

DANIEL JOSÉ OLDER

**FLOOD
CITY**

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C H A P T E R

1

Max Salazar and his older sister, Yala, burst out of their twentieth-floor apartment and sped into the still-gray sky over Flood City. Side by side, they plummeted toward the jagged ground. The wind screamed against their ears, sent Yala's locs flying out behind her, and made Max's stomach turn somersaults. The broken buildings around them sped past, faster and faster, until everything blurred into one soggy gray-brown smudge. Then (finally) Yala yelled, "Now!" and zipped out of sight with an explosion of fire and smoke. Max pushed both his heels down inside his jetboots, waiting for that heart-stopping jolt as the rocket engines propelled him skyward.

Nothing happened.

Uh-oh.

The ground flew up toward Max like an angry monster. He pushed his heels down again and felt the ignition pedals drop uselessly against the boot soles.

“Max!” Yala yelled from far up above. Max could already make out the mountains of scrap metal between the crumbling buildings. A peaceful stream wandered amidst the detritus beneath him. He dug his heels in again, this time getting a shallow sputtering. It was better than nothing. If he could get ignited, he still might be able to . . .

FWOOOOOM!!!

The jetboots exploded to life. Max jolted forward, bounced off a tire mountain, and zipped just inches over a pile of razor-sharp metal shards before speeding back up, up, up, past Yala’s bemused face and higher than their apartment building, straight into the early morning sky and way above Flood City, which glimmered and shone below. There was the cliff at the far edge that separated their neighborhood from the other areas. Beyond it, the main downtown section had already begun to bustle, and past that lay the open plaza outside the Music Hall where the pageant would happen that night. A little ways below it, the front end of a huge ocean liner stuck straight up into the air, marking Barge Annex. Off in the distance, Max could just make out the Tumbled Together Towers.

He took it all in for a single sweet moment, then let himself drift back down to where his sister hovered, looking unimpressed.

“Close call, space cadet,” Yala said. “You forget to take off the ignition lock?”

“Maybe.”

Yala had programmed Max’s jetboots to bypass the ignition lock if he pressed down on the heel pedals a few times in a row. It

wasn't the first time that had come in handy. She rolled her eyes at him and then blasted off.

Sometimes Yala would sneak out of their house and just sit in the tunnel late at night to let her thoughts wander. Today though, her mind was cramped around a secret, and even the fresh ocean air in her favorite hideaway wasn't enough to cheer her up. Max was so absentminded. Another near-death experience for the records. And what was he going to do when she was gone?

"Yala! Wait up!" Max flitted into the circular tunnel that gaped out of the rock wall across from the fifteenth floor of their building. His flickering headlight made him look like a dizzy firefly as he veered too close to the wall. Yala had already glided in and clicked on her headlight. It was still early, so no one else was around. The darkness was peaceful. Occasional drip-drops accompanied the shushing waves not far away.

"Hurry up, slowpoke!" Yala called over her shoulder. Before Max had time to let the calmness of the passageway seep in, the bright lights of downtown Flood City were dancing toward him. He zipped out and was instantly surrounded by the daily ebb and flow of jetbooted commuters bustling off to work. The smell of Mr. Sanpedro's freshly baked goods filled the air just outside the tunnel, and sure enough, a sizable crowd had gathered around the window to get their morning snacks. Mr. Sanpedro ran his bakery from inside a half-destroyed train car that jutted out of the rocky slope.

“Yo, I want some dougies,” Yala said as Max floated up beside her.

“I don’t know,” Max panted. “That line is pretty long.”

“I don’t think I can take another day of these ration packs.”

Max eyed the little gray package that dangled from his knapsack. Inside was the blandest of bland food ever: stale bread with some sickly gray pudding on it and a bag of flaky cracker things. It was the same meal the Star Guard provided to every Flood City household, day after day after day since they’d stopped the Chemical Baron attack and taken over the one city left on Earth. Just thinking about the ration pack made Max want to barf his guts out.

No one knew how Mr. Sanpedro did what he did, but if you brought him your ration, he’d hand it over to his team of hunter-fly helpers and a few minutes later they’d send it back up transformed into a delicious, steamy hot pastry called a dougie. It even had gobs of thick, sweet sauce dripping off it.

It was worth the long line, but they were already running late. Max looked out toward the ocean, past the Tumbled Together Towers, to where Saint Solomon’s Hospital hovered over the ocean. “Mom’s shift is ending soon and I don’t want to miss her.”

Yala shrugged. “I guess since the pageant’s tonight we probably shouldn’t—”

“I don’t wanna talk about the—” Max didn’t finish because he was too busy ducking out of the way. Something blurred past his head and smashed into the rock wall behind him. “What the—?”

