

IN SPACE, LOVE HAS BOUNDARIES



# DISCONNECT

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## **Dedication**

For our little angel

## **Chapter 1 - Worthless**

Zachary stopped at the *clunk* under his boot.

How had nobody seen the box? With a glance into the darkness of the Wastelands, he licked his chapped lips.

Taking the box, Zachary darted past heaps of tottering metallic sheets. So far today, he'd scavenged nothing that was worth shoving into the pockets of his knee-length coat. If there was one thing to beat today, it was the pride-crashing kick to the guts of returning empty-handed for a fourth day. As the shortest scavenger of the stall at five foot six, a barren run made him the easiest target for teasing.

The stall's heckles from the day before still chilled him. *The quickest rat with the hunting skill of a slug.*

But thoughts of leaving the vast Wastelands with only a handful of screws and two-inch nails drowned in his anticipation that the jingling in the box would be ratchets, fuses and battery cells.

Zachary sprinted along the ledge of the bay to an overhanging bank. Not even the sick rested amongst the rusty vehicles deserted here. Using his trusted titanium screwdriver, he teased off the knot of wires beneath the mesh. Why would anyone take trouble to wrap and then to discard this box?

*Whatever*, thought Zachary freeing the last clasp of the lid. Inside there was a folded note, a silver Intercom-transmitter, and an orange-tinted bracelet. *Result!* Twiddling his long, brown hair, he scrutinised the box for hidden compartments within the padded interior. The smooth texture couldn't have started life in Underworld, could it?

Locked away from light, Underworld was a murky pit in comparison to the rich nature of Overworld that few had seen, and finds such as these were rare here. Luck placed Zachary within easy access of the clutter that lay on the west side of Underworld, the Wastelands. Spending most of his day amongst the sewer pipes didn't bother him for it was far better than the dull lanes of District Two. No day was the same amongst junk. Every gush from the pipes revealed a new surprise.

Nobody knew how thick the ceiling was or why its creation blocked Underworld from the world above. Often Zachary pondered what exactly sat above the ceiling. He guessed unlimited power, droids with abilities that dwarfed the functions of humans, and a life that didn't require working in muck. Short hours. Free time.

An eerie chill climbed his spine at imagining the scattered giant steel support pillars dropping aside? Would Overworld add to the mess of Underworld? Could the two worlds of the *Galilei* Research Base co-exist? No chance.

What did it matter? Underworld's builders had left it to rot.

Zachary squinted in the darkness at the unbroken chain links on the bracelet and the deep dent in its centre. Components of music-playing Harmon bracelets weren't difficult to locate, though one as complete as this? He clicked his teeth thinking of when a working bracelet had last been handed to the stall. Longer than five years at least. There was a harsh rattle as he shook the bracelet. If he fixed this, it could be enough to save him another day of shame.

More than that, he could show his dad that scavenging wasn't a deadbeat job by putting some good food on the table.

The Intercom-transmitter, a communication device he'd often see in the hands of a ruthless looter, felt light in his palm. If this find functioned – he held his breath – then mushrooms for supper would become a memory. Zachary squirmed. Adjusting to the slimy, vomit-wrenching taste of mushrooms that thrived in abundance was at the bottom of his to-do list.

He rubbed his back against the carcass of a vehicle, his heart thumping. Maybe the Master of the stall would let him look behind the curtain?

Zachary's hazel eyes reflected off the Intercom's shiny shell. He rubbed the recognition pad underneath, not sure what to expect. Dull lights clicked along the screen's circular pattern. Blue tinted static formed in the air a foot above the Intercom.

"What in Europa!" Zachary swiped the image. Signs of energy were a signal to the greedy. If any of the gangs roaming the dry deluge saw this, they'd seize the Intercom and snap his skinny limbs apart.

Coat over the Intercom, Zachary sunk deeper into the bank. He paused before returning his thumb to the pad. The blue static burst out again, accompanied by a disturbing cackle. A human head with long hair formed in front of him. The image rotated, showing blurs where the eyes and mouth should have been. An incomplete android? Or an Overworlder?

