

## chapter 1

“TERRA?” MICA’S VOICE, HEAVY WITH SLEEP, SEEPS out his half-open door. “Where are you going?”

*Damn, I think. I was trying to be quiet.* Lightening my step, I go stand in his doorway and lean my shoulder against the frame. His ancient computer blinks softly on his desk. I walk over and shut the monitor off.

“Don’t worry about it,” I say softly. “You don’t need to be up yet. Go back to sleep.” Through the grime-streaked window above my brother’s head, I see the soft gray light of early morning beginning to peek through. I need to get a move on.

“You got it, chief...” Mica buries his face in his pillow. I hover over him for a few moments, waiting for his breathing to slow, before quietly drawing his door back to its half-closed position. I’m careful not to close it all the way. Even now, after all this time, he still won’t sleep with the door shut.

I walk back into the main room. Our apartment’s layout is based on Floor Plan #4, which means our bedrooms empty out into one large, square room that serves as foyer, living area, and dining room in one. Our bedrooms flank a tiny bathroom that

we share, and on the other side of the main room, the kitchen sits in an alcove. In one deft movement, I grab my bag from a hook near the front door and am off.

Thankfully, at this hour it's still cool out. The sun has barely crested over the horizon. I loop the strap of my blue scavenging bag over my shoulder and zip my black jacket up halfway. The air is thick, as it always is. I know that the sun will be blazing by the time I get back, but I take it as a good sign that there's even the slightest of breezes this morning. It's two miles to settlement limits, and I'm headed a good deal farther than that; the longer I can go without breaking into my water canteen, the better.

The streets are quiet. The few people who are up at this time of day will all be out by the docks, getting ready for the bustle of morning business. I choose my route to the southern wall carefully nonetheless. I skim along the outskirts of town, darting along side roads and occasionally throwing a glance behind me to make sure I'm not being tracked.

It might be a little paranoid of me, but you really can't be too careful around here. Last month, a boy from the East Quadrant was nearly beaten to death by a group of men who swore they saw him sneaking extra food pills into his pack after the Rationing. When they ripped the bag off his back, there was nothing inside but his scavenging spoils from the day before. The mob fought over the bits of copper wire and scrap metal anyway.

Once I clear the limits of the South Quadrant, I start to breathe a little easier. Slowing my pace, I root around in my bag for breakfast. I pull out a white pill bottle, twist off the cap and shake one of the large brown pills into my palm. The bottle rattles noisily, reminding me that there are only a couple of pills left inside.

*Mmm*, I think sarcastically as I read the bottle's label. B-E665. *So tasty*. I unhook my water canteen from the side of my bag and pop the pill in my mouth, trying not to shudder

as I wash it down. Bitter as the “meal” tastes, I feel energized immediately. I pick up my pace as I head toward the edge of town.

Reaching the boundary wall, I toss a wary eye behind me before I begin to climb. I’m alone for now, but others will be venturing into the plains soon enough, competing with me in scouring the fields for whatever useful bits and pieces that might have dropped from the trash barges that pass overhead. I want to ensure there’s plenty of distance behind me when they do.

Gran told Mica and me once that, long ago, before her father’s father was born, the walls surrounding Genesis X-16 were a hundred feet high, and the black dystidium brick was smooth as glass. Still feeling the scars of the Skyfall—the catastrophe that brought civilization to a grinding halt centuries ago—the founders of Sixteen built a protective dome that grew from the top of the wall, encapsulating our entire settlement. The giant ceiling acted as a UV filter that kept out both the acid rain and the harsh sun, akin to the ones that still encapsulate the skycities floating above us.

A single gate was built into the northernmost wall as the sole way to get in and out of the settlement. Of course, after the UV filter was destroyed, it wasn’t long before scavs began finding more convenient routes to the outside.

Since the gate is up in the North Quadrant, most scavs don’t bother going that way to get into the plains. It’s not just that it’s out of the way; most of us don’t like dealing with the hoity-toities who live in that part of Sixteen. I’ve only used the main gate a handful of times myself, on the few occasions when I’ve brought Mica out with me. It’s not like what we’re doing is illegal—scavenging is a regular part of life down here. But scavs don’t exactly like to have guardsmen breathing down our necks, so we prefer to climb over the western or southern walls instead.

