

“If you vow to *never* fight back, then one day you won’t be willing to fight for the innocent, the young, the old, the different, let alone everyday humans. So, if there’s one thing I know, sometimes you have to fight.”

—Andora Kanu, as quoted in Rayaal’s Secret Writings

CHAPTER 1:

ONE HUNDRED AND THREE YEARS IN THE FUTURE

I wake up before the alarm, trapped in darkness, locked in my bed-pod, a two-sided body-bag mattress full of sensors that surrounds and squishes my bony body, head-to-toe, front and back, beeping and buzzing all night. Can’t move. Can’t open my eyes. Can’t scratch. Can hardly breathe. I lie face-up. Squished. How much more data do they need from me? They know everything. If I dream, it beeps. If I think, it buzzes. If I feel sad, it beeps.

They say they collect the data to help make the Universe safer. I’m not feeling too safe these days. What about friendlier? That would be nice.

I shake thinking about Rayaal dragging me here last night by my overalls, in front of the other U-Bots, bending my neck the whole way, scraping my shoulder with his carbionic metal fingernails and screaming at me as I climbed into the bed-pod. All he had to say was, “Go back to your dorm, *skin-bag*, and get in your bed-pod.” I’ve done that for 3,607 days and nights in a row.

I thought he was going to kill me.

Rayaal used to like me.

Loved me, I thought, even though U-Bots can’t love.

He slammed the shell case down on me! I was barely inside the pod. Could’ve cut my fingers off!

Remembering all that makes more beeps go off.

It’s hard being twelve.

It’s hard being a skin-bag, too. Never knew why Trikkans call us humans that. Ever since they first invaded. Maybe they called us that when they were still on Trikkandor, watching us.

But Rayaal? Hardly ever called me that.

I know he's a U-Bot nearly seven feet tall, but he felt like a friend. A best friend, okay? He never even felt like a he! He felt like a she, even though I don't know much about she types, because there are only he U-Bots. That's all they made. But Rayaal broke the rules in private. Called me Harlo. My name! Or dear boy. Never made me keep my eyes down in front of him. Crime. Never said I couldn't say what I wanted to say. Crime.

He secretly taught me to *read!* Totally illegal to teach a human to read.

I remember riding on his shoulders, so high up, secretly making fun of other U-Bots.

That's what we did sometimes.

Was that all just tricks to get data out of me?

Turns out, yeah.

The alarm screeches in the darkness, freezing my thoughts.

I *feel* the lock click open. The pressure of the pod on my body loosens up. I wait another minute in darkness for the shell to lift. There it is. Light through the crack. Ah! Real air. Hot but I suck it in, my lips pushing against the tiny crack. I can breathe.

No sign of Rayaal through the crack. Not in front of me anyway.

With my eyes down, I'll see him soon enough and it won't be good.

I climb down from my bed-pod, naked and tired. The alarm screeches like it's screaming. I squint from the light and the sound. My shoulder is stiff and sore. I remember Rayaal saying the way our bed-pods crack open, they're like eggs hatching every morning. That was the old days, when *twenty-one* humans like me would wake up and squint out from their own bed-pods and then climb down and get on with the all the tests and the needles and running.

Not anymore. I'm the only one left.

The alarm stops.

Way too quiet.

Just me in this white, long room with the long, bright lights and twenty empty bed-pods on stands like short, metal trees. Now, if there are tears or nightmares, they're always mine.

I've only got two minutes and forty-eight seconds to get where I have to go, the Pee Room and then the Ingestion Room, or there's more punishment. I pull

on overalls and tell myself not to think about my friends all being gone. Guess what? I'm thinking about them.

I step outside the dorm into even hotter air. The night brown sky is not yet yellow. GLYKO smells like it always does in the morning: burnt plastic, gas fumes and smoke from landfills of burning human junk. I like those landfills. I like climbing on them. Broken machines, smashed cookers, ancient pieces of computers. It's where I find old human books, too. With pictures of people doing strange things. I wish I was climbing on Landfill 13B right now.

I limp across the dusty, orange alley to the Pee Room, with its sign above the door:

*You Are A Small-Brained
Unwanted Human
Do Not Make a Mess
And Be Grateful*

Rayaal used to tell me to scowl at that sign. Liar.

