shouting impatiently.

“Turn it again!” Arija barked as she flew up next to him.

Adal looked up at his friend's scared and frustrated face, then turned the knob again. He stopped mid-fall, only a few feet from the tank.

He ran the palm of his hand across his sweat-drenched head and said, “Two turns, you idiot!” He turned to look at Arija and swooped back into the air.



## 18 | A Team Effort



Once the panic subsided, the sensation of flight was amazing, as long as he didn't look down. Adal zipped around the immediate area to get a feel for the controls of his new appendages.

Arija followed suit, cutting across his path and jetting circles around him when she could. The more they tested their abilities, the more daring they became. Charging at one another and swooping away just in time, keeping so close they could feel the breeze created by the other.

"This is the most amazing thing I've ever done!" Adal shouted, flying past a wall equipped with large pistons that pumped and ejected steam. He ran his hand across the smooth, cold metal and pushed away, flipping and flying inverted over Arija. She pointed her body and shot upward, just missing his head and causing him to tumble in the air. The idea of being so high up still made him want to vomit but as long as he focused on trying to fly, Adal was mostly able to hide the panic that still settled in his gut.

"What's the matter? Still a bit jumpy?" Arija teased, spinning and pulling herself into a ball that briefly caused her to drop several feet before she opened herself once more and flew away.

Adal scrunched his face. Not willing to admit the thought of falling still made him sick. He gave chase and swung his arms at her feet as the two moved between structures.

"If you two think you are comfortable enough, I'd like to remind you we are still in a race," Cog said from atop a small shack that was bound and fastened to a pillar.

Arija slapped her forehead. "Sorry about that. Please, lead on,

Cog.”

Cog shook his head. “It has been quite amusing watching you learn your way around, but now that you have your bearings, I think it is time to catch up to Webley. So, try to keep up.” Cog lunged from his perch and took off. Arija straightened her body in his direction and shot off after him with Adal close behind. Adal watched Cog weave between buildings, railings, and other obstacles, narrowly missing them as he turned and twisted.

As Arija took a sharp turn around a tall building made almost entirely of glass and piping, she caught the corner of a window with her hip and spun face first into the side of the building.

Adal couldn’t help the laughter that burst from his mouth. As he shot past Arija, he turned and waved. She rolled her eyes, extend her middle finger, then shot off after him.

Passing through a slim gap that scarcely had enough space, a small flock of birds flew directly in front of the group. Cog spun and missed the flock entirely, but Adal and Arija found themselves swatting at the air to avoid colliding with the small creatures.

“Careful. Some of the small ones will fly right in front of you and jam your wings. Keep a look out!” Cog shouted over his shoulder.

Adal’s first thought was that, regardless of the birds damaging the wings, a metal animal hitting him in the face at this speed likely wouldn't feel great.

“Look out!” Cog shouted, pointing to their right.

By the time Adal had the chance to act, another small flock of birds flew into them. Adal covered his face with one hand and swatted at the air with the other. When he uncovered his face, his eyes bulged. The birds were running from a large winged creature that was coming straight for them.

Adal stared in shock at what appeared to be a mixture of a large beetle and a mosquito flapping its brass wings in their direction. Long legs hung underneath its metallic body like dead tree limbs.

Arija pointed at the creature, but she couldn’t seem to speak.

Adal glanced back to the flying monster. There wasn't just one beetle flying at them, but a whole fleet of them. Their fat, hefty bodies dropped and lifted as they flapped their too-small wings and struggled to keep afloat. Light reflected off their black, metallic bodies and blinded Adal as he squinted in their direction.

"Those things are like the size of a house!" he yelled, shielding his eyes from the glare.

Cog swerved downward and barely missed colliding with one of the bugs as it chased several of the birds directly at him.

"Adal!" Arija yelled, but it was too late.

Three of the larger insects flew directly into Adal as he twisted to avoid them. He managed to swerve out of the way of the first and exhaled with relief before another two insects came around a corner. The first insect struck Adal underneath his right wing, spinning him and turning him upside down. His stomach lurched into his throat and Adal immediately regretted forcing down the large cup of coffee he had for breakfast. He reeled, rubbing his hand across his head to steady his mind. But then the second beetle hit him so hard it knocked the wind out of him.

Adal bounced over the back of the creature. He reached out to grasp whatever he could. His hands found the edge of an invisible flap and he dug his fingers in. For a brief moment, he saw Arija and Cog still twisting and flipping through the air to avoid the rest of the group. Adal flew away, clinging to the back of a mechanical flying beetle. As the spinning in his head and the nausea in his stomach subsided, Adal looked back over his shoulder only to find he couldn't see Arija or Cog anymore.

With all of his remaining strength, Adal pulled himself up higher on the creature. He looked from side to side and saw what was left of his wings flapping limply off the sides of his new transport. With every twist and turn, they flapped and pulled at him, nearly knocking him off the beetle to fall to his death. *Fuck!* Adal thought as he watched his useless wings flapping in the wind.

Pulling himself up, Adal turned over, placed his stomach on the top of the creature and tried to wrap his legs around it. The insect was too wide, but he was able to hook his feet under the

shell between its wings.

He took a moment to examine his situation. He was riding a giant beetle mosquito as several others flew alongside him. His wings were fucked and, if the mechanical bug made any sudden movements, he would fall to his death. Adal forced bile back down his throat as he vowed he would never fly again. He didn't think the beetles knew or cared he was there, and he took this as a good thing. At least the bug wasn't trying to shake him off.

With his wings tugging at his back, he squeezed his legs as tight as he could and attempted to remove his pack entirely. With several hard tugs at the clasp, Adal released himself and watched the wings disappear.

As Adal brought his attention forward again, his small, triumphant smile vanished. The insect was flying directly toward a large, copper pillar.

Adal closed his eyes and flattened himself on the creature's back. But the force of impact jerked him downward. As the insect plummeted, Adal lost his grip, sliding up and off the insect's back.

As he slid off the end of the creature, Adal managed to grab one of its long legs. His added weight made the creature swerve. He had thrown its balance off, and it was having a hard time keeping steady. The creature wailed a mechanical cry as it twisted and turned.

Constantly adjusting his grip and kicking his legs to avoid close obstacles, Adal did all he could to keep from falling, or thinking about how far the fall would be. Fighting the driving sensation that he was going to slip at any moment, Adal gave one final tug in an attempt to steady himself.

The creature let out another mechanical screech, like grinding gears, and Adal looked up just in time to see his ride slam into another beam.

An explosion of components and metal shavings sent Adal flying forward through the air. The openness around him was possibly the most agonizingly peaceful sensation he had ever experienced. He spread his limbs as he flew on his own, though he could only close his eyes and wait for the inevitable collision that would end his existence. A collision that came quicker than

he anticipated, but wasn't nearly as devastating as he expected.

A sharp pain spread through his entire body, followed by continuous jolts of agony as he rolled repeatedly across what felt like a flat surface. After several harsh turns, Adal finally came to a stop on his back and let out a loud groan of pain. A stale, metallic taste filled his mouth, and he coughed loudly, attempting to regain his breath.

"Aw ... shit ..." Adal slowly opened his eyes and blinked the world back into focus. Remaining still to avoid discovering if anything was broken, Adal shot his eyes from side to side.

The platform he had landed on was sizable, and looked almost identical to the landing platform for the train. Numerous mounds of scrap metal were scattered around, reminding Adal of a landfill. As he pulled himself slowly into a sitting position, he realized he still clutched the long leg of the flying insect in his hand. That's when he vomited. Acrid stomach acid and coffee spewed out of his mouth and nose, covering a small area of the platform.

"Shit!" he croaked as he dropped the severed leg and wiped his hand on his black pants. Squeezing his eyes shut, Adal shook his head to regain his composure.

It was then he felt the vibrations.

Opening his eyes again, he found that one of the large bugs had also landed on the platform. It was roughly twenty yards away and was staring at him like he'd just killed its brother, which he had. It had glowing, blue, slitted eyes and a set of large fangs that resembled a spider's.

"Good ... thing. Nice thing ..." Adal cooed, not taking his eyes off the creature. He froze, thinking that, if he sat still enough, the insect wouldn't be able to see him. *Wait, no, that's dinosaurs*, Adal chided himself as the creature bared its large fangs and lowered its head like a dog about to strike.

"Damn!" Adal sprang to his feet, adrenaline pumping through his body not for the first time that day. Just as he touched his feet to the metal ground, the insect lunged directly for him. Adal reached down, grabbed the severed leg he'd tossed aside, and brought it up into the air.

“I don't think so!” he shouted as the animal lunged at him. Adal took a half-step backward and swung the leg as hard as he could. It collided with the left eye of his attacker, and the insect retreated backward, squealing in pain.

Adal raised the improvised club again and swung. This time, the creature dodged at just the right moment, and Adal's attack went wide.

The creature swiped one of its legs in an outward motion and swept Adal's feet out from under him. He hit the floor with a hard thud.

The creature tried for him once more. This time, Adal plunged the leg into the gap between the insect's two fangs. Half the length of the leg slid into the beetle, and Adal knew he had managed to force it down the creature's throat.

“Eat this!” Adal yelled, yanking the weapon free and striking again at the bug's face. Another solid hit sent it backward, but only for a moment.

It lunged forward with its fangs extended. Adal had just enough time to form a bar and jam it upward, blocking the large spikes just inches from his face. He pressed with all of his remaining strength as the creature lowered its fangs closer to him. Until he could feel the tips stabbing at his cheeks. Adal gritted his teeth, shouted in anger, and pushed with everything he had.

The creature whipped aside, releasing the pressure on Adal as it tumbled away. Two separate masses slid across the floor and it took a moment before he realized what had happened.

As the insect rolled onto its back, Arija leapt fast to her feet. She tossed aside the wings from her back that were now just as crumpled a mess as Adal's.

“Shit! Arija!” he shouted, jumping up and running to her side.

“Jesus, Adal! What is that thing?” Arija stepped away from the body as it twitched on its back.

Adal knew nothing about the creatures in this world, but it sure looked like it was dying. “I have no idea. The one I got snagged on collided with something, and one of its friends decided I was going to be lunch. Nice hit, by the way! I owe you one.” Adal

couldn't help himself; he wrapped his arms around Arija and squeezed so hard he thought he'd break at least one bone.

"Yeah, well you owe me more than one. I nearly broke my neck on that dive. So, is it just the one bug?" Arija asked, pulling from Adal's grip and looking about.

"I think so. I mean, there were more, but I haven't seen them since I hit the ground. Where's Cog?" Adal brushed imaginary dirt and dust from his shirt and shook out the sides of his long coat.

"Not sure. When we hit that group, Cog flew off to avoid the impact. I turned and went right after you as soon as I could."

A clanking sound caught their attention, and they both froze. Adal's heart jumped back into his throat and Arija scanned the area, her eyes narrowed and deadly.

From behind a mound of scrap metal came another one of the mechanical monstrosities. The three stood there, eyes locked for a moment, before Arija and Adal slowly took a step back.

"So ... maybe a team effort on this one?" Adal asked, picking up the leg he had previously used for protection and handing it to Arija.

She looked at the crude weapon like she was determining her odds and nodded.

# 19 | The Kleinmasch, A.K.A the Besquito



Adal found another segment of leg to use for himself. After scrutinizing his own weapon, he looked up to see the besquito—as he was now calling the strange beetle, mosquito mix—hunched over its fallen brother and nudged it with one leg. For a confusing moment, Adal felt guilty, and he wondered how a machine could display such convincing emotion.

“These things are no joke. Keep yourself as far away as you can,” Adal began, reminding himself that the besquito attacked him first. “Also ...”

“Adal,” Arija interrupted, pointing to their right.

Adal slowly turned and saw that two more of the bugs had landed on the platform. They too made their way toward the inverted machine.

“So ... this isn't good.” Adal pressed his shoulder against Arija's, suddenly needing to be as close to her as he could get.

“I think maybe we should leave,” Arija added, motioning to the side.

Adal reached out a hand and squeezed hers as they slowly made their way toward the edge of the platform. A clanking sound jolted Adal's attention and, as they turned, an ear shattering screech nearly knocked him backward.

Another besquito stood on top of the scrap pile behind them.



They were boxed in.

“Run!” Adal shouted, tugging Arija away.

The two turned on their heels and ran toward another scrap pile for cover. The shriek was echoed by another and then another as the besquitos sounded the charge. The floor beneath Adal and Arija’s feet shook with every step the horde of mechanical creatures took. Five of the large creatures hopped from pile to pile at an incredible speed. Arija seemed enthralled by the creatures, and Adal grabbed her by the arm to prevent her from inadvertently falling over the edge of the platform.

She stared at him, anger clear on her face. Then she looked down, as if just now noticing where they were.

Adal looked over the edge, found the distance dizzying, then raised his weapon.

Arija raised her severed leg and turned to face the monsters.

“Get ready. If these things want a piece, they're going to get the whole thing!” Adal’s chest swelled. He let the sweet smell of brisk air fill his lungs as the tingling of nerves took over his body.

## 20 | The Fight



The ground shook as two more of the creatures landed ahead of them. Adal squeezed his sweat-drenched hands along the leg like it was a baseball bat.

“This isn't good!” Arija stated, seeing the fight leave Adal's eyes.

“Don't do that! We got this!” Adal flashed a brave glance at Arija, but they both knew he was just as scared as she was.

The line of mechanical monsters inched forward, screeching and flapping their wings.

Arija swallowed the lump in her throat and tried to concentrate on finding the insects' weak spot.

One creature stepped forward from the line, causing the rest of the creatures to stop. An eerie ticking sounded as it rattled its large fangs and stretched its wings. The group lowered their heads in respect for their alpha and then a chorus of screeches and wails forced Arija and Adal to drop their weapons and cover their ears.

A gust of wind shot over Arija's head as something flew at her, and she instinctively dropped to her knees. She fumbled, reaching for her makeshift weapon. As she wrapped her shaking hands around it, she pushed herself to her feet, swinging the leg from side to side like she was swatting at a fly.

Catching a glimpse of something, Arija stopped and turned to face the line of mechanical insects. Cog stood in the space between her and the creatures. He kept his focus on the mechanical bugs, not even bothering to glance over his shoulder.

The wings from his pack retracted, tucking themselves neatly into his bag. Arija suddenly wished she'd known she could do that instead of destroying the only thing that could have prevented this situation.

Cog carefully took off his newsboy hat and placed it in a side compartment of his pack. Arija nudged Adal and motioned at a small pipe in Cog's right hand. It couldn't have been any larger than the severed legs they had. Arija scrunched her brow in concern as they walked up to stand next to Cog. At least now they had a third person to fight with.

"This isn't your fight, Topsiders. Please step back and allow me the opportunity." Cog's words were cold, like a teacher reminding a pupil of their place.

Adal shrugged and took a step back, but Arija scrunched her face and shook her head.

"I meant what I said," Cog insisted, as if reading her mind.

Arija's shoulders sank and she let out a defeated huff.

Adal dropped his weapon and put his hands out in front of him, palms up. "Have at it, boss. They're all yours." Adal walked back over to the edge of the platform, leaving a confused Arija still holding on to her weapon.

Cog waited, giving Arija the chance to leave before he extended his arm outward. He twisted his hand on the small pipe and, with a sharp ping, the pipe extended, nearly tripling in length. He lowered his arm and poised the staff behind his shoulder, taking two steps toward the first creature.

"You do not want this fight. I recommend that you leave," Cog said, glaring at his foe.

The six remaining in line shifted in their positions, as though they were considering his commands.

Arija didn't know if Cog was talking to the monsters or to her, but she took a few steps back anyway. She watched as the creatures reacted to Cog's words, seeming to understand them, and she wondered if they had understood everything she and Adal said too.

Cog took another step toward the lead monster. It followed him with its eyes, but didn't back away. Cog spun his staff with

such force that the weapon seemed to bend in the air, its structure growing blurry. He pointed the tip at the face of the bug and paused, giving another warning.

The mechanical insect shrieked and leaped at Cog. He anticipated the attack and ducked out of the way with perfect timing.

The creature took a step toward Arija who now felt foolish holding onto the severed leg. She dropped the leg and backed toward Adal.

The creature looked at them in confusion for a moment, as though trying to decide which of them looked more delicious. Then Cog again appeared between them and the insect.

Again, it lunged at him, but Cog slammed the edge of the weapon under the creature's head and sent it tumbling back toward the rest of the swarm.

The line of creatures all jumped back as their leader landed with a loud thud and slid toward them.

This time, Cog did not wait for a response. Before the animal could maneuver its way onto its feet, Cog landed on its stomach, driving his weapon through its torso and puncturing the platform beneath it.

The creature cried out, the sound like a machine powering down. It shuddered, then became deathly still.

The rest of the group roared in rage and flapped their giant wings, thumping their long legs like they sought revenge.

Arija wrapped her long fingers around Adal's, too afraid to take her eyes off the giant insects, but needing to know he was there.

Cog jumped off the dead mechanical beetle, keeping his weapon pointed toward the swarm. The remaining insects seemed hesitant to attack. A few gnashed their teeth and bared their fangs. Others swiped their long legs at Cog.

Cog shrugged his shoulders like he was annoyed that the creatures ruined his day. Then he ran at the group, swinging his weapon from side to side. He jumped higher than Arija imagined possible and buried his weapon in one creature's eye. Then he immediately drove the other end through the bottom of another's

head. The two creatures toppled to the platform, twitching and writhing for a moment before falling still.

Arija and Adal watched as the remaining three insects charged at Cog. Just as the first two approached him from either side, he twirled his weapon. Cog stabbed one end into the chest of one of the creatures. Pulling the staff out, he stabbed the other end into the chest of the second.

Arija had never seen the polite, quiet robot look so vicious. She turned a shocked look toward Adal, who was pumping his fist in the air and ducking his head like he was directing Cog in the fight.

The last creature stared Cog down for a few seconds before thinking better of it and flying away.

“I am so sorry for that! Really, I am. These things would have made short work of you and I had to act in accordance.” Cog’s stone-cold face came back to life as he approached Adal and Arija, retracting his weapon back into its small, tube form. Cog clicked the tool into a sheath that ran along his lower back, then brought his attention back to Adal and Arija. “They didn't hurt you, did they?”

“No ... I’m fine.” Adal coughed, straightening up and casting an embarrassed glance at Cog’s weapon. “I need to get me one of those.”

“What were those things?” Arija asked, stepping around Cog and slowly walking toward the lifeless pile of machines. One twitched with a final death rattle and both Arija and Adal jumped.

Cog looked at the fallen machines and sighed. “In the Machine, we all have our purposes. These creatures are known as the Kleinmasch.”

“The Klein what?” Adal interrupted. “I prefer besquito, easier to say.”

Arija made a face like she’d just smelled something awful as she turned her head to stare at Adal.

“Kleinmasch,” Cog continued, not even bothering to ask Adal what a besquito was. “They are a breed of Dweller that feasts on others. They live in the darkest parts of the Machine. Often, they reside in areas that only Webley would dare go.”

“Why would Webley make something like this?” Arija asked, intrigued by what their purpose could be.

“These things were not made by Webley ...” Cog trailed off, looking away from his companions, toward the dead machines.

“Then who made them?” Arija caught Cog’s eye before scrunching her face and turning back to the pile of dead machines.

Cog examined the twisted pile of lifeless scrap. He sighed, as if deciding how to reply. “We have to go. The Dwellers in these parts aren't the friendliest to visitors. Besides, surely, Webley, will be wondering what is keeping us. Are you two well enough to fly?” Cog asked, quickly changing the subject and walking over to Adal.

“I, uh, guess we’re fine.” Adal turned a confused look to Arija, who was still examining the Kleinmasch from a distance.

Something had piqued her interest. It could have just been an overactive imagination, but she could have sworn she saw someone watching them. The hair on the back of her neck stood on end, increasing her suspicions.

“What about our wings? Both sets were destroyed,” Arija finally said as she turned her attention back to the group.

“That isn't a worry. My wings are calibrated for extra weight. Often, I leave on errands that require the ability to move with extra mass. Do you think the two of you can hold on?”

Arija looked at Adal. “Are you sure this is the best way?” she asked.

“I mean, I don't really feel like almost dying a third time today,” Adal chimed in.

“I could leave the two of you here alone and fly back to collect you each another set of wings, if you would prefer.” Cog arched a single metallic eyebrow.

“Nope. We’ll hold on,” Adal answered for the both of them.

Arija glared at Cog like she was waiting for him to explode. Cog shot a glance to Arija, and they locked eyes in a wicked battle of wits before Cog smiled and pulled a handful of extra straps from his pack.

As Arija strapped herself to Cog, she gave a fleeting glance toward the Kleinmasch, and the shadowed area behind it, where

she'd seen the eyes. Arija knew Cog had seen them too, but he'd kept quiet, and so would she until she could figure out why.

The group finished preparing themselves for flight and, with more grace than Arija could have imagined, they jetted into the air, shooting past their hidden admirer. As the platform grew distant, Arija thought about the eyes she'd seen. These were not the blue of the Kleinmasch, these were a pale green and much smaller than the Kleinmasch's had been. She instinctively reached for the bag still clinging to her hip. She wanted to draw the eyes before she forgot them.

Just as the platform was almost out of view, Arija thought she saw a figure cloaked in black jump from the platform and fall into the never-ending machine.

## 21 | The Roost



Fausto's long fall halted as he grasped a passing beam. Using his momentum to swing himself, he launched into the air and grabbed another beam. Sliding from it to the one below, Fausto made his way deep into the pits of the World Machine. The master would cherish the news his loyal servant carried. Fausto brought good news to the master. The excitement and the anticipation of a big reward caused his cold mechanical heart to flutter.

These parts of the Machine were vastly different from those toward the light. The closer you got to Webley, the brighter and warmer everything became. But Fausto knew how dark and cold the Machine could really be. He let his mind wander back to when he frequented the bright parts of the Machine as he flung himself from one beam to the next like a mechanical Quasimodo.

The warm orange and yellow hue faded to a mixture of greens, blues, and purples as the polished surfaces transformed into wet, rusted, and neglected beams. Webley had forgotten about this part of the Machine long ago. No, not forgotten, abandoned. Webley had failed the Kleinmasch, caring only about the Dwellers that obeyed his every word. Well, Fausto was a free-thinking Dweller. Fausto was meant to be a leader, and soon they would see it. They would all see it.

After a time, strands of wire began to appear. Fausto was getting close. It wasn't uncommon to find stray wire strands woven between platforms, left by the spiders that often hid in the shadows. The further into the machine Fausto traveled, the more strands he expected to see. Fausto grasped a beam and swung



himself, maneuvering around the web-like structure. A wicked smile creased his face as he saw his home in the distance.

Fausto scoffed as he thought about the way Cog had described the Kleinmasch as Dwellers. The Kleinmasch were nothing like the Dwellers. They were far superior, vastly more intricate and a great deal more advanced than any Dweller could ever hope to be.

Dozens of Baeg scuttled about the large webs as Fausto stopped descending and stood on a beam, looking out over his home. He extended one long, thin hand and slid it between the wire strands, letting the Baeg crawl over his fingers. Fausto had always appreciated the Baeg. Though their spider-like bodies could fit in the palm of his hand, they could strip prey of every nut and bolt in moments, if they had a large-enough horde. Their ability to repair their larger brethren, the Feithidi, also made them extremely useful for building an army. It was a shame there weren't any Baeg on the platform earlier. They would have been able to repair the Feithidi that attacked Cog and the Topsiders, and make the fight that much more interesting.

Fausto watched as the leather-covered spider jumped from his hand back to its web. The Baeg were the only Kleinmasch made using leather before the master decided it wasn't worth the extra time.

A rumble came from somewhere overhead as a mass of creatures flew by. Somewhere deep in this web, one of the Kleinmasch made its home. Judging by the look, this was the lair of several Feithidi.

They were out, probably hunting for the rest of the collective. Their tank-like shells were hollow, so they could carry smaller prey back to their webs. The Feithidi's long, dangling legs were useless when it came to jumping, but their wings gave them the advantage of flight. Unfortunately, the Feithidi were made when the master was still learning his craft and their wings were not big enough to carry their hefty bodies, leaving them only able to skim short distances. Fausto jumped down from the beam, grabbed a wire strand, and swung around a corner into a long, dark tunnel.

Lost in his thoughts about the intricacies of the webs, Fausto

made his way down the tunnel and through the opening at the other end. He looked out over a city full of Kleinmasch, the place he called home, the Roost.

Fausto's eyes danced over the structure before him. Parts of the World Machine had been taken over by the Kleinmasch after the Great Divide. Before the Divide, the Kleinmasch were slaves to Webley, always following *his* rule, never able to think on their own. Then the master rose, and life improved.

Fausto looked over a large furnace. The fire had long since cooled, quenched when they followed the master and made it their home.

As he walked through a large set of poles, a small spike fell to the ground ahead of his feet. Casting his eyes upward, Fausto saw he was standing directly under one of the many Cead that guarded the entrance to the city.

He never really understood the usefulness of the Cead. Just like most of the other Kleinmasch in the city, their spider-like bodies made it easy to climb and jump from beam to beam. Their long legs projected them hundreds of feet into the air, but their bodies were small and orb-like. Their unintimidating statures made them a strange and weak choice to guard the doors. If it hadn't been for the fact that they were able to spit these spikes in rapid succession, Fausto would have thought them completely useless. But the master had a soft spot for his first creations, so there they were, guarding the entrance with their tiny spikes.

The city was bustling, as it always was. There was scarcely a time during which droves of Kleinmasch were not scuttling about, feasting on their prey, crafting webs and structures, even tearing down the structures of others to make their own. Further into the Roost, the structures became more ornate and organized. The insignia of the master sprawled wide as his intricate web-work stretched across the walkways.

The main entrance to the master's throne chamber was guarded by the brutes of the species—the Umar. They were gigantic, spider-like creations that struck fear into all the other Kleinmasch with their tendency to eat anything, including their own kind. Every aspect of these guardians was oversized and

powerful. Each of their eight legs was wider than Fausto and twice as long. Their clunky, round bodies were the size of ten Feithidi. The Umar surely would have been terrifying, if they weren't dumb as a bag of bolts. Their only purpose was to defend the master, tearing into anything he deemed a threat with their long, pointed fangs.

The two Umar on guard at the time groaned in deafening tandem as they twisted their bodies to examine the visitor. As they realized it was just Fausto coming home, they snapped back to attention and allowed him to pass. Though the Umar could easily crush Fausto with one stupidly placed foot, they knew not to mess with him. It would be a deadly mistake.

The royal nest reminded Fausto of a macabre mixture of a mortuary and a laboratory. The walls were lined with Breeders—Dwellers caught over the years and attached to larger machines. The master used the Breeders' internal mechanics to power the pump-like machines that produced small Kleinmasch and pushed spare parts into the nurseries behind them. If there was one fate Fausto would never wish upon himself, it was becoming a Breeder.

The Breeders were completely conscious and aware of the agony that befell them, but they were paralyzed and, thus, powerless to do anything about it.

Fausto would almost have felt bad for the Breeders, if it weren't for the fact that they were dirty, nasty Dwellers, and their torture was for the greater good.

One day, all of this would be his. One day, he knew the master would realize just how good Fausto was and give him his own kingdom to rule.

At the end of the chamber, the master of all Kleinmasch sat on his throne, a living, turning creation made of Dwellers, Kleinmasch, and other odd creatures from long ago. The pieces of the throne moved and twisted, their mechanical parts still clinging to life. The master was speaking with several Cead, his eyebrows tilted and a frown on his lips. Likely, the useless creatures had taken their attention away from the gates to feast again. This would either result in their death, or the loss of

rations. Fausto silently hoped death would win out.

As the master set his eyes on Fausto, he raised one arm and waved the Cead away. Looked like they would be going the next week without food. If you asked some creatures in the Roost, that was a fate worse than death.

As the Cead shambled their way past Fausto, he approached the throne and knelt in front of it.

The master was vastly different from any of his creations. He held the same humanoid body-type as Fausto, with arms, legs, hands, and feet. He wore black leather garments fastened around his body by silver buckles and buttons holding the numerous straps and flaps together. His patchwork robes were made by the Baeg and were some of the most intricate designs Fausto had ever seen. His skin was also different from all other creatures. Rather than the typical bronze or copper colorations, the master's skin was high-polished silver. This was the sign that the master was special. He was the chosen one, the one who would become the new ruler to the Dwellers of the World Machine and bring the Kleinmasch out of oppression.

From his back protruded eight long, thin legs that carried the master to any location faster than any of the other Kleinmasch could move. The master rarely used his own legs, relying primarily on his arachnid appendages. Fausto brought his eyes up to meet the master's. He was currently in his natural state, but the master had altered his mechanics so he could attach the body of any creature to himself and become them. This gave the master infinite power.

"Ah, Fausto, welcome home. Been having fun away from the city, playing in the Machine?" The master's voice was calm, but held the sharp edge of a knife, able to cut even as he spoke of love. The master lifted himself into the air and sat upon his throne.

"I come with news, Pajak. Something that will interest you very much, in fact." No other creature in the Roost was permitted to refer to the master by his name. Only Fausto had that ability because Fausto was the master's favorite.

Pajak considered himself a Creator and, with his ability to

make and take life, he demanded to be treated like the god he knew he was.

“Ah, news. Always something I greatly anticipate. You have the remarkable ability to impress me with the facts you discover on your outings.”

Fausto winced at the way Pajak emphasized the word *outings*. He always thought Pajak hated him leaving because he worried about him reverting to old ways or, maybe, because he missed him.

“I was watching a group of Feithidi collect food, when I saw them come across a particularly interesting type of prey,” Fausto began, pausing to weigh Pajak’s interest on the subject.

“Oh? What type of prey might that be? Has *he* been making more annoyances we can feast upon?” Pajak laughed as he brought his attention to a twitching eye protruding from a Dweller’s skull stuck to the arm of his throne. Pajak lazily flicked the Dweller until the spasm stopped and then gave a deep yawn, as if this was the most uninteresting thing he had heard in his life.

“No, I highly doubt *he* had anything to do with these ones. As I watched the Feithidi corner their prey, I realized they were Topsiders.” Fausto let a proud smile cross his cold face as the words effortlessly slipped through his lips.

Pajak drove the tip of his finger into the section of skull he had been toying with. The eyes twitched once more before slowly closing. He looked pensively at the lifeless part of his throne. Pajak’s face turned down, like a child who had broken his favorite toy, but Fausto knew it wouldn’t last. They would bring him a new Dweller to replace the dead part of his throne by the end of the day.

“You are mistaken,” Pajak said coldly, still not looking up at Fausto.

“I assure you, I am not. I saw them myself and close enough to nearly hear their breath. Two Topsiders, a man and woman, and they were with Cog. In fact, had it not been for his wretched meddling, you would have a human head to replace this broken Dweller.” Fausto stepped closer to Pajak, idly gesturing toward the

motionless skull. Unlike the others, Fausto wasn't scared of the master. Pajak needed Fausto to bring him information about Webley, and Fausto liked to think maybe the master loved him, if only just a little.

"You're saying there are Topsiders in the Machine?" snarled Pajak, finally looking at Fausto and sitting back in his throne.

"I have witnessed them. Cog destroyed several of our brethren, while saving the Topsiders."

Pajak twisted in his seat, fuming at the mention of Cog. "You mean to tell me there are not only Topsiders in the Machine, but they are with Cog and most certainly *him*, and they managed to kill my Feithidi?" Pajak rose from his seat and made his way over to Fausto, lowering himself so their eyes were level.

"Yes. I have seen it myself. These Topsiders are different from what we have learned of them. These ones are strong, smart, and loyal to one another. They think in a way I didn't know was possible. I worry that this may give them an edge that our Kleinmasch don't have."

Pajak rose and walked past Fausto. He traveled slowly down the chamber and moved his gaze from side to side, watching his Breeders. Fausto wasn't certain, whether it was seeing the torture and misery of the Dwellers used as Breeders, or the genius of his ingenuity, but Pajak often paced the chamber, watching the Breeders and thinking.

Pajak stopped as he reached the end of the hall, turning to a particularly sad-looking Breeder. It twitched in discomfort with its head hung low, looking at the floor. Pajak walked over to the creature and drew one of his long fingers across the top of its head. It shuddered and twitched at the contact, causing a wide smile to spread across Pajak's face.

"The presence of these Topsiders intrigues me. I want them, Fausto. You will bring them to me. I have so many things to learn from them. Bring me these creatures... alive, Fausto, do you understand me?" Pajak pushed the head of the breeder to the side letting it bounce in place before walking back toward Fausto and pressing his hand against his shoulder. Fausto glared into Pajak's eyes, nodding in obedience.

“What sorts of things might you have in mind for the Topsiders?” Fausto had known Pajak for a long time. He knew if Pajak wanted the Topsiders, he had something specific in mind for their use. Fausto leaned in and allowed a long, thin grin to etch itself across his face.

“My old friend, I have wonders planned for them,” Pajak laughed, releasing Fausto and making his way back to his throne. “As you know, I have long had the ability to draft and create many of the Kleinmasch in my image. I toil with their forces and structures and have given life to the lifeless matter I draw from the Machine.” Pajak stopped just in front of his throne, turning with one pointed finger raised. “However, I am tired of them. I want something more. I want to know the secrets of the Topsiders. I want to create something that *he* never could. I will learn their secrets, even if it’s from the pieces and parts I rip from them with my bare hands. Again, I want them alive, first and foremost ...If later I must kill, torture, or dismember them... so be it.”

Pajak spoke like a true Creator. Fausto knew Pajak should be the ruler of the Dwellers, not Webley. This drive to do anything necessary to save their people and put them in power was the reason Fausto followed Pajak into the depths of the Machine. There was so much power to be had, what was the purpose of one person holding it all?

“They will be yours soon, Pajak. I will see to this personally.” Fausto lowered to one knee and bowed. These Topsiders might just be the thing his master needed to become the true Creator and, when that happened, Pajak would keep Fausto by his side. They would be co-Creators and would both rule over the World Machine.

“Splendid. See that it’s done, Fausto. Be sure to take some Kleinmasch with you.”

Fausto rose and nodded in agreement.

“Would you like the acquisition quiet?” Fausto asked, bouncing on the balls of his feet and hoping for the right answer.

“I don’t care how, I just want it done,” Pajak responded in a growl.

Fausto smiled. That was the answer he wanted.



## 22 | Into Aparat



Since Adal and Arija left the platform, time had disappeared, and Arija found herself lost in thought as they flew with Cog. Despite swooping past structures and mechanical parts, it was nearly impossible for her to appreciate the sights. So she resigned herself to mentally etching everything she'd seen so far into her memory.

It had taken her some time to get used to the flight. She and Adal were hanging below Cog from straps protruding from his pack, and the sway of the trip caused her stomach to flip and the coffee she'd had that morning to make a sour reappearance in her throat.

She still clutched Adal's hand. Her stomach had calmed down, and now she just stared at the blurred metallic town, thinking about everything that had happened. She stole a glance at Adal, who had been staring at her, but he shot his eyes away when she looked. Why wouldn't he admit that he had a thing for her? His face flushed and she could feel his heart jump whenever she touched him. What was wrong with her that he couldn't admit it?

Cog jerked up so quickly that he pulled Arija from her thoughts and she looked up to see what was happening. She tightened her stomach in an attempt to control the speed at which Cog flew. The sudden rush of air caused Arija's hair to whip around, smacking her in the face from all angles and she let go of Adal's hand to try to wrangle it.

Arija's stomach lodged in her throat as Cog made a final

swoop, leveled them out and flew directly at a large wall. The wall seemed to cover the entire Machine, stretching as far as she could see in every direction.

Along the infinite walls, giant gears slowly turned. Creatures flew in a “V” formation along its length. Arija first thought they were birds until they drew closer, and Adal pointed out that their wings looked similar to the ones attached to Cog’s pack. Arija mouthed the word, “Dwellers?” and Adal responded with a shrug. He still looked a little pale, but it seemed like he was keeping it together. All this flying was sure to cure his fear.

Banking sharply to the side, Cog drifted into alignment with another platform. Along the sides of the runway, several assorted aircraft floated with gangways extended. Mixed with the aircraft were several ships sitting on metal rails. There must have been hundreds of Dwellers loading and unloading an assortment of packages, crates, and machinery.

“This place looks like a port or shipyard!” Adal shouted over the wind. “What is this place?” He looked up at Cog, who either didn’t bother to answer or couldn’t hear the question.

“Be ready. Here we go!” Cog shouted but, before Adal or Arija could ask what he was talking about, Cog plummeted toward the docks. Adal and Arija hung in the air for a few seconds before their straps pulled taut and they fell upside down after Cog.

Adal screamed at the top of his lungs, but Arija’s scream got stuck in her throat. She closed her eyes, frozen by sheer terror. After a few minutes, Arija’s stomach lurched into her throat again as she slowed and then, with a jerk, dropped right side up again. She cracked open one eye and realized that Cog was slowing as they approached the platform.

With the platform so close they could almost touch the metallic surface, Arija slammed her eyes closed in anticipation of an unknown landing.

Cog pulled tightly on their straps. With a final whoosh of air, a gentle thump ended their terrifying descent. Arija opened her eyes to see Adal slowly crack one eye. After seeing they were safely on the ground, a wave of embarrassment washed over his face.

“Hey, don’t play it like that! I know you were scared too!” he

barked at Arija, who was smirking as she pulled her fingers through her tangled hair.

Cog tugged at the straps, and the two dropped to the ground with an abrupt 'thud.'

"You scream more like a girl than I do," she mumbled.

Adal shot a look at her, and she laughed, pushing his shoulder.

"Welcome to the main entrance of Aparat, our capital city!" Cog announced enthusiastically. For a moment, Arija had forgotten where they were as she let the relief of finally being on a solid surface wash over her.

