

“If you vow to *never* fight, then one day you won’t be willing to fight for the innocent or the young or the old or the different, let alone everyday humans. So my truth is, sometimes you have to fight.”

– Andora Kanu, as quoted in Kayno’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 skinny 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 flat, face-up. Squished. How much more data do they need from me? They know everything. If I dream, it beeps. If I fart, 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. I can’t stop shaking thinking about Kayno 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 3,107 nights in a row.

I thought he was going to kill me.

Kayno 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 that. Ever since they first invaded. Maybe they called us that when they were on Trikkandor, watching us, too.

But Kayno? He never called me that until now. The secret fun we used to have keeps flashing in my brain, over and over. I know he’s a seven-foot U-Bot, but he felt like a friend. A best friend, okay? He used to call me Harlo. My name! We made up jokes that

weren't even funny. He never made me keep my eyes down. Kayno taught me to read.
To read!

Was that just a trick to get data out of me?

It's a fact teaching a skin-bag to read is a death crime. The other U-Bots would terminate him if they found out. But he did it. Kayno taught me about the five human wars. Taught my how humans tried to live on other planets and died because of the air. Taught me how to use hundreds of long words.

Gave me pencils, paper, taught me how to draw *perspective*. No other orphan knew that word. *Eleven* letters.

I'd find a torn, moldy book in the landfill, and he'd let me hide it and read it and talk about it. *Human* books.

What did I do to ruin everything? I don't know, but Kayno changed *completely*. He taught me that word, too. Now he's as mean as Magok!—

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 have to 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 Kayno through the crack. Not in front of me anyway. "Kayno?"

Nothing.

With my eyes down, I'll see him soon enough.

I climb down from my bed-pod, naked and skinny. The alarm screeches like it's screaming. I squint from the light and the sound—my shoulder is sore. I remember Kayno 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 open bed-pods and then climb down and get on with the Tests.

Not anymore.

I'm the only one left. That's it. Alone in this white, long room with the long bright lights and twenty empty bed-pods on stands like short, metal trees.

The alarm stops.

So quiet.

I pull on my overalls and stare at twenty-one empty bed-pods. I tell myself not to think about my friends all being gone. Guess what? I'm thinking about them.

I don't want to see Kayno. Hurts too much. Palimo says I feel lonely since Kayno abandoned me. Whatever lonely means, it feels like I can't breathe anymore. And I

don't want more needles. The outside of my knee still hurts from running on the V02 machine for ten thousand hours. But I have no choice.

I know what I want to do: sneak to the cages and see Palimo and bury my face in her smelly fur and feathers and close my eyes and forget everything forever. But I can't. At GLYKO, rules are rules and the U-Bots make sure of it. So I have to go to the Pee Room for four minutes and pee in a tube, then the Eating Room for six minutes and eat a wobbly, greasy square, then the Testing Room for, well...

Kayno, that's my problem.

The way he's been pushing me, I could be a goner by lunch.

I step outside the dorm into even hotter air. The brown sky is a ways yet from yellow. GLYKO smells like it always does in the morning: burnt plastic, gas fumes and smoke from landfills of burning human junk. I love those landfills. I love climbing on them. Broken old machines, smashed cookers, ancient pieces of computers. It's where I find old human books, too. I wish I was climbing on Landfill 13B right now.

I limp across the orange, dusty alley to the Pee Room with its rows of glass tubes and three poo holes in the floor with lids. The room is steaming hot. Stinks of old pee. Strong today. It used to be *so* busy. We'd even whisper to each other. Now I can hear my own footsteps, breathing, heart pounding, the sound of peeing.

I always feel like I'm being watched in here. That reminds me of a joke Kayno made up. *Why would Trikkans on Trikkandor watch humans on Planet Earth for 327,193 years?*

Answer? Because Trikkans can't predict what ridiculously stupid thing humans will choose to do next, and that's entertaining!

It's true. I don't even know what *I'll* do next—

An alarm goes 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 a mess.

Maybe the leader is here like Kayno said? *But which leader?* Why wouldn't Kayno tell me who he means? It couldn't be General Nezkabar. Why would the most powerful Trikkon on Earth come to GLYKO? To see me? A nobody. *No* Trikkans come to GLYKO.

That's it. I don't care. I am going...to...see Palimo *now*. What's Kayno going to do, hate me more? And Magok? He's always hated all the orphans.

Plan: I'll go to the cages, talk to Palimo, sneak a hug, sneak back in three minutes, and then sprint straight to the Eating Room.

Palimo will calm me down. She always says the perfect thing. Plus her fur smells good. Even the way she calls me Little Beak is perfect.

I'm doing it. I'm sneaking there. I'm going. And I'm not wiping up the pee, either. Ha ha.