Zachary's curiosity peaked. He'd never seen an Overworlder before and it wasn't like he had a choice in that matter. *Galilei's* distinct division prevented any mixing. There was no doorway, window or ladder to allow sight or sound between the worlds. Yet, he held a gateway to one in his hand. Were Overworlders as perfectly skinned as

he imagined them to be? Did they wash every day without scrounging for water under steam-filled pipes?

“Fourth of August 2340, 15:16,” said a young girl.

*Shut up!*

Zachary crammed the Intercom to his waist. A spark erupted in the centre of the device, and then it switched off. He gasped open-mouthed. Eyes closed, he bugged his memory to repeat her soft words. It was gone. Zachary rubbed the pad. Nothing. Inactive. Dead. Worthless. No – the Intercom could be salvaged. It could be worth ... something.

His eyes narrowed at the unfolded note. “Initial surveillance confirms the location. Continue with Project Centurion.” There was nothing on the reverse.

The word *surveillance* bothered him. It was what scavengers said when watching a lucrative drop point in the Wastelands. Did the girl write the note? Was she after someone?

Zachary tapped the Intercom. It didn't make sense for anybody to write on paper if they were going to place it with a messaging device, unless they knew the Intercom to be faulty.

He shrugged, putting all three items into his pocket. The box weighed little, but it was valuable. Hooking a wire from the box to an inner seam of his coat to aid its hidden transport, Zachary smirked. The mushrooms looked closer to being history.

After snaking around the vehicles, he jumped onto a protruding sewer pipe to reach the upper level. Whirring sounds halted him. Eastwards, embedded turbines spun clockwise like a volatile drill within the high ceiling.

A drop was coming. Normally, Zachary would've dashed over bust circuit boards to reach the drop point. Instead he watched a triangular section of the ceiling, secured by hydraulic arms, eject downwards. Wind spurted ahead of blazing light before rock-like objects rushed out, followed by a rainstorm of particles in pursuit. Discarded rubbish of Overworld had entered his world.

Zachary's eyes tightened upon other Underworlders swarming to the falling treasure. It was a good one-minute run away, and by the time they reached it, the Wasteland gangs would have fought one another for the glory. If the wired-box had been part of that drop, there'd be steel cutting through bodies to get it. He shivered with thoughts of the carnage if they'd found the Intercom.

Emitters within the ceiling dimmed, ending the artificial day. Turning on his heels, Zachary took the southern route to the bartering camps of District Two.

He manoeuvred to the steep ladder against the gigantic heated pipe. Halfway up on the forty-fifth rung, Zachary gazed over the irregular horizon of the Wastelands scanning for a girl running between the swamps, searching for her box. Who was she?

On reaching the platforms jutting from a mountain of metal, Zachary moved into the bartering camp, avoiding locking eyes with the near-naked hut occupiers begging with their scrawny fingers. Drooped faces, similar in every way, shared cracked bowls of sludge. He considered them to be a clever scheme, detracting from the pick-pocketers groping his coat.

If anybody here owned an Intercom, they wouldn't place it in a box, even for safekeeping. No – they'd solder it to their belts and some to their piercings. That wired-box had to have come from Overworld.

Zachary licked his lips. The Intercom wasn't totally broken; some life inside remained, and that gave it a chance to be repaired. There was someone who could repair it, but he'd have to be quick. If Zachary's dad found out that he'd messed around with a device rather than exchanging it for money, then he'd be in for a kicking.

Recessed between the huts of the rat seller and the cockroach grinder sat Zachary's employer's stall. A bullish man nodded, allowing him entry into the candlelit foyer. He spoke little to the other scavengers lining the room's edge. Either their goods had been delivered, or they had nothing spectacular to show. He continued, descending to the symmetrically carved area underground.

At the front of a corridor, a middle-aged man mumbled at his desk as he scribbled into a paperbound book. Shekhar peeked over cracked spectacles, showing no amusement at Zachary's tentative loosening of his fingers.