All around, Dwellers went about their business. Several unloaded boxes from what Arija could only describe as an old-fashioned steamboat, while others barked orders. A group of four women stood in a circle, talking and laughing. Their Victorian-style ball gowns looked like they were made from the same lightweight leather as Arija's skirt, and each was embroidered with intricate gold and silver designs.

Arija took a few steps toward the group, admiring the perfect curls that protruded from their heads. The woman closest to Arija was holding a thin wire parasol made of black lace, and it took a few moments before she realized the women weren't made completely of metal. All four women had beautiful skin in various shades, but the delicate hand that clasped the parasol was made of bronze.

The women leaned close to each other, whispering, then leaned back and laughed at whatever gossip had been spoken.

A small pack of boys ran toward the women, grabbing their dresses and hiding behind them as several older boys jogged toward the group wielding various pipes and sticks. Arija opened her mouth to warn the group, when the younger boys started to laugh, and the older boys stopped to argue with their mothers. The scene was strikingly similar to normal dockyards Arija had seen at home. At least, if the real world had been stuck in the eighteenth hundreds and made of metal.

Arija noticed Adal walking absentmindedly through the crowd of Dwellers. The group of women giggled as they glanced at him,

and he gave them a small wink.

“Even Dweller woman can’t handle how sexy I am.” Adal ran his fingers over his eyebrows as he looked back at Cog.

“Those are not Dwellers. Well, they *are* Dwellers but, here, they are called Toppers. They are the wealthier group of Dwellers who can afford to have Adhesion Surgery. They got the name Topper because they want to look like you. Like the Topsiders.” Cog watched the confused look on Adal’s face.

“The fuck?” Arija chimed in as she eyed Cog suspiciously. “Are you trying to tell me these people want my skin as an aesthetic? That’s messed up on so many levels, Cog.”

“Indeed, it is, my dear girl. The Toppers are elitist snobs, and Webley and I do not condone anything that happens on the black market. Even though Webley created all the Dwellers, once he gave them the ability to think on their own, he couldn’t control them. Years ago, when they saw their first Topsider, many Dwellers became smitten and eventually jealous that you have the ability to go Topside and they do not. Someone, I don’t recall who, discovered that they could stretch the pineapple leather over a Dweller’s face to mimic human skin. You will usually see Toppers with partial Adhesion because we need the leather for more important things, and the surgery is very costly. But don’t worry, they won’t hurt you. They simply admire you for what you have and they don’t.”

“Other people have been down here before? What happened to them? Are they still here?” Arija couldn’t help the string of questions that spewed out of her mouth.

“That’s a long story for another time,” Cog said as he stared into the crowd.

Arija nibbled on her bottom lip as she watched Cog, guilt warming her face. Cog had been nothing but nice to them. He’d saved them from the Kleinmasch and opened his home to them. He wasn’t here to hurt her. If he’d wanted that, he could have done it while they slept. Besides the leathery skin that stretched across the Toppers faces was obviously not human.

Arija turned her attention back to the bustling dock as one woman called a male Dweller over to her. The gold-colored Dweller

put down the crate he'd been lugging and wiped his greasy hands on his pants. He walked over to the Topper woman, and she leaned in and whispered something in his ear, causing a burst of giggles from her Topper friends. The man nodded, took something from her hand, then went back to work on the airship he had been loading.

Arija's brow scrunched as she watched the strange transaction. There was definitely more to this world than Arija had originally thought. She took a few steps toward the group and tried to get a closer look.

## 23 | A World of Creation and Science



Adal stepped farther onto the dock, watching the workers go about their business in awe, as if loading and unloading crates was the most interesting thing he'd seen in his life. The steamboat appeared to be sitting on a wide metal beam, like the train they had taken when they first arrived. A loud grinding noise sounded, followed by a shout of, "Look out!" Adal had just enough time to move when a Dweller in a basket flew over his head on one of the many wires that stretched the length of the dock. He stumbled backward, hitting something hard with his back.

"Oh, my bad ..." Adal began as he turned, only to be greeted by a large Dweller that looked similar to Webley, but with copper skin and without the beard to match. Adal immediately backed away as the large man peered down at him.

"Careful, Topsider! Trying to work here!" he bellowed. The man threw a large crate onto a pallet, and it was loaded by a crane onto one of the steamboats.

Adal apologized profusely, backing away. Cog's hand appeared on his shoulder and slowly turned him around.

"Careful, Adal. Folks here get testy this time of day. This is when the bulk of the shipments go out to the citizens in the rest of the Machine. Stick close. Webley will be waiting for us at the other end."

"Yeah. Right. I can handle that," Adal responded, trying to sound reassuring. This place just kept getting weirder and weirder. Every time Adal thought he'd figured it out, something

else threw him for a loop.

The two turned to look for Arija, only to find her sitting on a crate with her notebook in hand. She moved her pencil fervently back and forth, desperate to capture every bit of what she'd seen.

Adal smiled. Arija had a way about her when she drew. She threw herself into her sketches and left the rest of the world behind. Adal watched as she nibbled on her bottom lip, like she usually did when she got lost in her drawings. She tapped the charcoal on the tip of her chin, leaving a black spot in its wake, then pushed her hair out of her face and dove back into her masterpiece. Adal suddenly wished he could draw so he could capture how beautiful she was at that moment.

"Hey, Monet! Let's roll! We're moving out!" he shouted as he shook the lazy expression off his face.

Arija looked up from her notebook and frowned, then put her nose firmly back into the sketch. After a few more lines, she quickly closed the book and slid it back into her satchel. Arija hopped from her seat and ran over to Adal and Cog.

As she approached, she opened her mouth to speak, but Adal pulled her to him. He couldn't help it. He knew he shouldn't mess with her like this, but he needed to be close to her.

Arija was shocked into silence, and she let her rigid muscles go slack as Adal reached his thumb up to her face and wiped the black smudge from her chin.

The surrounding bustle died away, and the only thing Adal could hear was his heart furiously pounding in his chest. After a moment, he cleared his throat and let Arija go.

Arija's eyes roamed Adal's face for a moment before she cleared her throat. "I can't believe this place! It's like a scene right out of a science fiction book!" Excitement oozed from every word Arija spoke.

"You aren't kidding. This place is insane!" Adal agreed, turning his attention back to Cog.

The three made their way through the dense crowd. As they neared what looked to be giant doors built into the walls that surrounded Aparat, something took over Adal's thoughts.

"Cog, why aren't these people weirded out by us being here? I

mean, they act like we aren't anything special or strange. What's that all about?" Adal accidentally bumped another Dweller. Again, he responded with apologies, but it was near impossible not to run into people on the crowded dock.

Cog paused before he cleared his throat and answered, "This is a world of creation and science. There's little that will surprise the Dwellers. Besides, as I touched on before, you aren't the first Topsiders they've seen. Just like you humans, the gossip around here travels like an electric current through a bolt."

This didn't answer Adal's question but, as long as the Dwellers weren't coming after him with pitchforks, he could handle it.

"Ere ye are!" bellowed a familiar voice over the commotion. Webley stood several yards ahead of them and waved his tree-trunk of an arm excitedly. "What took ye so long! Not like Cog te' lose a race!"

Adal looked at Cog expectantly.

"Can I have a moment with him?" Cog asked.

"Sure!" Arija pulled Adal's arm, leading him a few feet away.

"Take your time," Adal added.

Cog took Webley off to the side to explain what had happened. Adal was immediately lost in his surroundings once more. Two more Dwellers flew overhead on their carts, making Arija and Adal duck, though they were actually several feet below them.

"This place is a trip!" Adal proclaimed, turning in a circle.

"Yeah, no kidding. I can't believe what I'm seeing. I don't think I ever want to go home!" Arija laughed, nudging Adal and pointing at a Dweller the size of a small house. The creature looked like an armored tank turned on its side with arms and legs. Its large hands were surrounded by over a dozen pipe-like barrels. His chest bore the seal of the World Machine accompanied by a polished badge. The ground shook as he passed.

"What is that thing?" Arija asked, sounding amazed.

"I think it's like their version of a cop down here. You see the hardware on his hands? What would they need guns like



that for?” Adal asked, pointing at the cannon-like appendages.

“I don’t know. Well, honestly, I don’t want to know. Look at his head!” she said, pointing at the comically small head atop the mechanical man.

Adal then motioned to what appeared to be a hatch on its back. “I think he’s wearing that thing.” Adal examined what he believed to be a latch that ran the length of its side. “Sweet! Wonder what I need to do to catch a ride in one!”

Arija scoffed and shook her head. “Keep dreaming! I wouldn’t let you run around in that thing,” she shot back, nudging him with her elbow.

“Adal, do you trust Cog?” Arija asked hesitantly.

“What do you mean?” Adal asked, knitting his brow and turning to look her in the eye.

“Do you get the feeling he’s ... I don’t know ...Maybe hiding something from us?”

Adal arched an eyebrow but, before he could open his mouth to respond, Cog and Webley walked up. Webley’s expression of joy and warmth was replaced with a solemn glare and saddened frown.

“Cog tells me that ye came into some trouble. Sorry ‘bout tha’. The World Machine is an amazing place, but some in it would see nothin’ but destruction. Those creatures are known in these parts as the Kleinmasch. They are a disturbed breed of Dweller that lives in the depths of the Machine. Those particular Kleinmasch are called the Feithidi. Don’ ye worry. They don’t come up to these parts much.” Webley’s grave expression loosened, and he immediately returned to his warm, chipper self.

“Nough ‘bout tha’! Let’s get ye two into the city. Should prove to be an amazin’ day!” Webley chuckled and threw his arms around Adal and Arija, pulling them close and squeezing them tightly. He smelled of musk and smoke, yet there were sweet tones under it all. Adal couldn’t help but think of his grandfather.

“Shall we show them anything in particular?” Cog asked.

“Nah! I think they prolly want to see a bit of it all.” Webley squeezed Adal and Arija again.

As they approached the giant doorway to the city, several

more of the sentries appeared along the gates. They stood motionless, like the statues they resembled, but Adal knew they were alive.

One guard stepped forward and approached the group. His armor was different from the others. Rather than riveted bronze armor, his was made of polished brass, covered with ornate filigree and etched designs. Adal noticed his badge was adorned with several more designs. He halted before the group, a stern gaze on his face.

“Morning, Webley. Nice to see you today. I see you have brought some Topsiders with you.” The guard glared at Adal and Arijia for a moment, scrutinizing them.

Adal met his gaze and fired a stern expression right back.

A Cheshire grin erupted across the man’s face, and he roared with laughter. Webley and Cog both followed suit.

“Good morning, Captain Silny! How are you today?” Cog asked, extending his hand for a shake.

“All’s well ‘ere?” Webley asked, slapping the captain on his shoulder and rocking him sideways.

The captain only laughed harder. “Ah, there isn’t ever anything interesting happening. Things are the same as usual. Kids stealing from carts, bootleggers trying to peddle in the city, my guards want more recreation time. If these are the worst of my problems, I ain’t gonna complain. Showing your guests the city today, eh?”

“Indeed, we are! They already had a show today. Kleinmasch herd huntin’ in the lower levels gave ‘em what-for! Nothin’ my friend ‘ere couldn’t handle.” Webley patted Cog on the back like a proud father.

“Just a few small ones flying around. We came across them chasing some birds. Nothing to worry about.” Cog added.

“Ah! Those things need to watch themselves! I’m half-tempted to dispatch a team into some of the smaller nests and start a campaign on them. Keep them in line and remind them of their place,” scorned the captain, his face now housing a genuine glare.

“Well, I think the ones I dealt with won’t be a problem any longer.” Cog smiled with a hint of sadness.

“I’m sure. Be that as it may, they have been a nuisance of late. Some of them have even been trying to raid the ships as they come and go. Hence, why I have so many of my men out here during the day. Someone needs to put those filthy bastards back in their place,” the surly captain ranted, shaking his well-armored fist.

“Well, I appreciate the service ye provide the citizens, Captain!” Webley interjected, patting him on the shoulder to calm him down.

Captain Silny smiled at Webley and wished them all a fine day. Scooping Adal and Arija once more into his arms, Webley made his way to the base of the giant door.

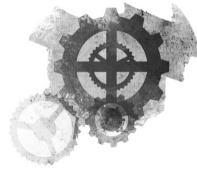
“Open the gates!” Captain Silny called from behind them.

One of the guards saluted and walked to the center of the wall. From what Adal could see, the guard inserted his giant fist into a hole, turning it clockwise, like a key. A low rumble started and several of the gargantuan gears on the door’s face began to turn slowly. As they cranked in formation, a crease emerged in the door. This grew into a long split as the doors worked their way open.

“Man, you guys don’t play around with this stuff, do you?” Adal asked as he peered past the opening. The doors did not lead to a city. Rather, the doors opened to yet another large corridor. At the opposite end were another set of giant doors. “It’s like this place just doesn’t stop!”

Webley looked down to respond, but a screeching sound came from behind the group.

## 24 | The Adal I Know



Another vicious screech sounded above the crowd. Shadows flew overhead so quickly that, by the time Arija and Adal looked up, whatever made the shadows was gone. Webley and Cog turned, scanning the dock from left to right. All the workers on the dock stood frozen, like part of a movie that had been paused.

“What the hell is going on?” Adal asked, a tight sensation returning to his stomach.

“I have no idea. Look at all of them.” Arija took a step toward one of the patrons frozen in place, when a bundle crashed to the ground ahead of her. Arija fell backward and Adal caught her, rapidly hoisting her to her feet.

“What the f—” Arija’s words were cut off by several more bundles falling to the ground around them. Arija and Adal took several slow steps toward one of the piles.

Adal’s heart sank. The tattered piles were the shredded remains of arms, legs, a torso, and wings. The shiny surface of the severed parts glinted in the simulated sun. Then chaos broke out.

Screaming erupted around them as Dwellers fled from the fallen guards. These had to have been the same aerial sentries they’d seen when they approached while strapped to Cog. Adal absentmindedly picked up a badge that looked identical to the badges worn by the city guards.

“These guys are guards!” Adal shouted as the mob of Dwellers threatened to trample them.

“What did that?” Arija demanded.

The shambling mass surrounding them erupted in more

panic as several Dwellers pointed toward the sky at the end of the dock.

“Gearrtha!” One of the Dwellers near them shouted.

Two dozen winged creatures swept through the air in a swarm like a military formation. They had long, thin wings, two short legs, and sharp, angular faces. They appeared to be a strange mixture of Dweller and praying mantis, complete with a mantis’ long, bladed appendages.

“They did this!” barked Adal, noting their arms and motioning to the mangled guards.

“Everyone, into the city!” bellowed Webley, waving his arms and pointing to the open gates.

Captain Silny and a squadron of his guards appeared at either side of Adal and Arija.

“Get inside! My men will protect you!” Captain Silny commanded.

The mob needed no further instruction. Like a wave, they all turned and ran toward the doorway to the city. Adal and Arija pushed and shoved the metallic bodies of the Dwellers to avoid being trampled as they ran into the corridor. Crashes of thunder erupted as the sentinels aimed their arm-cannons toward the coming assault and fired. The flying attackers expertly maneuvered around the streaks of hot steel that projected from the barrels.

Within moments, the Gearrtha swooped in and landed on the dock. The Dwellers unfortunate enough to still be in the area when they landed were cut down before they even knew what happened. With several perfectly timed slashes and swings, their appendages were severed from their bodies, creating piles of gears and scrap metal all over the dock.

Adal turned to look at Cog, desperate for guidance. Cog shot a knowing glance to Webley, who pursed his lips and gave a curt nod. Cog took out his staff and ran towards the massacre with Webley right behind him.

Captain Silny and his men continued firing their weapons and swinging their massive arms at the creatures overhead. One by one, dozens of Dwellers fell victim to the savageness of the

Gearrtha.

Arija stopped to watch as Dwellers all around her dropped to the ground. She ran over to the body of a flying guard and began to sort through the lifeless mass.

“What are you doing?” Adal shouted over the screams when he realized she was no longer following him. He pushed through the crowd of frantic Dwellers until he was standing only a few feet from the dead soldier.

“Here!” Arija tossed him the belt the guard had been wearing. On it was a holster that held a large revolver. He looked at the heavy piece of metal as if the weapon was completely foreign to him. Then she tossed him another belt that held rows of ammunition. As he looked at the two, she ran to another corpse and looted the same items for herself, immediately donning the equipment.

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me! No way in hell!” Adal shouted, holding out the belts as he realized what Arija wanted him to do.

Arija clipped her belts into place and adjusted them, giving Adal a look of disgust for the first time in her life. “No, *you’re* the one who’s got to be kidding. What’s happened to you, Adal? You used to be this big, tough man with an ego the size of a small city bus. You were somebody that never ran away from anything. Not a fight, not a chance to stand out, not a single opposition. Since your grandfather died, and we came here, you’ve been nothing but a little bitch. That isn’t the Adal I know. The Adal I know would’ve already been looking for a way to get in this fight and kick some ass!” Arija waited for a retort but, when none came, she continued. “Your grandfather is gone, but his spirit isn’t. It led us to this place. Do you think he would have stood frozen in fear while innocent people die? I can guarantee you, he would’ve charged in even before Webley. What are you going to do? Are you going to stay afraid, or are you going to honor your grandfather?”

Adal glared at his feet. Arija was right. He was being a coward, and now people were dying. His grandfather would have been ashamed of him.

Adal wrapped the holster belt around his waist and clipped

the buckle. He then slid the bandolier over his shoulder. “Coward, huh?” Adal said, a grin creeping across his face. The heat from his chest spread to his face and cheeks, and the hair all over his body stood on end.

“I got your ‘coward’ right here!” Adal yanked the weighty revolver free, feeling the weight of the pistol in his hands. It was heavier than he thought it should be, but he’d never held a gun before, so who was he to judge. Adal turned on his heels and looked toward the massacre. He cracked his neck to both sides and rolled his shoulders.

“Watch this!” he yelled over his shoulder before springing toward the fight.

Captain Silny and his men fired at everything that flew. Already, several corpses of the Gearrtha littered the ground around them, but it seemed more had appeared to replace the fallen.

The sight of Webley and Cog battling the Gearrtha was something to behold. It was like a scene from Jekyll and Hyde. Their usually kind and pleasant dispositions now contorted into cold killing machines. One of the Gearrtha dodged Cog’s strike, ducking under the staff and coming up in time to swipe his claw across Cog’s face. The Gearrtha were clearly much better fighters than the clumsy Kleinmasch from earlier. Webley even seemed to struggle as he battled four at a time. As one swiped at his face, Webley ducked and grasped two by their heads before they could react. He crushed their skulls in his palms, dropping them lifeless to the ground in one swift movement.

A shadow moved overhead, and Arija had just enough time to lunge forward and tackle Adal to the floor. A Gearrtha swooped in and swiped its claws at them. Adal rolled forward and aimed his pistol at the creature, firing several shots. The first three went wide, but the fourth shot ripped through the back of the Gearrtha right between its wings. It screeched as it fell from the sky and disappeared over the edge of the dock.

Adal’s heart pounded in his ears. There was no turning back now. He brought the pistol up to his eyes to examine it. He wanted to know how many rounds it held, so he knew when it

was almost empty.

The blued steel revolver had two barrels, one above the other. The rotating cylinder had two sections of chambers, both aligned with their own barrel. Two rounds were missing from the larger, external cylinder and two from the smaller internal cylinder. He gathered it must be alternating shots between the two. Ten rounds for the larger cylinder, six rounds for the internal.

“Sixteen shots! Remember that!” Adal said as he held out his hand and helped Arija up.

“Thanks for the save!”

As they approached the battle, the guards fired their cannons in all directions. With every shot, the air shook around them, and plumes of steam erupted into clouds. Captain Silny barked orders over the din, but Adal couldn't hear what he was saying. Adal and Arija made their way toward Webley and Cog, keeping their heads as low as possible to avoid the swooping blades.

Two Gearrtha landed on either shoulder of a guard, and he batted at them with the weaponized arms of his suit. The creature tore into the armor around his head and yanked him from the suit. One of the creatures held him in the air by his arm, while the second cleaved the appendage from his body. The Dweller guard screamed as he dropped to the floor, a wriggling pile. His mechanical suit crashed limply to the dock, the platform below shaking violently.

The Gearrtha launched into the air and landed next to their fallen prey. Reaching out with his remaining arm, the Dweller tried to crawl away from the insidious Kleinmasch and get to cover. The Gearrtha only watched, relishing in the terror on the Dweller's face as he shouted for help.

“Hey!” Adal and Arija yelled in tandem as they took a step toward the helpless Dweller.

The Gearrtha looked up from their victim, surprise covering their pointed faces as the two friends stood shoulder-to-shoulder. One creature cocked its head to the side and let out a predatory cry. Adal took a fleeting glimpse at the desperate man on the floor and then opened fire on the creatures.





## 25 | The Cliché Evil Twin



Arija was shocked at how accurate the gun was. Its weight and turnkey mechanics did wonders at taming the recoil. She used to go shooting with her dad, but she'd never shot something like this before. She barely felt the explosion from the shot and the plume of smoke from the barrels. When Adal had fired at the first Gearrtha, she thought perhaps he had just been making it look easy; now she questioned how he missed the first three shots.

Arija's shots tore through the face of the Gearrtha that screamed its battle cry. Adal had only fired one shot, but it punched a hole right through the other monster's neck. Arija could tell he'd never shot a gun before; even though the weapon was crazy accurate, he didn't look confident with it and his posture was all wrong, mimicking something from a bad action film.

Arija checked that the Dweller was still alive, then reached down to help him to his feet. She opened her mouth to say something, but closed it again, unable to think of anything that would help. The Dweller looked up at her with fear in his eyes, then ran towards the gate to the city, disappearing into the sea of Dwellers trying to get to safety.

The body of a dead Gearrtha dropped to their feet, causing Arija to jump back. She looked from the corpse to the guard that had just saved their lives and nodded a grateful thanks. He nodded in return and went back to shooting at the creatures

flying overhead.

“Let’s just get to Webley and Cog!” Adal shouted, firing another couple of shots at a Gearrtha attempting to surprise one of the guards.

“All right, just keep moving and try not to get yourself killed!” Arija shouted back as she shot at three passing Gearrtha. The one in the middle screamed as a bullet pierced its stomach and it fell from the sky. She aimed her pistol at the other two, but they flew out of her range before she could get a second shot off.

In the distance, Arija could see Cog still battling with a small group of attackers, his staff spinning so fast she could only tell it was there by the rhythmic movement of his hands.

As the world exploded around Adal and Arija, they ran as cautiously as possible, stopping every several feet to fire at a Gearrtha or avoid colliding with an obstacle. As they got closer to Webley and Cog, Arija got a strange feeling in her stomach. Why was it so easy to pass through the fight? The Gearrtha were everywhere and, yet, they seemed to ignore Adal and Arija. Just as this thought occurred to her, Adal turned, a look of pain erupting across his face, and she froze in terror.

Then he was gone.

A Gearrtha stood where Adal had been, screeching its war cry.

Arija connect a perfect spin kick. She sent the Gearrtha crashing into a wall. She ducked as another one flew at her, then fired a barrage of shots. Each shot hit the Gearrtha square in the chest, and it fell to the ground next to her. Arija reared back her booted foot and kicked the dead creature in the head, almost removing it with the force of her strike.

When she was satisfied the creature wouldn’t get back up she looked around, trying to figure out where Adal had landed. Her heart pounded in her ears and rage warmed her face. If she’d gotten him killed, she’d never forgive herself.

“I was starting to wonder if you were ever going to expel your munitions.” The voice made Arija jump, and she spun around, gun at the ready.

In front of her stood a Dweller man, but something about him was different from the others. He carried himself like he was in

charge, and the chaos on the dock didn't seem to bother him.

"What's wrong with you? You need to get out of here! Those things will kill you!" Arija said, keeping her aim on the strange Dweller.

A cold smile crossed his face and he shook his head. He looked familiar even though Arija hadn't met that many Dwellers. He was clothed head to toe in black leather pressed with straight edges. His hands sat perched on his copper belt, upon which hung two large daggers.

As Arija looked from the weapons back to his face, recognition washed over her. He looked almost exactly like Cog. The only difference between the two was a long, silver scar that ran down the left side of the Dweller's face.

"There isn't much of a reason for me to fear these amazing creatures. You, on the other hand, have no idea how lucky you are," the Dweller said as he let his eyes roam over Arija.

Arija took a small step backward, keeping the pistol trained on him, even though she was out of bullets. The Dweller clicked his pinkies on the pommel of his daggers.

"Look, I don't know who you are, but you need to get out of here!" Arija adjusted the grip on her pistol.

He grinned, looking at the ground by Arija's feet. Arija let her eyes drift down and, when she brought them up again, he was so close that the barrel of her revolver was pressed against his shoulder. A small gasp escaped her lips.

"Topsiders really are as dim as they seem." With another burst of blinding speed, the Cog look-a-like swung his arm, knocking the empty gun from Arija's hands.

Arija brought her leg up and thrust her heel into his stomach forcing him to stumble back a half step.

"Mistake!" the Dweller said as he brought his green eyes up to meet hers. Before Arija could react, he drew his blades and swiped them at her.

Arija stumbled backward just in time to feel a gust of air on her face from the momentum of the passing blades. A thin strand of chestnut hair drifted down, a casualty of the fight. Arija planted a firm foot on the platform, looking down at her severed locks.

“You are coming with me, Topsider! Either you surrender now, and I take you to him, or I cut you into pieces and take him what is left.” The stranger slid one foot behind the other and poised for a lunge.

Arija eyed the blades, trying to reason out what to do. “Screw you! I don’t know who *he* is, but there’s no way I’m coming with you!” Arija clenched her fists so tightly that several of her knuckles cracked under the pressure. If he was here for her, she wasn't going to make it easy. Even if it killed her.

“Really? Well, that’s a shame then, isn't it? I suppose it will have to be in pieces.” The sinister-looking Dweller snickered, lowering his stance.

Arija took a glimpse around for something she could use as a weapon. The empty gun was only a few feet away. If she could get to it, she could use it as a bludgeon.

“Whose house?” Adal shouted as he lunged forward and surprised Arija’s attacker. He kicked Cog’s doppelgänger in the face, sending him sprawling sideways. His knives flew from his hands, clattering to the metallic surface of the platform.

Adal let out a loud grunt as he slammed back to the platform and rolled away. “Oh, hell no...” Adal forced out between gasps.

Arija ran over to Adal and fell to her knees at his side, trying to help him up.

Adal pulled his arms away and shook his head. “I’m all right, kid! Who’s that idiot?” he coughed, trying to regain the wind knocked from his lungs.

Arija grabbed his shoulders and tugged him to his feet. “Quit being stubborn. We need to get away from here. You’re injured!” Arija placed a gentle hand on Adal’s ribs causing him to double over. “Why would you just dropkick a guy? What were you thinking? And what the hell was ‘whose house’? What does that even mean?”

Adal lazily brushed at his pants. “This my house... Hey, it seemed like a good idea at the time. You’re welcome for the save, by the way!” he responded.

“Save? You nearly got yourself killed! I had this one!”

“That’s not how it loo—”

“The second one isn’t so down and out after all. Wonderful. The master will be pleased to have both of you,” the Dweller sneered from only a few feet away. His wicked grin and narrowed eyes brought a sinister nuance to his face. He adjusted his jaw where he’d been kicked. His blades were scattered on the platform between them, and Arija glanced down for a split second before refocusing on his face.

“We aren’t going anywhere with your creepy-smiling ass. Thanks for the offer, but we have better things to do. Like fight these crazy mantis things. So, if you don't mind, step off, or I’ll throw you another beating,” Adal offered as he took a half-step ahead of Arija who yanked at his sleeve.

“What the hell are you doing? If I couldn’t take him, you sure as hell can’t! Not in your condition anyway.” Arija slid her hand down Adal’s side to where his empty holster sat on his hip. “Where’s your gun?” she mumbled out of the side of her mouth.

“I don't know. It went flying when I did. I’m going to make my move. You make yours!” Adal mumbled back, keeping his eyes trained on his opponent. With his little finger, Adal motioned to the two knives on the platform.

“So, what’s the plan, shiny? We gonna do this, or are you going to just stand there and look at me? I mean, I know I’m pretty, but damn,” Adal said, the humor gone from his voice.

The Dweller’s grin faded and he pursed his lips. He closed his robotic hands into fists and lowered his head to his shoulders. “If you think it’s in your best interest, Topsider, please feel free to try your odds. I will greatly enjoy peeling back your skin and seeing what your wet insides look like. When I’m done with you, your mate is next!” he said, flicking his gaze toward Arija.

Arija flinched at the word “mate.” She wasn’t even Adal’s girlfriend, for reasons she didn’t exactly understand, and the word brought a sudden embarrassment to her cheeks.

Adal’s upper lip twitched. Without another word, he lunged. He swung his right arm at the Cog look-a-like, and his fist collided with his face. A loud, metallic clang filled the air, almost covering the crack of small bones. Probably the ones in Adal’s hand.

Adal looked from his throbbing hand back to the metal man, who stood before him with a bored expression. Adal froze as that familiar grin returned.

“Thank you for going first. I wouldn't want this to be over too quickly. My turn?”

Before Adal could react, the Dweller grabbed him by the collar and hoisted him into the air. Adal clawed at the hands around his neck, doing his best to support his own weight. He flailed his legs, trying, and failing, to kick hard enough to be released.

Using this as a distraction, Arija slid across the floor to the knives. Grabbing the weapons, she pushed herself to her feet. The glint of the blades caught the light and Adal's attacker shot a furious look in her direction. He threw Adal, and the two collided just as Arija was preparing to attack, causing her to drop the weapons as she slid across the copper platform.

## 26 | A Lesson In Why You Shouldn't Punch Metal



“Clever, Topsider!” the Dweller said, walking over to his knives. “I guess taking you alive won’t be a possibility. It isn't that I cannot, rather I’m tired of dealing with you and do not wish to face the hassle.” The dark Dweller collected his daggers and rolled them around in his hands. He admired the sleek blades like an artist admiring a finished canvas.

Adal tried to stand, but the pain in his ribs was unbearable. He rolled over, looking at Arija’s unconscious body. He shook her shoulder, watching her head lull from side to side.

“Shall we get this over with then?” The Dweller walked over to Adal, who sat as best he could, covering Arija with his body.

“Coward! Couldn't handle me when I could fight back, could you?” Adal spat.

“Enough talking. After everything you have tried, I wouldn't want your weak words to ruin this moment for me.” The Dweller reached down, grabbed Adal by his shirt, and pulled him upward. He raised the blade in his other hand high into the air in a grand show of power.

Adal tried to fight back but, without a weapon, he couldn’t do anything more than stare death in the eye. He refused to die a coward. Adal grunted as the blade thrust toward his face.

*Clang!*

Adal flinched.

“That’s enough, Fausto. Not going to allow this one, brother!”



Cog pressed his staff against Fausto's wrist, halting the attack. Fausto dropped Adal back to the ground and stepped away, turning his attention to Cog.

"Ah! As usual, terrible timing, brother. I was just going to give my new friend..." Fausto stopped, his shoulders shaking in a silent laugh. "I mean, *our* new friend, a present."

"You need to stand down, Fausto! This isn't going to happen. Not today. Not ever. You can tell Pajak that!" Cog spun his staff around, stepping into a defensive stance.

Fausto twirled his knives and squared off with his brother.

Adal crouched back down beside Arija, but let his eyes bounce back and forth between the two brothers. *How can robots be brothers?* Arija's groan pulled Adal from his thoughts. He brushed the matted locks of hair out of her face, revealing a small bump on her head and a droplet of blood trickling down her face. Adal wiped the blood away with his thumb. He sat down beside her, cradling her head in his lap as he stroked her hair. He glanced up, tuning back into the fight.

"Your problem, brother. You never were much for sharing. Nor is *your* master!" Fausto taunted.

"You're the only one with a master, Fausto. I have a family. One that you walked out on. There's a difference. You never could understand that. Neither could Pajak."

"Enough!" Fausto shouted. "This ends here, Cogsworth!"

Adal brought his attention back down to Arija as the two Dwellers collided with a mechanical clash. Adal watched Arija's chest rise and fall and her face twitch with each small breath.

"I'm not sure what's worse; getting knocked out like an idiot in the middle of a fight, or waking up to you breathing on me like a creep," Arija groaned. Her eyes remained closed, but she cracked a small smile.

"Damn, kid! Don't do that to me again," Adal spat. "You had me worried for a second. I can't lose you. Now, get it together. I can't keep babysitting you like this. You're jamming up my style." The fight behind him drifted away, and all he could hear was Arija's soft breathing.

She opened her eyes and managed a scowl.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but weren't you getting choked out? Oh, and wasn't it your butt that knocked me out in the first place? I remember seeing your fat ass flying at me right before it went dark.” Arija laughed as she propped herself up on her elbows.

“Yeah, what can I say, Arija? Just looking at this ass is enough to make any girl faint.”

“I wouldn’t brag about that. Not sure it’s a good thing, Adal. What happened to that man?” Arija asked, bringing his focus back to the present.

“He almost had us, then Cog came in. Now they’re fighting.” Adal pointed over his shoulder to where Cog and Fausto were battling it out.

“Wait, what?” Arija forced herself to sit up all the way.

“Relax! Cog has it.” Adal turned to motion at the brothers.

As if on cue, Cog soared past them and slid to a stop a few feet behind them. Adal and Arija followed Cog with their eyes as he stood and pulled one of Fausto’s daggers out of his shoulder. He grimaced as he worked the end of the blade free.

“Oh, brother, you’re getting slower in your old age. Is Webley rubbing off on you?” Fausto taunted.

Adal and Arija turned their attention back to Fausto. He looked battle-worn just as Cog did, but he somehow looked like he’d won. He still held the other knife in his hand, and idly tossed it into the air and caught it.

“I see that your master is rubbing off on you. That was a dirty move, indeed. I won’t be making that mistake again.” Cog threw the knife down and charged at Fausto.

Fausto let out a battle cry, lunging forward to meet Cog. As they glided over the ground, Adal realized that the fight was coming directly toward them. He and Arija pulled at one another and rose to their feet. With their arms wrapped around each other’s shoulders, they moved out of the way. An explosion thundered from where they had just been, and the conjoined pair spun around to see what had happened.

“Enough!” Webley’s face was red from combat, and he had several small wounds from where the Gearrtha had gotten the

best of him. His eyes narrowed with such anger that Adal could have sworn there was actual fire in them. Adal noticed there were still pieces of Geartha stuck between his large fingers.

“This fight will continue no further!” Webley shouted, looking between Cog and Fausto like a disapproving parent.

“These attempts an’ plans of Pajak stop now! I will no longer ‘ave him risking not only the Dweller’s lives, but the Machine itself. You tell him I said to back down. If he ‘as an issue with tha’, then ‘ave him see me!” Webley said, turning his full attention to Fausto.

Fausto remained silent, as if he couldn’t help but to listen and obey every word that came out of Webley’s mouth. Fausto kept his stare fixed on Cog, who whistled, then tossed Fausto’s knife into the air. As Cog caught the knife by its blade, he threw it at Fausto who caught it inches before the pointed tip penetrated his eye.

“Had enough then, brother?” Fausto teased.

“Enough! The both of ye! I mean it, Fausto, leave!” Webley’s voice shook with fury.

Fausto calmly slid his blades back into their sheaths. He bowed almost comically low to Webley, then shot a glare at Adal and Arija. He winked at the two of them, turned, then sprinted to the opposite side of the dock. Once he reached the edge, Fausto spread his arms wide and dove from the platform, disappearing over the edge.

“Well, that was dramatic,” Arija said as she watched Fausto plummet over the edge of the platform. “Is he always like this?”

Cog shook his head, but said nothing in response.

“Ye all right?” Webley asked, turning to Cog, who nodded silently. Then he motioned to Adal and Arija. “Ye two all right?” Webley asked, stepping over and eyeing them as if searching for injuries.

“Yeah, we’re good. This sort of thing happens to us all the time,” Adal began, sarcasm infusing every word.

“We’re fine, Webley. Thank you. Just a little sore, really,” Arija finished.

“Tha’s quite the knock on the head, Arija. Perhaps we should

get ye to the doctor in the city.” Webley bent over the two friends, looking at the hit she’d taken.

Adal did his best to look unfazed by the battle. It was Cog that called his bluff.

“I think they both could use a bit of attention. Adal did well holding his own but, if I know Fausto, those hits were not restrained. Not sure a Topsider can take a full hit from a Dweller.” Cog walked over to Webley’s side.

“Come. Let’s get ye to the doctor.” Webley put his arm around Arija.

Cog attempted to do the same with Adal, but he brushed it off. As Adal took his first step, his legs nearly gave out, and a shooting pain erupted from his ribs.

“You know, on second thought...” Adal said, putting his arm back around Cog.

“Wait! What about the fight?” Arija twisted herself under Webley’s arm.

In the commotion, they’d completely forgotten about the Gearrtha that were terrorizing the docks. Turning to face the scene of the conflict, Adal’s mouth fell open. Several mangled Gearrtha littered the ground about them as the guards marched in formation. The few Dwellers that remained on the docks were helping each other up, and a few were pushing the severed parts of both Dweller and Gearrtha into neat piles with what looked like large push brooms.

“The fight has been fought an’ won, Arija. They weren’ much of a match fer the guards. I helped design them suits m’self. Right sturdy,” Webley added.

“So, we won?” Adal asked, rubbing his sore ribs with his free hand.

“This wasn’t the sort of thing you can win or lose. This was just the tip of the mound. Be warned, this—whatever it was—is not over.”

Cog’s words tore at Adal’s heart. Seeing things on film, or reading them in books, had an inert way of removing the severity and emotion of war. Being in this battle, having their own lives threatened, and being forced to face mortality, was a humbling

experience.