I wipe my hands on my overalls and tiptoe out of the Pee Room. Sky is still full of dust but getting yellower. If I'm spotted, I'll be surrounded by a gang of U-Bots in two seconds. Never good. What's my excuse? Don't know.

I can do this. I know every step.

I sneak along the outside back wall of the Pee Room and take off in shadows, staying as close to the woods as I can. Not too close. Any closer, I could 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.

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

I squeeze between the cages of Daral the massive, hairy grizzelfant and the barking, hopping kanga-dog. Not far ahead is Palimo's 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 wires between the bars of the cage. At least the alarm covers their squawks. As soon as I think that, the alarm stops.

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

I mean, she's *gargantuan*, which is a good word.

Imagine if you had a mom that was a tiger-eagle cross, two times the size of a U-Bot but with feathers and fur and claw-talons, a curved golden eagle beak and leather, black wings like a giant bat, but she can't fly. Been in a cage for nineteen years. That's Palimo. That's Mama Beak.

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 as far as I can. She pushes into me, too. Her beak touches my ear and purrs. *Little Beak, what are you doing here now?*

The dusty smell of her warm golden black fur and feathers is perfect. "I needed to see you. That's all."

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

"Kayno said that if I don't answer any questions this morning, I could...die."

Die? Questions? What questions?

“I don’t know. He said a leader is coming here to see me then kill me if I—”

General Nezkabar?

“That’s what I asked. And he...” I don’t want to say it.

Tell me he didn’t hit you again.

“Not super hard, but just for *asking*.” Palimo growls. “I don’t want to go to the Testing Room. I don’t want to leave you. I want to stay right here.” I push my face farther in.

She caresses me with her giant talon-paw. Huge claws, but they feel so good on the round side against my back. *Shh. Mama Beak is here.* Right then she pulls away, beak in the air, sniffing.

“Mama Beak?”

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

“What is it?”

Shh. Just smelling the wind, which way it blows.

I get this memory, my first memory: the day I arrived at GLYKO. Three years old. Dirt and dust in my mouth, burning my eyes, and I’m already crying but not making any noise. My mom *gone* forever. U-Bots everywhere with their silver helmets, human skin faces, carbionic arms. I hadn’t even been checked in. I looked up and saw Supervisor Magok on the Testing Room roof. Right then he throws this little creature with crumpled, furry, wet wings off the Testing Room roof to see if it would fly. Landed with a thump on the dirt. Broken wings and bloody. I could barely breathe.

I didn’t know then, but that little, furry creature was Palimo’s newborn baby. Two days old.

U-Bots barked their orders at me, “Skin-bag! Eyes down!”

I saw what Magok did. The U-Bots called it science! It was murder.... I could hear howling, but I *understood* her words. That was Palimo, Mama Beak, crying. I hate thinking about that.

But here I am, nearly ten years later, still thinking about it.

Marching footsteps for real snap me out of it. “Uh-oh.”

Tell him you forgot to feed me.

I peek over Mama Beak’s wing.

Kayno, all seven 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, marching towards us.

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

“Let go of the skin-bag or you’ll both be punished.”

She growls back a swear word.

I’d like to swear too, but that wouldn’t go well. “Kayno, uh—”

“Silence! Release the skin-bag *now*, teagle, or it’s worse for him.”

“I forgot to feed the hybrids yesterday—”

“Harlo Kanu, you are here hiding because you’re guilty! Answer me: why is General Nezkabar *coming* to *GLYKO* to see *you* and destroy the data?”

It is General Nezkabar! “I didn’t know General Nezkabar was coming!”

“And then she’ll kill you. Do you understand?”

“No. But killing all humans is their mission so...” I shrug.

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

Palimo growls. Kayno turns to her like he’s about to kill her.

“Don’t hurt Palimo. She’s done nothing to you.”

Kayno’s eyes squint through his yellow visor. “You’re the one in mortal danger, *skin-bag*.”

Mortal...? Oh yeah, deadly. Like dead. Not good. “What did I do?”

“Go to the Eating Room, eat, then be in the Testing Room *before* the alarm. Or your day will be tragically short.”

I glance at Palimo.

Palimo nods. *Go*.

I don’t want to leave her. “I didn’t do anything.”

Kayno 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 quiet snarl to anyone else, but Palimo’s talking to me. *Little Beak, go*.

I turn and sprint through the dust towards the Eating Room.

“Answers, skin-bag!” Kayno warns.

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

The dome-shaped Eating Room with its rings of tables is empty except for me and my fear. I push the door open into my food stall.

I need answers, but the only thing in front of me is the square, greasy, jiggly block of breakfast food waiting through the glass. 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 L.G. Tentaclus and General Nezkabar 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 Palimo. 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. Kayno's there, across the room – twice as tall as me – 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.

"Kayno, is Palimo safe?"

He still doesn't turn.

I step in and breathe.