As it stands now, the southern wall is no more than fifteen

feet at its highest point, so I have little trouble climbing up the jagged brick. As always, I'm careful to avoid the remnants of broken glass that still stick out from the top. Soon, I'm jumping down on the other side, kicking up a cloud of dry earth behind me as I land.

The sun has settled in a spot halfway up the cloudless sky; in this light, the dusty brown landscape seems to stretch on forever. Patches of dead weeds line either side of my path, crumbling from the light breeze my boots make sweeping past them. The glint of something buried halfway in the dirt catches my eye. I stoop down and see a pair of small metal plates, maybe three or four inches across, slightly bent in the middle and with holes in the corner where screws would normally go.

*Meh*, I think, shrugging as I stand. They're not a bad find as far as generics go, but I decide to leave them for the other poor schleps to fight over. It is Collection Day, after all. All the scavs will be out in full force. The more stuff found just outside town, the less likely others will bother venturing out to where I'm going. I kick some dust over my boot prints and set off again with light steps.

*No trails*, I remind myself. I don't want some curious late-comer following me and cashing in on my almost-secret treasure trove. As I trudge on, the ground begins to slope down and before long I see the tips of barren trees in the distance.

Another half-mile covered and I've reached the Dead Woods. I make my way south through the empty forest; the farther I walk, the less space there is between the trees. Scavengers rarely bother coming this far out from town. The woods are the only physical barrier between Sixteen and the District—the sprawling landscape of ruins that used to house one of the groundworld's greatest cities. A quarantine line wraps around the ruined city to warn us away too, but a few beams of red light don't provide quite the same sense of security as a petrified forest. Plus, for most, the spoils are hardly ever worth the journey out to the woods, given the risk of your findings

being stolen by raiders on the way back.

For those of us who know where to look, however, the odds of finding something worth collecting are much higher out here. Metal generics drop all over the place, but plastic is where the real money is. Mica tried to explain to me once why that is. Something to do with dried up fuel sources or something. I admit that I don't care too much about the specifics. All I care about is that it's worth a pretty penny, and the placement of the petrified trees out here makes it far less likely for someone else to scoop up the rare scrap of the stuff. And as for the raiders... Well, I know these woods like the back of my hand. They've never even had the chance to get close to me. Though I wish I could say the same for some other scavs.

I weave my way through the thick trunks, the path I forge growing narrower as the roots that have broken through the ground begin to overlap, overtaking the forest floor. I'm less than a quarter-mile in when I start to see the first recyclables, discarded by skyworld citizens without a second thought.

*One man's trash*, I think bitterly. I doubt they even realize how quickly they would run out of their luxuries if we weren't down here, working in their recycling plants and scavenging for their leftovers. It's not like these resources just grow in the ground, after all. Not anymore.

With my eyes fixed on the ground, I walk with deliberate steps between the withered trees. Back and forth, then over two paces and back again. I stop occasionally to pick up lengths of wire and screws that sparsely pepper the ground, adding them to my bag alongside the pile I gathered earlier in the week. The work is consuming, and at one point I have to force myself to choke down my last food pill.

I'm vividly aware of the sun, which has long since peaked in the sky, beating down through the leafless branches. I roll the sleeves of my jacket up and contemplate taking it off completely before remembering that the thin brown tank I'm wearing underneath will provide little protection against the

burning rays. I have more than my share of sunspots on my shoulders as it is.

*Time for a break*, I think, having just snatched up a cracked square of plastic. I grin as I calculate how much steel it will net me; I'm thinking at least 50 credits' worth, which means that my trek out to the woods has already been worth it.

I move toward a large fallen tree lying a few feet away. I straddle the trunk and unhook my water canteen again. I take a few grateful sips, then pull off the stretched-out elastic band that is knotted around my wrist. I tie my sweat-dampened hair into a bun on the back of my head, twisting it a little too tightly. When I pull my hand away, several dark strands come with it.

"Ooh," I moan. My neck is stiff from the hours of staring straight at the ground. I cock my head from side to side in order to work out the kinks, and I hear a dull series of pops as my vertebrae resettle. I hang my head to the right for a few moments, stretching my neck muscles; from this new sideways perspective, something catches my eye. I see the vague outline of a small silver lump tucked under a raised root about a yard over.