Adal would never admit it aloud, but he had been terrified. He had never met someone, or something, that could take and deal hits like Fausto and keep coming. If Cog hadn't shown up when he did, they wouldn't be there to think about it.

# 27 | I Will Lead Your Armies Into Victory



Fausto took his time making his way back to the Roost. If any of the other Kleinmasch had failed Pajak like he had, Pajak would have them disassembled and fed to the others.

“Let him try, if he fancies a go!” Fausto snapped as he made his way deeper into the Machine. Despite Fausto’s strengths and the number of soldiers he commanded, Pajak wouldn’t realistically hesitate to have him killed. He damned himself for not planning the attack more thoroughly. In hindsight, he should have kept to his traditionally stealthy ways instead of trying to make a show of it. Get in, get the Topsiders, and get out. But no, he’d brought the Gearrtha and tried to take on the whole dock. Stupid. He should’ve at least taken some Umar with him.

The lights dimmed as he drew closer to the city. A small group of Baeg scuttled past, and Fausto kicked at them, sending several flying deeper into the Roost. As he stormed past more Kleinmasch, Fausto shot infuriated glances at them, so they wouldn’t try to approach or talk to him.

“He hasn’t lost his step,” Fausto said as he thought about the fight with his brother. He lunged from a platform, free-falling over a hundred feet and landing effortlessly on another, his daggers clanking in their sheaths. A small group of Feithidi scattered in surprise as Fausto landed directly behind them.

“I should’ve had him. He sticks to the same tricks. The same moves. I nearly had him clocked to a pattern. But no, he had to

involve that oversized gremlin.” Fausto spat at the thought of Webley. He knew Pajak wouldn’t be able to see past Webley’s involvement. That would be the one point he would latch on to, and he wouldn’t even be able to see all the Dwellers that Fausto took out with the Gearrtha.

The Topsiders’ reluctance to comply with his orders further angered Fausto. Topsiders were weak. He knew it. They all knew it. Their soft, fleshy exteriors and their slow reaction times made it a wonder they survived at all. So, why were these two particularly difficult to capture? If Cogsworth and Webley had minded their own damn business, Fausto would be enjoying a feast while Pajak tinkered inside them.

Clearing the tunnel, Fausto slapped his hand at a Cead's long legs. The creature let out a surprised bark and looked down at the nuisance below him. Fausto shot a lethal gaze at the sentry, and it immediately snapped back to attention.

On the other side of the tunnel, Fausto stopped to look deeper at the hanging nest of the Gearrtha. Of all the creatures within the Kleinmasch’s ranks, these were his favorite. Granted, they were also one of the few Kleinmasch that he’d designed himself. At the time, Pajak had his intensely strong Umar, but Fausto told him they needed assassins to dive into battle and create as much havoc as possible. The Gearrtha were born from that.

Since that day, Pajak had allowed Fausto to lead their ranks. Fausto loved nothing more than directing his fierce soldiers in battle and watching them destroy everything in their path. He reveled in the praise he received from Pajak when he returned victorious.

This would not be one of those days. A failure that someone would soon answer for. Luckily, his creations were too dim to place the blame where it was due. He’d hate to watch his children be slaughtered, but it was either them or him, and Fausto knew how to survive in the Roost.

The grand chamber was surprisingly quiet when he entered. The Breeders seemed eerily still and didn't twitch or pump their hindquarters as they created new waves of Kleinmasch. Fausto

froze for a moment, and peered around the vast, empty space. Something was wrong.

“Damn.” The word was soft, but it still echoed around the walls.

Pajak appeared near the crest of the vaulted ceiling and scaled one of the main pillars that ran the length of the room, landing gracefully behind Fausto. Pajak lifted Fausto into the air by scooping two of his long, arachnid legs under his arms, then threw him across the chamber.

Fausto came to a stop as he slid into one of the pillars. He fumbled with his holsters and tried to draw his daggers, but Pajak was too quick. He jumped on top of Fausto and kicked his weapons away. Pajak’s face twisted into a snarl as he lifted Fausto into the air once more.

Fausto grasped and clutched at the long spider-like appendages, only to be slammed against the far wall of the chamber. As he fell to the floor, he nudged one of the Breeders on his way down. It squeaked and shivered in fear.

“I told you I wanted the Topsiders! Did I not assign you the task? Did you not promise me I could be tearing out their insides by this evening? Was I *not* fully clear on your duties?” Pajak shouted as he collected Fausto and threw him into another wall.

Fausto’s internal mechanics were jarred, and he saw double as he covered at the foot of Pajak’s throne, where he’d landed.

“Tell me, have you anything to say for yourself? Or shall I just introduce you to your new home with all the other Breeders?” Pajak strolled past Fausto and pulled himself onto his throne.

A part of Fausto wanted Pajak to end it all. He was a proud warrior but, lying on the cold floor, the pain of the day's battle and the utter disgust of defeat radiating from every nut and bolt in his body, a part of Fausto just wanted it all to end.

It was then that it occurred to him. How had Pajak known of his failure? The only way the master could have known would be if one of his cowardly creations retreated to the Roost and told Pajak. No! He would rise from this day. Things were not over for him by far.

Pajak waved his arm, the large chamber door flew open, and



one of his hulking Umar shuffled in.

“Hmm, I think the best punishment for you will be...” Pajak glanced at the wall covered in Breeders, where one nest was empty.

“Yes, I think that’ll be the best place for you. Perhaps I can find a use in you yet.” Pajak motioned to the Umar, who slowly made its way down the corridor.

“No!” barked Fausto, pushing himself up from the floor as he covered his head in anticipation of another attack. None came. Instead, Pajak smiled at him and waved his arm for the Umar to stop.

“No?” Pajak reiterated. “Just why, exactly, do you think you have a choice in the matter?”

Pajak often enjoyed toying with his prey, but Fausto was not in a playful mood. He was going to speak his mind and, if it came to it, Pajak would have to kill him. There was no way Fausto was going to become a Breeder.

“I did not fail you!” Fausto adjusted his clothing and stood up as straight as he could, ignoring the searing pain that coursed through his body.

“That’s not what I was told,” Pajak said.

Fausto twitched. One of his men *had* betrayed him. If he survived the night, he would find the traitor in his ranks and rip him apart one bolt at a time.

“As I said, I did not fail you. I had the Topsiders bested and in my grasp. It was not until Webley joined the fray that I had an issue.” Fausto knew the very mention of Webley would push Pajak over the edge and, sure enough, the master twisted in his seat at the mention of the name.

“I had my brother ended too. I had the Topsiders defeated. My men wrought havoc on the dock, claiming the lives of Dwellers and guards alike. Webley was among them. He helped fight back. In the end, we could not return victorious from the battle. If the weak creature that fled and informed you had remained until the end of the fight, surely he would have known this.” The more Fausto touched on the subject, the more his own rage grew. He had to catch himself from intentionally bating Pajak into another

scuffle.

“Webley doesn't kill machines,” Pajak interjected, his voice cold and mechanical. Every word he spoke twisted with uncertain intent.

“He did today. I watched him crush many of my men himself, with my bastard brother at his side. I even watched the Topsiders dispatch of some of my ranks. Had it been only the Topsiders and the guards, we would have been victorious. Even my brother didn't influence the mission other than slowing and irritating me.”

“What, and you couldn't tend to Webley yourself? He may have destroyed that which we have created, but certainly he wouldn't hurt one of his own creations,” Pajak argued, picking at the arm of his throne as he often did.

“Would *you* have battled him?” Fausto knew the answer before the words even left his mouth.

Pajak growled and squeezed the arm of his throne, crushing the metallic parts under the strength of his grip. “I would not challenge me, Fausto. Not today. You're already on the edge with me, and that empty Breeder spot is looking lonely.”

“He's protecting them! He defended the Topsiders more intensely than he ever did for us! He killed machines to keep them safe! He has even ordered the recycling of the fallen Gearrtha! What he has done against you today is the reason the mission failed! I was not the reason. This has become a full-fledged war, Pajak, and it is clear what side he has taken. My only question to you is, are you willing to do what is necessary to win?”

Fausto's words echoed through the vast room. Pajak remained silent for a moment, leaning back in his chair as if thinking deeply about his response. Fausto swallowed the nervous lump in his throat. If his plan didn't work, he would be spending the rest of eternity as a Breeder.

“So, you think his actions today were a declaration of war?” Pajak finally asked, his voice indicating a strange level of optimism.

“I... I suppose so, yes. He doesn't kill his precious Dwellers, but he will eradicate our ranks with no thought,” Fausto added, his voice finding a more confident tone.

“He has always admired *his* creations over mine. Webley has never granted respect to our race and, yet, he thinks what he makes is so superior? Then why do our brethren slaughter his creations and consume them? We are the dominant species! This place, this World Machine, is our kingdom. And it’s time we take it!” Pajak paused a moment, as if thinking about what he’d just said before he continued. “Webley thinks his ability to grant ‘life’ to his creations is something that only he can acquire? I will learn the secrets myself, if I must. I will tear those Topsiders apart. I will learn every part of their ‘living’ beings. Then, I will use that to grow a new race. Something better than both the Dwellers and Kleinmasch. A master creation that will go forth and grow, dominating all in existence, and I will rule everything he has created and mold it to my image!” Pajak rose triumphantly, the thought of war energizing him.

Fausto relaxed his tightened gears. His plan had worked.

“War. This will change all we know. To do this, I will need a General. I will need someone competent to lead my armies and accomplish my tasks. Is this something you think you can manage without failure?” Pajak held up his hand to stifle Fausto’s eager response. “Before you speak, you should know that your punishment, should you fail, will be something that has never been witnessed before. I will create something especially for you that will be far worse than anything you can imagine.” Pajak lowered his hand, the wicked grin on his face widening, a villainous glare in his eyes.

“Yes! I will lead your armies!” Fausto did not hesitate. He knew there was only one answer. Refusing would have resulted in death, regardless. Besides, he wanted revenge for the day’s defeat. He wanted Cog and Webley pay for what they had done.

“I’m pleased to hear that. I must warn you, this position will not be ‘granted’ to you. You must earn it. If you are to lead my army, you must prove yourself.” Pajak seated himself once more on his throne. His face contorted into the cold look of a businessman and then he raised his arm and waved the signal.

Fausto crouched low to the ground as the floor shook. He shot a stare over his shoulder at the Umar guard walking toward

him, small bolts and debris jumping with every step he took. A smile spread across Fausto's face as understanding reached his eyes. Pajak tossed Fausto his blades as he stood upright.

"All right, then. Let's see what you can do," Pajak said as he sunk into his throne, making himself comfortable.

Part II:  
The New World

## 28 | You Need To Do What Inside Me?



The doctor's office looked pretty standard, but the parts of the city they'd seen as they limped to the building had been more shocking than what they had already seen of the Machine. Strange vehicles filled the streets, barely missing buildings and Dwellers alike as they sped around, traversing crowds with surgical precision. Some of the cars looked like old Model Ts, but others were smaller with mechanical wings that ejected from the sides.

On both sides of the street, buildings pierced the artificial sky. Crowds of Dwellers gathered to get a look at the aftermath of the battle on the dock. Every so often, a Dweller gasped or pointed as they noticed Adal and Arija being escorted by Webley to the doctor's office. Despite the abundance of occupants, not a single Dweller looked exactly like another. They were all humanoid, all in beautifully articulated Victorian clothing, and all looking at Adal and Arija as though aliens had landed in their midst.

The streets were composed of brick cobblestone, and the sidewalks were a patchwork assortment of bronzed, pink, black, and yellow metals.

Arija wished, not for the first time that day, she had time to sketch what she had seen. Even now, sitting in the doctor's waiting room, she was too busy dealing with Adal's worried outbursts to pull out her sketchbook.

“I’m just sayin’, how in the hell is a Dweller doctor going to know how to treat our ‘Topsider’ injuries? If he rolls out here with a mechanic’s outfit on and some wrenches, I’m out!” Adal protested as he and Arija sat alone in the doctor’s office.

“And I’m telling *you* that if you act like a tool in front of the doctor, who’s only trying to help us, I will break the rest of your ribs,” Arija said, trying to keep a stern look on her face. “We have to get checked out, Adal. We got our asses kicked back there. Besides, with everything we’ve seen, I’d think you could admit anything is possible here.”

As soon as they’d reached the doctor’s office, Webley returned to the dock to help clean up the mess left behind from the fight, leaving Adal and Arija with Cog. Once inside, Cog left to find the doctor and see what could be done about their injuries.

Adal’s damaged ribs had kept him hunched over for most of the walk but, every time Arija gasped, he’d pushed his head up to take in what she’d seen.

“This place is like a mechanic’s shop mixed with a museum,” Adal said, looking around the room.

Arija couldn’t have agreed more. The large room was dwarfed by the sheer number of items within it. Glass cases held jars of parts, and things that looked like old-fashioned medical equipment. A case near the door included what looked like an old brass and wood microscope. The wooden stand held a long brass barrel with a piece of curved glass at the top, almost like a child’s kaleidoscope. A small, rusted piece of metal bolted to the wooden base held a small, glass slide with a metallic smear across it. On a counter near the microscope was a strange looking machine with plumes of smoke coming from a thin pipe at the top.

In the center of the room, a reclined chair reminded Arija of a dental chair with a large light suspended a few feet above it. Beneath it ran several pipes and tubes that connected to various machines looming ominously nearby. Another twitching caught Arija’s attention and drew her eyes to a tray of tools a few feet away from the chair.

“What is that?” Arija asked, nudging Adal’s shoulder and pointing to the tray. The severed arm of a Dweller twitched

reflexively on the tray, its fingers stretching, as if calling for help before curling into a fist. Several small tools protruded from an open panel on the forearm, while a tube ran from where the elbow should be to a small machine with wires that periodically arced with electricity. Following each arc, one digit would twitch.

“I’m sure the doctor has all the appropriate credentials and training ... to work on Frankenstein’s monster,” Adal muttered under his breath.

Arija shot him a warning look, and he laughed but immediately doubled over in pain as the laughter pressed on his broken ribs.

“That’s what you get!” Arija said, stifling her own laughter.

A bang from across the room echoed off the smooth metal walls, and Adal and Arija sat at attention searching the room. An eerily silent moment passed before Cog appeared from behind one of the large machines.

“Sorry about the wait, you two. It took me a moment to find her. She was tending to a malfunction with one of her instruments.”

“Oh *great*,” Adal whispered so only Arija could hear. She didn't scold him since she couldn't help thinking the same thing. Hopefully, that wasn't a machine the doctor planned on using to help them. Then again, she wondered if any of the machines in the room could be used to help them.

“I know that this may all seem a bit strange to you, but please give her an opportunity,” Cog pleaded, making his way over to Adal.

Before either of them could formulate a question of their own, another sound echoed through the room. A Dweller woman appeared from behind the same odd machine. A warm smile creased her bronze face as she walked over to them. The doctor.

Arija couldn't help but notice the doctor wore a waxed canvas mechanics apron. Her heart sped as she wondered what this doctor was going to do to them. Arija shot Adal a weary look and placed her fist on the arm of the chair directly next to his. They made three bumps with their fists; Arija's 'scissors' beat Adal's 'paper.'



“Shit!” he muttered under his breath. Looks like he would be the guinea pig after all.

The doctor's pants were tucked into large, leather boots and, under her apron, she wore an oil-stained, white shirt with rolled-up sleeves that fluffed out from the sides. Arija noticed the shirt was clearly much too big for her small frame. Her hair was a mass of titanium, formed into a tight bun with several twisted shavings creating stray curls that framed her face. Her cheeks were round, with two small divots in the center that looked like dimples. A set of wire-rimmed glasses hung around her neck, along with a unique leather choker crafted from old clockwork pieces bound by a bright-pink copper wire.

When she looked up, Arija noticed that her eyes were an unnaturally beautiful shade of aquamarine. If a robot could be beautiful, she would be.

Just as she stopped in front of them, Cog straightened, his chest extended like a proud bird.

*Aww. That's cute,* Arija thought as she watched Cog trying to get the doctor's attention.

“Avani, these are the Topsiders I was just telling you about,” Cog sputtered, trying to keep his chest out while he spoke.

Adal snorted a laugh before wincing in pain. “Smooth, boss.”

“Why thank you, Cog. I would never have guessed,” Avani teased, smiling and giving him a small wink. Avani was sweet and her voice soft.

As she joked, Cog smiled an awkward half-grin and laughed lightly, putting his hand on Adal's shoulder and trying to look casual.

“Hey. Ey, eyyy!” Adal bellowed, his face scrunched in pain.

Cog's confident face fell as he rubbed Adal's shoulder and said, “Oh, Adal, I am so sorry!” He pulled back, obviously not intending to cause pain. Cog only needed to find something to do with his hands other than nervously fumbling.

Avani bent over Adal, placed her hands on his shoulders gently, and examined him.

“It looks as though you have taken some nasty hits. Let's see if we can get those taken care of, no? Please follow me to the

examination chair.” Avani motioned for Cog to help her move Adal, and the two of them slowly brought him to his feet. The adrenaline from the fight must have thoroughly worn off by now. Adal looked sore and worn, as if he felt every aching muscle and twisted bone in his body. As he rose, he shot a nervous look at Arija. She smiled and shook her head, making a scissor motion with her fingers. Adal grunted as Avani and Cog guided him across the room to the chair.

“Just relax. I promise, I will take good care of you. Adal, is it?”

He nodded.

“Adal, my name is Avani. It is very nice to meet you.” Avani adjusted the light above Adal’s head so it didn’t shine directly into his eyes. She fumbled with a tray of instruments, and Adal tried to twist so he could see what she was doing.

“So, uh, you’ve treated Topsiders before?” Adal asked, a tremble in his voice. He jumped when Avani suddenly reappeared and stood over him, surveying his chest.

“Oh, absolutely!”

“Really?” Adal sighed.

“Not in the slightest,” Avani giggled, letting her amusement dance at the edges of her mouth.

Arija watched the relief on Adal’s face evaporate, replaced with terror.

“Relax, Adal! I have studied Topsiders for a very long time,” Avani continued. “I am well aware of your ‘unique’ structures. Biological organisms are so sensitive. I promise I know precisely what I am doing.” Avani reached over to a tray of instruments and produced a small hammer and hand saw. “Now, how do I remove your arms and legs again?”

Adal panicked. He shot up, his arms and legs flailing like he was fighting an imaginary octopus. Immediately, two hands pressed him back into the chair. For a quiet, soft-spoken Dweller, Avani was strong enough to withstand Adal's fighting.

“Adal! Adal! Calm down, I am only kidding. Look, no tools. I am only examining you.” Avani released him and waved her empty hands in the air.

Adal looked from her hands to the tray beside the chair, then to Arija and Cog on the other side of the room. Cog snickered while Arija doubled over, gasping for air as she tried to contain her laughter.

“I’m glad you two are having a good time with this,” Adal said before bringing his eyes back to the doctor. “So, you have jokes, huh?” he asked, his mouth slightly gaped and his tongue pressed to the inside of his cheek.

“One or two. I will say, I generally don't get as much response from my patients as this. I think we will be friends.” Avani held out her hand.

Adal looked at it for a moment, then smiled and shook it. “Yeah, you're all right, I guess. Seriously though, don't stick me with anything or break out those tools without warning me.” Adal adjusted himself in the chair.

Avani smiled, stepping away again and returning with a large black screen. “Well, Adal, it looks like your endoskeletal structure may have taken some integrity damage. I will have to examine your internal mechanics to better assess the situation.” Avani wheeled the strange machine to the side of the chair and unlocked a retractable brass arm.

Adal’s eyes widened. “Wait, you need to do what inside me?” he looked from the screen to the tools that sat just out of reach.

Avani laughed. “Relax, Adal. I am going to x-ray your chest and see if you have any broken parts. Unless you want me to open you up like I would do to a Dweller? Honestly, I *am* a doctor. Trust me when I say I mean you no harm.”

Arija sat on the edge of her seat, as if watching her favorite show.

“Hey girl, you enjoying the show? This isn’t an episode of Dr. Who, you know,” he barked, causing her to grace him with one of her smiles.

“Hey, she had to start somewhere. I'm just happy she got her fun out on you first!” Arija replied.

“Oh, do not worry, Arija. I have plenty of fun for you as well.” Avani winked.

Arija’s face went pale, and she slid back into her chair,

suddenly not feeling like gawking.

“Now, please remain still. I am going to turn this on and examine what is damaged. If you move, it will make it difficult for me to identify smaller injuries.”

Adal nodded. Avani pulled the arms of the device and extended the apparatus over Adal. The side that faced him was not black. Instead, a dim reflection peered at him from the silver metal on the back of the instrument. Avani aligned the device, placed a protective mat over his chest, and flipped a large switch on the side of the x-ray machine.

An immediate image appeared on the screen. Arija saw it from across the room and stood, walking over with Cog in tow. Avani inspected the image in intense silence. As Arija approached, she saw a glowing blue image of Adal’s skeletal structure. His bones moved slightly as he breathed but, aside from that, she could have been looking at a photograph.

“Ah, there they are!” Avani declared, pointing to the three lowest ribs on Adal’s right side. Sure enough, as Arija and Cog leaned in to examine her findings, it became apparent that two of the ribs were completely broken, while the lowest rib was fractured.

Arija sucked in a breath, squinting as she looked at the screen. “Man, Adal, that looks like it hurts!” Scanning her eyes over the rest of the image, she looked for other breaks. Nothing. Avani must have come to the same conclusion because she stepped away from the screen and nodded.

“I am so sorry that you were hurt so badly,” Cog said, shaking his head. “I should have been there with you sooner. This is all my fault.”

“Hey man, you had business to handle. This isn't on you. We chose to fight,” Adal responded. Arija knew he wasn't in the practice of allowing others to dictate his actions.

“Adal is right, Cog, this wasn't your fault. It was our choice. These are our wounds.” Arija placed her hand on Cog’s shoulder.

“Thank you, both. I swear, this won’t happen again with me around.”

Avani moved to Adal’s side holding a silver medical tray with

a large syringe, a vial of some metallic liquid—maybe mercury—and an odd device that reminded Arija of a gun.

“What’s all that for?” Adal asked, sounding nervous.

Avani placed the tray on a stand and sat next to Adal. “You have two solid breaks in ribs eight and nine, and rib ten is fractured. I must mend them, or your internal injuries will worsen, and your pain will only increase. This is the only way I can fix that for you. Well, other than cutting you open, that is. I would prefer not to, as I have no way of replacing your blood.”

Adal rolled in his chair so he could glare at Arija. She gritted her teeth and shrugged at him, forming another ‘scissor’ with her fingers. Adal extended his middle finger causing Arija to slap his hand away.

“Calm down, Adal. If this is what we have to do to get you fixed, then this is what we have to do.”

Adal relaxed into the chair, bringing his eyes back to Avani. “All right, what’s the procedure?”

“It is simple, really, I promise. I inject you with this,” Avani held up the vial of liquid metal. “Then I use this device here to guide the liquid to the location of the broken ribs.”

She raised the strange looking guns and showed Adal and Arija. “I will be watching the whole procedure on my screen here as the metal shows on this x-ray. Once it is in place, I pull the trigger and release a concentrated wave of energy that reacts only with this special mixture of mine. It will instantly harden and bridge the broken and fractured gaps.” Avani’s piercing eyes gleamed with excitement and pride as she walked the two Topsiders through the procedure.

Adal shot one more nervous look at Arija who only shrugged in response. It’s not like he had any other choice. It all seemed strange, but the basic theory was sound.

Avani produced a large needle and inserted the tip into the vial of metallic liquid. As soon as Adal’s eyes landed on the gargantuan needle, he gripped the arms of the chair as hard as he could.

“Wait a minute! Did you get the biggest needle you had? You could just stab me with a freakin’ pole, would be the same,” Adal

stuttered nervously.

Arija couldn't contain her laughter. "The big, bad Adalwolf Stein is scared of needles? You learn something new every day."

"I'm not scared of needles. But that thing? She might as well be holding an icepick!"

Avani looked at Arija and Cog, smiling and shaking her head.

"Adal, I have to do this. It's the only way I can set your breaks without physically opening you up. I promise this syringe is micro-sharpened and has been designed so you won't even feel it. This entire process won't take but a moment and you will feel worlds better." Avani's smile widened, and Arija thought she looked sincere. Adal's face warmed, and he dropped his eyes to his lap.

"Really? That sharp?" Arija asked, impressed with Avani's technology.

Avani shot Arija a brief look as she widened her eyes and shrugged. That was the most obvious 'I dunno, I guess so' expression that Arija could imagine and, suddenly, she was just as nervous as Adal. Avani seemed rather intelligent. She had a wit about her and a cavalier 'let's wing this' attitude that Arija would have admired if the woman hadn't been working on her best friend.

Arija squeezed Adal's hand as Avani bent down and picked up a large, brass cone from the floor that was attached to a long, thick tube.

"I know what will help." The doctor brought the brass cone up to her lips and yelled, "Kip!"

## 29 | The Name's Kip



A loud metallic squeaking filled the room, like the world's worst shopping cart.

In the corner, a rusted ladder led up to a hatch, like those found in a submarine. The giant wheel in the center of the hatch spun in place, though it sounded like it hadn't been opened in centuries. Arija pressed the palms of her hands to her ears to dampen the screech.

A sound like a released vacuum seal echoed, and the hatch opened. A small Dweller boy dropped out of the hatch and slid down the ladder without stepping on any of the rungs. He landed with a loud 'clunk' on the floor.

"The mobile clinic is almost up and running, Mum. I just had to adjust the throttle and... Wow! Topsiders!" Kip stopped mid-step as he noticed Adal sitting on the doctor's chair. He paused a moment, then ran over to Arija. He picked up her hand and ran his small, cold fingers across her skin.

Age wasn't really something that Webley and Cog had explained to them before but, if Adal had to guess, he would have said Kip was about twelve or thirteen in human years. He had small, rust-colored freckles on his smooth, brass face and wore oversized grey pants held up by suspenders. Under the suspenders, an oversized white shirt with the sleeves rolled up clung to his small frame, just like Avani's.

Kip dropped Arija's hand, removed his newsboy cap and

lowered it to the ground as he bowed. "The name's Kip, Miss," Kip said as he tossed his cap back onto his head and walked over to Adal. He leaned over the edge of the examination chair and slowly poked Adal in the arm.

"Hey kid, that's still a bit sore, bro!" Adal responded, wincing as Kip's finger jabbed at him.

"Wow, really? Neat!"

"Kip, focus. Our guests could use a boost after their day. Would you mind terribly retrieving some coffee that we got from Webley? I think the warm drink will do you both some good and relax your muscles. Webley roasts the best beans!" Avani nodded toward Kip, then toward the door she had entered earlier.

"All right, Mum. I can do that!" Kip turned on his heels and sprinted to the back of the room, disappearing behind the clutter of machines.

"Is Kip your son?" Arijia asked.

"Yes. Kip was orphaned as a baby, and I decided the world was too cold for such an innocent thing to be alone like that. So, I took him in and have been teaching Kip all I know ever since. He is a great kid." Avani offered a smile, as if she were remembering a lifetime of wonderful memories.

Adal had a flash of his father and wished he was as soft and chill as Avani. The only memories Adal had of his father were of him pushing and being hard on him for no reason. Adal was a smart guy, but nothing was ever good enough for his dad.

"Mobile clinic?" Cog asked as he turned his attention to Avani, a skeptical look on his normally smooth face.

"Yes, my mobile clinic. Why shouldn't those that live out in the Machine get the same medical treatment as those that live in the city? That flying cart will allow me to do so. Kip has really come along, and it is impressive what he has done with it. You should see it sometime. Maybe I can take you for a ride." Avani pressed on Adal's chest, aligning the broken bones with her fingers.

"I, uh, would like that ... I think ..." Cog sputtered. If Cog could blush, he would almost certainly be doing so. It was sort of cute the way Cog fell apart when Avani was around.



Avani pressed on Adal's ribs again, eliciting a grunt of pain. She aimed the large needle directly at his chest.

"Hey, shouldn't that go into my arm or something?" Adal stuttered, stalling.

"Not at all. I don't want this in your bloodstream. Too difficult to guide the metal where I need it. I'm going to inject it directly into your chest cavity. Like this."

Before Adal could reply, Avani stabbed the needle into his chest and pressed down on the plunger. Every drop of the liquid metal flowed from the reservoir, disappearing into Adal. He gritted his teeth in discomfort, but Adal soldiered through the injection.

Cog nudged Arija, pointing at the screen. As soon as the metallic fluid entered Adal's chest, it appeared as a blue-white substance on the x-ray. It beaded and spread inside his chest. Adal's heart raced as he watched the metal seep into every crevice and around his lungs.

"Dr. Avani... The liquid is going all over. Is that normal?" Arija asked, concerned. Adal looked at her, and she squeezed his hand.

"Relax, my dear. You will see," Avani insisted, finishing the injection and retrieving the gun from the tray along with three small disks.

Kip returned with a tray of four cups and a metal pot of coffee. He nearly spilled the entire tray as he hurriedly put it down on a small table next to the waiting chairs and ran back over to watch the screen like a kid missing his favorite TV show.

"Wow! That's what your insides look like? Where are all the gears?" he asked, squeezing between Cog and Arija.

Avani giggled but didn't answer. She turned the screen to improve her view and placed the three small disks on Adal's chest, one over each break. The spreading of the metal over Adal's insides ceased and, as if being called to attention, the liquid slowly retracted.

Each bead of metal moved toward the areas where Avani had placed the disks. Like a magnet pulling on the metal, the liquid pooled over Adal's broken ribs. Avani then produced her gun and aligned the tip of the barrel with the first magnet. Once she had everything in place, she pulled the trigger, and a dim flash of light

emitted from the barrel of the gun. The liquid instantly solidified around the bone.

She moved the gun from one disk to the next. In under a minute, Adal's ribs had a thin coat of metal over them, the broken and fractured areas nowhere to be seen.

"Wow! That was cool!" Kip announced, stepping around the side of the screen. "Can we break something else and do it again?"

"Hell no!" Adal barked, sitting up in his seat.

"Really? Aww man, no fun! How do you feel?" Kip asked, poking at Adal's ribs with one small, curious finger.

"Actually...better." Adal rubbed his hand over his chest, a shy smile peaking at the corner of his mouth.

Arija's mouth dropped open in shock.

"Fantastic! I am glad to hear that. You will still be sore for a little while. There isn't much I can do to reduce the bruising, but the bones won't be breaking again any time soon! Now, as for the rest of you..."

Much to Kip's pleasure, Avani spent the next hour performing the same procedure for several other areas, mostly in Adal's hands from the haymaker slug he'd thrown at Fausto.

After a while, the pain of the procedure and the general discomfort subsided, and Adal and Arija found themselves talking and laughing with Kip. Adal sipped his coffee, listening to the barrage of questions that came from the curious boy.

"What's the Topside like? Do you guys have a Webley too? What sort of machines are there? Can you show me?" Kip fired questions quicker than Adal and Arija could answer them.

"All right, Kip. I think it's time you went back to working on the mobile clinic, don't you?" Avani stood and gave Adal one final check.

"Awe, can't I stay?" Kip pleaded, slouching his shoulders.

"Kip, I need you working on the clinic. The Topsiders will be in the Machine for a while. You will have other opportunities to hang out with them. Now go. We need to have that thing functioning as soon as possible." Avani waved her hand at Kip, who sighed and slowly trudged back to the stairs.

"Hey, when you guys are all done, you should come up and

see it. It's really neat!"

"I'm sure they would enjoy seeing it later. For now, I must finish," Avani said as she crossed her arms in a motherly manner.

Kip sighed and disappeared through the hatch, leaving it open.

"See? That wasn't so bad now, was it?" Arija said as she reached a hand out to Adal, helping him sit up in the chair.

"You got jokes too? Well, keep it up, because it's your turn in the chair now!" Adal laughed as he hopped from the seat and broadly gestured to the chair like he was presenting a prize.

"I, uh, think I'm all set. Just a few bumps. Nothing that really needs any medical help." Arija put both hands in the air as she slowly backed away from the chair.

"Oh no, 'man up,' remember? Or are you going to admit that I can handle more than you?" Adal knew the buttons to push just as she did.

She glared at him and turned up her nose, hopping into the seat.

"Ah, Miss Arija. Let's have a look at you." Avani began her assessment of Arija's injuries. Fortunately for Arija, there weren't any broken bones, but Avani did note the nasty hit she'd taken on her head that needed mending.

"Well, we can stitch that right up!" Avani immediately produced another large needle and a spool of thick thread from her apron. "This will only take a moment."

"Uh, sorry, but do you have something that isn't so, well, large? I've had stitches before, and that thread looks more like rope!"

Avani paused for a moment and examined her tools. "Well, I suppose I could do something else. I had read of your stitching measures, but I wasn't aware of a size standard. My apologies for that. Still should be an easy fix." Avani shuffled over to one of the glass cabinets and produced a small jar with a sludgy brown liquid inside.

"This is an adhesive. I use it to bind the leather aesthetics to the Toppers that come in. Should do just as well here. It's made organically from sap. Shouldn't cause you any issues." Avani

turned on the light above Arija's head to look at her wound.

Adal stepped behind the chair to get his own look, happy that it wasn't him being poked and prodded.

"No worries, Arija. Shouldn't be too bad. Man, that's a big gash. Looks like that would easily need a few stitches. Nothing wrong with being held together with glue. Might make styling your hair easier, to be sticky, anyway," Adal teased.

"Hey, you're the vain one here!" Arija barked.

Avani pressed on Arija's side and slowly rolled her to face away so she could better access the slice on her scalp. "You know, it may be better if we just shave off all of this hair. Easier to get to the wound." Avani parted Arija's hair, but the smile on her lips betrayed her. She pressed hard on the wound, closing the gash and holding the skin together. Arija didn't reply, she just scoffed with a 'you just try it' expression.

With the flesh clenched into place, Avani applied a thin layer of the brown paste to the wound.

Arija glared at Adal, squeezing his hand but refusing to show more pain than he had.

Avani grabbed the same gun she'd used on Adal, and lit up Arija's scalp, instantly hardening the glue. "All done!" she announced, releasing Arija's hair. "Now, same thing goes for you as well. This will be sore for a little while. Just take it easy and try not to re-injure yourself. I am not entirely sure what other broken things on you two I can successfully fix without removing them and replacing them with parts I have lying around my shop."

Adal and Arija looked at one another, mirror expressions of horror covering their faces.

"So, what are the plans for the rest of the day? Will you be tending to the docks?" The mood drastically changed when Avani mentioned the battle. With everything that had happened and all the anxiety about being experimented on, Adal had momentarily forgotten about what brought them here in the first place.

Cog frowned and shook his head. "Webley went back to help clean that up and work with the rescuers to bring in the injured. He insisted I get these two to you and see that they were taken care of, then he wanted me to show them around the city.

Honestly, I would much rather be out there helping. No offense.” Cog turned and nodded towards Adal and Arija.

“Let’s all go back there and help! We don’t mind, really. It’s the right thing to do,” Arija interjected.

“Seriously, we should be there helping anyway,” Adal added.

“No, I must honor what Webley wanted. He doesn’t want you wrapped up in that sort of mess. The cause of those deaths is the one sickness we have not been able to purge from the Machine. Believe me, Webley would be ashamed if you went back to help,” Cog replied.

“Well, why don’t I help? You can still take them around the city, and I will make sure that Webley gets on all right,” Avani offered.

Cog placed one timid hand on Avani’s shoulder, then quickly removed it. “No, I couldn’t let you do that, really.”

“Why don’t you both go?” Adal suggested.

“Yes! We’ll be fine. Honestly, what else can happen? You two go on.” Arija hopped off the chair and grabbed Adal’s hand.

“Well, how about this then: Cog, you and I will go back to the docks and give any help we can. Adal and Arija, perhaps I can ask Kip...” Avani didn’t have the chance to finish her thought before Kip leaped from the open doorway and slid down the ladder.

“I can show them around the city!” Kip shouted enthusiastically, not caring if they knew he’d been eavesdropping.

“Look, I appreciate the gesture, but after a day like this, really, perhaps this isn’t the best idea. I... uhh... I think.” Cog broke away, glancing at Avani for reassurance.

Adal and Arija both fixed him with the same expressions. Their eyes bulged, and their heads cocked to one side. Cog studied them in confusion for a moment, before Adal motioned toward Avani with his eyes. She was busy cleaning up and putting her tools away.

“No, really. We’ll be fine,” Arija insisted, emphasizing each word.

“Yeah, really. Kip has us covered,” Adal added. He pointed toward Avani, then back to Cog, as if saying *go with her*.

Cog looked blankly at them, not understanding their cryptic messages.

Avani stopped picking up and turned to address Cog. “You see, Cog. They will be just fine. Besides, we can be more effective if it’s just us. I mean no offense to the two of you, but this sort of thing is best left to us. We have our own processes for dealing with situations like this. We are very lucky that, due to the response of the Watch, most of the damage was only to transport crafts and other structures. The loss of life was minimal.”

“So, can we be off then?” Kip took a few steps toward the door, looking between Avani and the Topsiders.

“Yes, go on ahead. Just be careful and keep an eye on them, Kip. Don't go on one of your little adventures. This has been a trying day for all of us, I am sure of it. Cog, if you would help me put these things away, we can be off too.”

## 30 | Casualties



Fausto sat perched on the top of a train car. The wind whipped past him as the car sped through the hillside. His heart raced a rhythmic beat as little bolts of electrified excitement tracked through his body.

He leaned forward, peeking into the window of the next car. A mechanic was fiddling with something. A woman with the insignia of a captain paced the length of the car, checking the gauges on the wall. Fausto fantasized about crushing the man's skull with his bare hands as the woman cowered on the floor at his greatness.