Inside it's rows of glass tubes and three holes in the floor with lids. The room is steaming. Stinks of old pee. Strong today. It used to be *so* busy. We'd even whisper to each other even though we weren't supposed to talk. Now I can hear my own footsteps, breathing, heart pounding.

I always feel like I'm being watched in here.

Why wouldn't I? Trikkans have this saying: "Humans, be aware. We were watching you for over three hundred thousand years before the invasion. We're watching you now and we'll be watching you always. We are watching you. Be aware or die."

It's true about the 300,000 years. Back in Trikkandor, like two galaxies away, Trikkans would watch us on a screen like we were putting on a show. They saw our war battles, everybody being covered in diseases, all five world wars, the air getting hard to breathe, all the bad stuff from weapons and being hungry. That's why they finally invaded. They'd seen enough.

An alarm rips my ears off. *What?* Now? Makes zero sense. The alarm shouldn't go off for at least another couple minutes. I haven't even finished peeing and now I've made the mess I'm not supposed to make.

That's it. I've had enough! I don't care what they do to me. I am going...to... see Stripes *now*. What's Rayaal going to do, hate me more? And Supervisor Magok? He's always hated all us orphans. Then again, we hated him, too. I know what they're threatening to do to me already.

I can reach Stripes' cage. I'm fast. Rayaal said I probably got that speed from my mom. Unfortunately, nine years too late. My mom was a famous human rebel from the time she was barely older than me now. Later on, she had me and kept me with her every second she was on the run. There was a poem about it that the orphans all knew:

*Andora Kanu was a great human rebel
Fast as the wind, brave and wild
No Trikkan could match her, snatch her or catch her
Until she was hit with a no good child*

That was me.

My mom got captured in a cave like twenty-seven seconds after she told me to crawl through this small tunnel to 'good people.' Ha ha – good people! It's a blurry memory but I remember the sound of soldiers and the clunk of the boots. I hate marching boots. And screaming, too. Then I didn't have a mom anymore. They captured her and vaporized her. That's what they do to all humans, worse even to super brave human rebels.

I didn't find any good people at the end of the tunnel.

I don't remember anything after that. I ended up at GLYKO.

I was three. And first day there I saw U-Bots kill a baby teagle and call it science. That was Stripes' baby.

I'm fast now, boy. I can climb a landfill faster than any orphan in the history of GLYKO, which is pretty much all the kids in the world.

That's probably why all the other orphans are gone.

In this world you've got to be fast.

I wipe my hands on my overalls and tiptoe out of the Pee Room. I sneak along the outside back wall of the building and take off in shadows, staying as close to

the woods as I can. Not too close. Any closer, I could fall into the woods and get eaten. I reach the back of all the cages, most of them empty, but the stink still burns my nose.

A lot of hybrids have died, too, rotting away. Bones still there. But not Stripes. Not my tiger-eagle hybrid. Stripes is the right name, too, because her furry back has black stripes that reach right to her wings. Sometimes I call her Super Stripes.

I peek beyond the cages for any U-Bots, past Skuul's hut to the Bio-Bot Building. No movement. Just a rising sun, orange dirt and dust and landfills glistening and smoking.

I squeeze between the cages of Daral the old, hairy grizzelfant and the barking, hopping kanga-dog. Not far ahead is Stripes' cage. I squeeze past the cramadillos in their cage and try not to get them squawking like the flying rats they are. I fail. They swarm at me but hit the wire blocking the spaces between the bars of the cage. At least the alarm covers their squawks. As soon as I think that, the alarm stops.

Stripes turns her thick head right away. Surprise in her eyes. She tries to stand. Her big black-and-yellow legs shake.

I mean, she's *gargantuan*, which is an exact word for a teagle.

I stick my hands in the cage and grab a thick roll of her furry, feathery neck skin and push my head between the bars until they touch my shoulders. She pushes into me, too. Her beak touches my ear and purrs. *Little Beak, what are you doing here in the morning?*

Her warm, golden dusty fur with black stripes and brown feathers smell perfect. "I needed to see you."

It's not safe to be here before feeding time.

"Rayaal said that if I don't answer any questions this morning, life will turn very bad."