The Harmon bracelet glittered in the candlelight.

Shekhar bit the lid off his red pen. "He already has many."

"This works." Zachary yanked the bracelet away from the attempted snatch.

"Whereabouts?"

"The drop."

"A working Harmon, Mister Connor? Why would anybody throw it away?"

Zachary gulped. The stall's beady-eyed Secretary wasn't a man to irritate. "Why does anyone throw away anything?"

Shekhar murmured. Pushing his spectacles up onto the bridge of his nose, he led Zachary to the wooden door with depictions of men carrying building blocks and guiding barrows. Shekhar knocked three times.

Zachary exhaled upon entry into the Master of the stall's five-cornered room. Air swept from Shekhar's slam of the door didn't detract from the heart thumps Zachary felt. He was seconds away from the padded curtain that hung behind the Master's chair. Desperation at wanting to peek behind the curtain accompanied the slide of his heel. No – wait, there wasn't time for the curtain, no matter how long it'd been since he'd gazed beyond it. Priority stormed his mind. Get home. Repair the Intercom.

Cobwebs pinned inside picture frames decorated the walls above stacked items and metallic gadgetry. Dust floated between the generous glows of the corner-mounted tubes of energy. Zachary passed the human skeleton standing there with sharpened pencils crammed into the holes and notches of its skull. It was a symbol of man stripped of protection whose purpose was to hold objects of use. Maybe that was the Master's interpretation of *Galilei*; Underworld lived as the skeleton holding up Overworld.

A strange smell hooked Zachary's nostrils. Of all the sewers he'd stepped in, this was by far the most rancid. Had something died here?

He drew near to the long, polished table in the centre of the room where Master Salvador "Biro" Burton sat observing him. The rear curtain skewered in place by copper rods tempted a grin.

Then, the thump of Zachary's heart tightened.

On the table lay a male torso. No arms or anything below the waist. Splatters of blood and jagged cuts ran along its light brown skin. Charred muscles overlapped where the neck should have been. Zachary's eyes swept the floor for dismembered limbs and the head. The rotting smell filled his lungs. A dead body? Here? Whose?

For a man who'd hoarded enough coins to build his own town, the Master's scrawny state drew pity. Going on seventy years, Biro had entered beyond the final phase of life. Blemishes littered his sunken skin. He looked ill. Diseased. Almost like the skeleton in his room. But what the heck was the Master doing with a corpse? Glaring at the torso, Zachary rubbed his sweaty palms.

Biro twitched with a never-ending shake of his left leg. "Quite extraordinary, isn't it? They're now creating them to look like us." His tone hummed between tainted teeth.

Zachary almost cried out. The corpse was an android! Impossible. It looked – too – perfect. Lines of blood-carrying veins could be made out above the region of the collar bone. Zachary shivered. Androids were pale, almost ghost-like. Where was the streaming-port that every android had on its abdomen? And why the blood, and the muscles?

“I suspect Overworlders are trying to integrate them deeper into their extravagant lifestyle,” continued Biro. “It’s rather artistic, isn’t it?”

“Did you find this?” Zachary gulped. It wasn’t his place to ask a question.

Biro’s smirk lasted a second. “Found in the most intriguing manner. Something almost flawless and no doubt expensive, yet, it came to rest here. Enough of that. Your find?”

Zachary handed over the bracelet. His eyes focussed on the padded curtain which was coloured black to prevent the sneakiest glimpse of the reward behind it. Zachary’s palms moistened as he clenched his anxious stomach. His thoughts stopped lingering on the torso.

After loosening the slim compartment on the bracelet’s edge, the aged Master directed a charged-stylus onto teeny cogs inside. The bracelet illuminated. Frozen in mid-twitch, Biro shuddered at the melody’s beginning. Soft strings gave way to a slowly building drumbeat.

An intensifying harp played, swaying Biro’s pleased face. “Shekhar will give you enough to treat yourself for this find.”