"Check the couplings, Bolt! We need to make sure we are fully connected. Still getting some drag on the rear cars," the captain commanded.

Bolt nodded, then made his way out of the engine compartment and through the supply cars.

Fausto followed him, silently hopping from one car to the next.

When the mechanic came to the car he'd been looking for, he stepped out into the open air and crouched down, examining the attachment coupling.

The open air of the World Machine and the thick rails holding the train whizzed below him.

Fausto slowly lowered himself. The thought of forcing the man into the gap between cars caused his heart to skip a beat.

What sound would his body make as the train ripped it apart?

“Don’t fall,” another man said as he grabbed the mechanic’s arm, shaking him and causing him to grab a hold of the side of the train.

Fausto pushed himself back onto the top of the car.

“Really, Sear? Really?” Bolt barked at his friend.

A high-pitched cackle rose from Sear. “Hey, I just saved your life!”

“Shouldn’t you be on top of the cars with the rest of the security?” Bolt tugged his arm out of Sear’s grasp, stepping back into the train car.

“We have enough security on here. You need to breathe a little, Bolt,” Sear joked. “What are you doing out here anyway?”

The mechanic checked his sidearm. “Captain Rchette has me checking the couplings. Apparently we are getting a little too much sway around the turns.”

“Aw, your future wife making you work? Keep dreaming, big guy. She’s a captain. She’d never get involved with a rail worker.”

“You never know.”

Fausto had to fight the urge to drop down and slaughter these two idiots. There was so much more to life than getting caught up in the pointless fantasies of women.

Rchette’s voice sounded over the intercom, pulling Fausto back to his mission. “*Bolt, have you checked the connections yet?*”

“Uh... Yes ma’am! All set here.”

“*Then get back to the engine. I’m getting some strange readings and...*” The radio crackled into static then went silent.

Fausto pushed himself up and hurried across the top of the train back to the engine room. It sounded like his men were in position and it was time for the fun to start.

He slid down the side of the train between the engine room and the car behind it. Fausto peered around the corner into the room and watched the captain as she shook the intercom.

A sadistic smile crept across Fausto’s face. His men had cut the power. No train communications would work. When Captain Rchette turned her back towards him, Fausto slipped into the



engine car.

He raced across the car, pulling one of his daggers out. He grabbed her around the waist and slid the dagger into the side of her ribcage, piercing her heart before she could even gasp. Fausto lowered her to the ground and flipped her over so he could watch as the light drained from her eyes. That was his favorite part.

Bolts of electricity shot across his body, making his fingers tingle as he watched the captain die. The feeling was intoxicating, and he had to steady himself as he stood.

After a few moments he slid her body behind one of the racks with his booted foot and walked back out the way he came in.

Once back on the roof, he walked along the top of the cars toward where he'd last seen the mechanic. In the distance he could see his Geartha slaughtering the security that were posted at the end of the train. The sound of frantic gun shots soothed him as he walked. The security would put up a good fight, but they were still no match for his Geartha.

Fausto stopped as he saw the mechanic stumble through one of the train cars. He sucked in a long breath, relishing in the scent of fear and chaos.

Bolt forced the door to the nearest car open and sprinted through the countless racks and crates of mechanical parts.

Fausto followed him, waiting for the perfect moment to make his move. He'd learned his lesson back at the docks. From now on, he was sticking to what he did best.

A jolt tossed Bolt forward, slamming him to the floor. Several small cases fell down on top of him. He thrashed, throwing cases aside.

Fausto couldn't help the small laugh that forced its way past his lips.

A group of Geartha and Fithidi rushed past and Fausto grabbed one of his men. "I need you to come with me. I have a special kill I'd like you to help me with." Fausto didn't know what about Bolt drew his attention, but he needed to know what it felt like to drain him of life.

Suddenly, the emergency alarms sounded. "*All security*

*personnel to their stations. Mechanics and support crew please retreat to shelter locations.”*

Bolt pulled out his sidearm, running towards the engine room. “Captain Rachette?” Bolt called. But everything was quiet.

Butterflies filled Fausto’s stomach. He loved a good reveal.

Bolt’s face scrunched as he looked around the empty room. “Captain?” he called again.

Fausto jumped off the roof of the train car, smashing the window to the engine room and jumping inside. Two of his Geartha burst through the window on the opposite side of the room, landing next to the mechanic.

Glass showered Bolt as he crouched down and covered his head with his hands, dropping his pistol in the process.

“Get up you sniveling idiot!” Fausto snapped as he kicked Bolt in the ribs.

The Geartha screeched, the high-pitched sound bouncing off the metal walls of the small engine room.

“What do you want?” Bolt yelled, his voice shaking.

“Me? What do I want?” Fausto asked as if he’d never heard the question before. “Hmm. Well, for starters, I want every disgusting Dweller to die a horribly painful death.”

Bolt looked up at Fausto, realization washing his face.

Fausto raised one hand, a wicked smile covering his face. “Get him.”

Just then, the Geartha jumped on the mechanic, sending him sprawling on the cold metal surface of the train car.

Bolt didn’t fight back as the Fithidi ripped into his stomach, pulling out the gears that kept him alive.

As Bolt searched the room, he must have noticed Captain Rachette’s body laying behind the rack next to him. The mechanic reached a blood soaked and shaking hand toward the dead woman.

Fausto was giddy with anticipation. “I want war my dear friend. War and power.”

## 31 | The Way the World Works



They weren't more than five minutes from Avani's office when Arija began to question her decision to let Kip lead her around the city. The hyper-active Dweller child interrupted their every attempt to take in their surroundings, making it nearly impossible to sightsee.

"This is the place. Isn't it neat? Bet you haven't seen a place like Aparat before, have you?" Kip walked several feet ahead, but turned so he was walking backward, keeping his attention on Adal and Arija. Every so often, Kip would unknowingly bump into someone trying to get around him, and a barrage of curses would follow as the child tried to apologize to the busy Dwellers.

Arija had never had so many people pause from their daily lives and examine her before. Several Dwellers even stopped mid-step and gaped at them. Arija quickly discovered she really hated being the center of attention, but Adal probably couldn't enjoy himself more. Kip picked up on Arija's discomfort and drew the attention back to him.

"Hey, if your eyes are broken, I can fix those for you!" he shouted at a Dweller couple that were so busy staring, they wouldn't move out of the way to let the group pass. Adal cracked a smile as Kip shooed the couple away, then turned a smiling face back to them.

Arija, being so uncomfortable with all the gawking, focused on examining every part of Aparat. She was itching to stop and

draw the city as it presented itself.

“So, did Webley build all this?” Adal asked, bringing Arija’s attention back to the group. “I mean, how long could this have taken?”

“I have no idea, but there’s no way he did all this without help,” Arija added.

“We all build this place!” Kip interjected, tripping over a stack of papers as they passed what looked like a newsstand. The older Dweller that occupied the stand shouted at them as they passed.

“Damnit, Kip! You wreck my papers, and I am sending Avani a bill!” the owner shouted, not even paying attention to Adal and Arija.

“Yeah yeah, put it on my tab, Mr. Nuts!” Kip waved the vendor off.

“That’s Mr. Naught, you little shit!”

Adal shot the newsstand owner a look, and the old Dweller fell silent and sat back down.

“Hey, Kip, we appreciate the tour, but could you please try to not draw so much attention to us?” Arija asked as softly as she could.

“You two stick out like a broken gear,” Kip said between bouts of laughter. “Believe me, you aren't sticking out because of me!”

Adal snorted. “Shit, you said it, man!”

Kip let out a proud grin, and Adal clapped his hand on the top of Kip’s head, smashing his newsboy cap into his hair and ruffling the short strands.

“Great, I already have to deal with one of you, don’t you go corrupting Kip!” Arija sighed, hopping over a large puddle that Adal failed to notice.

Adal pulled his sopping wet foot out of the puddle, cursing as he shook the water from it.

“Ha! Sorry about that! Those puddles can be tricky. I would have driven you around the city, but Mum took away my driving privileges.” Kip shrugged like it was the most normal thing for a child to say.

“Wait a minute, Kip. Are you telling me you can drive? Aren't you a little young?” Adal broke in.

“Oh yeah, I can drive anything. In fact, that's how Mum found me. She was out in the Machine one day, and I tried to steal her car. In my defense, she left the keys in it.” Kip stepped backward into a large cart, spilling a small bag of oranges to the ground.

“Hey, kid! Watch where you're going! You're going to pay for those if they're bruised!” the owner of the cart shouted without dropping the cigarette from his mouth.

“All right, Kip. You need to slow down and relax. This place is amazing, but maybe it would be better if we got to see it without angering everyone in the city?” Arija suggested.

“Ha! Don't worry about these guys. Most of the people on this street are either Toppers or Bours. They all have their heads up their own cans,” Kip retorted.

“Bours?” Adal cocked his head to the side and scrunched his eyebrows together.

“Yeah, you guys have a lot of different names for Dwellers. What do they all mean?” Arija added.

Kip stopped and leaned against the side of a building. Wire silhouettes displayed ornate clothing in the shop window next to him. A deep burgundy gown with black and gold lace, and a thick black corset top hung in the window. Arija wondered how much a dress like that would cost, and what they used as currency down here.

“Ok, so here's the story: You already know we are called Dwellers. Well, there are different kinds of Dwellers depending on where you live. There are three types... Okay, there are technically four, but no one even recognizes the fourth one.” Kip shifted, planting his foot against the side of the dress shop and crossing his arms over his chest. “There's the Toppers. The wealthy assholes that like to go around pretending they're better than everyone else because they think they look like Toppers. There's the Bours. Those guys are below the Toppers. They are all the working Dwellers you see everywhere. Truth be told, without

them, I'm not entirely sure this place would keep going. Below the Bours are the Desps. They live in the crevices of the city or in small settlements in the Machine. Everyone pretty much looks down on the Desps. The Toppers see them as a bunch of criminals, useless machines, and a general blight on their perfect city, but I grew up as a Desp before Avani took me in. They aren't all bad, they just... It's a tough life out there for the Desps."

"So, this is your class system then?" Arija asked.

"Yeah, I suppose you can call it that. Though some of them have no class at all," Kip joked, snorting.

Adal leaned against the building next to Kip. "What about the fourth group? You said technically there was a fourth group. Who are they and where do they fall?"

"Oh, right. The fourth group are called the Radix. These people were the first. The founding Dwellers made by Webley himself. There are only a handful of them. But because they were all handmade by Webley, they are held in higher regard, have special abilities, and serve a much higher calling than the rest of the Dwellers. You ask me, the Radix are the top of the top. The Toppers are no better than the Desps they hate. The only difference is their money. Without that, the Toppers would be the scum they accuse the Desps of being."

"Oh, wow. So, there's a whole class of Dwellers made specifically by Webley? Do you know any of them?" Adal asked.

"Ha, sure do! Let's see, there's Cog, Captain Silny, my mum, of course, and a few more you haven't met yet."

"Wait a minute. If Webley made this place and only made a handful of Dwellers, how do you guys make more?" Adal blurted.

Arija imagined a large factory with giant machines pumping out Dwellers and one guy at the end just putting batteries in them. She scrunched her face, realizing the thought was rude.

"Well, uh, that's kind of a personal question, don't you think?" Kip said.

"Oh," Adal responded, perhaps realizing exactly what he just asked their young tour guide.

Kip paused a moment, as if trying to figure out the right way

to explain the reproduction of his species. “We make more by assembly,” Kip finally said.

“Assembly?” Adal continued, ignoring Arija's dirty look.

“Yes. Okay, so here's how *that* happens: each Dweller male is made with a singular key. That key is housed in the index finger of his right hand. Each Dweller female has a keyhole just over where her heart is. When two Dwellers decide they want to, uhh, have a baby, the male inserts his key into the female's heart. The key detaches from the male and disassembles in her heart, becoming the basis of what will grow and develop into a baby Dweller. Any other questions?” Kip was staring at the ground kicking a small rock.

Adal opened his mouth, but Arija jabbed him in the side, forgetting about his bruised ribs. She needed him to stop asking the kid so many awkward questions.

Adal gasped and rubbed his sore ribs, shooting her an evil look. “All right, never mind then. Kip, let's get going.”

“Yeah! Sure thing! Hey, do you guys want to see something really cool?” Kip asked, looking up and down the street.

“Yeah, why not?” Arija agreed.

“Lead on, kid,” Adal motioned up the street.

Kip seemed more than grateful for the change in subject. He pushed off the wall and jogged several feet ahead, stopping at the mouth of an alleyway. He looked down the passage, then back to Adal and Arija. A grin stretched so widely across his small face that Arija could almost hear his metallic cheeks creaking.

“It's this way. Just follow my lead and play it cool. They know me, but don't really like outsiders. Don't worry, I'll vouch for you, so it'll be fine.” Kip turned and made his way down the alley.

“Adal, I swear to God...” Arija began, shaking her head.

“Relax. I got this. I'll keep Kip on track,” Adal reassured, chasing after the small Dweller. Arija sighed and followed.

As soon as they made the turn down the alley, Arija paused to give herself a moment to take it all in. Dim, yellow lights ran the length of the brick walls of the surrounding shops. A large assortment of indescribable machinery and trash cluttered the

path, making the alley nearly impassable.

Kip was already halfway down the street, climbing over what looked like a pile of junk. Arija let out a frustrated sigh.

“I know, I know. Let’s just keep a lookout,” Adal replied without turning to acknowledge her.



## 32 | Hazard Dice



Arija glared at the back of Adal's head as he walked. She squinted, trying with everything she had to set his head on fire with her thoughts. They had just barely survived the fight with Fausto, and here they were. Off on another adventure to God knows where, as though none of it had happened. There was a sinking feeling in her gut, like she'd swallowed a boulder. This wasn't going to end well.

Adal stopped, and Arija peered around him to see what was going on. They had caught up to Kip, but a two-story high mound of discarded trash and metal parts blocked their way. The feeling in Arija's stomach deepened. They were trapped. She sucked a shallow breath, opening her mouth to suggest they go back the way they came but, before she could say anything, Kip motioned to the brick wall of the building next to them. A crudely drawn pair of dice was etched into one of the bricks.

"That's how you know where they are." Kip's small voice bounced off the walls and the pile of trash, making it sound louder than it actually was. Without going into further detail, Kip walked to the scrap pile and lifted a tarp that hung to one side. Beneath it was an opening that led into the pile. He turned and waved for Arija and Adal to follow.

Arija gave a cautious glance to the empty alley behind her, then followed Kip and Adal into the opening.

Past the blockade, Dwellers walked the narrow alley in

masses. It was like stepping into a new world. Lights were strewn about haphazardly, tables were packed with Dwellers talking and eating. There were vendors peddling goods, and what sounded like a loud mixture of rock and opera music was playing.

“What?” Adal turned to look back at the blockade. “How? Why... Uhh, why didn’t we hear any of this on the other side of the tarp? We were just ten feet away and nothing.”

Kip gave a silent laugh. “Disruptors,” he said, as if it were the simplest thing in the world. “How else could we do that? It keeps the local crowd and curious walkers away. Best part, most flat-foots won’t even come down the alley. This place is a secret. It’s where I go to have fun when I’m not working on Mum’s machines.”

Kip dogged the other Dwellers in the crowd effortlessly, but Arija was not as lucky. As she walked, slack-jawed and curious, she bumped into virtually everyone and everything that crossed her path.

“I’m not sure we should be here.” Arija eyed a group of Dweller men, who looked like they could be serial killers, beating the crap out of another Dweller with bent pieces of metal. Everywhere she looked, men seemed to be gambling and drinking from large copper mugs. Any time a Dweller thought someone else was looking at them funny, another fight would break out.

“Yeah, I’m not sure about this one either. I feel like the kid just took us to a members only biker club,” Adal added as he stepped around a Dweller passed out in the middle of the walkway.

“Are you guys coming or what? The fun stuff is up here,” Kip said as he disappeared from sight around a corner.

Adal looked at Arija for confirmation. She had suddenly become hyperaware, and was eyeing everything with a skeptical stare. She glanced at Adal, then tapped the side of her face by her eye. Adal gave her a curt nod, understanding that she wanted him to stay alert. As they rounded the corner, Adal was stopped by a small metallic hand to his stomach.

“Mother—” Adal gasped, bending at the waist.

Arija couldn't help it; she let out a small laugh as she patted him on the back. "Whad'd ya learn?" she teased, grabbing Adal by the shoulder and pulling him upright.

"Sorry, I didn't want you to interrupt the game! They don't appreciate it much if you throw off their rolls. Back Slangers are very particular about how they roll the dice."

Kip pointed to a group of Dwellers all kneeling in a circle. In the center of the circle were several small piles of gold coins. Each of the coins had the anvil and hammer seal engraved on its face.

One Dweller was viciously jiggling his hand and kissing the tops of his knuckles. "My main will be eight. Come on baby. My main will be eight." He threw the dice across the circle, and everyone leaned in to see what he rolled.

Arija tilted her head and tried to see what they landed on, but she could tell by the Dweller's reaction that it wasn't what he wanted. "Damn!" The Dweller punched his fist into the concrete. A small crack appeared where he hit.

"That's number three, you lose!" barked another Dweller as he snatched up the dice.

The sore loser rose from his spot and shouted further obscenities before stomping away.

"What are they playing?" Adal asked as he watched the losing Dweller disappear down the alley.

"Hazard Dice. It's a fun game once you get the hang of it. I never lose." Kip proudly puffed out his chest.

Adal and Arija inched closer to the circle of gamblers as the crowd began to energize, and a new player picked up the dice. Several other spectators did the same, crowding around Adal and Arija, and pushing them closer to the circle.

"So, how do you play?" Adal turned back to ask Kip, but the kid was gone. "Kip?"

"Where'd he go?" Arija asked, concern pouring from her voice. She swiveled her head from side to side, looking for their tour guide, but the crowd of Dwellers had almost doubled now that a new player was in the circle. This wasn't the sort of place she wanted to be lost in. A burst of cheers made Arija flinch, and she

momentarily turned her attention back to the game.

Several of the gamblers were scooping up their chips and stepping back as a Dweller entered the ring holding Kip by the scruff of his collar. He was smaller than most of the other Dwellers they'd seen, with slender features that reminded Arija of a teenaged boy. Once everyone's attention was on the newcomer, he threw Kip to the ground in the center of the circle.

"Look what I found, fellas! The little rodent has come back to play! Didn't I warn you what would happen if you didn't stay away from here, little rodent?" The teenaged Dweller snarled as he spoke, like he'd smelled something disgusting.

Kip tried to stand, but the Dweller kicked him back to the ground with the tip of his black leather boot.

"Let it go, Lupo! I won those games fair and square!" Kip shouted, adjusting his cap as he stood.

"Fair my ass! You cheated! You know it, I know it, everyone knows it. You always cheat! I told you if you ever dragged yourself back to my alley, I would break you down piece by piece until you're nothing but a pile of scrap! Guess that's what you want, since you're back here like the dumbass you are."

Lupo reached for Kip, only to be kicked in the shin. He howled in pain and rubbed his leg.

"You little shit! I'm gonna break you down into so many pieces, even your whore of a mother won't be able to put you back together!" Lupo grabbed Kip by his collar, yanking him into the air.

"Put the kid down!" Adal pushed through the crowd and stepped into the circle, followed by Arija. The previously cheering crowd suddenly fell silent as the Topsiders faced off with the bully.

"Topsiders! What the hell are they doing here?"

"They are my friends!" Kip choked, trying and failing to swing his legs and kick Lupo.

"Hey! I said drop the kid, or I'll drop you. Not going to repeat that, asshole!" Adal took several steps into the center of the circle, his fists clenched, and his jaw jutting out as he scowled.

Arija was right behind him, surveying the crowd and assessing who and what could be a possible threat. Adal usually had tunnel vision when he got into confrontations, so it was up to Arija to keep an eye on their surroundings. She had to make sure he didn't get them into more trouble than he could handle.

As they neared Lupo and Kip, a fat, gold-colored Dweller stepped out of the crowd and stood next to Lupo. He wore green leather overalls that were ripped up one leg and covered in mysterious black stains. His tungsten hair stuck out of the top of his head like a patch of neatly cut metallic grass, and a small patch of stretched leather skin the color of the setting sun covered one hand.

A sound caught Arija's attention and, as she glanced over her shoulder, she saw two more Dwellers step into the circle. Adal continued toward Lupo and his friend, completely oblivious to the other two Dwellers that had entered the ring behind him.

Arija focused her attention on the newcomers, blocking the path between them and Adal.

One was taller, with short cobalt hair and an open white leather vest revealing his smooth, cobalt chest. His long wiry legs were covered in thick, black leather, and stuck out of a torso that seemed too short for his size. The other Dweller was more Arija's size with thick, black-rimmed glasses on a round bronze face. He grabbed the edges of his brown leather pants and hiked them up, adjusting his belt and tucking in his shirt. One of his arms was completely covered in stretched leather and crudely pinned to itself. The golden-brown fake skin was too tight in some areas and too loose in others, like a back-alley facelift, and Arija cringed at the sight.

"Oh! A Topsider with a sense of humor! Why don't you mind your business? This is between me and this worthless little shit!" Lupo shook Kip, the kid swinging like a rag doll under the bully's grip.

"Last time. Put the kid down," Adal commanded.

The tall Dweller and the one with glasses took simultaneous steps toward Arija, looking past her to their leader like she wasn't

there.

“Not the best decision, boys. If I were you, I wouldn't pick this fight... But if you insist, you'll have to go through me first.” Arija clenched her teeth as she grinned, positioning her weight on the balls of her feet.

“Remember, you can't punch them,” Adal whispered to Arija without turning his head to look at her.

“Elias. Coffee shop,” she replied, bringing a smile to Adal's face.

Lupo took another look at Adal and Arija, growled through his teeth, then threw Kip to the ground.

“Split, kid. Get out of here.” Adal waved his hand at Kip, who stood and backed away to the edge of the crowd.

“No, stay. When we're done with your friends, we'll get to you, I promise.” Lupo looked over his shoulder at the young Dweller. Kip spat at the ground.

“Beat it, Kip!” Adal bellowed.

Kip jumped in place, then slowly slunk into the crowd, vanishing from sight.

Once he was sure Kip was gone, Adal turned his attention back to Lupo.

“So, Topsiders here to save the day, eh? Isn't that cute.” Lupo slowly walked in a circle around Adal, his face scrunched up like the cocky teenager he was. His smile was two gnarled rows of crooked teeth, several covered in rust.

“What do you say we make an example of these Topsiders and find a better use for them?” Lupo posed to his crew, who all grunted their approval.

Arija's muscles tighten as the two Dwellers in front of her began to bob in place, preparing to attack. They shifted their weight onto the tips of their toes and hunched down, leaning slightly in her direction. Arija tried to hide the smile that lingered at the edges of her mouth. Telegraphing. She knew exactly what their next move would be, and she was prepared.

“Look, man, this doesn't have to go this way,” Adal was saying, trying to end the fight before it began.

“Oh, excuse me! I thought we were having a nice conversation here. Do all Topsiders have such an attitude? Maybe spending some time with the Toppers will change your perspective. Or, rather, as a Topper.” Lupo laughed, a wicked, throaty sound that made Arija want to cough.

The group around them waited in silence to see what would happen next. Not a single Dweller moved as the scene unfolded. Arija kept glancing at the crowd, scanning for any other possible threats, but she didn't want to pull her eyes away from Legs and Glasses.

“Want to run that by us one more time?” Arija joined the conversation, bouncing her eyes between the two Dwellers in front of her and the crowd.

“Oh, the female speaks! Let's hope she's more entertaining than her male counterpart. One thing that makes me so good at what I do is, when I see an opportunity, I never pass it up. Some may see you two as pests. Two ignorant Topsiders walking around the Machine and sticking their noses into everyone's business. Me? I see a business opportunity.” Lupo took a step sideways, towards Arija.

“Don't touch her, or it will be the last thing you do!” Adal growled.

“Oh, are you going to protect your mate? How quaint,” Lupo said, but he retreated anyway.

“It's not me you should worry about,” Adal replied. “I wouldn't piss her off if you value your extremities.”

Lupo looked from Adal to Arija and then back to Adal again, trying to figure out what exactly he was trying to do.

“As I said...” Lupo continued, “I don't miss out on an opportunity. Looking at you two, I see a fortune I need to cash in on. Can you fellas imagine the bits some Toppers would pay to replace their fake leather skin with a full, real Topsider skin suit?”

Arija broke her gaze briefly from the two Dwellers and looked over her shoulder at Adal. Her eyebrows knit together and a sour taste filled her mouth. This definitely wasn't going to end well.

Lupo walked over to Adal, who stood like a statue, his fists so

tightly clenched that his knuckles popped. The Dweller leaned in until their chests were touching, and ran his long finger across Adal's cheek. "Think of the bits I'll get with real Topsider skin."

"Look, asshat, you need to stop this. I'm not warning you, I'm telling you. You don't want to go down this road." Adal knocked Lupo's hand away and tilted his head, pointing his chin at him. He raised his hands, pushing at the air between the two and signaling for the Dweller to back up.

Lupo took this gesture as fear. "Oh, what a rich idea. The fact is, there's nothing you can do to stop me. If I say you're just parts, then you're just parts. That's how it works out here." Lupo extended a thin finger and jabbed it into Adal's right shoulder.

Adal took a deep breath and stepped back.

"What's the matter, Topsider? The reality of your situation sinking in. Feeling beaten already?" Lupo joked, laughing and nodding to his lackeys.

Adal slowly shook his head. "No, it's not that. I just really don't want to get stuck with that damn needle again." Adal looked over to Arija, who rolled her eyes.

"You... what?" Lupo looked between Adal and Arija, confusion covering his metallic features.

Before he could react, Adal reared back and thrust his right leg into Lupo's chest. A metal crunch rang out as Lupo's face fell blank from surprise. He stumbled backward into his friend, who still stood behind him.

Taking the opportunity, Legs and Glasses lunged at Arija. She expected it and charged lower. Using his body weight against him, Arija flipped Glasses over her shoulders. He landed with a hard metallic 'thunk' on the ground behind her. She pivoted on her toes and dove at Legs.

Out of the corner of her eye Arija saw the Dweller next to Lupo charge at Adal. He flinched, throwing a powerful right hook out of reflex. A sharp metallic 'ping' echoed off the walls of the alley as Adal's fist made contact with the Dweller's face, creating a small dent in the teen's cheek. Adal looked at his balled-up fist with wide eyes.



“Now that’s what I’m talkin’ about!” he shouted as he stepped toward the staggered attacker, hands at the ready. The metallic mixture Avani had injected into Adal’s hands to fix his broken bones must have made them immensely powerful and resilient.

The Dweller stumbled back, running his shaking fingers across the dent in his cheek.

Arija gained purchase over Legs and interlocked her legs with his, twisting them about. She applied leverage to the top of his foot and wrenched it backward.

The Dweller shouted in pain as small creaks, cracks, and pops came from his ankle and leg.

“Looks like you won’t have a leg to stand on,” Arija grunted. She snickered at her own pun as another ‘pop’ echoed from the Dweller’s leg.

“Really?” Adal scoffed next to Arija, ducking a follow-up volley of enraged swings from Lupo and his follower.

“Mind your own business!” Arija shot back as Glasses got to his feet. He stalked over to her and kicked her in the side of the face.

Arija’s world spun and, as she let go of the other Dweller, she felt herself being dragged across the ground. She reached up, grabbed both of his arms, and used her weight to pull him down to her level. Arija locked his wrists and flipped her feet into the air, pressing them against the Dweller’s throat. Glasses gasped and grabbed for her feet as he was forced forward.

“I’ll kill you both and then skin you alive!” shrieked Lupo as he desperately swung at Adal. Adal ducked under the flurry of strikes. He brought his right fist up under Lupo’s chin, sending him sprawling backward. In the shuffle, the second Dweller rushed in, forcing Adal to punch at him with his left hand. The hand that was still skin and bone.

“Daaaaaaaamn!” Adal shouted, recovering and swinging his right hand at his attacker. But he must have been distracted by the pain, and the swing went wide.

The Dweller collided with Adal’s waist, thrusting him back as the two fell to the ground next to Arija in a twisted pile of man and machine.

Adal’s skull collided with the hard ground. In a fit of desperation, he blindly swung his right arm upward, and it connected with his attacker’s left eye.

Arija lay on the concrete with her feet stretched over her head, still pressed against Glasses’ throat. She wanted to go to Adal, but she couldn’t let go of Glasses, or he would crush her face with the weight of his body. Legs had crawled to the edge of

the crowd, nursing his broken appendages, but Glasses just wouldn't quit.

As Arija shifted her weight to position the Dweller's arm behind his back, he was able to free himself and grab her by the throat. "I... don't... think... so," she gasped, pressing her foot into his chest and thrusting outward.

The Dweller's grip weakened just enough for her to grab all the fingers on his left hand and yank them backward. The sound of them breaking reminded her of snapping twigs, and Arija cringed.

Glasses shouted and released her, reflexively cradling his broken fingers with his free hand.

Arija took this moment to plant the heel of her boot in his jaw, causing him to jerk away, and roll to the edge of the onlooking crowd.

## 33 | Off With Their Skin



The metallic taste of blood filled Adal's mouth as the Dweller punched him in the jaw. He spat crimson liquid into the Dweller's eyes, and followed with another powerful swing of his right hand.

The Dweller slumped to the side, a wheezing sack of metal.

Adal rolled out from under him, then pulled himself to his feet. Just as he was about to kick the Dweller in the ribs, a loud 'pop' made him jump, and several of the onlookers scattered.

At the edge of the circle, Lupo stood like a statue, with a pistol pointed in the air. The corner of his right eye twitched as he lowered the gun and leveled it at Arija.

Adal prepared himself to charge, but Lupo turned the gun on him. He waved the gun erratically, back and forth between the two of them, like a psychotic game of eenie, meenie, miney, mo.

"That's enough!" Lupo shouted. Brown liquid sprayed from his mouth with each word.

Arija slowly rose to her feet, both hands in the air, and her eyes trained on the gun. Lupo was too far away for her to risk rushing him, and as she tilted her head toward Adal. He knew what she was thinking, and he slowly shook his head.

"You... you... assholes! Enough fighting! Enough snarky remarks! I may have been overzealous with the idea of skinning the two of you and selling you to the highest bidder. To be honest, it would have taken some time to find a buyer with enough money to afford the goods. But now, I think I'll do it for fun." Lupo turned his attention to his broken and cowering friends. "You

three, get off your asses!”

His men grunted as they collected themselves and helped one another up. Lupo snarled impatiently as he waited for them to join him.

“Oh, this is ridiculous. The three of you are useless! What’s wrong, too much time spent robbing old ones and not enough time actually being Back Slangers? Fine!” Lupo took a step into the circle and opened his mouth to address the crowd.

Before he could utter a word, Arija spoke. “What’s the matter? Need to hide behind your little gun and your friends? Maybe if you just put the gun down and politely apologize, my friend and I won’t have to hurt you again.”

Adal furiously shook his head as Lupo turned his attention back to her and aimed the gun at her face. “Is that so?”

“Hey man, bring that over here! You going to let her mouth get to you? I’m the one that beat your ass!” Adal stepped toward Lupo, hands out in an attempt to shield Arija.

“Fine! The two of you want to play this game? I can abide. The lot of you!” Lupo looked past Adal to the crowd. “The first one to bring me their skin will get thirty percent of what it takes in!”

Adal glanced at the group of men that stood directly behind him. Several of them were whispering to one another and nodding as they looked at Adal and Arija, like hunters on the prowl.

“Hey, girl! You good?” Adal said over his shoulder, splitting his attention between Lupo and the buzzing group of onlookers.

“Oh, sure thing. No worries here!” Confident sarcasm dripped from each word Arija spoke.

“Not so smug now, are you?” Lupo laughed as worry spread across Adal and Arija’s faces.

A Dweller man standing next to Adal produced a small pocket knife, and wiped the blade on the side of his dirty, brown pants. The tension in the circle thickened, as if the air was made of maple syrup.

As Adal looked at all the sad, angry, reluctant eyes, he said a silent prayer they’d find a way out of this. A distant sound tickled at his ear and, as he brought his attention to it, the sound

morphed into the crunching of metal. Adal and Arija looked at each other, their faces screwed up in confusion as the sound grew progressively louder.

Suddenly, an explosion burst from the mob, sending the Dwellers nearest to Adal flying and their various parts raining down on them.

Arija leaped from the path of the explosion and rolled over to where Adal stood, stunned.

A car plowed at full speed through the huddled mass, casting aside all the would-be attackers. Everything happened so fast that Adal didn't have time to process how a car could have gotten into the alley in the first place.

Lupo raised his gun to fire as the car fishtailed toward him but, before he could shoot, the trunk of the car smacked into him, sending him sailing through the air. His gun landed with a loud bang on the roof of the car.

"Sorry to interrupt the party, but are you two ready to go yet?" Kip panted through the broken glass of the shattered driver-side window.

Adal stood petrified for a moment, his mind buzzing as he tried to piece together what had just happened. A few of the Dwellers near them started to pick themselves up, no doubt thinking the same thing.

"What the hell is this?" a petite Dweller woman shouted.

"Hey, that's *our* payday!" The Dweller with the pocket knife said as he brushed the dirt from his pants and went to stand next to the woman.

"Get in the car!" Adal and Arija shouted at one another in tandem.

Without thought, they both grabbed the handle of the door, only to find it had been jammed by the impact. After a few good pulls, Adal gave up and grabbed the handle for the back door. Luckily, it was still in working order, and the two pushed themselves into the car, slamming the door behind them just as a short, navy-blue Dweller smashed his fist into the window.

Arija fumbled with the door, holding the handle while the

Dweller tried to pull it open. “Where the hell is the lock!” she screeched. The door came open a few inches. She pulled harder on the handle, slamming it shut again.

Adal leaned over Arija and ran his hand along the top of the car until he found a switch. He pressed the switch, and the door made a faint clicking sound. Arija kept her shaking hands on the door handle even as the Dweller gave up and started to kick the rear tire of the vehicle.

“Drive! Drive! Drive!” Adal shouted as a rock came bursting through the window and nearly hit Arija in the face. A surprised yelp escaped her lips, and she grabbed the rock and threw it back through the shattered window.

“Hold onto your nuts and bolts!” Kip slammed the accelerator, peeling the tires and kicking up enough street dust to give them a cloud to escape in.

The vehicle jerked forward, throwing Adal and Arija against the soft, leather seat. The gun that had landed on the roof of the car slid through an open sunroof and hit Adal in the stomach before settling in his lap. He gasped as Kip drove rampant through the narrow alleyway, striking virtually everything ahead of them.

“Kip, careful! You’re going to kill someone!” Arija shouted. She scooched to the edge of her seat to watch as Kip rounded another corner. The car tilted, lifting slightly onto two wheels, and Arija slid into Adal, bracing herself on his door so she wouldn’t fall into his lap.

“Now really isn't the time for that, Arija.”

Arija jabbed her elbow into Adal’s groin as she pushed herself up, resulting in a loud groan from Adal. Several bangs erupted behind them. The rear window exploded, sending shards of glass raining over them.

“Kip!” Arija shouted as she covered her head with her hands. “Are they shooting at us?”

“Well, they aren't throwing us a party!” Kip replied, pressing harder on the accelerator. Several more shots pierced the air and Adal leaned down, fumbling with the pistol that had fallen to his

feet.

“I’m over this!” he yelled, leaning halfway out of the window and taking aim at the pursuing crowd of Dwellers. Several Dwellers were wearing fliegensacks and waving sticks or pipes. Some even had small guns as they struggled to catch up to the car. One thin, wiry Dweller that looked like he couldn’t be a day over fifteen had a pile of rocks and was struggling to keep himself flying straight while aiming at the car. He zig-zagged down the alley and, as they took a turn, he lost control and spun into a cluster of trashcans.

Adal leaned over the back seat and took aim through the broken back window. The car bounced and shook as it barreled over the cobblestones, but Adal squinted and fired at the closest Dweller he could see carrying a gun.

“What are you doing?” Arija demanded as he fired a second round.

Adal was certain he hadn't hit anyone, but the shooting was enough to cause some of their pursuers to scatter. Ahead of them, a large container stuck out from the side of the building near the exit to the secret alley.

Arija snatched the gun from Adal's hand. “Give me that!”

As the car drove under the container, Arija leaned out of the window and fired four shots at the base of the giant drum near a large pipe that fed into it. The pressure from the container’s contents forced the pipe aside, and a violent flow of rust-colored liquid spewed out, covering the street. The car had just enough time to get out of the way as the flow hit the ground, but thick liquid enveloped several of the closest Dwellers.

“Ah man! What is that stuff?” Adal asked, clenching his face in disgust at the possibilities.

“Did the job, didn’t it?” Arija blew a thin line of smoke from the barrel of the gun.

“I mean, I could’ve done that,” Adal mumbled sheepishly.

“It’s just cider,” Kip said. “They store it in those towers so they don't have to worry about tons of barrels sitting around. Limited space in these alleys you know.” Kip yanked the wheel



and sent Arija and Adal colliding with one another again as he finally brought them to the main road and forced his way into traffic. Adal gave a loud sigh of relief as a barrage of horns and shouting replaced the terrified thumping of his heart.

“You guys all right? That was amazing!” Kip let out a manic laugh. “Life was never this exciting before you two showed up. Now that I got us some wheels, let’s start the official Kip tour!”

Adal stared, his mouth slightly ajar. He turned to find Arija staring right back at him, shaking her head. Somehow, he doubted Kip had any difficulty getting himself into trouble.

## 34 | The Creator



To Adal's relief, the next several hours of the tour went without much fuss. Agreeing with his begging passengers, Kip reluctantly kept the rest of the tour tame by showing them what he called "Topper fluff."