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

And 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!" Kayno barks, glaring like he's about to kill me. "Wire up the SR70 – and don't you look at me."

Anything but the V₀₂ Hyper-Angles Simulation Cardio Device, a treadmill designed to kill me.

Kayno walks towards me.

"Is Palimo alive?"

“Yes. There’s an answer, skin-bag. Now put your helmet on and give me answers.”

I put the helmet with all the wires on my head. Kayno sticks a needle in my shoulder. Hurts but I’m used to it. I place sticky electrode pads onto my chest and stomach and plug their wires into the computer panel. Soon, I’ll be running until I throw up. All to collect data. Then, on another station, I’ll have to hold my breath for a long time. More data. Then, for twenty-two minutes, I’ll put my tongue on a rough, white slab of paper that’s stuck to a pole. My tongue cramps up. More data.

“Hurry up with the wires!” Kayno yells.

I sneak glances at Kayno and Crick as I clip the strap of the blue neuro-helmet under my chin. Kayno 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,” Kayno snarls. “So do I. *Why* does General Nezkabar want to meet you personally *before* killing you?”

It is General Nezkabar! Sweat bursts through my skin. “I’d like to know that, too,” I say, keeping my eyes down.

“So you did know?”

“What? No. What? You just said it.”

Kayno speeds up the running machine. “*Why* is General Nezkabar coming here to examine you, destroy the data, and then kill you?”

My eyes pop. I can’t breathe. “I...what? I thought collecting data from humans was for making the universe safer.”

“Yes. Safe from you rotten *humans*. Now talk, skin-bag, or I’ll crush you with my hands and feed you to Crick!”

I’m trembling, but I take the risk. I lean as close to Kayno as I can while still running. “I’m a human on a machine at GLYKO. I don’t know anything. You’d know *everything* before I’d know anything, right?”

Behind his yellow eye-shield, his eyes tighten. I think my response was disappointing. Kayno speeds up the running machine again.

“I can’t go any faster, Kayno!”

He speeds it up more. “Talk or die.”

I stagger, but I guess I’m going faster.

“One more time. Why is the supreme General Nezkabar coming to GLYKO, you turd-dropping, small-brained skin-bag?”

"If I knew, I'd tell you." I notice Crick out the corner of my eye. For the first time ever, he's looking *at me*, a side-glance but staring from across the room. Creepy. Crick never looks at anyone. At least I think he's looking. His skull face is shadowed in his black hoodie but tilted my way.

"Kayno," I whisper, legs a blur, everything shaking, "is Crick staring at me?"

Kayno speeds up the running machine *again*. No, no, no.

"Is speeding up your answer for everything?" I mutter.

Kayno pokes my chest with his thick, metal finger. "Don't ask questions until you've got one." The machine speeds up again, and the slant goes up with it. Kayno walks back to whatever he was working on.

I can't take much more sprinting. I can't feel my legs.

Kayno walks back. "Answers, skin-bag?"

I shake my head. Kayno walks away. I want to scream! I glance at Crick. He's staring at that piece of paper he always looks at.

Three thousand, seven hundred and ten straight days I've done the tests, but this is as hard as I've been pushed. To survive, I think about things. Anything. We do tests from 5:55 in the morning until 12:10. Then from 12:20 to 6:55, we do more tests. In the old days, some of the orphans would be so tired they'd just lie in the alley and sleep during our tiny break time. I never did that, ever, and I won't now. Even if I can barely walk after today – crying, bruised, sad, doesn't matter – if I'm alive I will do what I *always* do in my break: climb one of the fourteen super-landfills, piles of ancient human techno-crap from when humans used to rule the world.

Up there, with the yellow heat coming down on my face, I feel good for a couple minutes every day even though landfills are dangerous and hot and smoky. Spilled acid. Radiation. I sliced my foot bad once, jumping on the bottom of an old broken bottle. Cut my thumb, too, right to bone.

Kayno stitched me up. Can you believe that? Kayno! Gentle, too. Asking me questions, though. Getting data, right? Are you in pain? Can you bend it? Sneaky. But up there on the landfills? I like looking for old human junk: shiny metals for U-Bots. Toys and books for me to hide and play with. Humans used to make good junk. I have a secret place in Landfill 13B where I keep junk I've found. Only Kayno knows that, too. It's trouble that he knows. He can kill me on the machines or kill me by telling Magok special data about me. It's up to him.

What would my mom do right now if she were me? She's the famous rebel. Of course they killed her too.

What? That just popped into my head. I stagger but don't fall off the treadmill. That gets my eyes open. Sixteen minutes and seventeen seconds have passed. Lungs are on fire. No air. Kayno's not even looking.

I get energy from somewhere and balance and remember more things that happened between Kayno and me. 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. And my favorite book ever: *The Guinness Book of World Records* from 2056. I keep it nearby, in a secret place in the landfill, just so I remind myself that humans used to be free enough to do crazy things. 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 Nezkabar coming to kill him!