It's already bad.

"Normal bad I'm used to. Very bad scares me."

She caresses me with her giant talon-claw. Huge claws, but they feel so good on the round side against my back. *Shh. Mama Beak is here. And you are strong.*

No, I'm not.

Right then she pulls away, beak in the air, sniffing. Trouble.

"Mama Beak?"

Stripes shoves half of her huge leathery wing through the bars, covers me completely, and squeezes me against the cage.

“What is it?”

Shh. I'm smelling the mood.

I peek over Mama Beak's wing.

Marching towards us, Rayaal. All six and a half feet of him in his light blue jumpsuit, carbionic fingers flexed like clubs, his silver helmet and yellow, clear visor over his eyes, glistening in the low sun.

Stripes growls, big but trapped in the cage, wobbly on her thick legs.

“Let go of the skin-bag,” Rayaal orders, “or you'll both be punished.”

She growls a swear word.

I'd like to swear too, but I shouldn't even talk. “Rayaal, we used to be friends, remember?”

Rayaal's carbionic hand shoots over Stripes' wing, and his big fingers grab me by the overalls. Stripes tightens her wing. There's a tussle, but Rayaal yanks me away and slams me to the ground.

Stripes growls. Rayaal glares like he's about to kill her.

I put my hands up. “Please, don't hurt Stripes! She's done nothing to you.”

Rayaal squints through his yellow visor. “Go to the Ingestion Room, eat your calorie block, then be in the Testing Room *before* the alarm. And keep your eyes down or your day will be tragically short.”

I glance at Stripes.

Stripes nods. *Go.*

I don't want to leave her. Rayaal steps towards me, raising his huge arm of hairless skin and carbionic steel to hit me.

I put my hands up.

It sounds like a snarl to anyone else, but Stripes' talking to me. *Little Beak, go.* She pushes me away.

I sprint away through the dust towards the Ingestion Room.

“I want answers, skin-bag!” Rayaal yells at me.

I glance back but keep running. Answers! I have no answers.

The dome-shaped Ingestion Room with its rings of tables is empty except for my fear. To make the food come out, I have to talk into tiny holes in the glass, admit how worthless I am as a skin-bag and how perfect Lord Tentaclus and Tri-General Nezkaboom are.

I don't want to do it.

I don't want to say it! I'd love to squish this grey, square chunk of food in Magok's snarling face, but something tells me to eat it because I might need every ounce of energy I can get. Besides, if I don't eat it, alarms go off again.

I force it down in four gagging bites and leave through the opposite door, trembling over Stripes. Down the alley, dust mixes with my sweat.

I peek into the Testing Room. The big silver machines of all shapes beeping and humming and flashing like always. Rayaal's there, across the room, standing with his back to me. I don't see any teagle blood on him, so that's good. I keep my eyes down and clear my throat.

"Rayaal, is Stripes safe?"

He doesn't turn. "No one said you could talk. Go to the machine."

I step in and breathe.

Next live being I see? Skuul – *argh* – near the far wall, draped in his big black cloak and bending or polishing some weird silver tube. Skuul, the giant of creepy. The machine-mover of GLYKO. He is actually Triikkan, who supposedly *look* human. But Skuul doesn't look one bit like a human. Scariest face ever, like a skeleton wrapped in skin, and tall as Rayaal. Teeth cracked and half-missing. His brain was destroyed in battle, so he can't talk. He wears a thick black cloak and reads a little piece of paper every day to remind himself what to do because his brain doesn't work. Pulls it out of the pocket on his cloak.

He's staring at me. He twists skin off his cheek and eats it. Eats it! He eats his own cheek!

A shiver shoots up my back. What's he doing with that tube?

"Plug into station twelve!" Rayaal barks, glaring like he wants to vaporize me. "Wire up the SR70 – and keep your eyes down."

Anything but the V0₂ Hyper-Angle Simulation Cardio Device, a treadmill I think was designed to kill me.

Rayaal walks towards me.

I whisper, "You didn't hurt Stripes, right?"

"Put your helmet on and give me answers."

I put the helmet with all the wires on my head but I'm think about Stripes. Rayaal sticks a needle in my shoulder. Stings but I'm used to it. I place sticky electrode pads onto my chest and stomach and plug their wires into the computer panel. All to collect data.