Amazing structures and machines were intricately woven into the fabric of the seemingly infinite city and, at some point, Arija had climbed into the front seat with Kip and drew as she stared out the window.

Arija glanced over at Kip, who was droning on about the place he'd stolen his first something or other.

Adal lazily watched Arija draw, wondering how the hell she had managed to hold on to that book this entire time. He leaned against the window and watched as building upon building passed while Kip explained how the city was designed in levels.

"If you really wanna see something cool, we gotta go up!" Kip twisted in his seat to look at Adal and narrowly missed an oncoming car that blared its horn at them. "One day, when I can get us a Fliegenmobi... Oh uh, that's a car with wings. Once I can nab us one of those, we can really have some fun!" Kip said as he practically bounced in his seat with excitement. After everything they'd been through that day, even Adal wasn't sure if that was a good idea or not.

As they turned onto a side road, a Topper woman pushed open the door to a large brick building. Her light-blue ruffled dress was hanging off one shoulder, and she looked side to side before she stepped out of the building, pulling a Dweller man behind her. As Kip got closer, Adal recognized the Dweller as one of the dock workers. The Dweller leaned in, planting a lingering kiss on the woman's cheek, causing her to giggle and push him away. She stepped back into the doorway and waved goodbye as she nervously glanced around the street again, then quietly shut the door behind her.

"What was that about?" Adal asked, pointing to the Dweller who was adjusting his suspenders on the side of the street.

"Oh, that? Just a little bit of Topper fun. They like to slum it with the dock workers every now and again when their husbands are out in the Machine. Everyone knows about it, but it's something no one talks about." This time Kip kept his eyes on the road as he spoke.

Adal didn't reply, he just looked out the window, watching the dock worker make his way down the road.

Eventually, they came clanking and grinding to a halt just

around the corner from Avani's shop. Adal couldn't help but admire Kip. He had a cavalier 'don't care what happens as long as it's fun' attitude that made for an interesting day, to say the least.

"All right, you two. We're back. You can go about your boring evening with Cog and Webley. I'll leave you here to make your way back in. I have to get rid of this thing before Mum sees me. Just tell her I went up and started working on the mobile clinic again."

Adal leaned forward and patted Kip on the shoulder. "Thanks, little man. This was a cool day after all. Take it easy." With a final tap of appreciation, Adal slid over the seat and stepped out of the car.

Arija forced her lips into a thin smile. "Yes, thank you for the tour and for not entirely getting us killed. Do me a favor, don't get into any more trouble tonight?" Arija winked as Kip nodded wildly, a toothy grin stretched across his freckle-spattered face.

"No promises, Miss. Can only do what I do."

Arija collected her bag and stepped out to the curb with Adal. With a final wave at his former passengers, Kip rocketed off down the street, the tires peeling once more and steam pouring from beneath the car as it disappeared around the corner.

"That kid is going to get us killed," Arija said, shaking her head.

"Yeah, but what a way to go out!" Adal laughed, putting his arm around her.

"Hey, you all right? Hasn't really been the most chill day we've had together." Adal straightened, his smile fading.

"I'm fine. Definitely not a normal day, but we survived it, so that's something." Arija smiled and nudged Adal in the ribs, pushing him away playfully. "No thanks to you, that is!"

"What the hell did I do?"

Arija raised an eyebrow and tilted her head. "Really? We going to start on this one?"

"You mean when I kept those guys off you in the alley, or shooting at them to slow them down? You wouldn't be here if it weren't for all of this." Adal grinned and stretched his arms, flexing to show off his muscles.

“Oh, my hero... not. You mean when I took down two Dwellers using only my momentum and locks because I don't have some super fist? Nice going, by the way, *Hulk smash*. Oh, how about when I fired the shots that actually stopped the mob from chasing us? Jeez, what would have happened if I didn't have my big, strong Adal with me?” Arija rolled her eyes, doing her best to look fragile and delicate, all while laughing at Adal.

Adal thought in silence for a moment, then grinned back. “See! You did notice!”

Arija scoffed and walked past him toward Avani's office.

“Ah, don't be like that!” Adal shouted, jogging after her. He picked her up and spun her around, placing her gently down on the ground in front of him.

Arija buried her elbow once more into his ribs.

“You can fight it, but I know you like it,” Adal said between coughs. Since they'd both come to the Machine only a day ago, the two hadn't had the chance to just hang out and get a feel for what was going on. Webley and Cog's plans kept them occupied. Adal would never admit it, but he was enjoying this moment of normalcy. It reminded him that, no matter what happened in the Machine, Arija still had his back.

Adal wrapped his arm around Arija's shoulders, and she playfully hip-checked him as they walked into Avani's office.

A familiar laugh rumbled through the room, and Adal immediately knew Webley was back from cleaning up the docks. As Adal and Arija entered the main room from the foyer, they saw Webley, Cog, and Avani standing in the office's center. Webley was doubled over in a fit of laughter.

“Ello there!” Webley boomed, raising his hands high and scooping both Adal and Arija into a bear hug. “Welcome back from yer tour. ‘Ope ye enjoyed what ye saw of the city.” Webley squeezed once more and put them down.

Adal and Arija gave a nervous laugh as they looked at one another, silently deciding to keep the day's events to themselves.

“It was great,” Arija began, re-parting and smoothing the hair that Webley had ruffled when he picked them up.

“Yeah! This place is ridiculous! I really can’t believe this whole place is down here,” Adal added, nervously tugging his shirt straight.

“Well, today was not the most pleasant of starts on your adventures in the Machine. Hopefully, there won’t be any future issues,” Cog interjected.

“I think you just need to watch over these two a little better.” Everyone turned to Avani as she spoke. “This place can be amazing, but there are still, and always will be, dangers. It’s the nature of the Machine. I see it all the time. Just promise you will watch over these two.”

“Avani, I can promise ye tha’ there won’ be any more funny business with my guests. Today was ‘orrible, but I think I’ve taken care of tha’.”

Adal wondered what Avani meant, but was too busy inspecting his right knuckles to pay much attention. How was he ever going to explain the metal in his hand if he had to get medical attention back home?

“Thank you, Webley. On that note, where is Kip? How was he as a tour guide?” Avani inquired.

“Oh, uh, great! He really showed us... uh... all the different parts of the city.” Arija tried her best to sound collected and believable. She shot a look at Adal, whose eyes widened as the attention focused on him.

“Yeah! He was a perfect guide, very... entertaining.” Adal coughed as the last word caught in his throat.

Avani’s smile thinned slightly, and she took a few steps toward them. Her raised brow reminded Adal of his father when he caught him in a lie. Damn.

“Really? That’s nice.” Avani took a few more steps toward Adal, her hands planted firmly on her hips. “Tell me, where is Kip now?” She narrowed her eyes and looked back and forth between Arija and Adal, gauging their expressions.

“Oh, uh, he said he had to work on the mobile clinic. Good guy, Kip. All he talked about the whole tour was getting back here and finishing up the clinic for you,” Adal lied, his voice shaky.

Avani's eyes sharpened. "Oh! He stole another car, didn't he? I am going to hide all his tools when I get a hold of him!" Avani barked as she turned on her heels and marched off into the shop.

"Way to lay that one on thick, Adal!" Arija slapped him on the back.

"My bad!"

Webley started to roll with laughter and Cog looked to where Avani had gone, his mouth hanging slightly open as she disappeared around the corner. Adal smiled as he watched Cog. He was a little strange and gave him weird vibes when they first met, but now he could see the Dweller was just terribly awkward.

"Oh! Tha' Kip sure is keepin' her busy! Wha' do ye two say? Want te get back to the house? Been a bit of a long day, no?" Webley walked past them and made his way over to the door, opening it and waving his arm outside.

"I'm down for that. One thing, though; can we *not* fly back?" Adal asked, shaking his head at the thought of having to fly anywhere any time soon.

"Yeah, I'm with him on this one," Arija added.

"I think a ride in the rail car might be in order. Webley, what are your thoughts?" Cog pulled his attention away from Avani and back to the group.

"Well, I don' see why not!"

The ride back went without incident. Webley remained silent for the most part, conducting and operating the rail car as they sped through the Machine towards his home.

Arija and Adal sat in silence, peering through the glass at what sights they could behold before they became an indistinguishable blur. Cog worked in a box attached to the wall next to the control panel, adjusting various things that neither Adal nor Arija could see.

"Webley, did you adjust these capacitors?" Cog peeked his head out of the box, his face streaked with oil. Webley only shrugged his shoulders and grunted. Cog dove back into his work.

Arija leaned her head on Adal's shoulder as she watched the

mechanical world fly by. A few minutes later, Cog stuck his head back out of his box. "When did we upgrade these components? They aren't functioning well with the connectors at all. That is why this thing is sluggish."

Again, Webley only shrugged his shoulders and, after a few seconds of silence, Cog huffed and dipped back into his box.

Finally, there was a high-pitched screech followed by a plume of steam as the railcar came to a stop in front of Webley's house. Exhaustion had taken over Adal's body, and he lazily slid from the seat, climbed out of the railcar and into Webley's house, as if he had done it a thousand times.

Webley, Adal, and Arija sat in silence at the table as Cog served a steaming bowl of some sort of soup. Adal hadn't spoken one word since they'd gotten on the railcar and the aches and pains that covered his body had made themselves known as his whole body throbbed.

Adal looked across the table to Arija, who was propped up on her elbow, spooning chunks of broccoli into her mouth. Even Webley was abnormally quiet, the only sounds in the house those of Webley slurping his dinner.

"Well, I think some coffee is in order." Cog's voice shattered the silence. "Everyone into the study and I'll bring some in."

The fire crackled as they all sat in comfort on the oversized leather seating. Arija had begun to thumb through a large book of paintings sitting on the small coffee table in front of the couch. Adal was staring into the fire, casually sipping his coffee. Both Webley and Cog just sipped from their cups and stared awkwardly into the distance.

"So, what's the deal with this place?" Adal finally asked, finishing his coffee and sitting back in his seat. "Like, you built this place, but where did you come from? What started all of this?" Once Adal's first question came, the rest followed like a bunch of sheep jumping off a cliff.

Arija put her book down and leaned back on the couch.

"Well, time works differently down 'ere, Adal. Things happen... faster. Yer parents probably 'avent even noticed ya



missin' yet. As fer how I made my machine, those 'er long tales, Adal. The day 'as been long a'ready. Ye sure ye want te' hear it all?" Webley asked, putting his bowl of coffee down and leaning forward.

Adal nodded.

"All right then. Fact is, I made this place. Long ago. Now you see all tha' is around. Simple enough. Well... uhh... I'm rubbish with stories. Cog 'an ye 'elp a guy out?" Webley took another sip of his coffee and leaned back in his chair.

"Ok. You want to know it all? After all you have seen, I think that... We think it is only fair." Cog took a deep breath and looked back to Webley, who nodded a single, slow nod to his friend.

"All right, it all began in a time before time was even a notion. I told you once before that Webley was a Creator, and I assume you took that as he fancied building things. This is true, but not the entire truth. Webley is a Creator, an old race that spends their days building life from nothing. There are entire worlds out there that the Creators call home." Cog paused, watching Adal's and Arija's reaction.

"You mean like aliens?" Adal asked after a moment.

Cog didn't reply, he just scratched the back of his head and continued with his story. "So once, from a timeless time, a Creator came to a dead rock in a galaxy lost to the rest of creation. The Creator's journeys took him to many places, but something about this system sparked his interest. So many lifeless, dead structures sat like blank canvases in a dance with a star. This Creator decided to take a brief stay on one of these structures and do what he was born to do—create."

"Wait, lifeless structures dancing around a star?" Arija began before Cog interrupted her.

"Yes, my dear. He came to this planet. The Creator burrowed deep into the core of Earth in search of a quiet place to do his work. In the beginning, he had only his ship as a home and very little to work with, venturing forth to collect the planet's natural metals so he might create. After a time, the creations began to take a form and function. Within several eons, large machines

occupied the center of this planet. Massive furnaces sprang up and began to heat the lifeless structure. Gears of immense size rotated the dead structure around its star. Eventually, a grand machine, the likes of which no Creator had ever accomplished on their own, came to life from the dark.”

Adal looked at Arija, wide-eyed, but her attention was fixed on Cog, trying to make sense of what he was saying.

“Alas, even with such creations and accomplishments, one will grow lonesome without the company of others to share in life’s experiences. So one fateful day, the Creator decided to make another creation. He gathered his best materials and crafted himself a son. A son to not only provide him with family and company, but to help him build. Although the Creator was able to bestow life on his creations and give them souls, the Dwellers he created were only able to create shells of beings that could follow orders but weren’t sentient. Only the Creator could give true life to his creations.”

Webley shifted uncomfortably. He stood like he was going to leave, then sat back down, shifting his weight from one side to the other before slouching into the chair.

Cog waited until Webley settled, giving him a look before continuing. “The two were a family, and they worked together, crafting machines and drafting new ideas for further creations. Eventually, the Creator and his son decided that it was time to grow their world. So, they set out creating several more sentient beings. These would be the first of the Dwellers. Though similar to their future lines, these were very special Dwellers, imbued with special skills to help grow the world they were creating. First came twin brothers, to help with general creation and maintenance of the machines. Next came a woman to help care for the sick and injured. The third was a mighty warrior created to protect those that dwelled within the Machine. Next came two pairs of men and women that would help bring forward the future generations of Dwellers. Finally, they created a child to always remind the group that they stood as a team. They lived in harmony for many years.”

Arija looked at Adal. When his eyes met hers, she mouthed 'Radix,' and Adal nodded back as he remembered what Kip had told them earlier that day.

"Then it all changed. Unbeknownst to the Creator or the Dwellers, life had taken form on the top side of the planet. The large furnaces the Creator had crafted were heating the planet so that it was livable to other beings. The gears the Creator kept turning to keep the Machine functioning were slowly rotating the planet and causing weather to form and life to grow. One day, a human male found his way into the Machine through a tunnel the Creator had made when his ship first burrowed into the planet. The Dwellers were all very excited and intrigued to see this new type of creature, so the Creator set out to investigate the Topside. The other Dwellers begged the Creator to let them come with him but, not knowing the dangers they might face, the Creator insisted he go alone. Several days later, the Creator returned to the Machine and sealed the hole to the Topside. He refused to talk about what had happened while he was away, but he brought bags of seeds and plants that we have used to create the gardens you see today." Cog paused and took a sip of his coffee.

"Several years later, the Creator installed the elevator you took to get down here, so he could make short trips to the Topside and gather knowledge and supplies. But he never spoke of his journeys, and he never let another Dweller accompany him. After a while, the Creator's son grew jealous of his father's ability to create life. So one day, he went to his father and asked what the secret to giving life was. His father refused to tell him. The secret to life was something only a Creator can have knowledge of. This enraged his son. And this was the beginning of the Great Divide. Eventually, the eldest son decided that, if his father would not share his knowledge with him, then he was just a slave to his father. So he began to spread lies into the ears of the Dwellers to turn them against the Creator. Some heard his wickedness while others sided with the Creator and denied the son his audience."

Adal thought back to the fight they'd had with the Dweller at the docks, and everything started to make sense. He'd wanted to

take them to someone. Whoever he was, he must be a follower of the Creator's son.

Cog continued. "Fights broke out between the two groups. In one of those fights, the child that was meant to keep the people united was killed. Each of the remaining Dwellers took a side during the Great Divide. The twins chose opposite sides, the warrior and caregiver sided with the Creator, and the birthers also split evenly between sides.

"The Creator didn't have the heart to choose between his creations, so he refused to go to battle. This left the long war to be fought amongst the Dwellers. Once all was said and done, all four of the birthers were dead. The remaining twin and the son were defeated in battle and cast into the depths of the Machine, where they remain to this day. It was left to the remaining three and the Creator to start again and rebuild. Though this war was fought and lost long ago, the fire that birthed it still smolders and occasionally flares up. This was what you had the unfortunate luck of witnessing today."

Arija and Adal sat in silence. At some point during the tale, Adal's mouth had fallen open, and there it remained. He tried to think of questions to ask, but his mind was a muddled mess. "Wait, so you... And we are... But then..." Adal mumbled incoherently. To him, it sounded like a fairytale version of the Bible. Adal couldn't believe any of this was real but, as he thought about everything he'd seen, he realized that anything was possible.

Arija's eyes could not have been any wider. "What was his name? The one that betrayed everyone?" she asked quietly, leaning further forward.

"The son? His name was Pajak. The twin that followed his new master into madness was Fausto," Cog said, falling silent and staring at his two overwhelmed and befuddled guests.

Adal thought about the Dweller on the dock and how eerily similar he looked to Cog.

Webley sat in silence, lost in the warm dance of the fire, a look of shame and sadness resting on his face.

“Hey man, are you all right?” Adal broke in, addressing Webley.

Webley let Adal’s words hang in the air for a moment before he gave a slight snuffle and brought his attention back to the room. “I’m all right, Adal. Thank ye’ for the ask. I think it’s time fer’ bed. We all need our rest fer’ tomorrow. Gonna be another grand day.”

Webley rose from his seat and bowed to Adal and Arija without making eye contact. He turned toward the kitchen and disappeared through the door.

“Perhaps he is right. Maybe we should be off to bed then.” Cog stood and walked over to the staircase that led to the upper level.

Arija and Adal slowly rose from the couch. Everything felt so strange now with this new knowledge. Maybe a good night’s sleep would help.

Halfway up the spiral stairs, Arija paused and turned to face Cog who still stood at the base of the steps. “So, today, all those things that attacked us... Webley made?”

“No, my dear. Those were bastard creations made by Pajak. Their only purpose is to follow orders. They don’t have souls. That is why the guards gave no pause in dispatching them. They are not true creations.”

“What about the Dwellers that fought with us today on the dock? The ones that died. What did you guys do with them?” Adal asked.

“That is likely the only good news of the day. So few Dwellers truly fell that Webley was able to act in time to save them. Had the destruction been greater, he may not have been able to do so. With that, some Dwellers are missing, and I do fear their fate, but there is nothing that can be done for them now. Please, get some rest. It has been a long day for us all.”

With Cog’s final request, Arija and Adal bid him goodnight and made their way to their rooms. That night, Adal slept hard, but his dreams were plagued with sporadic nightmares of a dark kingdom filled with demonic machines.



Part III  
The War

## 35 | Should We Be Getting Our Asses Out of Here?



The next morning, Adal found himself blankly staring at his reflection in the mirror. The dark circles under his eyes and scruffy stubble on his face reflected how poorly he'd slept.

Adal reached for his brush, unable to pull his eyes away from the distorted image of himself. The weight of everything he'd learned and seen had finally settled in, and he felt like he couldn't breathe. How could he focus on how he looked when there were giants on other planets bringing inanimate objects to life that wanted to kill him and wear his flesh like some creepy sci-fi version of *Silence of the Lambs*? Life would never be the same knowing what he knew. He gave up on his appearance and shuffled into the hall.



Arija sat on the edge of her bed, notebook in hand, staring at a mostly blank page. She'd been unable to sleep more than an hour at a time without waking up in a panic. At some point, she'd decided to put her thoughts on paper. Arija dragged her pencil around the question mark she'd made in the corner for the



thousandth time. She was too tired to be creative, and there were too many questions clouding her mind.

She glared up at the clock and watched the seconds count down until her alarm broke the silence. Then she slid the sketchpad back into her bag, pulled her legs up onto the bed, and sat cross-legged as the alarm sounded for a few minutes. Finally, she pulled herself off the bed to shut it off.

Arija ran her fingers through her tangled mess of hair, and dressed in the same outfit she'd worn the day before. She longed for the days when her only worry was whether she was going to win her track meet. It was time for them to go home, and she would say as much to Adal when she saw him. Things needed to get back to some form of normalcy, or she may never have a good night's sleep again. With this thought, Arija grabbed her bag and slipped out of the room.

Out in the hall, Adal was waiting for her, slouched against the railing like he was using it to hold himself up. His usual grin was replaced with a solemn stare, and Arija knew he'd gotten as good a night's sleep as she had. He glanced up at her, and she nodded, unable to force her mouth into a smile.

"Sup?" Adal managed.

"Yeah," Arija replied as Adal pushed off the railing and they made their way down the stairs. An awkward silence hung thick in the air as Adal and Arija stepped into the study. The house was strangely quiet. No Cog greeting them with his annoyingly cheerful grin and coffee, no Webley stomping around preparing for whatever they were going to do today.

In the study, the fire had long since gone out, yet the smell of smoke still filled the room. Arija looked around, hair suddenly on end, until she spotted a platter of fruit on the coffee table and a note sitting at the corner. She walked over to the kitchen and cracked the door to look inside. She turned to Adal and shook her head. Adal walked to the table and picked up the note.

*Adal and Arija,*

*We had to tend to an issue this morning. Please, enjoy the breakfast we left for you, and we shall be back shortly.*

-Cog

“Looks like we’re flying solo today.” Adal tossed the paper back to the table and turned to Arija.

“Looks that way. Great. It isn't bad enough they dropped that bomb on us last night. Now we’re stuck sitting here waiting. We really need to get back home, Adal. Things have just gotten so... complicated, and I just want to be back in my own bed.” Arija walked over to the table and picked up the note once more, only to roll her eyes and crumple it up.

“Hey, what’s the matter with you? Normally you don't throw attitude around unless it’s warranted. Did I miss something?”

Arija sighed and plopped down on the couch. She uncrumpled and re-crumpled the piece of paper a few times before she started to speak. “It’s just, well, all my life, I was raised in my family’s faith. Being told of a higher power, creation, God’s gifts, and so on. Now, I’m sitting in this world under ours, hearing the news that Webley created this place. That there are other Creators out there doing the same thing. What does that mean about God? Am I wrong? Are we wrong? This is just too insane.” Arija huffed as she spoke, exasperated and frustrated.

Adal sat down on the couch next to her and put his arm around her, squeezing her into a side hug.

“Hey, kid, I get it. I’ve never really been religious, but I know this is about what you believe. This has to hit heavy. Here’s how I look at it. Webley created this place, and all the things in it all came from him. Everything is mechanical and weird to us, right? We’ve only seen variations of people, but these Dwellers aren't like us. If a Creator like Webley had made us, then this place wouldn't be a thing and, if it were, it would be just like back home. Webley may have made this place, but we come from something else. That’s what I believe. Basically... I guess what I’m trying to say is

that there's room for God *and* the Creators to exist. Don't let that faith leave you. If this world is possible, so is ours. So are others. Besides, right now, we have other things to worry about."

"Like what?" Arija asked, her brows furrowed as she raised her head to look at him.

"Like where in the hell we're going to get some coffee in this place!" Adal laughed.

Arija let the rise and fall of his chest rock her to a slightly happier place. She smiled and threw one of her arms around him, squeezing tightly.

"You know, sometimes you aren't as dumb as you look," Arija teased. She caught Adal staring at her mouth and, when he glanced up to meet her stare, she found herself unable to look away. The world around them faded to nothing. Adal lowered his head as Arija tilted hers up. She leaned closer to him, so close she could feel the warmth of his breath tickle her lips. Her heart pounded, fighting its way out of her throat. Finally, Arija closed her eyes, needing to enjoy every second of what was about to happen.

"I don't care what you think! That's the plan. You take 'em out o' here, and I'll handle this!"

The door smacked the wall as Webley burst into the room, ruining the moment. Arija and Adal pushed away from each other. Adal cleared his throat and leaned back on the couch as if nothing had happened while Arija jumped up and took a few steps away from the couch. She stole a glance at Adal and silently wished Webley and Cog had come home just a few minutes later.

Webley looked as though he had just been through hell. His clothing was tattered and torn, and there were several deep scrapes across his face. Cog came in behind him with several small dents in his legs and arms. Neither Webley nor Cog was paying any attention to them, and the embarrassment quickly left Arija, replaced by fear.

"Webley, this isn't the time. Let me help you. They will be safe here! We must do this together. Now is not the time for you to take this up," Cog huffed, chasing after Webley and slamming his hand

on the bookshelf as he leaned his weight against it.

“Cog, move yer’ hand! You saw it too! We both barely got out o’ there. Ye need te’ get them outta here!” Webley pushed Cog’s hand away and pulled on one of the larger books on the shelf. From behind the wall, there came a metallic rumbling as the shelf slid up the wall toward the ceiling. Behind the shelf was an assortment of strange looking weapons.

Adal stood, doing a double take at the small arsenal as his mouth dropped open in awe. He let out a loud whistle, and the room fell silent. “What the hell is going on right now? Should we be getting our asses out of here or what?” Adal asked, still staring at the weapons.

“There isn't time, Adal. We need you two to stay put. There is a little problem, and we have to leave you to take care of it,” Cog replied.

Arija scoffed. “Really? You need an armory to fix a *little* problem? Cog, I like you and all, but you might want to come up with a better lie than that!”

“Get them outta ‘ere, Cog!”

“Really, there isn't time.” Cog turned back to Webley.

“Hey, first off, we aren't going anywhere. Secondly, you need to tell us what happened. We can help,” Adal added as he walked over to the wall of weapons.

“The Gearrtha tha’ attacked ye’ yesterday. They are back, an’ they are runnin’ amuck in my machine. Yesterday they attacked a train carryin’ a shipment farther inte’ th’ Machine and this mornin’ they attacked one of the furnaces. If we hadn’t gotten there in time, they would have cast us into cold an’ darkness!” Webley’s voice shook with anger and a hint of worry.

Adal looked at Arija. Her face contorted with concern and fear. If Webley was scared, then things had to be a lot worse than Arija thought.

“All right. Well, you beat them yesterday. Can you fix the furnace?” Adal asked. “I don’t get what the big deal is. It’s just a furnace.”

“We only managed to stop their attack, but they aren't

finished. As we left the area, they followed us. If we are correct, they will be here any minute, bringing the fight to the house,” Cog explained as he stuffed ammunition into a bag.

“So, they attacked a furnace?” Arija asked, finally breaking her cautious silence. “Cog, you told us last night that this machine is what powers the world, basically. The mechanics here directly affect the surface. So, what happens if you can’t fix the furnace?”

Cog and Webley fell silent, their eyes focusing on anything other than the two humans in front of them.

“Once, long ago, during the first war, one of the furnaces was destroyed, and Webley couldn’t fix it right away. Half of your world froze,” Cog replied bluntly.

Adal took a step towards Arija. “Wait, what?”

“Yes. Do not worry, though, we have a plan to stop them. What we need to worry about at the moment is getting you two to safety.”

Cog turned to Webley, but Adal interrupted before he could speak again.

“Wait a minute. You mean to say the last time you all had to handle your business, you caused an ice age? I mean damn! I sure as shit am not about to leave you guys here to fight this fight without me! I like to keep my world, you know, livable.”

Arija couldn’t agree more. What about her dad? What about Adal’s family? They couldn’t just sit around, do nothing, and let another ice age kill everyone on Earth.

“Adal, I appreciate yer’ stance. But the fact is, this isn’t yer’ fight. I can’t ask ye’ te’ join in.” Webley walked over to Adal and placed his large hand on his shoulder. “We need te’ get ye’ out of here.”

Adal and Webley’s voices faded into the background as Arija’s eyes fixed on the shelves of weapons. She reached forward, running her finger across the length of a barrel as she made up her mind about what she needed to do to protect her family. Her hand closed over a shotgun. She pulled it from the shelf while Adal, Webley and Cog argued. The gun was arm’s length, with an

ax blade stretching from the barrel. The sound of her racking the gun made both Adal and Webley jump.

Arija ran her eyes over the weapon, a small smile playing on her lips. “Look, I’m over all of this. Just... I’m done! We’re in a world that’s in the middle of ours, science doesn't matter anymore. Logic doesn’t matter anymore. I have no idea where we came from or what to even believe and these... these... assholes are constantly trying to pick a fight with us. One thing my father always taught me was to be smart enough to know my boundaries and how to overcome obstacles. My mother taught me that, when things in life hit you, hit them back even harder. Now, I’m done fighting over this. All I want to know now is; how hard does this thing hit?”

Webley and Cog turned to look at Adal, but he only shrugged back, his mouth wide open. He shook his head, perhaps to clear his thoughts.

“Damn, kid, save some for the rest of us! Look, guys, Arija’s right. This fight is about all of us now. You need as many people as you can get to fight, and we aren’t exactly helpless kids. So, are we going to do this thing or what?”

Their hosts looked at one another, having a silent conversation, before turning back to Adal and nodding.

“All right, then. The fight is upon us all. Know this, we will do what we can to help you, but likely the two of you will be on your own,” Cog warned.

“Aye, this won’ be the place fer’ rescuin’. This will be nothin’ but fightin’,” Webley added.

Adal and Arija nodded in unison.

## 36 | Suit Up



Adal's heart pulsed in his clenched fists. He was rigid with a strange combination of excitement and fear. A singular thought raged through his mind so loudly he was impressed he could still hear Webley and Cog speak. *What the hell are you doing right now?*

Arija tightened her grip on the surprisingly light weapon. Her eyes danced over the ax blade suspended underneath the barrel. Clearly, that would be Plan B.

"All right then, Arija, I think I may have some tools you will like." Cog broke the silence, walking over to her.

Webley clasped his massive hand on Adal's shoulder like a proud father. "Adal, ye' may like what I got fer' ye'."

Webley drew a large case from one of the shelves and brought it to the table, slamming it down. Adal hardly had a moment to appreciate the delicately hammered and riveted texture of its surface before Webley popped the lid open and began to shuffle through its contents, withdrawing items and clumsily slapping them on the table. Once he had taken out everything he'd been looking for, Webley closed the lid with a heavy thud.

"Firstly, put this on. Ye' will need it." Webley thrust a thick belt with a holster attached to Adal, who clipped it around his waist. "This 'ere will be yer' best friend in a pinch. A revolver of m' own design. This is how ye' open it te' reload." Webley pressed a

button, and the cylinder juttled out from the side. “It’s balanced an’ calibrated to where ye’ won’t even feel the recoil. Ten shots in there!” Webley thrust the gun into Adal’s hand and grabbed another weapon. “Now, these are a set of forged Damascus tungsten knuckles. Also, m’ own design. I saw that ye’ are a fan of pugilism so these may find ye’ well. Will near crush anythin’ ye swing at!”

“Wait don’t you mean steel?”

“No I don’t,” Webley replied. He didn’t give Adal enough time to retort before he added, “Ye’ll find plenty of munitions in tha’ bandolier belt ye’ got on. Oh, an’ the last bit fer ye’...”

Webley picked up the last weapon on the table and tossed it to Adal—a shotgun similar to the one Arija had chosen. Only this one had two large drums on it, and the racking mechanism was a lever that a hand slid into on the grip. Adal took a moment to take it all in.

“Tha’ there is a personal favorite o’ mine. Rotatin’ drums hold fifty rounds o’ ammunition. Ye’ eject them from here and slap a new one in just like tha’. Rock that lever to load the next round. Simple. Oh, and take these replacement drums.” Webley handed Adal two more drums attached to a leather sling.

As Adal threw the leather sling over his shoulder, the weight of the situation finally hit him. He was about to head into a war that only forty-eight hours ago, he didn't even know existed.

Yeah, sure, sometimes he spoke a big game. And usually, he didn’t have an issue backing it up. But this was different. This time, he wondered how he was going to do this. This wasn’t some bully talking shit. This was life or death. And if something went wrong, Adal could lose his best friend.

Then his thoughts fell to his grandfather. Grandpa Lawrence hadn’t been older than eighteen when he’d taken up the calling to fight evil. Was it really so crazy to think he could do the same? Weren’t these people in need of help just like the people that Grandpa Lawrence fought for? Adal remembered how his grandfather told the story of the first time he’d been thrown into battle. How scared he was, but how, with the support of his fellow



soldiers, he knew he could do some good. In a way, Adal felt closer to his grandfather at that moment than he ever had while he was alive.



As Cog finished pointing out the particulars of her shotgun, Arija had a flash of her mother. The warrior that taught her to always be strong and fight the good fight. The woman who was strong enough to leave her home country to give a better life to her daughter. Arija had to preserve that life with everything she had.

Her father's typical lecture about considering all the possible outcomes of her actions crept into her mind. Since her mother passed, she had developed quite the temper with the world and was quick to fight. But now she was wondering what she had gotten the two of them into.

Cog cleared his throat as he finished removing his own set of weapons from the shelves and placed them on the opposite end of the table.

"Two blades. I figure you are a little too smart to get caught in close quarters, but these will get you out if something should happen. Laminated and folded titanium, lighter than the air around them, but will cut through anything." Cog reached out and took the shotgun from Arija's hand. "While I agree that this weapon is formidable, it is a bit clunky. For you, I think this is better suited." Cog pulled another rifle off the wall of weapons and held it out to Arija. This rifle was much smaller, having been filed in half.

With a flick of Cog's wrist, the bottom section sprang upward, and the weapon extended, revealing a long, polished barrel. "This is fed in a similar fashion to Adal's weapon. This drum

underneath holds twenty-five rounds. When all the shots have been fired, press this button here, and insert the next cylinder. Simple. This scope is designed to zoom in and out by drawing this small bar up and down. Lastly, with this, there are sights on the side. If an enemy gets too close for the scope, you can use these sights. And when you need to move, this folds the entire weapon in half so that it may more easily attach to your back for travel.”

Arija stood in silence as Cog pointed out the weapon’s features. She pressed the butt of the rifle to her shoulder and squeezed the foregrip in her left hand. Everything was moving so fast. Only a few days ago, she was worried about her next algebra test. Now she was preparing for battle. How had things gone this far?

Arija flicked her gaze toward Adal, her eyes squinting as she watched him studying his weapons. His eyes widened when he caught her staring, and he nodded back. Whether they wanted it or not, Adal and Arija were going to war.

“Wait a minute! What is all of this stuff exactly?” Adal finally asked, motioning to his and Arija’s equipment. “I thought you guys didn’t believe in fighting or killing. You spent all night blabbing about how you couldn’t kill your own creations and, yet, here we are, standing in an armory disguised as a library. What’s that about?”

“These are relics from th’ past,” Webley explained from his post in front of the fireplace. He’d taken down a large gun and hammer-wrench that clung to the wall. “They ‘aven’ been used in a long time, but I can assure ye, they will get the job done. An’ ye are right, we don’ kill one another in my Machine. A Dweller is a sacred creature, an’ they should all strive to love one another. These things... these Kleinmasch, as he calls ‘em, they aren’ Dwellers. They are somethin’ else, an’ they have te’ be stopped or all Dwellers are in danger.”

Arija looked down at the weapon in her hands. If what Webley said was true, then these things were over two million years old. Were these weapons safe to shoot? Time alone should have seen these deteriorate even if properly cared for.

“I know this is a lot, but we haven't the time,” Cog started, seeing the look on Arija’s face. “You should also take these, just in case.” He tossed a backpack to Adal and one to Arija. “I repaired your fliegensacks. If things get too heavy to handle, you need to get out of here. Understand? Go back to the elevator and wait for us.”

“On tha’ note, ye should give Avani a call. She should be ‘ere fer’ what comes after,” Webley added. He broke open the barrel and stock of his rifle and inserted two rounds.

Cog made his way into the kitchen and out of sight, leaving Adal and Arija alone with Webley.

“I have te’ say, I’m sorry fer’ all this. I’m sure ye didn't find this place an’ think ye would be fightin’ a war. Somethin’ is wrong in my Machine, and I plan on gettin’ te’ the bottom of it.” Webley turned from them, slung the large tool over his shoulder, and clutched his heavy gun.

Arija’s thoughts drifted to her family again. The struggles and tales of horror her mother had faced in her homeland. Israel had been at war for thousands of years. To some, war was all they knew. Aliza Rapp often told a young Arija that, had she not met her father and had the strength to seek a better life, she would have been consumed by death. At a young age, Aliza had been trained to kill. War had a way of destroying youth and replacing it with a cold killer.

Arija loved her father very much, but he was a peaceful man. Her mother often said he was the cool air that helped tame her fire. Today, Arija would embody her mother. She sucked a deep breath of the musky air from the study and whispered a silent prayer to her mother for strength as the door to the kitchen flew open.

“She’s on her way with the mobile medical vehicle just in case. I also urged Captain Silny to put all his men on the city gates,” Cog announced, rejoining the group.

“Good, now tha’ tha’s settled, it’s time te’ get ready. I can smell ‘em gettin’ close.” Webley’s voice had grown cold.

“You ready for this?” Adal whispered to Arija.

“I am if you are,” Arija replied, doing her best to sound confident, though her heart beat so fast she was certain he could hear it.

“We got this. Stick close, and watch one another’s asses, and we should be all right,” Adal added. “And lucky for you, I have a great ass.”

“What ass?” Arija scoffed, rolling her eyes and forcing a smile. Her pulse slowed slightly. She knew he would have her back. If something was going to take one of them out, it would have to take them both.



Adal focused on the faint lavender smell of Arija’s hair. Somehow it also smelled of the coffee they never did drink that morning. He smiled. He watched her fiddle with her pack, a small, frustrated wrinkle forming on her forehead when she couldn’t figure out how to latch one of the buckles. If they got out of this alive, he was going to tell her how he felt.

“All right then. Let’s get this done,” Webley commanded, taking a deep breath.

As they walked away from the rack, Arija stopped, grabbed a small, silver pistol off the shelf, and slid it into her belt at the small of her back. She fisted a stack of magazines into her pocket but, as she turned to catch up with the rest of the team, she found them all staring at her.

“You know, perhaps we can be a little more tactful,” Cog said as the rest of the room fell silent, waiting to hear his plan.

## 37 | A Rootin' Tootin' Good Time



Cog, Webley, and Adal lined up in Webley's backyard. Arija followed them with the crosshair on her rifle from the second-floor window. She couldn't hear them talking, but Adal was doing something stupid.

Typical.

Adal rarely took anything seriously.