Zachary unhooked the box from his coat.

Biro’s gaze sharpened. “What’s inside?”

“I found it ... empty.” He looked at the curtain, knowing the Master would interpret it without asking.

“Going behind will forfeit any reward for the box,” Biro went on, seeing Zachary’s furrowed brow. “Tell me. Why love something so far away?”

“It lets me without asking,” replied Zachary.

Spinning the bracelet twice to prolong the melody, Biro waved for Zachary to continue. “You need to find yourself a girl”.

There was no point in Zachary fighting the urge. His breathing accelerated. Hands trembling under his chin, he went around the table, and then behind the curtain. Lights sparkled outside the awaiting window with greater strength than a thousand diodes. His heart raced quicker. The melody, behind him, peaked to a thunderous fanfare.

Remnants of Zachary's breath frosted the glass as his eyes soaked up the atmospheric dense bands of the gas giant of space.

Jupiter.

He'd always thought that there was nothing more intriguing than this planet. Except now. Something new seeped into his mind; something that reduced the gas giant to a ball. Eyes closed, Zachary took a deep breath. He visualised the blurred face of a girl without eyes.

Who was she?

## Chapter 2 - Hacked

The orange glow of internal lamps within Shantytown blurred above Zachary's rush. The home he shared with his dad lay on the ground floor of a tower, a short distance from the entrance to the town.

He altered his grip of the supple package so as not to alert the attention of the beggars that lived along the gutter-trenches. Yanking keys attached by string from a pocket, he undid four door-locks on his front door. The inside offered a stove, table, and two chairs in the first section. Opposing corridors in the middle led off to the two bedrooms and at the far end was the bits-and-pieces zone. From behind ragged cloths attached to the corrugated iron-sheeted walls, he took a match from a box and lit the single lantern to illuminate the area above the table. Shadows formed like creeping creatures, moving deeper into the dark at the rear.

He peered down at the contents of the saucepan on the single electric plate of the stove. Minced rabbit meat. Spores of white fluff covered it. A putrid smell, worse than the sewers, invaded his nostrils. With his thoughts attached to the Intercom, he'd trusted the claim that it was fresh meat when he bought it. Zachary retched. Nothing came out.

Shekhar's seven Leo-coins would have purchased an armful of potatoes instead, but it'd been months since he'd consumed something worth chewing. Almost all his dad earned disappeared to the slumlords of District Two and the Resourcers, who didn't deserve payment for their volt-line stealing induction coils.

With one cup from a tub of water into the saucepan, then, nostrils squeezed, he slid the lid over it.

Zachary drew back the curtain next to the stove. Inside the alcove, a Haulage-404 droid hung mid-way from bolts secured to the wall. The Haulages were ancient, labour-efficient droids used for construction purposes. Oblong headed with two circular eyes and a blocky plated jaw, the droid resembled a muscular human clad in copper armour. With one defunct eye, its left arm removed, and nothing below its waist this was a little more complete than the one on Biro's table. *Skin.* Zachary wriggled the image from his mind as he stroked the droid's torso. No – this was how droids were meant to be. Metal and screws.

To the rear section of his home sat the Bombay core-generator. He often wondered how his bulky-framed dad managed to step over the toilet-hole to reach it. Five LEDs

along the Bombay's top remained empty. Zachary swapped two crocodile clips over, and then rotated the generator's wheel. The LEDs remained unchanged, even after a third rotation.

"Come on."

His dad had paid the Resourcers their twice-weekly charge – hadn't he? Loosening his tense fingers, he banged the top of the generator. An internal component whirred as two of the LEDs lit up with a soft aqua tone.

"Next time you do that, I'll shove my screwdriver in and dismantle you," Zachary growled at it.

Back at the droid, Zachary took the coiled-tube that ran the length of his home from the stove's socket. Clearing dust from an exposed chest-plate on the droid, he thrust the coiled-tube inward. A current sizzled along twisted circuitry. Tiny blue lights illuminated its functioning eye.