I crawl over and gently dig around the object. After a minute of maneuvering, I pull out a small machine, comprised of dozens of little interlocking tubes and shafts. The device is slightly larger than the palm of my hand and surprisingly heavy. Underneath the caked-on dirt, it looks shiny—brand new, in fact. It's missing that matte sheen, a telltale sign of having been processed through the recycling center. Some small pieces might be missing—a few loose wires hang out, a lonely peg sticks out from the side—but, for the most part, it seems intact.

"Jackpot," I whisper aloud. This thing has got to be worth at least a hundred credits, easily. Enough to cover an entire month of Rations. Between this little machine, the plastic, and the myriad of generics already lining my bag, this is going to

be a stellar Collection Day.

I carefully tuck the piece of machinery into the inner pocket of my bag and survey the spoils inside. Toting around a week's worth of generics is bothersome, but I'd rather deal with the annoyance than with the line that will form outside the recycling plant in the time it takes me to collect my spoils from home. Sweat drips down the crook of my arm and I decide that this should be more than enough to carry us through until the next biweekly Collection.

*Not bad*, I think, swinging the bag over my shoulder and striding back toward Sixteen. The bag bounces softly against my side with each step, and I can hear its contents jingling as the generics roll against each other—a soft symphony that seems to commend me on my success.

I steadily work my way back, still on the verge of overheating but in good spirits. As the trees begin to thin, I can vaguely make out the silhouettes of other scavengers scouring the fields. I peel off my jacket and shove it down into my bag to mute the sound of metal on metal before striding into the field.

“Ahoy, Terra!” Mal is the first to see me, and I wince slightly as he shouts his friendly greeting in my direction. He and I have always been on good terms, but he's one of very few to regard me with such enthusiasm. Several men in the surrounding area sneer as I pace toward them. I've been a scavenger for over three years and they still can't stand that, at just eighteen, I pull bigger payouts most weeks than they do. The fact that I'm a girl doesn't help draw their favor, either.

“And just where're ya coming from? Ya look, uh, kinda . . .” Mal trails off as I come close, dusting off his brown pants as he stands. I can tell by his expression that I'm not exactly at my most gorgeous. He runs his hand through his salt-and-pepper hair, leaving a streak of dirt on his temple.

“What? I can pull off the dirty, sweat-soaked look just as well you can, old man,” I respond with a grin, though my words sound stiff and formal compared to Mal's easygoing

South Quadrant drawl. "I've just been cruising the Southern Plains for a while. Picked up a few more generics, nothing too exciting," I lie smoothly. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a rugged-looking guy who's been eyeing me return his gaze to the ground.

"Same here. Jus' some screws mostly, but I did find half a spool of copper wire right outside the wall." He shoots his eyes in the direction of our eavesdropper before adding in a hushed voice, "Chrys scored the real Jackpot though. Found two metal plates just south of the wall, with a battery core underneath 'em! That's, what, 300 credits for the core alone? At least? The lucky bastard was hardly out here twenty minutes. Turned tail and headed straight back in to turn 'em in."

*Damn it*, I think, kicking myself for dismissing the plates earlier.

"Wow," I say, failing to keep the bitterness out of my voice. Jealousy is a normal reaction to that kind of find, though, so Mal doesn't seem to care. "Smart man."

"Yeah, well, a' least he only got those twenty minutes in 'cause of it. Means more scavin' for us, right?"

"Right," I respond, smiling at him. "Well, I should get back."

"Heading in already? But if ya didn't find that much..." he says with a concerned look, and I know he's thinking of Mica. I feel a twinge of guilt for lying to him and have to remind myself that he wasn't the only one who was listening.

"Nah, it's okay, really. We still have credits left over from the last Collection. I just have to get back. I don't like to leave the little bro alone for too long, you know how it is. He's..." I trail off.

"Mica," we say at the same time. We both laugh. I wave goodbye to Mal and start back toward the wall, pinning my bag to my side nonchalantly as I pass through the other scav's lines of sight.