Arija pulled her face away from the rifle and rubbed her eyes. Adal was a dork, and he'd probably get them both killed, but she couldn't help thinking about their almost kiss that morning. She shook the thought from her head and focused back on the three men standing in the backyard. She would have to worry about her non-relationship with Adal when they weren't in danger.

When Arija brought her crosshairs back to the group, they were all standing in a line in the middle of the yard, hands poised on their weapons, awaiting battle. All they needed was a cheesy whistling sound and a tumbleweed to make this the weirdest western she'd ever seen.

She allowed her sights to slide beyond the yard. Nothing seemed out of place. Just a few Dwellers milling about, and a flock of birds sitting on one of the beams.



Adal clutched his shotgun. Sweat covered his palms and his heart pounded in anticipation of the battle. He mentally reviewed the position of each weapon on his body. Each fight he'd gotten into in this place had resulted in him getting thrown or slammed into something, and the wind being knocked out of him. If this got hairy, he wanted to remember where each weapon was, in case he had to go for one under duress.

Adal looked at the two men standing with him. Webley stood in humble silence, his breath rumbling from his chest like distant thunder. Cog twirled two revolvers around his fingers.

Adal's eyes danced over the distant and surrounding structures, not really sure what he was looking for. He figured he'd know when he saw it.

"All right, Cog. This is yer part." Webley's voice broke through the sound of Adal's heartbeat.

Cog nodded, turning to Adal. "Remember, if it gets bad, you two get out of here. Take care of yourselves." Cog turned his attention to Arija and gave her a thumbs up. He couldn't see her in the dark frame of her perch, but that was the point. He took several steps forward and, with a jolt, his wings expanded from his pack. Before Adal had time to register what was happening, Cog took off into the air, disappearing from sight.

"Ye prepared fer your part?" Webley asked, not bothering to turn and face him.

"About as much as I can be. You ready for yours?"

Webley responded with a low grunt as he stared into the distant Machine.

Adal let his eyes run over Webley's focused face and wondered if it was possible for a Creator to die.

He turned his head toward the window he knew Arija was perched in. Adal needed to know she was there. That she had his

back in case something happened. A slender hand crept from the darkness and formed a thumbs up.

Adal turned back to Webley to ask another question, but the Creator raised a finger in the air between them, silencing him.

The sound started off small—a static white noise hanging in the background of his thoughts. Adal could barely make out what it was but, after a while, the sound grew. Adal leaned toward the gate, straining to hear, when something jetted ahead of them, scaring the crap out of him. He clumsily swung his rifle around, fumbling with the trigger before realizing it was only Cog.

“Here they come!” Cog shouted as he turned and flew behind the house, continuing his patrol.

Adal jerked his gaze from side to side, but he couldn’t see anything.

“He wasn't kidding. Here they come, and they look pissed!” Arija’s voice drifted down from the window above.

Adal brought the rifle up to his line of sight and scanned the horizon. His heart hammered in his chest. The edges of his vision darkened. He slowly moved his finger to hover over the trigger. His body shook, but he tried to calm and control his nerves.

Like a piling horde, hundreds of Gearrtha and Feithidi flew toward them, wings out. Adal's stomach lurched as he tried to comprehend the magnitude of the inevitable attack, but it was difficult. They moved like a swarm of insects. It was almost comical how outnumbered they were, and Adal found it impossible to focus on any one of the creatures.

“Remember, if they overcome ye, get back in the ‘ouse!” Webley commanded, cracking his neck.

As the swarm neared the house, Adal's nerves calmed. His shaking fingers steadied, and his heartbeat slowed.

A thunderous eruption followed by a plume of smoke emanated from beside him as Webley fired his first shot, obliterating nearly a dozen Kleinmasch and sending small fragments of debris into the air around them. The strong odor of burnt iron filled Adal’s nose, and he flicked his eyes toward the giant next to him as time seemed to slow to a crawl.

“Damn! What did you put in those things?” Adal shouted over the sound of crunching metal.

“Huzzah! Ye think tha’ was somthin’, ye should give yers’a go!” Webley bellowed.

Adal opened his mouth to reply as a set of rapid-fire shots came from overhead.

Cog hovered above them, laying waste to any creatures unfortunate enough to be caught in his sights. Once the focus was on him, Cog elegantly spun in the air and led droves of the creatures away from Adal and Webley. As Cog disappeared around the side of the house, one by one, Kleinmasch fell from the sky.

Webley grabbed the large wrench slung over his shoulder, clutching it in his hands. The gentle giant’s face contorted into something hideous. He screamed and charged, leaping fifty feet into the air and colliding with several of the creatures, instantly crushing and dismantling them. Webley grabbed a metal beam with one meaty hand and swung the wrench with the other, demolishing several more Kleinmasch.

Adal raised his shotgun, focusing on a group of Kleinmasch on the platform just outside the gate. “You’re mine!” he shouted, charging forward.

The creatures screeched and raised their bladed appendages as he neared. Adal stopped mere feet from the group and aimed. He slid his finger to the trigger and squinted one eye as he focused on the Gearrtha in the middle. Three loud bursts erupted from behind him, and the creatures’ faces exploded in a burst of metal. Adal paused in shock, wondering how he was able to shoot them without pulling the trigger.

“What the hell? Those were mine!” Adal shouted, turning to face Arija when he realized what had happened.

“Didn't see your name on ‘em. Not only do I have the first kill, but I’m winning too,” Arija teased, shooting at a fat Feithidi that swooped over Adal’s head and dropping it from the sky.

Adal’s competitive side roared to life. He raised his weapon and began to fire at everything that moved.





## 38 | Billy Badass



Arija laughed. Adal was so easy to play. She'd seen how scared he'd been and knew the second she turned the fight into a competition, he'd get his head out of his ass.

The swarm of Kleinmasch hadn't fully engulfed the house yet, but there were far too many of them for Arija's comfort. Dozens of Kleinmasch flew in a frenzy, many of them too fast or too close for her to get a good shot. She took a deep breath and held it, counting to three before exhaling and squeezing the trigger.

A Feithidi came flying at her. Before she could register whether she'd hit it, it plummeted to the ground, lifeless. She exhaled and loaded another round.

Arija was a terrifyingly good shot, but she didn't really have the time to think about what that meant or if it was hereditary. It also helped that the weapons Webley had given them were eerily accurate. She hardly had to do anything other than point and shoot. Honestly, if Adal could do it, anyone could do it. That boy's hand-eye coordination wasn't anything to brag about. With her mind wandering back to Adal, Arija allowed her sights to settle on him.

He was rolling to the side and shooting down two Feithidi. Arija was convinced he was doing his best to look like he was in a movie. A Gearrtha swooped at him, and its bladed arm nearly cleaved his leg. Arija followed the Gearrtha until she was certain

she'd land a kill shot, then she squeezed the trigger.

The Gearrtha slumped to the ground next to Adal, and he hopped to his feet, brushing himself off. "I'm good!" Adal picked up his gun and racked it.

Arija watched as small, spider-like creatures swarmed the dead Gearrtha. Their tiny legs glided over the monster so fast, she could hardly see them moving. After a few moments, the Gearrtha's arms started to twitch, and Arija realized it was coming back to life. She hovered her cross-hairs over the pile of Gearrtha and Baeg and pulled the trigger.

"Careful! This isn't a game, Adal!" Cog's voice shouted from overhead. He had just dispatched his pursuing party and was swooping back to keep the horde focused on him.

Adal raised his shotgun, firing a round. Cog flinched as the projectile flew over his shoulder, and the shot landed square between the eyes of a Feithidi behind him. It was too late for Cog to move, and the massive body of a dead Feithidi collided with him in the air, sending Cog down to the platform.

Cog and the lifeless Feithidi hit with a wrenching crack, followed by a rumble as they rolled across the deck and slid off the edge. The two slid from sight as Adal dove to the ledge, his hand outstretched.

"NO!" Arija jerked forward.

A Gearrtha shot up from below. It moved toward Adal. Its appendages swiped at him as it flew upward.

Arija followed Adal with her sights as he reached over the edge of the platform. Adal grunted and reached one arm off the platform, holding on to the edge with the other.

Arija bit the corner of her lip as she zoomed in to see Cog clutching a piece of jagged metal. His wings were completely mangled, and his fingers shook as he struggled to hold on.

"I don't think I can hold on anymore, Adal." Cog rasped. Arija could barely hear him. "Tell Avani that it's always been her."

The Gearrtha's bladed arm struck the platform next to Adal's head. He rolled to the side as Cog slipped from his hold and plummeted into the Machine.

“No! Cog! Cog!” Adal yelled as he pushed away from the Gearrtha while simultaneously searching the void for his friend.

Arija pulled the trigger only to hear a small click. She pulled it again and again, desperate to save Adal from being shredded, but it was useless. She was out of ammunition. The Gearrtha landed next to Adal. It shrieked as it raised its lethally sharp arms.

Arija reached into the back of her belt and took out the small pistol she'd grabbed from the shelf. She didn't aim or try to steady her shaking hand. Terrified she would lose her best friend, she pointed the pistol in the Gearrtha's direction and pulled the trigger.



Sparks flew past Adal's head as one of Arija's shots hit the Gearrtha in the shoulder, taking its attention away from its prey. The Gearrtha reared its head, steadying its gaze on the window in which Arija was perched. It extended its wings and lunged through the air toward its new target.

Adal spun as a piercing shriek came from Arija's window. Even from this distance, Adal could see the Gearrtha tearing at the window ledge. He had no idea what he was going to do, but he knew he had to do something. Arija was in danger.

The Gearrtha slammed into the window, too big to fit through the small hole. It flew back a few feet, shaking off the impact. Then it slammed into the window again. This time, the window frame bent inward.

Adal looked around for something to help and found that Webley had the majority of the attacks focused on him. Adal removed his pistol from its holster and took aim at the creature, lining up the shot. But he couldn't bring himself to fire.

“What if I miss or it goes through him! What if I hit her!” Adal

barked. With only an instant to consider his options, Adal holstered his weapon and charged at the house. A small table adorned with several pots sat against the side of the house. He gathered as much speed as he could, leaped into the air, and sprung from the small table with just enough force to grasp the edge of the roof.

Adal clung to the structure for life. There wasn't enough time to do that again. Tightening his chest and arms, he managed to pull himself up and roll onto the roof. As he turned over on the ledge, his pistol slipped from its holster and fell to the ground.

“Damn it!” Adal shot his gaze from side to side, looking for something to use as a weapon. Then he remembered the tungsten knuckles Webley had given him. Adal fished in his pockets and slipped the metal object over his fingers.

The Gearrtha let out another wail and ripped away a sizable portion of the window frame, giving it enough berth to enter the house. There was another terrified shriek from inside the room, and Adal ran toward the window.

The creature crouched down, one bladed arm in the hole of the window, swiping blindly at Arija. Adal grabbed the Gearrtha by its back. He slid his arm under its wing, and placed the palm of his hand on the back of its head, bringing it into a half nelson. The Gearrtha reared backward and out of the window. Its right arm swiped at Adal, but he was expecting it.

“Whose house is this?” he shouted, enjoying the re-use of his catchphrase. Adal brought his free arm up, repeatedly punching the Gearrtha in the head with his tungsten-knuckled fist.

The groaning sound of metal giving way filled the air as the Gearrtha let go of the window and stumbled backward. It focused its attention on Adal. Adal used his momentum and spun the creature around so that he was facing the edge of the roof. He brought his fist down into the Gearrtha's head again, his heart skipping a beat when a fist-sized dent appeared in the creature's skull. Adal released the beast from his grasp and stepped away as it stumbled about like a zombie running on fumes.

The Gearrtha couldn't see with its head dented so far in that

its eyes were no longer visible. Adal figured it was probably dying, but it turned and dealt a few clumsy swipes in Adal's direction. Not wanting to take any chances, Adal rushed in and struck the creature just under its gaping mouth, crushing the remainder of its insect-like face inward. It gurgled a muted response before it collapsed backward, falling from the roof.

"Arija, you all—" Adal turned to the mangled window to check on Arija but, as soon as he set foot in its tattered frame, a sharp pain erupted along his side. Suddenly he was smashed onto the adjoining wall of the house's exterior. Another Gearrtha had blindsided him, mouth outstretched in a screech.

Adal looked down at his hands to find that his knuckles were missing. They had slid from his fingers and joined his revolver on the ground below.

The Gearrtha stomped its way across the roof. Adal used what energy he had left to push himself up. He curled his fingers into fists, waiting for the creature to make its way to him. While his left hand may have been useless against the metal creature, he still had one bionic hand, and he intended to beat this thing to death with it.

The Gearrtha poised itself before Adal, a look of animalistic intent on its mechanical face. It glanced to its fallen comrade, then back to Adal.

"Let's go! I don't have all day," Adal huffed. The Gearrtha screeched a high-pitched noise that Adal thought would shatter glass, then its expression went limp. The light in its eyes faded to blackness and, before Adal could assess what was happening, its head fell from its shoulders and rolled off the roof.

The headless body of the Gearrtha teetered, then plummeted to the ground, clearing Adal's view of Arija, who stood with a blade in each hand and a smug grin on her face.

"Yeah... I was just about to do that," Adal stammered, with a nervous smile.

"Oh, I'm sure you were. It's not like you've ever needed me to bail you out or anything. Regardless, you're welcome." Arija winked.

“Uh, Arija—” Adal pointed behind her, his eyes wide. She spun, blades up and ready for the next fight.

Webley had disappeared, and more than a dozen Gearrtha now hovered over the backyard. Their eyes were hungry for revenge.

“So, what’s the next move?” Adal asked through the side of his mouth.

“What happened to Billy Badass?”

Adal looked from side to side for an escape plan. Jumping into the window wouldn't help. The window was now completely dented, with bits hanging off, and there was no way it could withstand that many Gearrtha. “I mean...” Adal started but, before he could finish, two blinding white beams of light filled the air around them. Adal slammed his eyes shut, bringing the palm of his hand to his face.

“What the—” Arija began, but was cut off by a deafening air horn.

Adal slapped his hands to his ears and crouched down, trying to shield himself from the incessant wail.

Arija jumped back just as a large flying vehicle crashed through the swarm of Gearrtha, sending parts flying in all direction. What Adal could only imagine was a Fliegenmobi flew past the house. There was a giant, red cross painted on the side. The mobile clinic.

The machine landed as another dozen Kleinmasch charged in. Arija pulled Adal to his feet just as a large door opened, splitting the cross down the middle. Kip poked his head out from inside the craft.

“Here comes the boom!” Kip shouted, tossing two balls into the air toward the mob of Kleinmasch. Adal pushed Arija up against the side of the house, covering her with his body.

When the smoke cleared, there was nothing left of the swarm of Kleinmasch. Adal ran his thumb across Arija’s cheek, wiping away a black smudge of soot from the explosion.

“What the hell are they putting in those things?” Arija coughed, a blush coming to her cheeks as she pushed away from

the building.

“I don’t know, but remind me to duck next time.” Adal stepped to the edge of the roof, surveying the damage.

Kip hopped out of the mobile clinic, slid off the roof, and ran to the center of the yard as the craft rose into the air and tore off, plowing into everything that moved.

“Careful with that, Mum! The cyclic rate of the engine is still a little off!” Kip shouted, throwing another grenade into the air from a pouch he had around his shoulder. Several more Kleinmasch were obliterated by its explosion.

Kip pointed to one of the Feithidi at the edge of the group. The Feithidi narrowed in on the small prey and charged at him. At the last moment, Kip let the grenade fly and took cover. It landed directly in his attacker’s mouth. The ensuing explosion sent shrapnel everywhere, successfully shredding two Gearrtha flying nearby.

“What is it with that kid?” Adal asked, a hearty, singular laugh leaving his lungs.

“Like you’re any better,” Arija shot back. “I don’t know what gets into either of you to make you do the insane things you do.”

A large shadow appeared overhead, and Webley emerged into the fray, a Feithidi in his arms. He spun it around like a melee weapon, striking other Kleinmasch as they neared.

The swarm never seemed to end. The mobile clinic spun overhead as it collided with several more flying creatures, but Adal could see that several Gearrtha had attached themselves to the side of the craft and were trying to get in.

“Arija, it’s time for the surprise! Do it!” Webley’s voice thundered over the chaos.

Arija grabbed Adal by his shirt and yanked him back into the window.

“What’s going on now?” Adal asked, confused. He watched as Arija lifted a giant gun from the floor and set it in the window. She then slid over a large case and opened the top of it, removing a chain that connected a slew of rounds and slapping it into the weapon.



“Whoa! What is that?” Adal asked, running his fingers over the gun.

“A surprise,” she answered with a devilish grin.

“Hey, let me shoot that thing!”

Arija laughed, tossing him the small pistol. “Here, use this. If you can handle it, that is.” She squatted behind the large machinegun and took aim out the window.

“Ah, what the f—” Adal began to protest, only to have the rest of his sentence drowned out by the deafening fire of the giant gun.

The air in the small room fluctuated with every shot. Casings jetted across the room as Arija delicately swayed the barrel back and forth, slicing through the Kleinmasch in droves. As Avani flew past in the medical craft, Arija did her best to align her shots to clear the clinging Gearrtha from its sides.

Adal stood in dumbfounded silence, looking from the small pistol in his hand to Arija’s canon. He peeked out the window. Everyone, including the Kleinmasch, had stopped fighting and were gawking in Arija’s direction.

Kip stared up at the window, his mouth curled into a smile as a Feithidi snuck up behind him.

“Kip! Trouble!” Arija shouted over her shoulder as she concentrated on moving from one Kleinmasch to another.

Adal swept up next to her. “Kip! Run, bro!” Adal shouted, leaping from the open window and sliding down the roof.

Kip turned just in time to see the creature coming for him. He spun around and ran toward the house. As Adal jumped to the ground, he fired several shots from the pistol and charged toward Kip.

The Feithidi stretched out one of its long legs in an attempt to grab Kip. Adal reached Kip at the exact same time, grasping him around the waist. He threw all his weight into him, lifting Kip from the ground, and the two rolled forward from the path of the charging Feithidi.

“Clear!” Adal shouted toward the window.

Before the Feithidi could take more than a few steps, it shook as Arija pumped several rounds into its body. It dropped to the

ground, riddled with bullet holes.

As parts and sparks flew past them, Adal rolled to cover Kip from the debris. Kip's shirt was mostly torn away, and underneath the fabric was a strange device. It looked very similar to a corset and peering out from the top was what appeared to be cleavage. As Adal's mind pieced things together, he pushed himself off Kip, his mouth hanging open.

"Kip... you're a girl?"

Kip's face went blank, and his lips thinned as a scowl developed. "I'm not a... You're a... Shut up!" Kip slugged Adal in the arm and pushed to his feet. He pulled as much of his shirt closed as he could and ran into the house.

"What the hell was that?" Adal said, to no one in particular as he watched Kip disappear into the house.

After a moment, Adal looked around. For the first time since the fight had started, the air around the house was clear of Kleinmasch. The ground around him was littered with parts of fallen machines, and everything had fallen silent.

"Adal! Are you all right?" Arija shouted from the window. "Where's Kip?"

"I'm good. Kip ran inside. You good? What can you see?" Adal brushed the debris from his pants as he spoke.

"I'm just peachy. I think they're all gone. The last of the swarm followed Avani and Webley over the edge of the platform."

The air between them hung heavy. Catching a glimpse of metal, Adal walked over to the edge of the yard to collect his knuckles and revolver. He then wandered around the backyard kicking every large piece of the Kleinmasch to make sure they were all dead.

## 39 | The Calm Before The Storm



Arija scanned the edge of the platform, looking for any sign of more Kleinmasch. Nothing.

The medical vehicle piloted by Avani flew into sight and toward the house.

“Incoming!” Arija shouted, her heart rate increasing.

On top of the craft, Webley held on to its roof, crouched down with a solemn smile creasing the edges of his mouth.

Adal put his revolver back into his holster and adjusted his clothing.

The burst of air from the mobile clinic rattled and shifted the smaller pieces of the fallen Kleinmasch. Arija rubbed her shoulder where the recoil from the automatic gun had repeatedly jammed into her. She couldn't wait to get down to Adal and the rest of the group. She climbed back out onto the roof, took a deep breath of fresh air, then slid down the side of the roof, landing on the ground in a crouch.

“I can't see any more of them, I think we're good,” she announced, walking over to Adal and giving him a hug.

A loud commotion came from the craft as it landed, and Webley hopped from the roof, slamming to the ground. “Ye' two all right?” he asked, walking over to them. The hatch from the ship opened, and Avani came charging out, running at the two weary Topsiders.

“We're fine. Give us something harder next time,” Adal joked,

trying to sound calm.

“Yeah, no problem at all. Used to do that all the time back home,” Arija added, but her hands were still a little shaky.

“Where is Kip? Is he all right?” Avani asked, a slight tinge of panic in her voice as she approached. She looked frazzled, but sounded more concerned for Kip than about what she had just gone through.

“Kip is all set. He just ran inside after we took care of the last guy. No injuries, I think he’s just upset.” Adal glanced toward the house. His eyebrows knitted together.

“Kip was upset? That isn't like him at all. What happened? Are you sure he’s all right?”

“I promise, Kip is all good. Look, when we were fighting, that big one came in. We ended up rolling, and it reached for him...” Adal gave up being coy. “Look, I know Kip is a girl. She got upset and ran inside.”

Arija analyzed Adal’s face for signs of the joke she assumed he was telling. She turned to look at Avani, who had brought her hand to her cheek and was smiling.

“Kip is a boy,” Avani stated plainly.

“I saw what was underneath... Well, I mean, the corset and the uhh... uhh... cleavage. Kip is a girl. How could you not know that?” Adal’s face warmed from embarrassment.

Arija didn’t know how to react. So, she didn’t. She stood, confusion playing on her face and embarrassment flushing her cheeks.

“Here in the World Machine, there are many different creatures. You can make yourself anything you could ever want to be. It does not mean that there is something wrong with you. On the contrary, it means you are an individual and your own being. Kip decided that, though he was made in the form of a girl, he was, for all intents and purposes, a boy. So, he is a boy. It is not for the rest of us to define others, only to accept them for what they are. Kip is a wonderful Dweller, smart and cunning. Don't diminish who he is by being blind to that,” Avani said softly.

Arija could tell Avani’s words weighed heavily on Adal’s mind.

She could tell by the widening of his eyes and the twitching of his lips that he felt like an idiot. She didn't care if Kip was a boy or a girl, and she knew Adal didn't care either. Kip was a good kid that had saved their asses more than once. That was all that mattered.

Adal rubbed the back of his neck. "I think maybe I should go inside and apologize or something."

A wide smile creased Avani's face, but her eyes remained narrow and analytical. "Maybe that would be best. After all, he did bail you out yesterday, no? Don't worry, he told me all about it. Never been good at keeping secrets, that one."

"I think I'll stay out here and help with this mess," Arija interjected, trying her best to break the awkwardness of the situation.

"I will be off t' look fer Cog. Not like him te' be knocked from a fight an' stay out," Webley added, concern in his voice.

"Wait, where is Cog? He was taken down? Down where?" Avani's voice suddenly filled with panic.

"He got knocked out of the sky and slid off the platform. I tried to reach him, but..." Adal let his words trail away.

Avani's expression contorted into one of horror as she looked from Adal to Webley and back again.

"Relax. I will find him. I sense tha' he's still 'ere," Webley replied, his voice calm and even. With that, he turned and leaped into the air before disappearing over the edge.

Even with Webley's reassurance, Avani's features were still creased with concern.

"I'm sure he'll be fine. You're here to help when they come back. If Webley isn't worried, it will all be fine," Arija reassured her. "Come on, let's clean this up. Adal, you go inside and check on Kip. This time, try not to be a jackass to the kid."

Arija took charge of the moment. She'd seen enough pain for a lifetime, and this group didn't deserve to have their hopes dashed now. As she saw it, it was probably best to stay task-focused and give Webley time to find Cog, instead of sitting around and worrying about him.

Avani nodded in agreement, and Adal snapped a quick and

sarcastic salute before making his way into the house to look for Kip.

## 40 | You Like My Knockers?



Adal used the time it took him to walk into the house to think about what he was going to say to Kip. Kip was a cool kid, and Avani was right—he had saved their asses twice in two days. The last thing Adal wanted was to ostracize him, or make him feel little. Adal thought back to his home, not for the first time since they'd entered the Machine, and the issues he'd had with Elias. That guy was an asshole, and Adal didn't want to resemble him in the slightest.

As he entered the house, Kip was sitting in the den next to the shelf of weapons they'd left open. He'd removed several of the more impressive pieces of hardware they had left on the shelves, and was mulling over them. When Adal entered the room and walked over to the seat across from him, Kip wouldn't even look up.

“Hey, bro. How you feeling?” Adal asked nervously. He didn't want to make things any worse, but he hadn't the slightest clue what he should say.

Kip didn't respond immediately. He picked up one of the ax-guns and looked at the blade, running one small finger down the steel.

“I'm fine,” Kip said bluntly. “I didn't need your help, you know. I was here to save you guys.” Kip dropped the gun on the table and leaned back in the chair. He crossed his arms over his chest and trained his eyes on the fireplace.

Adal sighed and shook his head as he lowered into the chair. “I know that. Seriously. I owe you thanks like ten times over. You saved our asses more than once, and I appreciate that.” Adal noticed a pitcher of water sitting on the table. It hadn't been there that morning. Kip must have gotten it when he came inside. Adal had a strange thought as he reflexively picked it up and took a swig straight from the pitcher: do Dwellers drink water? The thought tore at his brain for a couple minutes while the two sat in silence.

“Yeah, well, you're welcome I guess. I mean, you two would have gotten yourselves killed by now if it wasn't for me. Just saying.” Kip played with the tip of his knee, running his fingers over it again and again.

Adal smiled and shook his head. “Hey man, I know it. You're a pretty cool dude. You got the brains and kick-ass toys to boot. The way you came in today, that was dope.” Adal took a long swig of the water, not realizing until that moment how thirsty he was.

“Oh, so you liked my knockers?” Kip asked, finally meeting Adal's gaze.

Adal spit the contents of his mouth into the air, spraying water all over the table and Kip.

“What?” Adal coughed as his lungs tried to force the water out of his windpipe.

Kip ran his palm across the side of his face, wiping away the droplets that had landed there. “My knockers. The bombs I made. They're pretty cool, huh? The mixture inside is my own design.” Kip's voice softened, and his pitch relaxed.

After a moment of coughing, and recognizing the lack of slang terms in the Machine, Adal was able to compose himself. “Oh! Yeah man, those were sweet! What did you put in those things?”

“Well, it is simple really. I take a bit of—” Kip cut off as the door burst open and Arija stepped into the room.

“Webley found Cog. He was unconscious several levels below. He just came back with him. Come outside!” Arija commanded, a strange mixture of relief and concern running rampant across her face.



As Adal pushed through the door, followed by Kip and Arija, they were greeted by Avani and Webley standing over a motionless Cog. Webley seemed to look fine at first but, once they got closer, Adal noticed the giant was nervously rubbing his hands together as he examined Cog.

Avani had a small pack of tools next to her on the ground, and she was tapping Cog in the chest and running a small box across his eyes.

“He’s alive. He took quite a hit. It looks like something landed on him.” As Avani spoke, Adal’s stomach jumped into his throat.

He had shot down the Feithidi that collided with his friend in the air. This was all his fault. He looked at Arija, but she was entirely focused on Cog. A strange frustration came over him. If Webley was so powerful, why couldn't he just fix this?

“He’s a tough one. Should pull out o’ it soon ‘nough! Always been a fighter, this one.” Webley sounded more like he was trying to convince himself than anyone else.

Avani continued to check Cog over and monitor his responses. After withdrawing a string implement that she had inserted into his ear, and watching something on a small screen, she put her tools down and leaned over Cog.

“All right. That is enough of that. You are in there! I know it. Time to wake up,” Avani demanded sweetly. She leaned further over Cog and pressed a lingering kiss to his forehead.

“If... if I pretend to be out a little longer, could I venture another kiss?” A soft-spoken voice broke the silence.

“Ha! Tha’s my boy! Cheers!” Webley thundered, his shoulders sinking into his frame as he relaxed.

A smile erupted over Adal and Arija’s faces. After all that had gone down, it felt nice to have something good happen.

“Well, I’m not sure if that is a medically sound theory, Cog. Perhaps we can reassess your theory at a later date.” Avani smiled, tapping Cog on the cheek playfully. Cog lay on the ground for a moment, just looking up at his love while she looked back at him.

A rumbling sound interrupted the moment. Adal couldn’t

help thinking something bad was about to happen. He glanced at Arija, the corners of his lips turned down. Before she could say anything, Webley came crashing into them, sending them both sliding across the ground. Avani's ship barreled through the air towards them and, when Adal cleared the spots from his eyes and looked around, Avani was gone. "What the fuck!"

"Son of a bitch!" Arija yelled as she slid into Adal.

A large creature came into focus. Somehow, it had managed to sneak up on them, which seemed ridiculous considering its size. It resembled a giant mechanical tarantula that had to be at least four stories tall, and several times that width if you counted its legs. Its behemoth body shook everything under them as it moved, casting various objects aside as it crunched through the bent and broken Kleinmasch.

An Umar.

Before Adal had time to process what was happening, Webley was on his feet and running toward the monstrosity. Adal waited until his world stopped spinning to examine the situation.

Avani was sprawled on the ground halfway across the yard. Her mobile clinic was dented on one side and teetering on the edge of the platform. Adal watched, dazed, as the mobile clinic groaned, then tipped over the edge of the platform, falling into the Machine.

Webley's shouts pulled him from his daze. He shifted, so he could see Webley banging his fists on the creature's exoskeleton.

"What the hell is that thing?" Adal shouted, scooting closer to Arija.

"I don't know, but we have to help." Arija's voice quivered as she stared back at Avani. "You get Cog, I'll get Avani. We need to bring them away from the fight before they're trampled." Without waiting for a response, Arija pushed herself up and ran toward Avani.

Adal ran for Cog, who was writhing on the ground, trying to pull himself up. Webley and the Umar fought in the distance. The remnants of a Feithidi was thrown through the air as the Umar reared back and swung one of its legs at Webley, sending him

backward. Adal dove into a roll, coming to a stop next to Cog.

## 41 | The Way The World Ends



Arija slid to Avani's side, hands up as if she were afraid to touch her for fear she'd break into a million little pieces. Avani's clothes were ripped, and portions of her arm had been peeled back, revealing hundreds of small cogs and gears surrounding a long, thin metal pipe that almost looked like a bone. The delicate clockwork mechanisms weren't moving.

Arija had a sudden sickly feeling in her stomach. Small parts from the corpse of a fallen Kleinmasch rained down upon her, but Arija didn't look up. She couldn't wait while Avani potentially died in her arms, so she slid her arms under Avani and dragged her across the platform.



"Let me in the fight!" Cog yelled as Adal dragged him across the yard toward the house. Adal did his best to ignore him but, the more Cog protested, the more he squirmed, and the more difficult it was to pull him to safety.

The wail of crushing metal came from behind Adal, and he glanced back in time to see Webley drop onto the back of the Umar's head and pound his fist into it. The creature reared back and tossed Webley from his perch.

Adal turned again, using the strength of his legs to pull Cog

to the side of the house just as the Umar plunged its feet into the ground where Cog had been laying. Arija was leaning against the side of the house, staring at Avani with a blank look on her face.

“How is she?” Adal asked as he slid Cog up next to Arija.

Arija didn't respond, she only looked at him with tears in her eyes. Her forehead furrowed in anger. After an intense moment, she shook her head, turning her eyes back to Avani, who lay motionless on the ground.

“What happened to her?” Cog's voice hitched, and he crawled toward Avani.

“That thing threw her mobile clinic, and I think it crushed her,” Adal answered quietly, not sure how to say it.

Cog leaned over Avani's body, lightly brushing his hand across her face like he was trying to wake her from a deep sleep. “Come on sweetheart wake up.” He leaned down and kissed her forehead.

Avani's head lulled to the side.

“No!” Cog yelled. “No, no, no, nononononono!” He cradled Avani's head in his hands. He pulled his body as close to her as he could and laid down next to her. “Shhhhh. It's ok. You're ok.” Cog whispered as he kissed her forehead again like she had done to him only moments before.

Arija tugged at Adal's shoulder. “We have to do something! That thing is still out there! We need to find a way to help Webley.” Arija wiped the tears from her cheeks and pulled back from the group. She scooched her body down the side of the house, and carefully peered around the corner. “Why can't he take that thing down?” she mumbled under her breath as Adal pressed up behind her.

“What's the plan? That thing looks like it isn't playing games.” Adal watched as Webley slammed his fist into one of the Umar's legs only to be kicked away by another.

“Well, neither are we.” Arija turned back to Adal. She nodded toward his pistol.

“Let's get this party started then.” Adal pulled the pistol from his holster and cocked the hammer back.

Arija pulled out the small pistol she had tucked away in the belt of her skirt. “Me first!” She barked, rolling around the corner and leveling the sights of the pistol with the head of the Umar. Webley was underneath one of its tree-sized legs, trying to rip the limb from the socket. Arija took a deep breath and squeezed the trigger. Sparks shot from the Umar’s face as the bullet plunged into its head.

The creature reacted like someone swatting away a mosquito. It swept one leg toward its face, then continued to kick at Webley, sending him flying through the air toward them. Adal tackled Arija to the ground as Webley smashed into the side of his house, denting the siding.

Adal raised his gun and fired round after round at the Umar. “Come and get some!” he yelled.

The Umar turned its attention to him, stomping toward him and giving Webley time to collect himself. The two Topsiders alternated firing and maneuvering to avoid the crushing legs of the Umar. It was like a strange interpretive dance.

“Webley, what the hell?” Adal shouted, trying his best to reload his revolver while Arija distracted the Umar.

“Can’t break through its armor. This ain’t one o’ my makings, Adal!” Webley grunted as he attempted to rip into the creature’s side, succeeding only in getting swatted away once more.

Adal slapped his revolver closed and raised it for another shot.

“Need. Another. Plan!” Arija panted as she emptied the last of her ammunition.

“Yeah, no shit!” Adal replied, realizing he, too, had run out of rounds. “Webley!” Adal shouted after a minute. They only had one option. The giant didn’t respond, but he glanced down at them as he punched the Umar in the side. “We’ll keep him distracted!”

Webley went back to trying to rip the rivets out of the Umar’s side as Adal reared back and kicked the side of the Umar’s leg. The giant spider raised his leg to stomp Adal, but he grabbed the Umar’s leg and swung himself out of reach. Arija jumped onto one of the Umar’s other legs and held on as it tried to shake her off.

Adal picked up the severed arm of one of the dead Kleinmasch and smashed it into the beast. The Umar shifted its weight back and forth a few times, trying to decide who to focus on, before it gave up and brought its attention back to Webley.

All at once, a deafening sound pierced the battle and the Umar started to violently shake as hundreds of bullets tore into its side. "This is for my mum!" Kip shouted from the second-floor window. Adal and Arija both looked up to see Kip standing in Arija's former perch with the giant machinegun.

"Damn, that kid doesn't play!" Adal dropped the useless arm he'd been holding, suddenly embarrassed.

"Uh, Adal..." Arija motioned back to the Umar, who had turned his attention to Kip. "This kid is going to get me killed!" Arija protested, sprinting toward one of the spider's legs as it slammed to the ground.

Before Adal could ask what she was doing, Arija jumped onto the leg, digging her fingers into the small holes that held the rivets. Once she gained her balance, she reached for the next hole, shoving her foot into one below her like she was climbing a rock wall.

The Umar didn't seem to notice her until Arija took one of Cog's blades and stabbed at the cluster of pipes and tubes running the length of its leg. A burst of rusty brown liquid sprayed into the air, covering Arija. With the back of her hand, she wiped the liquid away from her eyes and stabbed at the spider's legs again. The Umar let out an electronic shriek and shook Arija from its leg, sending her somersaulting through the air.

Adal shouted a guttural protest as he ran toward the Umar. Just then, he remembered that he was wearing a fliegensack. He bent down, released the compressed wings, and launched himself into the air toward Arija. He collided with her just a few yards from the platform, wrapping his arms around her and speeding toward the roof of the house.

"You're welcome," Adal whispered as they circled before landing next to the house.

“Yeah, that’s one to my... How many times have I saved you?” Arija smiled up at him, then turned to run back toward the Umar. Adal paused for a moment and retracted his wings before following her.

Webley had managed to rip several small panels of the Umar’s armor away, exposing the delicate mechanical workings beneath, but it proved nearly impossible for him to damage the vitals. Kip continued his assault, unfazed by the looming doom. It was like that kid thought everything was a game.

“All right, what’s the next idea?” Adal asked as he caught up with Arija.

“Repeat step ‘A!’” Arija bellowed, charging back into the fight.

Just then, the Umar reared one of its front legs and lunged at the house, desperate to get to Kip.

“Kip! Get—” Adal started but, before he could finish, the Umar brought its leg down on the window, nearly crushing the entire side of Webley’s house. The explosion of debris cast Arija backward, forcing Adal to catch his falling friend once more. The two met mid-maneuver and fell to the ground.

“Kip!” Adal and Arija screamed in unison.

Webley bellowed with rage and tore at the Umar’s back. “Ye’ blasted machine!”

The Umar turned its attention back to Webley, removing its leg from the side of the house and spinning it in circles to dislodge him. The two titans churned over and over as they took their shots at one another. The Umar turned at just the right time, and Webley slid from its back, rolling and tumbling before coming to a stop at Arija and Adal’s feet.

The two Topsiders looked down at the master of the Machine, frozen in fear. If Webley couldn’t beat the Umar, no one could.

“Any ideas now?” Adal asked, looking from Webley to the crushed house, to the Umar. Webley was knocked out at best, Cog could hardly move, Avani was probably dead, and Kip was nowhere to be seen.