"Hello, Patch," said Zachary pulling over a chair.

"I feel rusty," sounded the droid's deep voice emitter. His jaw crunched for a few seconds.

"You say that all the time."

"Detecting anomalies is all I am good for. I detect a peculiar stench."

Zachary clicked his fingers. "Forget that. I need your help."

A flicker erupted from his broken eye. "I can offer little in my present state." Four digits on his large hand twitched in isolation.

"Do you know what this is?" Zachary held up the Intercom.

"A transmitting variant. Yours?"

"Kind of. Can you hack it?"

The droid's arm dropped limp. "For what purpose? Hacking is an illegal act."

Zachary frowned. "Why does it matter? You used to hack all the time."

"For reconnaissance."

"Reconnor-what? Look, I just need you to clear the image."

"To delete?"

"No. Make the image clearer. I found it in the Wastelands, and I want to see what it's got."

"I am past hacking. That was then."

"And this is now." Zachary rammed the Intercom into Patch's hand. "You need to slacken your stiff upper lip."

“Difficult given my build.” Two of the droid’s fingers clasped the Intercom. Needles and green-lit prods protruded like hungry insects from the other two digits, invading the device. They quickly disassembled the middle region of the Intercom to expose reams of wires and miniature circuit boards.

“Don’t damage it,” whined Zachary.

“To hack is to break. What do we have here? Damaged interface. Password locks. Corrupted files. Secure protocols. Deficient backdoors. Difficult. Halt, I have found something.”

Zachary almost pushed forward out of the chair. The blue-tinted face reappeared for a second, scrambled with thicker lines than when he’d seen it in the Wastelands. He slapped the air. “You had it.”

“Unworthy to expose,” monotonously replied Patch. “However, four partial segments have been located.”

*Four!* Better than expected. “Go on. Show me.”

The Intercom burst up an unscrambled, blue-tinted photograph. Zachary concentrated on the girl between two adults. Six or seven years of age? Rounded cheeks fit her cheerful smile and frilly dress. Was she the Intercom’s owner? Didn’t the voice he’d heard sound older?

“The file’s signature states the year 2331,” said Patch.

*Nine years ago*, thought Zachary.

The woman to the child’s right showed a dominant pose with hair matching the crinkles of her thin dress. On the left, a tall, formal-suited man glanced downward at the child with a look of admiration. Something perfect that Zachary didn’t have shone between the three of them. Nowhere in his home did a collective image exist of his family. Smashed. Broken. Banished. He sucked back the unwanted wobble of his lower lip.

“File two,” said Patch. “Signature stamped as 2332.”

Another image replaced the first with the assumed parents and their child. Less round, the girl continued to smile, this time dressed in a tank top. Stone-faced, the mum’s fingertips half hung over her daughter’s shoulder, and the dad stared to his side away from them. What had changed in the spent year?

“Should I go on?” asked Patch.

Zachary nodded. “More images?”

“No – a motion recording dated five weeks ago.”

“Motion – like a movie?”

A large room flickered into view. The recording had been taken from high up, giving the figure in the centre the height of Zachary’s thumb. He couldn’t make out much except that she had long hair and wore a wavy skirt. Her back turned towards him, she walked away, making a soft thudding sound with her bare feet.

Zachary gasped at the huge curved wall ahead of her. It was transparent, and gave a tremendous view of Jupiter’s bands. She had it all to herself.

With a sudden turn, letting her skirt spin around her legs, the girl whirled around. Hands tracing down the front of her top, she kept her head down as her body straightened. All of a sudden static-polluted blurs interrupted her face.

“Hey,” cried Zachary.

Patch prodded the Intercom. “Stabilising.”

Two delicate claps from her coincided with a windswept chime playing from left to right. A flute began ahead of a verse of panpipes, then the patter of hands from a hundred unseen collaborators. He recognised the tune. The Harmon bracelet.