“Tinibu!” Yala yelled.

A small orange head with a long beak appeared from the brand-new hole in the mountainside. With two tiny hands, the creature adjusted the ornately carved mask on his face, shook off a cloud of dust, and then popped fully out.

“Jeez, Tinibu, you almost knocked my head off,” Max said, brushing debris off the little hunterfly.

“What are you doing up so early anyway?” Yala asked. “You usually don’t leave the house till long after we do.”

Tinibu flitted his wings and nodded his head in the direction of the bakery.

“Right,” Yala said. “For the big concert tonight, of course! Mr. Sanpedro asked for extra hunterflies to help him out with deliveries and baking so he could prepare for the feast. What’s wrong, Max?”

Max had turned an uneasy shade of green at the mention of the concert. It would be his first time playing lead in the horn section. What was worse, the whole entire city would be watching. Even worse than that, Djinna, the holographer’s daughter, was leading the percussion ensemble. She’d probably be right next to him in fact, and she’d know every single time he messed up. Max’s tummy squirmed like it was trying to break loose and wander freely around his body. “I’m fine.”

Yala rolled her eyes and turned back to Tinibu. “Yo, can you hook us up? We trying to make it to Mom’s hospital before her shift ends.”

Tinibu twittered irritably.

“I know, I know . . . but Max’s all nervous about the show tonight . . .”

“I am not!”

“And doesn’t wanna wait in line.”

The hunterfly raised an eyebrow at Max, made a clicking noise with his tongue, and then flashed off to the bakery.

“Great,” Max groaned. “Now I’m gonna wake up tomorrow with half my hair shaved off or something.”

“You didn’t wanna wait and I wanted dougies. This way, everybody gets what they want and I get to see you with a ridiculous haircut. Now c’mon. Tinibu will catch up to us.”

Yala sped off into the crisscrossing jetboot traffic. Max followed, grumbling. Jetboot repair shops and odds-and-ends bodegas were opening up for business in the sloping rock walls and sea-soaked buildings around them. Iron grates grumbled and clanked back to their resting spots to reveal storefront windows glowing with the first rays of sun.

Old Man Cortinas hovered out in front of his barbershop. He waved at Yala and Max. “Hey, kids!” he yelled, a mischievous grin stretching beneath his big mustache. “You ready for the show tonight, Max?”

Max’s tummy did a cartwheel.

“Hi, Mr. C,” Yala yelled, gliding easily out of the way as a group of chattering kindergartners fluttered past behind their teacher. “He’s—”

“I’m fine!” Max said. “I can’t wait!”

“Right.” Old Man Cortinas nodded. “You’ll be fine!” He took a sip from his tiny coffee cup and chuckled.

Around a corner and down a narrow alleyway, the hustle and bustle of downtown Flood City was only a vague murmur beneath the gnashing ocean waves. Yala had taken them along Max's least favorite shortcut. "You said you were in a hurry," she reasoned, springing along the winding corridor.

"But, Yala . . . so close to the Electric Ghost Yard. I don't know . . ."

The Electric Ghost Yard was a no-man's-land: a mess of tangled electronic cabling spread across an abandoned lot. The Chemical Barons had dumped the wiring as they fled to space after the first Flood City uprising. Everyone said that the cables harbored errant souls of people from the days before the Floods. Rumors or not, the place was creepy. It lay in the shadow of a tall, crumbly row of brownstones. Flashes of blue electrical light crackled between the wires, which seemed to writhe like a slo-mo worm pile.

Max gazed farther down the dark alleyway. He could just make out where the building wall gave way to a jangled barbed wire fence. He could hear the snapping currents. The wind brought in a nauseating whiff of burning rubber and something else . . . something that maybe had been alive once, but was now just charred ickiness.

"Chicken?" Yala said.

"No, I just value my life is all. Unlike some people."

"You know what'd be even faster? If we just flew directly *over* the—"

"No! Are you nuts, Yala?"

No one flew over the Electric Ghost Yard. Even the toughest Flood City folks, the ones who scoffed at all the creepy stories, the

ones who'd happily zip straight off into an oncoming typhoon to help fortify the city—even they weren't *that* nuts.

"Suit yourself." Yala shrugged. "Around it is." She sped off.

Max put a palm on his forehead. "How do I let you— Hey, wait up!"

As Max dashed after his sister, something on the alley wall moved ever so slightly. It was practically invisible, a large dark stain on a brick area between tattered posters and exposed pipes. Its motion was languid, could've been mistaken for the shadow of some cloth wafting in a gentle breeze. Two long white slits opened along the shape and squinted toward where Max and Yala buzzed around the edge of the Electric Ghost Yard. A crease folded through the middle of the shadow, its edges turned upward into a smile.