“We go for the sides. It has to have a weak spot. If we get in there, we have him,” Arija replied, drawing the other knife and



clutching both blades in her hands.

“All right... Any ideas how we’re going to get in there?” Adal asked, taking out his knuckles and looking at the massive legs that had taken Webley down.

“Haven't gotten that far yet,” Arija replied.

The Umar shuddered and took a step toward them.

“You ready?” Adal asked.

“Not even close! You?” Arija replied.

“Always.” Adal tried not to sound as terrified as he truly was.

A shrill shriek startled Adal, and he turned to see Cog running at them, his face twisted into a mask of fury.

“What’s that?” Arija asked, pointing to a satchel that Cog clutched in his hand.

“Oh no... Those are Kip’s Knockers!” Adal yelled.

“His what?”

“Just run!” Adal pulled her by the shoulder, making a full sprint toward the edge of the platform.

As they neared the open void, Cog met the Umar in the center of the yard and leaped into the air toward the Umar’s open mouth.

“Jump!” Adal shouted, taking Arija by the hand.

“Are you insane?” Horror was plastered on Arija’s face.

“Now!” Adal commanded.

Arija squeezed her eyes shut as she jumped from the platform.

“I hope you’re hungry,” Cog’s muffled words penetrated the air as it rushed around them.

As Arija and Adal cleared the edge, the sound and air around them was sucked away. A ringing erupted in Adal’s ears as a massive explosion tore through the air. Falling below the platform, Adal stole a glance at the underside of Webley’s house. A column of crimson and orange flames spewed from all four sides of the structure.

Adal deployed his wings, but he never let go of Arija’s hand. A few seconds later, Arija released her wings as well, and floated up so she was even with Adal. They drifted to a slow stop, hovering in

silence, watching the sky above them burn and crackle. The smell of smoke and explosives putrefied the air around them.

Arija wiped a tear from her cheek. "What do we do now?" Her voice was cold.

They were all gone. Adal could hardly believe it. In the few days since they'd been in the Machine, he'd grown closer to them than he had to most people Topside. And now they were just... gone. After losing his grandfather, Adal didn't think he could take anymore loss. A horrifying thought crept into his mind and the gravity of what this meant hit him.

If Webley was dead, Pajak would be free to run the Machine and, with the furnace destroyed, the entire world would freeze to death.

"I don't... They are... I don't know." Adal couldn't find the right words to say.

A small click, like someone cocking a gun, came from below them. Looking down, deep in the shadows, Adal saw something moving. Adal and Arija flew closer to the sound.

Nearing the shadows, they came to an abrupt stop, floating behind a pillar. With precision maneuvering, they landed on a cross-section of beams just wide enough for their feet. Adal crouched down so he could hear what was happening.

"Search all of it. I don't care if you have to bring back everything. The master wanted both of them, and he won't be happy about this. Bring me whatever parts of the Topsiders and Webley you can find."

Skirting the edge of the structure, but doing their best to keep in the shadows, Adal and Arija witnessed the cold silhouette of Fausto standing on a small platform and speaking to a group of Gearrtha. Adal felt the sudden urge to punch the Cog look-a-like in his stupid, smug face.

Feeling his anger, Arija pulled back his shoulder, yanking him away. Adal turned to her, and she shook her head. Doing something stupid now would only get them killed. Fausto had proven strong enough but, with a group of Gearrtha, they didn't stand a chance.

“Then, once you have collected all the parts, make sure you bring back what is left of the master’s special gift. I am certainly not going to do that myself. Do you think you idiots can handle that?” Fausto spoke the last sentence slowly, like he was speaking to a group of toddlers.

“Good, then I will make my way back. Be sure to send word if you find anything else of interest.” With that, Fausto jumped off the beam and disappeared into the Machine.

The Gearrtha shot into the air toward Webley’s home, flying past Arija with enough force to push her hair into her face. Adal turned and tilted his head.

“Let’s follow him,” Arija whispered and jumped off the beam.

The dim lights of the machine danced about them as they darted from one place of concealment to the next, making sure to never lose sight of Fausto. This had been a coordinated attack, and Adal was hell-bent on getting to the source of it. As they hopped from one beam to another, he lost track of how far they were traveling, moving further and further away from Webley’s home.

After what seemed like hours of leaping from surface to surface, and platform to platform, Fausto came to a stop on a large dock near a giant, spinning gear. As he landed softly on the metal surface, he took a moment to stretch his arms and look about the cold machine. Then he walked to a gap in the turning wheel and disappeared from sight.

“Do we follow him in?” Arija whispered.

“We can’t lose him now. Just be ready,” Adal replied.

After checking the area for threats, they slid out from behind their concealment and swooped down to the platform. With their wings in their packs, they made their way silently across the platform.

“You know what to do when we get in there, right?” Adal looked at Arija, his lips thin and eyes narrow.

She nodded and took out her blades.

They stepped through the gear only to find it led nowhere. A chill ran through Adal’s body as he realized it was a trap.

“Whose house is this?” a voice echoed off the steel walls of the empty room.

Before Adal could turn, a sharp pain reverberated through his head and his world tilted. He had a second to see Arija lying next to him, her eyes wide with terror, before a burst of pain behind his eyes turned everything black.

## 42 | A Shitty Sci-Fi Movie From The Eighties



Arija woke to a throbbing pain in the back of her head. From where she lay, all she could see was a strangely beautiful ceiling. Web-like etchings covered the entire surface, and there were small gems woven into various parts of the design.

“Arija... you with me?” Adal whispered, his voice tinged with confusion and pain.

“I think so. I don't think I'm dead yet.” She couldn't help how her voice hitched at the word 'yet.'

Adal stretched his hand outward, feeling for Arija's. When his fingers brushed hers, he let out a breath of relief. She wrapped her fingers around his and squeezed, reassuring him, or herself.

“Not dead yet? That's awfully optimistic of you, wouldn't you say?” a voice echoed through the room.

Adal pushed himself up to a sitting position and slid over to Arija.

Arija looked around the room as she pressed her back against Adal's. Large pillars ran the length of what she could only describe as a palace hall. At one end, a set of gigantic doors stood closed, a spider web etched into their surface. On one side of the hall, a row of what looked like Dwellers were attached to strange devices that ran the length of the wall. Their dead expressions brought a chill to Arija's blood. Along the opposite side lay a large,

dead creature, like the one that had attacked them at Webley's house.

At the end of the hall, a man sat on a macabre throne, a smug look on his face. He didn't seem to care about the two Topsiders as he toyed with what seemed to be a living Dweller's face protruding from his armrest. Standing next to the throne was Fausto, leaning against one of the pillars, a sinister grin on his face.

Arija pushed to her feet, steadying herself before reaching a hand down to help Adal.

"Who the hell are you?" Adal demanded, taking a step forward.

Fausto glanced at Pajak who started to laugh. After a second, Fausto also started to laugh, but immediately stopped when Pajak shot him a dirty look.

"Where are we?" Arija asked, changing the question to avoid Adal saying something that would get them killed more quickly. Adal's ego usually overrode rational thought.

"Well, for two Topsiders lost in a strange world, the two of you certainly demand quite a lot. Fausto, are these the two that bested you at the doorway to the city? I cannot imagine how. They appear just as foolish as they are scared."

At Pajak's condescending words, Fausto stirred, his face twisting at the implications.

"Either way, I suppose I could enlighten you. I am having too much fun to end this quickly. You stand in the great hall of my kingdom. I am Pajak, and this is my Roost, the capital city of my children, the Kleinmasch. Welcome, Adal and Arija, to your end." Pajak pointed a finger at Adal. "Which one are you? Arija is it?"

Adal clenched his fists and tightened his jaw. "Now that we have that out of the way, exactly what is it you want? I have better places to be than in some Dracula-wannabe robot's house with his minion that has to sneak up on people to win a fight. What's the matter, Fausto? Couldn't get the job done, so you ran to Daddy for help?"

"You will speak when instructed, Topsider!" Fausto yelled,

stomping one foot like a spoiled child having a tantrum. "I suggest you close that mouth of yours, or I will have to remove your lower jaw."

"Look at you go! You do have quite the burning fire in you, don't you? I can't wait to rip it out and see what makes it burn." Pajak turned his attention to Adal as he rose. Four long, thin, spider legs lifted Pajak into the air and set him down gently at the foot of the steps that led to his throne.

"What is it with you people and spiders? I feel like all we need is a large can of raid in here," Adal muttered.

Arija couldn't help the laugh that escaped her lips. This scene felt like a shitty sci-fi movie from the eighties, complete with overly dramatic gigantic spider. She moved closer to Adal and grabbed his hand. If something was going to happen, they had to act together, and that was her way of reminding him.

Fausto stepped away from the throne and followed his master as he slowly made his way towards Adal and Arija.

"The two of you speak with such conviction. Topsiders are an amazing race, are they not, Fausto? I cannot wait to see what makes them run." Pajak's eyes narrowed, and he twisted his head from side to side as he examined his new prey.

Arija squeezed Adal's hand. "You two need to step back!" Even with her knife, she didn't think she could take Fausto and Pajak. "Fausto, didn't you have enough problems taking me on yesterday? Are you sure you want to take on the both of us?"

Fausto's lips thinned, and he crossed his arms over his chest. "You had the good fortune of catching me on an off day. I can promise you, today will not be the same. Especially without your little toys." Fausto removed two daggers from his belt and a set of knuckles from behind his back, and cast them to the floor.

The crash of metal on metal was jarring, and Arija's heart leaped into her throat as she slid her free hand to the small of her back.

"Oh, now, there is no need for that. Really, it isn't like this situation will devolve to fighting anyway. After all, why would it? It isn't as though you have the slightest chance of surviving. I will

take you, rip you into pieces, and discover the secrets of your life. Then, no matter what secrets he may keep, I will have my own ways of creating sentient life. I won't need his—"

Pajak's monologue cut off as Adal finally put two and two together, and found them to, in fact, equal four.

"Wait a minute! You're the ones from the war? It was you that turned everyone against each other? You?"

Arija's heart raced as she recalled the story Cog had told them about the spoiled child that destroyed their society. It was this guy? This Dr. Octopus-looking mother fucker was the reason the world might end?

"For what? The chance to play God and make these... What do you call your science experiments again?"

Pajak brought two of his spider-like legs to his knees and doubled over in laughter. "My Kleinmasch are living, that is for certain. What they lack in spark of life, they make up for in function. They are driven by the basic instincts of feeding, completing assigned tasks, and growing like the horde they are. To give them life and awareness would truly make them a superior race of creature. Far above that of Webley's Dwellers. Nevertheless, that time has passed. I no longer wish to create a better machine. I wish to create a better Topsider. Ones that are not as weak as you, but have your powerful resolve. Soon I shall have those secrets."

"Sounds like someone wasn't held enough as a child. I can tell you one thing asshat, you touch either one of us, and you will eat that hand!" Adal snapped, taking a step toward Pajak and pushing Arija behind him.

"Still think you can survive, Topsider? I'm the most powerful creation in the Machine. Even Webley could not stop me." Pajak snaked two of his legs around, yanking on Adal's vest playfully.

Adal slapped his mechanical hand away, and Pajak made a show of shaking like he was hurt.

"He couldn't stop you because he still loved you even though you betrayed him! But I can promise you, I won't have the same problem." Arija's voice was hoarse, and she prayed they couldn't



hear the small quiver.

“Child, it is over. Even your Webley was no match for my Umar! He may be the master of his creations but, when he faces my might and intellect, he is reduced to only his brute strength. I built something stronger than him. And now I will take you out too.” Pajak took several steps forward, closing the gap between them.

“You know, maybe I should just dissect one of you and keep the other as a pet. Wouldn't that be splendid? How about it, Arija? Would you like to be a pet?” Pajak reached out and ran his thin fingers across the cuff of Arija's corset.

Adal thrust his right hand out and caught Pajak's outstretched appendage. “I warned you...” Adal brought his foot upward and kicked Pajak in the groin. He shouted in pain, bringing his hand down to his injured foot.

“Was that your master plan of attack?” Fausto gasped in between bouts of laughter. “Pathetic!”

Adal bent down groaning as he rubbed the top of his foot. As he knelt underneath Pajak, Adal too began to laugh. At first, his laughter was a soft, a barely audible chuckle, but soon it grew into a loud, maniacal sound.

“Whose. House?” Adal reared up and brought his reinforced fist underneath Pajak's pointed chin.

Pajak stumbled backwards as a metallic crunch bounced off the walls in the room.

Adal used his momentum to lunge forward and spear Pajak in the midsection, sending them both rolling backward. Pajak's thin spider legs flailed in the air as he fought to steady himself.

Arija took advantage of the opportunity and rolled over Adal's legs, colliding with the floor and sliding toward the pile of weapons. As she reached for one of her daggers, Fausto realized what she was doing, and lunged at her.

Fausto clumsily pawed at the weapons, sending Adal's metal knuckles sliding across the room. Arija slammed her shoulder into him, forcing him back as she awkwardly fumbled for her blades.

She threw herself over Fausto, surprised when she came up holding one of her lethal blades in each hand. Her look of shock and horror melted into a wide grin as she glanced from the glistening edges of the blades to Fausto.

Fausto slowly rose from the ground, looking almost embarrassed to have been rolling around with a Topsider. He straightened his shirt, his eyes burning with rage.

“Well, look at that. Sounds like we’re gonna have a little fun after all,” Arija teased, bringing her blades into a fighting stance.

“This won’t be pleasant for you. I guess if that’s what you mean by fun, then yes, this is going to be a blast.” Fausto reached behind his back and withdrew the same blades he had used to fight Cog.

Arija looked from his weapon to hers. His were longer. She lowered herself, feeling the weight of her body on the balls of her feet, then sprung toward Fausto, blades ready.

## 43 | This Is How It Ends



Arija and Fausto danced around one another, taking various swipes from a distance, before leaping in, meeting blades, then pushing away. Arija was in her comfort zone as she squared off with Fausto. She'd done this a million times in wrestling. The threat of death was new, but she found it was a special kind of motivator. Her mind and body moved in perfect unison as she remembered Fausto's fighting style from the fight with Cog on the docks.

"What's the matter? Scared to fight me because you know I have no problem killing you? Just like you didn't have a problem setting up your brother's death!" Arija yelled, trying to sound more unhinged than she actually was.

Fausto seemed unbothered by her words. He merely snickered and swiped one blade at her.

Arija shot a look towards Adal, worried at what she would find. Adal was a great fighter, but he knew nothing about wrestling or using your opponent's weight against them. She tried to get to Adal, only to be cut off by Fausto.

"Oh, we wouldn't want to spoil their fun now, would we?" Fausto teased, placing himself between the two groups.

Arija scoffed but, inside, she was terrified. Adal was repeatedly trying to punch Pajak, which was basically like trying to punch your way out of a metal room. If she didn't get there soon, Adal wouldn't last much longer.

Arija managed to parry Fausto and throw her shoulder into his chest, knocking him backward into a pillar.

She took the opportunity to run toward Adal's knuckles and kick them in his direction. It was all she had time to do, and she gave a silent prayer it would be enough.

Just as she kicked the knuckles, she glimpsed Fausto coming up behind her, and spun with just enough time to crouch and flip him over her shoulders.

Fausto jumped up, spinning around impossibly fast and sliced a deep cut into Arija's arm.

She jumped back before he could get her again, but she couldn't prevent the gasp that forced its way out of her mouth at the pain. Warm blood seeped from the wound, but Arija didn't have the time to tend it.



Pajak wrapped one of his legs around Adal and flung him across the room. He was much stronger than Adal anticipated. With him only having one fist that could do any damage, the fight wasn't off to a promising start. As Adal slid to a stop at the base of one pillar, his head spinning, he had the sudden urge to throw up. "Why does this keep happening to me?" Adal grunted as he bounced to the floor.

Pajak made his way towards him, using only his thin, spider legs. Adal pushed himself to his feet, bringing his fists up as he tried to think of a plan.

"You're pathetic, Topsider! Just give it up!" Pajak demanded, sounding bored with the tussle.

"I was just going to say the same thing to you!" Adal shouted, hoping the strength behind his words would mask the shakiness.

"Oh well, at least you still have your sense of humor. It will come in handy as I'm taking you apart piece by piece. You see, I really need you alive in order to fully understand your inner mechanisms. But don't worry, that quick wit and sharp tongue of

yours will be your solace when you're in unbearable—" Pajak's words cut off as Adal tackled him to the ground.

Pajak wriggled out from under Adal and lifted him into the air by his shirt collar, holding him high enough that his feet dangled above the ground. Adal tried to pry Pajak's hands off him. He kicked the Dweller's chest as hard as he could.

"You can't beat me, Adal, just give up and accept your fate. If you're a good little boy, maybe you'll live long enough to see me make history." Pajak laughed as Adal went limp.

Taking a moment to think, Adal remembered a wrestling move he'd watched Arijia use to win countless matches. He released both of Pajak's hands and grabbed him by one wrist. Turning the limb inward and pulling Pajak's hand toward him, Adal broke his grip and utilized the momentum to bring him down to the floor.

Pajak gasped as he was pulled to the ground. He snapped one of his arachnid legs at Adal like a whip. Adal rolled out of the way just in time to see the leg strike the floor and leave a perfect gash in the metal.

"Damn!" The word slipped out involuntarily, but Adal couldn't help how impressed he was.

Sweat dripped off Adal's forehead. He didn't know how much longer he could fend Pajak off. "You hit like a... well... like whatever the hell hits soft down here." Adal fumbled for words, trying to sound like he didn't already know he was beaten. Every punch he threw missed once the extreme exhaustion set in. Now and then, he managed to land a successful right hook, but even that was doing less damage as time went on.

"I'm not sure what that was supposed to mean but, I can assure you, your protests are truly pathetic." Pajak swiped one long leg at Adal, forcing him to roll under the strike and slide across the smooth floor.

Where were his knuckles?

As if the thought had summoned them, Adal heard the metallic grinding of the weapons sliding across the floor. He rolled sideways as his eyes found his weapon, and he crawled the few

feet he needed to retrieve it.

Pajak used the force of his legs to propel himself into the air and bring down his fury upon Adal. Adal slid his knuckles over his fingers just as Pajak stabbed his extended appendages into the hard floor, narrowly missing Adal's face.

Pajak tried to raise his legs. He looked down as he met resistance. His arachnid appendages were wedged into the floor. Pajak jerked his body, twisting as he tried to free himself.

"Well, this sort of sucks for you." Adal directed his wrath towards Pajak, swinging wildly, like his target was the punching bag in the school's weight room.

Pajak brought his remaining legs up to defend himself against Adal's strikes, but his lack of mobility made it easy for Adal to maneuver around them.

Adal took a step in Arija's direction, wanting to go to her. But he couldn't leave Pajak now that he finally had him cornered. Adal focused his rage on the thing in front of him and unleashed a flurry of punches.

He was in the zone—nailing punch after punch—but, somehow, the creature managed to wriggle his legs free. He shot one of them toward Adal, catching him off guard. Adal jumped back.

With all eight of his spider legs free, Pajak lowered himself onto his human legs and lashed out at Adal with the long, thin extremities. A cold, burning pain erupted in Adal's cheek as one of Pajak's limbs whipped him in the face. Adal stumbled backward into one of the pillars.

Pajak thrust another of his legs at Adal, who managed to duck just as the powerful hit crashed into the pillar behind him, denting the frame and causing the metal to groan in protest.

Adal slid from under Pajak's legs, not wanting to corner himself. As he backed into the room, Pajak shot another bone-shattering strike at Adal.

Adal dropped to the floor as a sharp ping erupted, and the room went quiet. Adal looked up at the stunned Pajak and traced his extended leg to its end.

In Pajak's haste to finish Adal, he'd stabbed Fausto directly through the face. As Adal's eyes met Fausto's, his two blades fell to the floor, and Cog's twin slumped to the ground lifeless.

## 44 | You Ready for This?



Arija stood, her mouth agape. Her mother's voice crept into her mind. *Finish this.*

She sprang into action, running under Pajak's arm. She crossed over Adal and swept her blade through the air, burying it in Pajak's thigh. The engineered knife ripped through the metal of his leg like it was flesh. Pajak screamed and doubled over in pain.

Before Pajak could strike at Arija, Adal brought his fist to the face of the creature. A dull crunch was met by a spurt of green fluid from Pajak's mouth.

Arija removed her blade from his leg and buried it in Pajak's torso. He shifted sideways and fell to the floor as Adal brought another blow to Pajak's ribs. As Pajak hit the floor, Adal and Arija fell on him with murderous intent.

Adal buried his knuckled fist into Pajak's face as an explosion rocked the hall. The pillars and walls reverberated, and the sheer pressure of the blast brought Adal and Arija to a crouching halt. Arija brought her hands up to protect her head as small particles of debris rained down upon them.

Looking towards the source of the explosion, she located a newly formed hole in the ornate ceiling of the hall. Debris littered the ground and, as Arija glared through the strange formation, a craft drifted into view. Bright light from several spinning parts blinded Arija as she stared in awe.

Adal and Arija stepped away from Pajak as the craft lowered into the room. Pajak didn't move, struggling to suck in air, too



bent and broken to push himself out of the way.

Dust and debris blew about as the machine lowered. Three large legs extended from beneath the craft as it set down on the smooth floor. The sides of the machine had been battered and dented, but Arija could still see the remnant of a faded red cross on the side.

“No way,” Adal gasped.

“Who could be—?” The sound of the doors sliding open interrupted her. A plume of steam flowed from the vehicle's sides.

From the darkness of the open doorway, Webley emerged, battered and beaten, with a bandage crudely wrapped around his head and left eye. He had similar bandages around his right arm and legs. His ripped clothes showed signs of singeing at the ends.

“Impossible!” Pajak gasped.

“Webley!” Adal and Arija shouted in unison. Arija couldn't believe he had survived the explosion.

He made his way toward them, a slight limp on his left side. “Tha's enough o' tha!” Webley bellowed as he marched over to the group. “This fightin' stops now!”

“Webley! You should be dead!” Pajak snarled, using his arachnid legs to lift himself into a standing position.

“Pajak, tha's enough from ye! This foolishness ends! I have let you continue to break my heart fer' too long! This is all my fault. I should never 'ave let this go on, but I was blinded by my love fer' ye!” Webley marched past Adal and Arija, directly over to Pajak, who seemed to cower in his maker's presence.

“You never could stop me, Webley! This is my world.” Pajak paused as he coughed up more green liquid. “This is my Machine. You cannot stop me. You don't have the resolve. Take your Topsiders and just le—”

Pajak's words hushed as Webley thrust his hand outward and grasped Pajak by the throat, lifting him into the air. The arrogance and pride left Pajak's face, replaced by fear.

“The saddest day in a father's life is when he realizes his own children 'ave become monsters. Ye' became a monster long ago, but I was too weak te' see it. Not anymore. Ye're done, Pajak. It is time te' face your defeat!” Webley glared into his son's eyes but

spoke to Adal and Arija. “Ye two, get in the craft. This ain't a place fer' ye.”

“Hey man, I'm not leaving you,” Adal retorted, stepping toward Webley.

“Webley, you're hurt. We need to get you some attention,” Arija added, looking at his poorly treated wounds.

“Not up fer' discussion! The two of ye, get in the craft now! I will be jus' fine.” Webley's voice bore an edge that insisted they listen to his demands.

Adal and Arija turned, and slowly made their way over to the gangway of the tattered mobile aid unit. Taking a fleeting look over her shoulder as they walked up the small ramp, Arija saw that Webley still held Pajak in the air, unmoving, as if they were in the climax of a movie that had been paused.

As soon as Adal and Arija were inside the mobile clinic, the sliding doors slammed closed behind them. They both jumped at the sound, but Arija's attention was immediately drawn to her new surroundings.

The craft was filled with strange machines similar to the ones they'd seen in Avani's shop. Countless shelves filled with an assortment of parts ran the length of the craft's interior on either side and, in the center, was an examination chair identical to the one they had used yesterday. At the far end, a set of steps led to a piloting deck with two chairs for the pilot and a copilot.

There, sitting in the pilot's chair, was Kip. His newsboy cap was charred on the ends, his clothing was ripped, and he had a large gash on the right side of his face. But he was alive.

“Holy shit! Kip!” Adal shouted, running to the pilot's deck with Arija close behind. Arija smiled at the sight of the young Dweller alive and well. Adal and Arija wrestled over each other to wrap their arms around him.

“All right! I get it! You love me! Now let's get out of here! No time!” Kip straightened his hat and shifted the vehicle into gear.

Adal took an extra moment to squeeze the kid as tightly as he could while Arija wiped a rogue tear from her face.

Kip flipped several switches and pulled on levers, not taking his eyes off the window ahead of him. Slowly, the room began to

move as the craft lifted from the ground.

“Avani? Cog?” Arija asked, hopeful.

Kip sat in silence. The urge to burst into tears nearly won once more, and Arija dug her nails into the palms of her hands.

“Where are we going?” Arija finally asked, thinking about Webley. “We can’t just leave him here.”

“Yeah, Kip. What’s that all about? Don't leave the guy.”

Kip ignored them, too focused on getting the craft into the air. “Webley will be fine. This was his call. I’m just driving this thing. Trust me, you don't want to be here.”

They were well into the air now, and slowly making their way through the large hole in the ceiling. Once clear, Adal and Arija stared out the window at the horrific sights the Roost had to offer. Arija gasped as the horrid nest of Kleinmasch stirred and expanded outward around them.

“What is this place?” Adal asked.

“The Roost. It’s where the Kleinmasch live. That’s why we don't want to hang around.” Kip motioned out of the window. Drones of creatures marched toward the hall.

“Kip, we can’t leave him in that!” Arija protested again. This time, the frustration in her voice was noticeable.

“I don't have a choice. Webley wanted it like this,” Kip replied as they turned and made their way through the Roost.

“Dude, this isn't you. You don't run from fights. We do this as a team. Let’s get in there and get him!” Adal replied, sitting in the copilot’s seat next to Kip. “I know you want a piece of them. Think of Avani.”

As Adal uttered his mother’s name, Kip slammed on the brakes and brought the craft to a hover high above the floor of the Roost. He stared straight ahead for a couple minutes before bursting from his seat and flying past Arija.

“Wait, where are you going?” Arija asked as she and Adal chased Kip to the rear of the craft.

As Kip reached the far end, he knelt at the base of a shelf and pressed a rivet. A distant clank followed several of the shelves sliding aside, exposing the open air and several harnesses that fell from the ceiling. Adal and Arija stared at Kip as he pressed a

small button next to the open window, which resulted in two large guns lowering from a secret panel and orienting themselves to point out the window.

“What is this?” Adal asked, tugging at one of the harnesses.

“Kip, I don't even want to know why you put this in here, but what can we do to help?” Arija asked.

“Put on the harnesses and stand behind one of the guns. I'm driving!” Kip turned and made his way back to the pilot's seat.

Adal and Arija looked at one another, but did as they were told.

“Kip, you ready for this?” Adal asked, looking down the sights.

“Just hang on! This one is for my mum!” Kip jerked the machine back to life, and the group headed toward the great hall, deep inside the Roost.

Arija and Adal shot at anything and everything that moved as Kip soared back toward where they left Webley. The hall was covered by thousands of Kleinmasch climbing over each other, and fighting to get inside. The scene looked like something straight out of a zombie movie, and Arija had to fight not to scream as they approached.

The closer they got to the hall, the more Arija wondered if they were diving toward their deaths. Even with the massive machine guns of the mobile clinic, there was no way they could kill all the Kleinmasch and get to Webley.

“Kip!” Adal yelled over the rush of wind. “Just get to Webley. We can't take them all at once like this.”

Kip didn't reply, but Arija felt the shift of the mobile clinic changing direction. Soon they were so close to the mound of Kleinmasch that used to be the hall, Arija figured she could probably reach out and slap one of the ugly, spider-like faces.

The mobile clinic crashed into the horde of creatures, sending several of them in various directions. Then they were back in the hall.

Pajak was crumpled in the corner, and Webley was fighting off at least a dozen Kleinmasch, the creatures overtaking him as more seeped through the hole in the roof. Webley's eyes widened

as he saw the ship approaching, and he kicked a group of Baeg.

Arija took a deep breath and aimed her sights on the creatures closest to Webley. Adal kept his fire on the coming horde of Kleinmasch, doing his best to keep any more from making their way toward the Creator.

As Kip brought the craft as low to the ground as he could, Webley grabbed Pajak around the waist and hoisted him over his shoulder. He reached up and grabbed the edge of the craft as Adal dropped the gun and grabbed Webley's hand.

"Go! Go! Go!" Adal yelled over his shoulder.

Kip pulled on one of the ship's leavers, and the craft tilted back to an almost forty-five-degree angle.

Arija held onto her weapon to stop from sliding across the ship, and continued to fire at anything that moved. A group of Gearrtha and Cead jumped at the craft, but Arija sent a barrage of bullets at them before they could latch onto Webley.

Webley pulled himself onto the ship just as it broke through the wall of Kleinmasch and back into the Roost. He grabbed, opened one of the side cabinets, snatched a coil of rope, and tied it around Pajak as he dropped him in the corner of the ship. "Don't think o' doin' anything stupid, Pajak."

Once they were clear of the horde, Arija dropped the machine gun and ran toward Webley.

"I'm fine. Don'cha worry 'bout me," Webley said between panting breaths.

"What do we do now?" Kip asked as he pushed out of the Roost and into the light of the Machine.

"We go back to my 'ouse and regroup. But first, we get Adal and Arija back to their 'ome."

Arija shot Adal a look. They couldn't leave now. Cog and Avani were dead, and there were hordes of Kleinmasch who would be looking for revenge—not to mention their leader. What would that mean for the Dwellers that lived in the Machine?

Adal intertwined his fingers around Arija's, brought her hand up to his lips, and planted a lingering kiss on the back of her hand. "Or... we go back to Webley's house. Whatever is left of it anyway. We can't just go back home and let the people of the

Machine suffer.” Adal met Webley’s eyes as he spoke.

Webley waited a moment before turning to Kip and saying, “Ye’ heard the man.”

The craft jerked to the side as Kip took a sharp turn, changing their direction toward Webley’s house.

“What do we do with this Spider-man-looking asshole?” Adal asked as he kicked Pajak.

“I don’ know yet. Fer now, I’ll put ‘im in a cell until I ‘an figure out what ta do with ‘im”

Pajak didn’t respond. He only looked down at the ground.

“You ready for this?” Adal pulled Arija to his chest, and she leaned her head on his shoulder, finally able to relax.

“Always.”

## 45 | Enter The Hall of Doors



Adal and Arija loaded into the mobile clinic. Things had calmed down a little in the Machine since they'd defeated Pajak, and Webley had decided it was time to show them something important.

Neither of them had any idea where they were going and, every time they questioned him, Webley would only smile and say, "Ye'll 'ave te' see." Then he would go back to piloting the craft. Occasionally, Adal would shoot a look to Kip in search of clues, only to have him shrug back.

Adal and Arija hadn't let Kip leave their sides since Avani died. Arija felt responsible for keeping him out of trouble, and knew Avani wouldn't want to see him go back to living with the Desps and stealing to survive.

The craft made a sharp turn to the left and, this time, Adal slid into Arija. She placed the palm of her hand on his chest, and it lingered a long moment before she pulled it away.

"Looks are free, but you can't just be hitting on me like that, Arija." Adal flexed the muscles in his chest.

Arija scoffed, grinning wildly before clenching her fist and slamming it into him. Adal scowled.

"Oh, big man can't take a hit?"

Adal raised one eyebrow. "I can handle anything you throw at me, little girl."

"Oh really?" Arija asked.

"Sure enough!"

Arija grinned and grabbed Adal by the collar, pulling him close and pressing her lips against his. The sweet smell that was distinctly Adal filled Arija with the sense that she belonged.

Her world fell away. Thoughts were replaced by the sound of blood pulsing through her veins. Their lips parted and she let her tongue trace the inside of his lips, relishing in the taste of him. When she pulled away, Adal reached for her.

Arija placed one cold, delicate hand on his face and he opened his eyes.

“Uhh... I... I... mean, next time warn me. Sneaking one in there on me like that,” Adal stuttered nervously, clearing his throat and straightening his collar.

Arija rolled her eyes. Of course Adal would find a way to ruin the moment.

“I mean, that was definitely the best kiss you’ve ever had, right?”

Arija shrugged, doing her best to hide her smile. Adal looked at her expectantly.

“Meh,” she replied, turning her eyes toward the back of Webley’s head.

Arija let Adal wait a few minutes before she turned back toward him. After all, he deserved a little grief. He’d made her wait ten years for this moment. He could withstand a few more minutes.

When Arija decided she’d made him suffer long enough, she slid back close to him. Adal was still sitting there, mouth half open, staring at her. She let a big smile spread over her face. The first real smile in what felt like forever.

Adal placed his hand on her cheek. He traced the line of her jaw down to her chin, then pulled her into another kiss, this one soft and sweet. He wrapped his arms around her waist, and planted a soft kiss on her cheek. Arija nuzzled her face into his chest just as the mobile clinic touched ground.

Webley rose from his seat and walked past the three passengers. “Well, ‘ere we are!” Webley opened the hatch door and stepped outside with Adal, Arija, and Kip sliding out behind him.



They stood on another platform, deep in the Machine but, unlike most of the platforms Adal and Arija had seen, this one didn't seem to lead to anything important. At the far end stood a single door. The black, metal looked almost like a bank vault.

Before Adal or Arija could ask any questions, Webley made his way to the door and placed one large hand on the spindle "This was somethin' tha' Cog wanted te' show ye. He helped me build this. I think tha' he'd want me te' take ye 'ere. The lock inside is always movin'. Ye' 'ave te' be able te' feel the mechanisms movin' an know just when te' pull..." Webley went back to focusing on his hands.

Just as Arija was about to ask what was behind the door, Webley yanked the handle sideways and pulled it open.

"After ye'." Webley motioned for the group to enter.

The vault door opened into a long, narrow hallway, dimly lit by dozens of Edison bulbs. At the end of the hall was another door identical to the one they had just come through. Webley squeezed past Adal and Arija with Kip pushing his way behind them.

"Wow! This place is the coolest!" Kip yelled, his words bouncing off the metallic walls.

Webley didn't need to focus to open the second door. As soon as he grabbed it, he pulled, and the door popped open.

Kip pushed past everyone and ran into the dark room. As Arija and Adal stepped through the entryway, Webley closed the door behind them, snuffing out the small stream of light from the hallway.

Arija's heart thumped in her chest. She hated feeling claustrophobic and, in the darkness, she could swear the walls were closing in on her. Arija reached out a blind hand, grabbing onto Adal's arm.

A distant 'clank' rang out and, in another instant, the room was lit by large bulbs that slowly grew to life.

Arija looked up at Adal, who was wagging his eyebrows. She let go of his arm.

The walls were lined with numerous tubes, pipes, coils, and

all other assortment of parts that seemed to bleed to the center of the room. Arija followed the pipes with her eyes until they landed on an archway.

Webley walked from the doorway to a large panel where Kip already stood, staring at the surface.

“What’s all this?” Adal asked as he approached the panel with its dozens of knobs and switches. All of which had strange words or symbols etched into the metallic surface below them.

“What does this machine do?” Arija asked, shooting a glare at Kip as he reached past Webley to try to flip one of the switches. Kip caught her look and pulled his arm back to his side.

“This is somethin’ special. Ye’ see, I’m a Creator, an this world isn’t the first tha’ I’ve been a part of. Travelin’ back an forth was gettin’ exhausting over time. So, Cog helped me catalog all the worlds. This place is how I get te’ them.” Webley fanned his hand over the controls.

Arija’s eyes bulged as she realized the strange words and symbols weren’t labels; they were names. Names of other worlds.

“Wait, so you mean this place is like a portal or something? And you can go to other planets? Does Scotty know about this?” Adal joked, walking over to another panel with a row of necklaces hanging from it.

Webley stood in confused silence for a moment, Adal’s reference lost on him. “Those are the keys! Ye’ need one o’ them te’ get back. Ye take the chain an’ spin it as fast as ye’ can. If the portal is closed, it will open. If it’s open, ye’ jus’ jump through an’ no worries. Always make sure te’ close the portal behind ye’, though. Never know who or what may make their way through with ye’,” Webley warned.

“How do you close—?” Arija asked before the room started to shake as the portal roared to life. Panicked, Arija shot her gaze from side to side as a bright light erupted from the center of the room.

Adal had his hands in the air, showing that he hadn’t touched anything. Arija searched for Kip by the control panel, but he was no longer there. She ran over to the controls. One of the

switches had been turned on.

“Taraveil,” Arija whispered as she read the label under the switch.

“Kip don't!” Adal shouted.

Kip was making his way down the side wall, sprinting for the portal.

“Let's get this party started!” Kip shouted, running into the light. “Cannonball!” he yelled as he disappeared into the vortex.

Arija turned, wide-eyed and fuming toward Adal. This kid was going to get her killed.

Adal grabbed two of the keys from their hooks and whistled as he tossed one to Arija. She caught it mid-air, and threw it around her neck.

“Ye' two be careful! Ye don't know what ye' are doin'!” Webley shouted at them, but they were already standing in front of the portal, fingers laced together.

“Just keep anything from coming back through the portal! We have to get him!” Adal called over his shoulder.

“I'm going to kill this kid!” Arija growled as she looked into the blue electric current of the active portal.

“Me first!”

“I guess the fun is just starting, huh?” Arija squeezed Adal's hand as they leaped into the light and disappeared.

THE END

Dear Reader,

Thank you for following Adal and Arija on this crazy ride...even if we barely made it out alive.