"Hurry up with the wires!" Rayaal yells.

I sneak glances at Rayaal and Skuul as I clip the strap of the blue neuro-helmet under my chin. Rayaal plugs the wires into his own chest. I get a shock every time, like a heater turning on inside me.

The running machine rumbles, and off I run.

"Supervisor Magok demands answers," Rayaal snarls. "So do I. *Why* does Tri-General Nezkaboom want to meet you personally before killing you?"

Sweat bursts through my skin. I keep my eyes down as I run. "I'd like to know that, too."

"So you know about it?"

"What? No. You just said it."

Rayaal speeds up the machine. "*Why* is General Nezkaboom coming here to examine you, destroy the data, and then kill you?"

"I...what? I don't know! I thought collecting data from humans was making the Universe safer."

"Yes. Safe from you rotten *humans*. Now talk, skin-bag, or I'll crush you and feed you to Skuul!"

Rayaal speeds up the running machine again.

"I can't go any faster!"

The question keeps coming. I have no answer. Minutes go by. My lungs burn. My legs burn. Everything's blurry.

"I'll ask one more time, human. Why is Tri-General Nezkaboom coming to GLYKO?"

I know nothing except the pounding of my feet. "If I knew, Rayaal, you know I'd tell you!"

Rayaal smacks the back of my helmet. "Liar."

He speeds up the machine.

"Please, no!"

He whacks the top of the helmet. "Confess!"

I can't get my breath. I glance up. Over Rayaal's shoulder, Skuul, blurry out the corner of my eye. His bony face with his deep set eyes, shadowed in his black cloak, tilts my way. He's staring at me. Skuul never looks at anyone.

"Rayaal," I whisper over the noise, still running, "why is Skuul staring at me?"

Rayaal pokes my chest. "Don't ask any questions until you've got answers!" He speeds up the machine again, and the tilt with it.

Rayaal knows I can run, but I can't feel my legs. My brain is rattling.

He walks away to whatever he's working on.

Sixteen minutes pass. Seventeen. Lungs are burning. Sweat pouring. I stagger. I want to scream!

Rayaal's not even looking.

I glance again at Skuul. He's staring at the piece of paper he always looks at.

I close my eyes and get energy from somewhere. I start having memories of the good things that happened between me and Rayaal. He was good, I swear. He not only taught me to *read*, he snuck me books about old-fashioned animals, whales, lions, wars, and killer computers. Books about monkeys from another planet. My favorite ancient book ever: *The Guinness Book of World Records* from 2056. One human ran 189 miles in one day! If that's true, running here for sure won't kill me. Of course, he wasn't in GLYKO with General Nezkaboom coming to kill him!

"Answers, Harlo!" Rayaal barks, snapping me out of my thoughts. "Or I'll put fifty needles into your arm before lunch!" He's glaring through his yellow visor. Everything's a blur. Sweat burns my eyes.

I can't feel my feet. Suddenly I just say it. "Rayaal, what about our friendship?"

"*Friendship?* We were never *friends*, you weak-brained skin-bag! I was manipulating you to get unique data. And you will give me the information I demand!"

Clang, clang, clang! Skeleton-man Skuul is smashing a big, rectangular machine with the pipe he was polishing. Terrifying. *Clang! Clang! Clang!* What is going on?

I turn back. Rayaal's steel-flesh fist hovers above me, about to smash down on my head. I duck. "Rayaal, no!"

"Confess or I'll crush you!"

“Rayaal, put your hand down now!”

My head spins. It’s Magok! He fills the doorway in full scowl. Two huge U-Bots stand beside him.

“Supervisor Magok,” Rayaal says. He grits his teeth as I gasp and run. “Please, two more minutes to wring an answer from this turd-dropper.”

“Put your hand down and step away,” Magok orders. He points to the U-Bot he brought with him. I think it’s Galock. “Escort Rayaal to the Bio-Bot Building now.”

Still running, sweating, confused. Did Magok, the meanest U-Bot in GLYKO, just save my life from Rayaal?

“Supervisor, please, two more minutes,” Rayaal pleads.