## chapter 2

THE LINE OUTSIDE THE RECYCLING CENTER IS blissfully short. Rain kept us trapped inside for two days this week, so I'm not surprised that most scavs are still out searching, putting in last-minute efforts to boost their credit totals as high as they can. I get in line behind a tall, lanky boy with reddish-brown hair that sticks up in the back. He looks a few years older than I am, but I know I recognize him from somewhere. *E-something*, I think. His name definitely starts with an E.

A tired-looking woman with dirty blond hair loosely braided down her back approaches the drop-off station, which is set up right outside the recycling center doors. She begins to empty her bag out on the table, though since I'm stuck behind *Something-That-Begins-with-E*, I can't quite see its contents. I can, however, hear the pathetic clink as each item hits the metal tabletop.

The Collection Agent purses her lips as she pokes the items with her white-gloved hands, then holds her computer tablet over the collection to scan them. She prods at the screen for a minute before looking up.

“Total: 37 credits,” she announces curtly, sweeping the items into a bin that hangs off the edge of the desk. I well up with sympathy immediately. It’s barely enough to make it by between Collections.

The blond woman doesn’t move. She mumbles something feebly to the attendant. The agent stares vacantly, her right eyebrow raised, while the woman speaks. After a moment, she gives a small but distinct shake of her head. I don’t know what the question was, but the answer is very evident. The woman bows her head low as she’s ushered off by a guardsman.

“Next!” The agent motions for the next person to step forward, flicking a speck of dirt off her crisp uniform as she does. A bearded man limps up to the table.

“What was that about?” My tendency to think out loud rears its ugly head. E-something turns around and looks at me quizzically.

“That’s Hess Underwood,” he says quietly, in a way that makes it clear I should already know this. I furrow my brow in response. “She’s Loran Underwood’s wife.”

“Oh.” Loran Underwood is a well-established scav that was making his rounds a few days ago when raiders jumped him. In these instances, generally a scav will be robbed of his spoils and, if it’s a man, probably gets beaten a little—the severity of the latter directly corresponding with resistance to the former. If it’s a woman... well, there’s a reason there aren’t too many female scav.

These days, it’s an unwritten rule that if you get caught, you just give up your stash and the raiders won’t bother with the other stuff. Loran would have known this better than anyone, having had so many run-ins with them in the past. It’s been months since a scav’s been seriously injured, even longer since one’s been killed. Not since Lee. So it was a bit of a mystery when the guardsmen brought Loran back to his home that night, on the verge of death. He was unconscious for over a day. When he finally woke up, he had complete amnesia, in

addition to a shattered kneecap. I guess Hess has had to take over his scav duties while he's been healing, which is always a slow process down here.

"Total: 89 credits," I hear the agent say. "Next!"

"I thought they had a son," I whisper to E-something, an edge of accusation in my voice. "I'm pretty sure he's a year or two above Mica. Trip Underwood, right? So why is his mother the one out scavenging?"

He stares at me for a long moment before slowly exhaling, an act that sounds suspiciously like a sigh.

"Traders." He says the word matter-of-factly, before turning to the front again.

"Oh." I don't know if he means that Trip has been recruited into the ranks of the infamous band of thugs and law-breakers, or if the Black Traders have done something else with him. Either way, it explains why poor Hess has been stuck with scavenging as a means of providing for her sick husband. The couple will be lucky if they get to see their son again.

"Next!" It's E-something's turn. He steps up to the metal table and gives a wary glance in the direction of the guardsman to his right.

"Name?" the agent asks as she takes his palm and scans it on her tablet.

"Garren, Emery," he replies.

*Well, at least I was right about the E.* Still, I can't exactly remember how I know him. I can't place him in my memories from school but, then again, it's been years since I've set foot in the place. Gran's passing sealed the deal for me: Higher learning was never going to be my bag. I never even bothered to find out if I passed my secondary examinations.

A vague memory begins to stir as I watch Emery stand in front of the Collection Agent. There's something about the set of Emery's shoulders that sends me back to my classroom days. Before I can fully recall the memory, however, I'm snapped back to the present by the agent's shrill voice.

“Total: 218 credits,” she says through pursed lips.