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**\*\*\*TURN THE PAGE TO READ THE FIRST THREE CHAPTERS OF KIP AND THE GRINDERS\*\*\***

# Part 1

## Grinders

# 1 | Pure Grinding



Ypsilon always appreciated the brief moment of solitude before pulling a heist. The type of moment that let her get in her own head and assess just how badass she really was.

The bright orange and red hue of the sun had only been over the top of the blocky skyline of buildings for maybe an hour, and she let the warm air fill her lungs and tickle her nose.

As Ypsilon sat on the edge of the Hemmingdoll building and looked out over the bustling city below, she squinted her eyes, trying to see how far down she could make out. Eventually, the lights from the flying crafts and mist from the lowest visible levels mixed together, creating a colorful blur of neon and rust.

Several strands of her multi-colored dreadlocks danced in the air in front of her face, drawing her focus back to reality. Ypsilon glanced up at the colorful locks signifying her leadership and separating her from the rest of her gang of Grinders.

Each color represented a different ability, a unique strength.

Spitting a large wad down the side of the building, Ypsilon wondered what existed beyond the fog. None of the Grinders would dare go that far.

Her Grinder gang, the Engineers, always said there wasn't actually a bottom, but rather just stacks of buildings that went on forever. Ypsilon had always thought that theory was bullshit, but she wasn't about to test it.

The only Grinders that really knew the truth were the ones chosen by the fall. No one had ever survived falling that far, so no one really knew what was down there.

Snapping herself back to the job at hand, Ypsilon brought her gaze up toward the horizon. She glanced at a window across from

her and glared at her reflection. The sun reflected off the window, highlighting the bright greens, blues and pinks of her hair. The colorful nature of her dreadlocks was a stark contrast to her milky white complexion. Her lips were the pale blue of a corpse, and her dark eyes were ringed in black, making them look sunken and mysterious.

The arm pilot she always wore glinted in the sun as a breeze brushed by her exposed midriff, ruffling her loosely-fitted, tan cargo pants.

Ypsilon shivered as she bent down to tie her black lace-up boots. Her shit kickers were the pride of her outfit. She'd made them herself. With her boots, her kit, and the vest strapped across her chest, she had everything she needed to be the best Grinder. And she *was* the best.

Ypsilon brought her hand to her side and ran it over the heavy piece of steel attached to her hip. Her friend, Bangarang, never left her side. That trusty pistol had gotten her out of more jams than she could even fathom. The last thing she truly had to remember her father.

Ypsilon shook her head. She still had a job to concentrate on. Their target was due to arrive at 0800, sharp.

The Engineers needed more capacitors for their boot mods. A tech truck was set to work on the holo-signs this morning, but the Engineers had caused it to “accidentally” malfunction the night before.

Soisha, Ypsilon's Captain and best friend, had found out through the mainframe that the repairs were slated to begin at 0800. So, Ypsilon had arrived there an hour before and had set up post around the corner. She always arrived at a job early. At this point, Grinding was her profession, and she treated all her jobs as such.

A chirping sound came from the Pilot device on Ypsilon's arm, and she checked the small screen on the heavy, metal bracer. The fun was set to start in thirty seconds.

Butterflies erupted in her stomach as she stood and took another deep breath. If she was being completely honest with herself, she lived for this shit.

Ypsilon pressed the confirmation prompt on the unit and looked to the right of the building across from her.

Her gaze dropped thirty levels down, just as a power unit mounted to the side of a metallic platform exploded. The vehicles parked on the steel surface shook as plumes of smoke erupted and sparks burst like fireworks.

From the depths of the smoke and mayhem, Rom and Rea appeared and leapt from the platform onto a passing tractor. The brothers clung to the top of the moving vehicle as Ypsilon grinned, shaking her head.

“Really, guys? Pramming?”

Grinders valued not needing help from machines to get around and considered it weak to ride on the top of a pram. This was especially funny coming from the twin muscle of the Engineers. Seeing them choose that as part of their maneuver was interesting to say the least.

On cue, sirens blared in the distance and the lights on the compliance officers’ vehicles lit up the air. Most Grinders called the compliance officers Stronzi and weren't fans of their mocked authority.

Within moments, the compliance officers approached the explosion and fell right into the trap. They sped past the burning platform toward the transportation the brothers had chosen.

Ypsilon watched as the officers neared her men, but as soon as they boxed in the pram, the brothers leapt from opposite sides of their ride, falling.

She didn't wait to see how things worked out for them. Rom and Rea knew what they were doing. With the officers out of the way, her fun could start.

Ypsilon cracked her neck and rolled her shoulders, allowing a giant grin to crease her pale face. “Time for Mama to do what she does best,” she said as she pulled up the large headphones drooping over her shoulders.

She swiped through the Pilot’s screen until she found the perfect theme song for the day. When she found what she’d been looking for, Ypsilon slammed her finger down on the green button and let the loud music deafen her from the world.



Ypsilon casually stepped off the edge of the building and began her fall.

The colorful locks of her hair whipped through the air above her head as she rapidly descended. Several floors cleared in only a few seconds. Her stomach lurched into her throat, her heart pounding and the blood rushing through her veins like streams of liquid electricity. She experienced the same feeling every day, yet she never tired of the rush.

She threw her arm out, and the snap-extensions from her kit shot from her sleeve, helping her grasp the heavy gauge wire running the length of the building. She clenched down on the wire and pressed her feet into the side of the tall brick structure.

The hairs on her arms stood on end as her boots let out a compressed groan and thrust Ypsilon forward into the air once again. She aligned her body just right and narrowly passed over a vehicle. The cold metal from the hood of the pram slid right over her shoulder, and she curled herself to continue the momentum.

In the vanishing instant she had to react, she flipped herself over and slammed those heavy boots into the front fender just as the bass from the song kicked up.

She couldn't help the ear to ear grin at the perfect timing. There was nothing like the feeling of Grinding.

Nothing topped the rush of adrenaline.

The wind whipped past her as another compressed boom shot her forward again, closing the gap between herself and the opposite building.

Another turn of her body, and she brought her knees up, grabbing a pole and swinging herself upward and onto a window sill running the width of the building.

Not even waiting to assure her steady footing, she lunged forward and sprinted the urban catwalk as prams whizzed by, mere feet away—their horns muffled through the bass pumping into her ears.

“Calm down! I'm not a jacker!” Ypsilon shouted at one particularly hostile operator who was leaning out his window and screaming obscenities at her.

She politely extended her middle finger and kept running,

humming the next verse of the song as she went. She was on the clock. He could eat it.

Near the edge of the block, a civilian tram rounded the corner. As it slowly turned, it blocked her direct line to the building across from her. Thinking on her feet, she leapt up and slammed her heavy boots into the side of the tram, using her momentum to run its length and follow its natural curve as it rounded the corner.

When Ypsilon pushed her left foot into the building beside her, it launched her sideways into an aerial and once more into traffic. For a moment, the world bled together as the blur of headlights and holo-signs swirled in her vision. A world of light and distorted faces meshed in her vision, their frowns and scowls of terror temporarily looking like the strangest, deformed smiles.

The world came back to life as she landed on the hood of another pram, the bass thudding in her ears, and turned to see a frightened older woman sitting behind one of the most beaten down rides Ypsilon had ever seen.

“Sorry!” she shouted as she jumped from the hood and used another vehicle as a springboard to the next vehicle.

Grinding is Grinding, and that was what Ypsilon did, but she wasn't a jerk. Feeling guilty for nearly giving an old lady a heart attack, Ypsilon continued.

Finishing up her chain of pram hopping, Ypsilon managed to reach the wall of her intended building. Landing on yet another ledge, she took the opportunity to catch her breath and wipe the sweat from her palms. Her kit had done its job with keeping her moving, but she still couldn't grip metal surfaces with wet hands.

Ypsilon appreciated how amazing Soisha was. Like a machine, she'd calculated the day's movements to the minute. Soisha was the Engineers only computer monkey, and this was the reason why. Ypsilon didn't trust anyone else with her life.

She looked down, and sure enough, the maintenance vehicle hovered at the base of the multi-story holo-sign just as it was supposed to be. Ypsilon couldn't see the techs piloting it but knew there would be two of them.

The massive frame of the holo-sign stretched nearly a dozen

floors from where she was to where the maintenance vehicle hovered in the air. Heat from the plasma-based sign still radiated off it.

These things were dangerous when they were on, and though their glowing lights were pretty, it would fry any poor bastard that came too close or was stupid enough to touch the damn thing. If she was going to use it, she had to get down before these jokers turned the thing back on, or it would be good night and crispy journeys for Ypsilon.

Sliding her finger across the off button on her pilot, she hung the headphones around her neck. With one more breath, she grabbed the cold metal and wrapped her legs around the base of the projector. The utility van shifted in the air. The mechanics were inside the vehicle.

“Damn,” she mouthed as she brainstormed a way to get them out. Nothing came screaming to mind, so it looked as if this one was going to get a little risky.

Releasing her grip slightly, Ypsilon slid down the death pole. She glanced at her hip to make sure Bangarang was still with her. She was probably going to need him. The van grew closer and closer until she could almost hear the men’s voices inside over the buzzing of the traffic.

Only a few feet above the vehicle, Ypsilon swung her legs out and lightly placed herself on the top of the maintenance van. It shuttered and shook from the movement inside, but otherwise, she was able to catch and keep her footing.

No time to wait. Ypsilon crouched down and knocked on the heavy, metal door as hard as she could. “Anybody home?” she whispered under her breath.

The movement inside the vehicle stilled for a moment and the voices fell silent. She clutched the edge of the doorframe and waited. After a moment, the latch snapped, and the doors flew open.

“Mama’s home,” she shouted as she swung down into the vehicle.

As her heavy boot collided with one of the technician’s chest and threw him backward into the van, Ypsilon caught the brief,

surprised look on his face before he collided with the second technician.

In one seamless motion, Ypsilon pulled Bangarang out of its holster and pointed it at the two men as they struggled to help themselves up, hands high in the air.

“Morning fellas. Sorry to drop in like that. Just had to swing in for some supplies. Hope you don't mind.” Ypsilon’s couldn't help grinning. She truly loved her job.

The two technicians kneeled on the floor in front of her, shaking like it was the dead of winter.

“I need a few of your capacitors, please and thank you,” she added, dragging the sights of her pistol from one man to the next.

When neither answered, she reached up her thumb and drew back Bangarang’s hammer.

Their rough, unshaved faces and dirty mechanic overalls gave them a salt-of-the-planet type appearance, and she knew these guys were pretty tough. Perhaps her message wasn't getting across to them.

“I’m sorry, kinda pressed for time. Really need those capacitors.” Ypsilon had learned early on that if she really scared people they acted in funny, unpredictable ways. Ever the professional, she tried to always be smarter than the mark.

Her threat seemed to work, and one of the men pointed to a large toolbox sitting on a shelf next to her. Ypsilon flipped the lid open to see a dozen azure-glowing tubes illuminating the dark van.

*That’s the payload, all right.*

She carefully placed each one in her pocket and closed the zipper, ensuring that they would make it back to headquarters. As she did so, the two men shuffled to their feet, and she snapped her attention back to them.

“Uh uh, boys. Not a smart move. I have what I want. So, I’ll just be leaving, and you’ll be fine. Just stealing from a corrupt, hypocritical shithead anyway. No need to risk your lives for someone like that.” With each word, Ypsilon backed her way to the door of the van, shooting glances over her shoulder to her exit strategy.

“Damn Grinders,” one of the technicians barked, his voice scratchy and gruff.

Ypsilon shot a look back at the bold man. “Nothin’ but punks and waste of space. Just look at yourself. You put that ridiculous color in your hair. Trying to be original? Why don't you do us all a favor and jump? Save everyone the time.”

His words tore at Ypsilon. He had disrespected not only her, but all Grinders. That type of hate got her friends killed. It was why—when they caught them—the authorities were quick to beat a Grinder or simply take their kits and drop them, saying they’d jumped.

Ypsilon slowly brought her eyes back to the two men. Her face burning in hatred. Sucking her teeth and letting a half grin escape, she lowered the hammer and slid Bangarang back into his holster.

“Now, why would you go and say something so stupid?”

One of the men rose and took a step towards her.

Ypsilon extend one finger, shaking it side to side. “Not so fast. If you’re coming for it, I suggest you bring help.” She motioned at the disheveled shelves stacked with tools to either side of the men. Ypsilon was nothing if not fair.

The man that had spoken grabbed a wrench off one of the shelves while the other man pushed himself up and grabbed a utility knife.

“There you go. Now, you were saying?” Ypsilon said as she squared off with the technicians. The one that clearly had a bone to pick with her lunged forward, swinging his wrench.

Ypsilon caught the inside of his arm as she stepped in and slammed her knee up into his hip. The technician shouted in pain as she brought her forehead down onto the bridge of his nose. With a dull squish, Ypsilon knew she’d broken the delicate bones.

He shouted and tilted his head backwards. Ypsilon pressed against the back of his elbow. After a brief moment, another dull snap as she broke his arm, letting it hang backwards at an odd angle.

The technician let out a pained gasp, like he couldn’t believe what was happening. The screams that followed were so piercing

that Ypsilon had to force herself not to let go so she could cover her ears.

She grabbed his shoulder and forced his face to the metallic edge of the counter, knocking him out and relieving him of his pain. He fell limply to the floor.

As Ypsilon brought her eyes up from the unconscious technician, the other ran at her with a knife. He swung wide and fast, obviously unfamiliar with the right way to hold a weapon.

She ducked and thrust her palm into the base of the man's chin. As his head shot back, she grabbed his wrist with one hand and punched his kidney with the other. Another ear shattering scream of pain filled the small van as the technician tried to pull himself free.

"Shut. Up. Asshole," Ypsilon grunted as she brought her boot down on the side of his right knee.

A pop followed a howl of pain. Ypsilon took the knife from his hand and threw it out the open doorway just before she thrust her knee into the man's face. The sudden silence was deafening as he fell backwards, asleep.

"You see what being rude will get you?" she panted as she knelt over the two men to make sure they were still breathing. "I didn't want to have to do that. Why couldn't you just let me screw over your almighty overlord and be done with it?" Confirming she hadn't killed them, Ypsilon grinned and made her way to the open door once more. A faint groan came from behind her, but she couldn't be bothered with intolerant assholes.

Prams whizzed by as she surveyed her dismount options. After a quick scan, she saw her path. Jumping to a small landing to the left of the tech van, Ypsilon sprinted the length of the walkway. The van rapidly disappeared behind her, and she felt her pocket for the capacitors. Another successful mission in the bag, and now she could work on the new order for boots.

Reaching the edge of the building, she grabbed a flagpole and used her momentum to swing herself into the air and into a flip.

With the air blowing around her, she twisted to see the slanted roof of a building three stories below. As she landed, her boots let out a puff of air that absorbed the shock. Keeping low,

she slid down the metal slope toward a small platform. Her boots sparked as they ground on the metal surface.

Reaching the end of the grind, Ypsilon leapt into the air and collided with the hard surface of the platform. It looked to be the balcony of some yuppie cafe. Brushing the soot from her shoulder, she sprinted toward the edge and prepared for another leap.

Just as she crouched to take the jump, a sharp pain erupted from her back and shoulders as something large and heavy sent her rolling forward.

## 2 | It's Raining Men



Ypsilon groaned as she slowly stood up, looking around. Whatever had hit her had collided with a row of tables and chairs, creating a huge mess of the once orderly cafe. Good thing the place wasn't open yet, or she would have had to deal with some really pissed off customers. As she looked around, the rubble shifted.

Someone was in there.

“Oh shit! You all right?” she shouted as she put aside her better judgement and ran over to the mess. She was going to kick the Grinder’s ass for landing on her like that, but first she wanted to make sure they were okay and not someone from her own crew.

Pulling back a chair, a hand appeared, causing Ypsilon to step back. Small artificial fingers stretched out toward the hot, midday sun. As she took a step towards the hand, the mass shifted, and a small boy stood up.

Ypsilon gasped and took several steps back, drawing her gun. “What the hell?” she shouted as the young kid emerged from the wreckage.

Ypsilon’s mouth hung open as she surveyed him. His skin was stretched out and made of metal. He wore what looked like overalls and an eight-piece cap.

The kid stumbled from the pile, brushing off his knees and looking around in shock.



“Woah...” Kip surveyed the fantastic world he’d dropped into.



He was familiar with the gigantic buildings and flying cars, they had those in the World Machine. His mechanical home in the center of Earth was all Kip had ever known until he'd landed here. The open, blue sky made him pause, mouth hung open in awe.

Kip had never seen a real blue sky before, and he gasped as he stared up at the beautiful bright azure color.

His eyes danced around until they found the girl he'd collided with. A woman with rainbow colored hair and piercing eyes was pointing a gun at him. Kip shoved his hand into his pocket, taking out a small, marble-sized knocker. He never left home without a few of them stashed in his pockets, just in case he needed to make an explosive exit.

"Hey, lady. What's your problem? Are you crazy or somethin'?" Kip raised his hand and prepared to lob the small grenade.

Ypsilon took a step back. "You can talk? What the hell are you?"

"Umm, a Dweller, duh. Not for nothin', but you wanna point that thing somewhere else? I mean, even if you did hit me, you won't win if I drop this. Trust me." Kip tossed the small ball into the air and caught it gracefully in his palm.

He'd known Topsiders would be shocked when they first saw a Dweller, but *she* was not Topsider. Sure, she looked human enough, but there was something strangely familiar about her. Something oddly mechanic he couldn't quite put his finger on.



Ypsilon stared at the strange, robotic boy. She'd never seen anything like it. But, somehow, something about it seemed familiar. "Where did you come from?"

"Literally, or actually? Literally, the sky. Though that's probably obvious since I kinda just landed on you. Actually, I come from the Machine," Kip said as he tossed a small, silver ball

into the air and caught it again.

“The Machine? What’s that? What are you?” Ypsilon repeated as she tried to wrap her head around what was happening. She was an Engineer. She couldn’t help finding the aspect of a falling robot kid insanely interesting, but until she could determine whether he was dangerous or not, she needed to keep her wits about her.

“I feel like we covered that already,” Kip began, annoyance lacing his voice. “I. Am. A. Dweller. Kip. Is. My. Name. I. Came. From. The. Machine,” he continued, slowly speaking each word before giving up and huffing a sigh. “Look, lady, we can keep talking, but do you mind not pointing your gun at me? I mean, isn’t pointing rude wherever...uh this is?”

Ypsilon, not knowing why, slowly lowered Bangarang. She got the strange feeling Kip wasn’t truly dangerous.

“Taraveil. You’re in Taraveil,” she said, holstering her weapon. “I’m Ypsilon.”

Kip lowered his arm, placing the knocker back into his pocket. “Cool! That Hall of Doors portal actually worked.”

A pram flew by, and Kip turned and sprinted to the edge of the balcony. Ypsilon’s heart froze for a moment at the thought of him jumping.

“Wow! This place is cool!” Kip shouted as he peered over the ledge at the bright lights of the holo-signs. “It’s like the Machine on crack.”

Ypsilon watched the curious kid, and the more she examined him, the more fascinated she became. This was a fully sentient, living, breathing, and talking robot. Soisha was going to flip her lid when she got ahold of him.

“Hey, Ypsilon. What’s that?” Kip shouted, pointing over the ledge.

Ypsilon started to walk over but was immediately sent back as a pram erupted over the side of the building. Kip was thrown backwards and slid across the ground.

“Code violation! You are under arrest. Please lie down and await processing!” the vehicle’s mechanical voice commanded of them.

Its red lights flashed, and the silver panel with blue accents shone in the rising sun. The compliance officer's boisterously reflective paint and mightier-than-thou attitude were a surefire way to spot them a mile away.

Two loud snaps erupted from the pram as the side compartments fell open revealing two large barrels. That's not good. Ypsilon looked over to Kip, pleading him with her eyes to stay back.

"Who are these guys?" Kip's voice cracked with frustration.

"Kip, don't move! The Stronzi love shooting at Grinders, and right now, you're a Grinder!" Ypsilon looked back to the vehicle. She didn't have an escape plan. If she sprinted and slid underneath the pram, she could probably lose them on the fall from the building. But that would mean leaving the kid behind, and he was just too interesting to let the Senate have.

Ypsilon sighed and put her hands in the air, slowly lowering to her knees.

Kip walked towards Ypsilon. "Wait a minute? Are these bad guys?"

"Kip, don't move! Stay there!" she barked. One of the barrels shifted so it pointed at Kip. He stopped, glaring at the compliance officer's vehicle.

"Ypsilon? Are they bad guys?" Kip asked again, his eyes locked on the pram.

"Yes!" Ypsilon shouted. "Now, get down before you get us killed!"

A sinister grin crept across Kip's face. He turned and shrugged at Ypsilon. "Oh, okay then."

Kip turned to the vehicle. "Knock knock!" he shouted, taking the small marble back out of his pocket and throwing it at the underside of the pram. As soon as the little ball touched the thruster under the vehicle, a massive explosion sent Ypsilon onto her back.

Orange and red flames shot in all directions. The compliance officer's vehicle spun and whirred uncontrollably in the air. Ypsilon looked up at Kip with horror and excitement gleaming in her eyes, but not even the explosion shifted his stance.

He just might be a Grinder after all.

“What the hell was that?” Ypsilon shouted as she ran over to Kip. The vehicle collided with a wall at the far end of the platform, sparks erupting as it slid across the metal surface. It bounced off the wall and crashed into an adjoining building, causing a small fire to ignite somewhere within the vehicle’s depths.

“Invention of mine. I call them Knockers. They make great party favors,” Kip joked as he looked back at the totaled vehicle.

Ypsilon was speechless. As they examined the mangled wreckage, one of the hatches popped open and smoke plumed from inside the cab.

“Uh oh. Looks like they’re still with us. Let’s get out of here, kid. You're coming with me.” Ypsilon motioned for Kip to follow.

“Uh, okay. But, if you try any funny stuff, I have plenty more of those.”

Ypsilon smiled. A killer set of knockers and an attitude to boot. He wasn't just a Grinder. This kid was an Engineer at heart. “I hear you. Just hold on to your knockers and come on before they call for help.”

## 3 | A Whole New World



Adal knew that feeling. That feeling when you're driving down a road and cresting a hill at seventy miles per hour. When your stomach feels like it just fluttered up into your chest and you think you're falling just for a split second. Jumping through a portal feels a lot like that.

Adal's grandfather used to call those Kazoom-Booms. The only difference this time was that, even though he couldn't really see or make any sense of the flashes of images and lights, he was almost certain he *was* falling.

Adal tried to catch a glimpse of Arija, but no luck. He wasn't sure how long he'd been in this fever-dream of a wormhole, but he wished it would be over soon.



Arija had resolved to close her eyes after the first strange hallucinations. She wasn't sure when she and Adal had stopped holding hands, but once they'd entered the portal in the Hall of Doors to go after Kip, all bets were off.

That kid had done nothing but get them into trouble since they'd come to the World Machine, and now she couldn't even fathom what type of problems they would face when they got to the other side. Or would there even be another side?

She called out for Adal, but sound wouldn't leave her throat. No matter how much she screamed, she couldn't get her vocal cords to make a single sound. Had she somehow lost her voice?

Were they in some sort of vacuum where sound wouldn't travel?

In an instant, a bright light flashed, and for a brief moment, Adal and Arija were falling. Really falling.

Arija landed hard on Adal, her knee finding its way into his groin.

Adal's face twisted up in pain. "Hey, I get that you work out and all, but damn girl, you're heavier than you look."

Arija's eyes hadn't adjusted to the bright light of wherever they'd landed, but she could feel Adal squirming underneath her.

She braced herself on the warm metal platform they'd landed on, letting her long, dark hair slide over her shoulders and onto Adal's face. She let herself get lost in the darks of his eyes for a moment before she lined up her shot and dug her elbow into his stomach.

*Teach him to make smart ass remarks.*

"And you're softer than you look," she snapped as she rolled off him to the hard surface, and the blurred world came into view.

Adal sat next to her, nursing his sore stomach. "Oh, come on, you big baby. I didn't hit you that hard."



Adal rolled to his side before sitting upright. He wasn't sure if it was Arija's hit or the trip itself, but he was having trouble finding his breath.

He looked up at his best friend, and for a moment, his mind wandered back to the kiss they'd shared that morning. Did the kiss mean they were dating? They hadn't exactly talked about it. Kip had jumped through the portal so quickly that they hadn't had time to discuss anything about their relationship, or lack thereof.

Something was different about Arija. She wasn't like the other girls he'd been with over the years. She was strong, fierce, a warrior. He couldn't mess this up.

Shaking the thought from his head, Adal pulled himself to his

feet and finally looked around at the world they'd landed in.

The bright light that had nearly blinded them wasn't a light at all. It was the sun. Warm air tickled Adal's face, and he closed his eyes, taking in a gulping breath of fresh air.

He had nearly forgotten the feeling of open air in their time in the World Machine with Webley and his mechanical creatures.

Ever since they'd found that elevator to the center of the Earth, their life had been one strange adventure after another. Adal still wasn't completely convinced it wasn't some weird dream, but he was rolling with the punches, so to speak.

"Bro, what *is* this place?" Adal marveled.

"Okay, first off, don't call me 'bro'. Secondly, according to the panel Kip activated in the Hall of Doors, we're in someplace called Taraveil."

In their awe of the moment, Adal had nearly forgotten why they'd come in the first place. "Oh shit, do you think Kip would've landed somewhere around here?"

Arija shoved her hand in her pocket and pulled out the key that would bring them home to the World Machine. She let out a sigh of relief as she examined the chain with the small lantern on it.

"Uh...Arija..." Adal nudged her.

Somehow, they'd managed to miss the large crash on the opposing side of the platform.

Smoke and sparks erupted from a vehicle that looked like it collided with one of the building. Adal took a tentative step towards the crash, feeling like Kip must have something to do with it.

"Get on the ground!" two men in police uniforms shouted, their weapons pointed at Adal and Arija.

Adal sucked in a deep breath, instinctually sliding his hand underneath his black leather jacket to his hip, where his pistol was holstered. "Hey, fellas, I think there's some mis—"

"I said get down now!" The older of the two officers—a pudgy guy with a speckled graying black beard and pock-marked skin—took a step toward Adal, aiming his pistol at him.

His steady hand told Adal the officer had been doing this job

for a long time.

The other officer shot sideways glances at his older counterpart. "Sarge, I know we took a hit to the head, but I don't think these are the Grinders we were just dealing with. This one's black, and the girl... I think the girl had rainbow hair, not black hair."

"You think I can't see that, Yuri? It doesn't matter anyway. They all look alike to me."

"Aw, what the hell?" Adal protested, stepping toward the Sargent.

"Get down, or I'll shoot!" The Sargent's voice cracked a higher octave.

"What the hell is your problem? We just got here." Arija took a defiant step forward, closing the gap between her and Adal.

"Sir, these aren't them," Officer Yuri said again, placing one shaky hand on the sergeant's arm.

"Son, do I look like I care? Grinders are all the same. I bet these two just finished robbing a bank or jacking a car. Anyway, it don't matter. The Senate pays us to clean up the trash and keep order. You'll learn that soon enough."

The older officer brought his attention back to Adal and Arija. "Now, you two, get on the ground. This is your last chance, before I put a round through your head."

Adal and Arija shared a knowing glance. This was bad. They couldn't just fight their way out or they may end up public enemy number one and never find Kip or make it back to the Machine. Reluctantly, they slowly raised their hands and lowered down to their knees.

"That's good! Now, lay flat on your stomachs," the Sargent barked.

Adal and Arija both sighed in frustration as they did what they were told.

The warm surface of the platform heated Adal's face and a loose bolt dug into his cheek as he turned his head to look at Arija.

Rage contorted her features, and frankly, he couldn't blame her. They'd done nothing wrong, yet here they were, about to get



arrested—even though the officers knew they were innocent.

“There you go. Yuri, take the boy. I’ll tend to the young lady.”

Something in the sergeant’s voice made Adal’s skin crawl. He locked eyes with Arija, using the familiar gold flecks to remain calm.

The officers’ footsteps quickened as they approached. Soon, the sergeant’s glossy black shoes stood next to Arija’s head, but he refused to pull his eyes from her. Arija was a warrior but there was also something so soothing about looking into her eyes.

“All right, Yuri. Check him for any contraband and then cuff him. These damn kids always have GoGo on ‘em. Bunch of damn junkies.”

“Yes, sir,” Yuri responded.

A heavy weight pressed into Adal as Yuri placed a knee in his back and an audible click came as he holstered his weapon.

“I think I’ll have to be especially thorough with this one. She looks like she’s carrying,” the sergeant announced as he crouched down next to Arija and slid one hand down her waist to her hips.

“You know this is bullshit, right? We haven't done anything,” Adal protested, struggling when he saw the hardened look in Arija’s eyes.

“Shut your mouth!” the sergeant snapped.

Yuri paused, eyeing his partner before he continued to press his hands up and down Adal’s back. Yuri was going to find Adal’s gun any minute now. He needed to act fast before things went south.

“Adal, calm down,” Arija started through gritted teeth. “This is all a misunderstanding. Think about Kip.”

The Sergeant gave a deep, throaty laugh as he ran his hand up and down Arija’s hips. “Like you two can do anything to stop me.”

With every overly enthusiastic pat and squeeze from the man frisking Arija, she winced.

Adal knit his brows together, willing her to put an end to this and go for the daggers she always kept in her boot. “You know, I wouldn't keep touching her like that. I find it’s the quickest way to earn an ass-whoopin’”

The officer didn't reply but as his hands finally found her butt, he squeezed.

Arija's face went cold, and rage burned through Adal so strongly he thought he'd physically start shooting steam.

"Arija?" Adal asked, silently pleading with her to let him beat the shit out of this skeezball.

"Yeah, I'm over this," she replied.

"Bout damn time." Adal yanked his left shoulder up and slid his right leg around, knocking Yuri back. He used his momentum to kick Yuri in the head as he slid around to face the sergeant.



Arija's rage and disgust fueled her. She reached back and grabbed the perv's hand still clutching her ass. With her fingers squeezing as tightly as she could, she repeatedly brought her right elbow upward into the man's face.

Arija didn't bother to look at the damage she was inflicting, but with each strike, the slaps and snaps turned to moist, squish sounds. The delicate bones in his nose were broken to say the least.

Rolling sideways, Arija tucked, grabbing the sergeant's hands and flipping his heavy mass over her body. As he slammed into the platform, Arija sat on his chest.

The crimson stream from his smashed nose ran over his face as she hit him until the pervert stopped fighting back. She looked over.

Adal's attack had surprised the young officer, and he hadn't been able to successfully avoid the hits. As he fell back, Adal landed another kick to his chest before standing and drawing his pistol.

"Woah, woah, woah! Don't shoot!" Yuri shouted, the shock in his voice evident. He threw his hands up in the air and surrendered.

Adal furrowed his brow. He hadn't expected such an easy fight.

"I'm not with this idiot."

Arija stood firm atop the perv's motionless body and glared at the piggish man for a moment before throwing a parting kick to his groin. She needed a shower to wash the creeping feeling off her skin. No, she needed an acid bath if she was going to get rid of the feel of this asshole's fat, grubby fingers groping at her body.

The young officer cowered at Adal's feet. "It's my first day. Really. I'm not into what he did," Yuri pleaded.

Adal kept his weapon trained on him like he was trying to figure out whether or not he could trust the guy enough to let him go.

"Adal, he's good. Let's just get out of here," Arija said as she walked up to stand beside him.

The sound of her voice seemed to instantly calm him down, and he looked at her then back to Yuri.

"All right, that's cool. Slowly take your gun out of its holster and throw it over there." Adal pointed to the crash the two officers had come from. Without missing a beat, Yuri yanked the pistol free and threw it as hard as he could.

Arija watched the metallic object bounce several times before it disappeared into the smoking wreckage.

Adal turned to Arija. "All right then. Let's get the hell out of here." After a second, he took a deep breath and awkwardly turned back to Yuri. "Hey, I appreciate you surrendering and all, but um...how do we get down from here?"

Yuri looked at him in silence for a moment, confusion settling on his features. "If you want to go to another level, there should be a lift inside the cafe that can take you down." Yuri pointed at the wall of windows and a glass door that led into the shop behind them.

Arija nodded as the two walked away and over to the double door.

Adal gave the door a full yank, but it did not budge. "Seriously? This place is closed?" he scoffed, shaking his head.

"Why not? It isn't like catching up to Kip could be easy. That

kid gets us into more trouble... I swear. He's almost worse than you," Arija added, giving the door another firm tug.

"Me? What did I do?"

Arija rolled her eyes, shaking her head. "We wouldn't be in this mess if you wouldn't encourage him to get into so much trouble."

"Oh, right. Hey, if I remember correctly, I wasn't all about running in here and saving him. I specifically remember that particular vote coming from you."

Arija opened her mouth to retort, but the sound of an explosion and shattering glass prevented her. They ducked and spun on their heels, turning to face the source.

Officer McPervy stood on the other end of the platform, blood dripping from his nose and his gun pointed directly at them.

"Son of a bitch!" Adal shouted as he grabbed Arija by the shoulder, yanking her around the corner of the building toward a pile of toppled chairs and tables.

"No!" Yuri's small voice burst between shots.

Arija glanced over her shoulder, but to her surprise, Yuri wasn't trying to stop them from escaping. Instead, the young cop sprinted at his partner and threw himself on top of the bleeding man. He yanked the pistol free from the sergeant's fat fingers and threw it across the platform. The two partners scuffled for a bit before several lucky hits from Yuri eliminated the threat once again.

As Adal and Arija stood next to the pile of rubble, she shot a worried glance at him and then down at her own hands. At some point, Adal had drawn his weapon, and she had managed to work a boot knife out of her shoe. How had they gone from normal high school teenagers, to combat ready warriors in only a few weeks?

"You two need to get out of here now!" Yuri shouted as he kneeled over his partner.

Adal slid his revolver back into its holster, and Arija pocketed the blade rather than placing it in her boot.

"Thanks, bro," Adal shouted as the two trampled over the broken glass and into the vacant business.

"Thank you for your help," Arija added before ducking into

the shattered door after Adal.

The interior of the shop looked like any other cafe on Earth, with an assortment of little round tables and all the chairs piled neatly on top.

Arija took a few more steps into the dark room. A long chalkboard stretched along the back wall with various listings for soups and sandwiches, coffees and ice cream. She touched the palm of her hand to her stomach as it let out a rebellious gurgle.

The lift Yuri had told them about stood across from the doorway. Why he decided to help them, Arija didn't know, nor did she care. They had to find Kip.

As Adal and Arija neared the double doors, they automatically opened, and the two friends stepped inside. The doors closed behind them, and the noise from the sky world fell away.

“What is it with these adventures and elevators? I swear, it’s like the same guy is setting this shit up or something,” Adal joked, tugging at his jacket and adjusting his belt.

“Now isn't the time to joke around. We need to find Kip. Everything’s changed in the Machine, and we still have a whole butt load of stuff we have to figure out. Yeah, Pajak is in jail, but his creepy creations are all sorts of jittery. That, and now there’s some civil unrest in Aparat. I can just smell an uprising, and we can’t leave Webley there alone.” Arija examined a seemingly infinite set of scrolling numbers on the digital screen.

Adal strutted over to the panel in a grand attempt to take control. “I know. I know. Shit got real, and we’re stuck here on this goose chase. If Kip hadn't jumped into that portal in the Hall of Doors, we wouldn't be in this mess.” Seeing the wave of options, he paused and stood back.

“What’s wrong? Not as easy as it looks is it?” Arija sneered.

“I mean, it can’t be that hard. Just hit lobby or something. Ground floor maybe?” He ran his finger over the screen, but the scroll of numbers was endless.

“Don’t you think I would have done that already if it were an option? Jackass.” Arija mumbled the last word under her breath.

They may be dating or something, but that didn’t give him

the right to be a jerk.

“There. Maybe that’s it,” Arija said, pointing to the P1 selection.

Adal looked at her. “What does that even mean?”

“I don't know. Maybe it’s like parking or something. Either way, that’s the first floor I’ve seen that has a 1 in it, so we’re going there. Buckle up, buttercup, because we’re going down.... Hopefully.”

The lift came to life, and the numbers on the screen started to countdown. Unlike the lift that had taken them down into the World Machine on Earth, this trip was relatively smooth and painless.

“What do you think is going to be out there waiting for us?” Arija asked, her gaze locked on the doors.

“I don’t know. We’ve seen so much the last few weeks, I honestly wouldn’t be surprised if there was a dancing purple dinosaur or a crazed guy with a chainsaw for an arm.”

“You watch too much television, and clearly not even good T.V.”

Adal turned to look Arija in the eye. He wrapped one arm around her waist and pulled her close to him.

Arija’s breath hitched. She hated how he made her heart pound. It made her feel vulnerable.

“Besides, whatever it is, we got this,” he whispered against her cheek.

Arija’s face flushed, and she pulled away, trying to regain her composure. As much as she wanted the feel of his lips on hers again, now was not the time for this. They had to get Kip and get back to the Machine.

“You think we will find him anytime soon?”

“Don’t know. I do know that, when we do find him, I’m going to beat his ass,” Adal joked, pulling his arm back as the elevator came to a stop.

Arija smiled.

At least this was going to be entertaining.

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# About Zach

Zachary is a bow tie wearing, formal vest rocking, pocket watch using, sarcastic monster of a writer. Currently residing in Mount Dora, Florida, he spends his days working, writing and procrastinating.

Coupled with being a USA Today bestselling author of award-winning fantasy and science fiction, Zach spends his days trying not to kill himself with lethal levels of caffeine.

Zach is the author of the Gabrielle series, a young adult fantasy with a paranormal-historical-time traveling twist (try saying that five times fast) and The Hall of Doors Series, a cross worlds adventure with snarky yet lovable characters.

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