“You will immediately analyze the last twelve days of G-Data for my return,” Magok orders Rayaal. “Destroy *nothing*. I will take over here.”

Rayaal steps towards Magok. “Sir, I have already studied that data. I assure you, all *new* data is flawless.”

“I run GLYKO. And *you*, Rayaal, have failed to find answers and therefore failed to be useful.” Magok unzips his purple jumpsuit jacket like he’s mad at it. “Plug the wires into my panel.”

Near the wall, Skuul cleans the pipes with his head down. Why was he hitting that machine? And why am I in the middle of all this!

Rayaal accidentally plugs the wires into Supervisor Magok’s chest. Magok’s goggles fog up and smoke like he’s going to explode. The rims of the goggles crack off his skin. “Ack! What are you doing, you idiot!”

Rayaal panics. “Sorry, Supervisor. I inserted the wires incorrectly.”

Magok snarls. “You have become an impediment to the mission!”

Rayaal is flustered. He unplugs two wires and reinserts them. Connecting me to Magok’s body, a vomit wave goes through me. I keep my eyes down.

“Make it the last thirty days of data analysis,” Magok orders Rayaal. The vomit feeling gets worse, right up into my throat. Uh-oh. Then, it drops back down.

Magok points at one of his U-Bots. “You know what to do with Rayaal.” The U-Bot salutes. “And find out how far away the Tri-General’s army is—not her lyenas, the army.”

The U-Bot whispers to Magok. The supervisor shakes his head *no*. “Take Rayaal. I will call if you’re needed.”

The U-Bots escort Rayaal out. "That human knows something!" Rayaal yells back. "Run him to death!"

I know nothing.

Magok gets an inch from my face. "Listen to me, turd-dropper..." I wish U-Bots didn't call us that. It's not like humans can stop things coming out of their rear ends. Magok cranks up the treadmill. "Trikkans have been observing skin-bags for hundreds of thousands of years. You *can't* win."

I don't say anything.

Magok lifts me up above the treadmill, my legs still running. I can't stop them or feel them. "There's nothing special about you."

"I agree."

"So why does the great Tri-General Nezkaboom want to come here to see you?"

I keep saying, "I don't know!"

He slams me back down. My legs buckle, but I'm running again. Magok cranks the running machine.

Every couple of minutes Magok asks the same question.

Every time I say, "I don't know," Magok speeds up the machine.

Nineteen minutes later, my heart rate is 217. I can run a long time, but now I'm in the heart explosion zone.

I don't say, "Please, I don't know!" anymore because I can't breathe, let alone talk. The room is a blur. My stomach feels like I swallowed a cramadillo.

Magok revs the machine even faster and ups the incline. Full speed and steep! I'm going to die!

"Talk!"

I can't feel my legs. I can't see straight. "I don't know! Something to do with data! That's all!"

"So you do know! Confess!" Magok slams his metal fist on the velocity switch one more time. But it's like he pushed a button on me. Something gross and wet explodes out of my mouth so fast I think my tongue went with it. But not a confession. I slam into the wall behind me. Everything goes black. There's moaning. Panting. Groaning. I figure out that's all coming from me.

My eyes open. I'm on the floor. The treadmill still spins. The wires have been ripped off my chest. Bits of slimy, stinky breakfast are all over my stomach and pants. "Did I explode?"

No answer.

Magok's standing over me, my breakfast square all over his cheeks and goggles, up his nose, slithering down his silver forehead, across his silver chin, down his silver-orange neck and all over his purple jumpsuit. Maybe my kidney or lung is on him, too, because there was more food there than I've eaten since the last quadrant.

"I'm pretty sure my food and some of my stomach is all over you shirt," I mutter.

"Listen to me, you evolutionary mistake!" Magok yanks me up with his thick, fleshy hands.

My legs shake. I can't stop it.

"Don't you look at me!" I look down. "I am the leader of the U-Bots of GLYKO, and we will not be terminated because of some foul-smelling human. Douse this half-brain and put him to sleep."

I'm swung around. A U-Bot I didn't know was there jabs a thick needle into my arm. Pain! I try to pull it out. He points a big hose right at me and blasts a smoky liquid into my face. I slam backwards into the wall again. The pain reminds me how hard it is to be human.

That's the last thing I remember.