*Wow. Go Emery,* I think. I’ve never broken the 200 mark at a single Collection before, though I’m hopeful that my little machine will help me do so today. Our electric bill’s a day overdue, Mica needs new school supplies, and the next Rationing is less than a week away, which means most of this payout is already allocated. I need to bag at least 150 credits if we’re going to make it without dipping into our paltry savings.

*Plus,* I think, scraping the worn-down heel of my right boot in the dirt, *I was really hoping to get a new pair of boots this month.*

There are a few impressed murmurs from the people in line behind me, still appreciating Emery’s pull. I turn around briefly and take in the length of the queue. Good thing I came back when I did.

Emery turns away from the drop-off station with a poorly suppressed smile on his face. I give him a subtle thumbs-up as he passes but he simply stares impassively at me in response.

*Well, fine then.*

“Next!”

I step up to the table and stick out my hand automatically.

“Name?” the agent says, placing my palm on the tablet.

“Rhodon, Terra.”

“Let’s see what you’ve got,” she says, her eyes still plastered on the screen of her handheld computer.

I lift the flap of my bag and remove my jacket, setting it on the table in front of me. “Um, I think I’m going to need a container,” I say quietly.

The agent peers up at me with large hazel eyes, eyeing me quizzically.

“It’s a lot of little pieces,” I explain.

She nods curtly to the guardsman, who places a shallow metal tray on the table. I slowly tip my bag over it; the piece of plastic is the first to fall out, quickly followed by dozens of screws, wires, and other scraps. They ring loudly as they

pour onto the tray, and I can hear speculative murmurs coming from the line behind me.

With pursed lips, the agent immediately holds her computer out and scans in the contents of the tray before I have a chance to interject. "175 credits," she says briskly.

An appreciative whistle rings out from behind me. I glance back to the crowded line and see several faces beaming at me among the standard, pissed off ones. At least some of them, Mal included, seem pleased that I've gotten a good haul. They're happy for me. Well, happy for Mica.

The agent looks at me impatiently. "Your credits have been transferred to your account, Ms. Rhodon. You may go."

"Er, sorry. I wasn't done," I say. She stares at me apathetically. "You scanned before I had a chance to..." I trail off as I reach into the pocket of my bag. Wrapping my fingers around the machine, I pull it out and place it gingerly on the table.

Annoyed, the agent taps around on her computer screen for a few moments, then holds it over the machine. The scan takes longer than usual. Suddenly, I hear a sharp intake of breath. The agent looks from the screen to my little machine, and back again. She looks up at me with widened eyes and it takes her a second to find her words.

"C-correction," she stutters. "3,215 credits."

A collective gasp rings out from behind me, and I hear the number repeated over and over again as it moves through the crowd. After a moment, the onlookers' hushed voices fall into total silence. My hearts hammers in my ears as I process the number.

"What?" My voice barely registers above a whisper. "Are... are you sure?"

The agent simply nods. There has never, in all my recollection, been a credit payout this large before. The crowd's silence breaks with my whisper, and their murmurs begin to take on a considerably different tone. I risk a furtive glance behind me to find that the smiling faces have changed. Some look confused,

some outraged. Several people in the back of the crowd have begun to argue. I force my eyes back to the agent, who is staring at me with her mouth agape.

Taking a deep breath, I gently place two fingers on my little machine, still shining on the metal tabletop. It already looks different to me; the tubes wrap around each other, interlocking in a way that seems more intricate in the light of its hidden value. "What is it?" I blurt out.

The agent gives me a puzzled look and closes her mouth as if she's debating how to respond. Ultimately, she says nothing, and her mask of composure quickly return.

"That information is classified," she says brusquely. She surveys the crowd that has edged up behind me, all semblance of a line forgotten, vying for a look at the valuable machine. The agent summons a stony-faced, brown-haired guardsman forward. "Brant will escort you home, Ms. Rhodon. You may go."

Brant's green eyes are wide as he approaches, flashing with something that almost looks like recognition as he searches my face, but he says nothing. He simply grips my arm and pulls me away from the crowd of onlookers, many of whom are still sending angry looks in my direction. Just before we turn out of the square, I look back to see the agent pick up the machine and walk directly inside the recycling center, shutting the doors behind her.

It appears Collection Day is over.