Holding her long skirt up to her knees, matching her strides to the strums, the figure glided across the floor. When a second guitar forced the pitch of the first to increase, she raised her hands and hit out like a thrashing wave. Her hair again fell over her face. Zachary’s breaths quickened with the building drumbeat. Never losing her balance, she span, arms out, then with a smacking wrap of her body, she jumped. At the final crash of a cymbal, she collapsed onto her front with her arms spread forward. Blurry lines blended to a sharp resolution. Zachary didn’t know whether it was Patch’s doing, or the recorder’s, as the screen zoomed to her head. Straight hair covered it. The girl’s hand flicked several strands right before the recording ended.

“*Patch!*”

The Haulage-404’s solitary shoulder shrugged. “Defective file.”

Zachary restrained from punching the droid. “What about the last file?”

As Patch’s bulky fingers loosened off the Intercom. Crackles sprinkled from the device. The sound of someone moving or shuffling items back and forth came out.

“Fourth of August 2340, 15:16 ... Ro ... *pzzzt* ... Kade’s diary,” a female spoke. “I hate today more than ever. I thought they’d be mature enough to handle it by now.” She chuckled. “Who am I kidding? What do my parents get from banning joy in our home every year on this day? All I can say is, congratulations to me on this anniversary. I wish I could sob with mother, but I can’t grab her sorrow and bring it as

my own. Why does she whisper like something inside has to be said? And father, quiet as ever ... *pzzzt*.”

“Is that it?” Zachary stared at the device. It’d been years since a female spoke to him without running her fingers through his pockets. He cursed under his breath. She wasn’t talking to him.

Patch fiddled with the Intercom. “Irreparable. Did you gain what you sought?”

Excitement dried Zachary’s mouth. He forced his back into the hard chair, glancing up at the rusty pipes in the ceiling, imagining the polished floors of another world above them. “Why don’t the girls around here talk like her?”

Tilting his head, Patch stammered, “I c-c-cannot comment.”

The skin above Zachary’s ears pulled back. He bolted up, facing the generator. One LED flashed. Using Patch had sucked away two days’ worth of energy.

“Zach-ach-ach-ach.” The Haulage-404’s eye sunk into darkness.

Frozen, Zachary’s limbs shivered as the door opened.

Only one other person had a key.

### **Chapter 3 - The Job**

Zachary feared the knowing glare fixed on his dad's face.

Marcus Connor's weathered brown eyes scanned the room as he dropped his bulging sack. "You been powering that rust-bucket again?"

Eyes dropped, Zachary winced at the invisible choke.

"How many times must I *tell* you?" Marcus's hand scraped over his formidable chest under his black-tarred vest. "I slave for us, every day, and what do I find when I get home? This? Two more days, Zach ... two more days until I have enough to buy more."

"It was only meant to be for a minute," muttered Zachary, wishing he had at least reattached the coiled-tube to the stove in time. He could have blamed an anomaly for sucking the volts in one go.

The lantern glowed close to his dad's bald head. "Is that uncooked rabbit?" An overlapped tooth jutted from his snarl. "So, son, tell me what was so important that you had to ruin dinner?"

*The Intercom!* Zachary exhaled at the droid's closed grasp.

"I was trying to repair his eye." His own rolled at the stupid suggestion. He'd be caught and suffer another tirade if his dad asked to see the parts.

"He's fine with one." Marcus walked to his room. "It's time you gave up on treasure-hunting rubbish and joined the Wallers. I'll have a word to get you apprentice status."

Zachary mouthed his groan. The Far-Wallers, the largest employer in District Two, sent men to batter sludge along the distant hydro-wall where circulating fans operated. To many, the preservation of the oxygen supply exceeded the need to scavenge. Not to Zachary. He was the wrong build to start with, and the common scars of acidic leakages didn't appeal to him. Zachary didn't consider himself to be handsome, but he wasn't ugly either.

"I could haggle with upstairs to use their stove," suggested Zachary. Half of the rabbit as a trade should be enough.

Marcus emerged pushing padded gloves into the front pocket of his murky-green sweatshirt. "I got a job for tonight with Gerry."

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