"Answer, Harlo!" Kayno barks, snapping me out of my thoughts. He's glaring through his yellow goggles, but I pretend not to look. "Or I'll put fifty needles into you!"

My feet bang hard on the treadmill, over and over. I can't feel my feet. "Kayno, I have no idea why General Nezkabar wants to see me! Just as sure as I don't know why you and me aren't friends anymore!"

"*Friends?* We were never *friends*, you weak-brained skin-bag! I had a data-retrieving mission to maximize and complete. And you will give me the data I demand —"

Clang, clang, clang! That noise makes me stumble. Skeleton-man Crick is going full zoo, smashing a machine with the pipe he was polishing. *Clang! Clang! Clang!* Super loud and hard.

I turn back. Kayno's huge, steel-flesh arm hovers above my head, about to swing down on me. I duck as I run. "Kayno, no!"

"Confess or I'll crush your hairy head!"

"*Kayno, put your hand down now!*" We turn. I'm still running. It's Supervisor Magok — of all the terrible U-Bots. Magok fills the doorway in full scowl and his terrible teeth. Two huge U-Bots stand beside him.

"Supervisor Magok," Kayno says, gritting his teeth. "Please, three more minutes to wring an answer from this skin-bag turd-dropper."

"Arm down *now*," Magok orders.

"*Two* minutes? Sir?" Kayno begs.

Magok points to his sidekick. "Escort Kayno to the Bio-Bot Building."



I'm still running, sweating, trying to figure out if Magok just saved my life from Kayno.

"Analyze the last twelve days of G-Data for my return," Magok orders Kayno. "Destroy *nothing*. I will take over here."

Kayno steps towards Magok. "Sir, we have already studied that data. And I assure you, all *new* data is also flawless."

"Never step towards me! I am GLYKO's supervisor. Nobody knows data better than Magok, and that's me. I was built for precision. And *you*, Kayno, have stooped to the level of a skin-bag."

"To acquire data, sir. I despise skin-bags and their lies."

"Kayno, until you have information that can delay the obliteration of GLYKO, silence your mouth." Magok unzips his purple jumpsuit jacket like he's mad at it. "Plug the wires into my panel. I will get real data from this half-brain."

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

Kayno 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, Kayno?"

Kayno panics. "Sorry, Supervisor. I inserted the wires incorrectly."

"You, U-Bot, have become an impediment to the Mission!"

Kayno unplugs two wires and reinserts them. Connecting my body to Magok's, I feel like I'm going to barf. I keep my eyes down.

"Make it the last thirty days of data analysis," Magok orders Kayno. The barf feeling gets worse, right up into my throat. Uh-oh. It drops back down. Magok points at one of his U-Bots. "You know what to do." The U-Bot salutes. "And find out how far away the General's Army is— not her lyenas, the Army."

The U-Bot whispers to Magok. The supervisor shakes his head *no*. "You two go. Take Kayno. I will call if you're needed."

Two U-Bots escort Kayno out. "That half-brain knows!" Kayno hollers.

"Is it true?" Magok asks in a fake voice.

"That I have a half-brain?" I ask back.

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 our rear ends.

Magok cranks up the treadmill. "Trikkans have been watching skin-bags for hundreds of thousands of years. You *can't* win."

"I'm not trying to win!"

Magok lifts me off 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 General Nezkabar want to come here to see you? I will run you until you are dead."

He slams me back down. My legs buckle, but I'm running again. "I don't know anything!"

"The molecules of your sweat, your eye movements, and your blood pressure tell me you know everything." Magok cranks the running machine.

I've been in GLYKO nearly my whole life. What could I know? Every couple of minutes Magok asks.

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

Nineteen minutes later, my heart rate is 217. That's the heart explosion zone. I've stopped saying, "Please, I don't know!" But Magok turns up the speed anyway. The room goes blurry. My stomach feels like I swallowed a cramadillo. I'm going to die!

Then I scream it again, "Supervisor Magok, *please*, I don't know anything!"

Magok revs the machine faster and ups the incline. I'm at full speed and so steep I'm staring at the ceiling. We pass the half-hour mark. Then thirty-two minutes. "My heart's going to blow!"

"Talk!"

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

"Confess!" Magok slams his metal fist on the velocity switch one more time. 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. I touch the burn marks. Bits of slimy, stinky breakfast are all over my stomach and pants like a rash. "Am I dead?"

No answer.

Magok's standing over me, glaring. He has my breakfast square all over his skin cheeks, his goggles, slithering down his silver forehead, up his nose, 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 think I totally barfed on you," I mutter.

"Listen to me, you evolutionary toilet stain!" Magok yanks me up with his hateful, silver, fleshy hands. My legs are rubber. "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 skin-bag. 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.