

FORS EPISODE 00

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TWEET
TWEET



Idona

Idona was a small town, but not in the traditional sense. It was larger than a single main road with a collection of scattered houses, but it was the kind of place where you married the guy you sat next to in Biology, and where everyone knew your name.

And like all small towns, it was more than just your name that people were curious about. Anyone who acted out of the ordinary was an object of scrutiny – and Jaqueline Flint was as far from the ordinary as Idonians came.

It wasn't her looks that were remarkable. She had the same tanned skin that many of the Mediterranean-blooded members of the town had. The only real difference between her and them was that her hair was straight, not curly. She wasn't exactly drop-dead gorgeous, as much as it would have helped her situation. She would have loved to find a knight on a white

horse, who took her away from the watching eyes of the small-towners, and preferably one who would pay for her university education too.

Jak also didn't dress in a remarkable way. She dressed just like every other kid in her situation – in the nicest-looking clothes which fit her from good will. Luckily she had a slight figure and average height, so there were a lot of options, even if many weren't all that flattering.

She wasn't remarkable because her family was poor, despite her opting towards good will. The reason why she opted this way was that she was a third child, with seven siblings. Some cost cuts were inevitable.

So then why was Jak so remarkable in this small town? Because Idonians love to gossip, and Jak had a very out of the ordinary personality.

The owner of the book store knew her because she was amongst the small group of person who had ever come in and enquired about books on robotics; and the only one to then go so far as to place a pre-order. When he mentioned it to others, they talked about seeing her on her during

her breaks, or on slow nights at the restaurant where she worked. She would be sitting in a back booth, her nose in some book.

Everyone had assumed it would be some romance or fantasy novels. Just a girl, daydreaming about a knight in shining armour saving her from her average life, and her status as a drop-out with no chance. But had any of them enquired as to what she was reading, they would have been dumbstruck by a non-fiction work on artificial intelligence theory.

Then, there were local garage owners. Due to the nature of Idona, these were family owned businesses. They had been passed down from parents to children for generations, and the rare exceptions had been sold to other families to own and operate. The reason why they were so familiar with Jak, was that she would do the rounds bright and early every morning, asking them for a job.

But nobody would take her up on her offer; nobody could. Work had to go to family, not just to strangers. No matter how much they begged.

When every garage had turned her down for the umpteenth time, she decided to try electronics shops instead. That is how she ended up encountering Mrs. Ferriday, and her shop 'Electoynic'.

Electoynic wasn't quite like the rest of the local businesses, though.

"Hello, my name is—" the proprietor behind a glass counter cut her off with a brisk wave.

"Jaqueline Flint," she said, watching expectantly. The girl quickly recovered herself to give a polite smile and nod. The woman responded with a sigh. "Yeah, I know you. Everyone knows you, Jacky."

The girl winced at that; the proprietor noticed a quick dark look in her eyes. She realised she had hit a nerve.

"I would prefer to be called Jaqueline, or Jak," she responded, keeping her tone cheerful and light. She had been through this conversation dozens of times with dozens of people, and carried the tone off perfectly. She returned the proprietor's look,

their eyes meeting in the brief silence that followed.

"Look, Jacky," The woman began, pausing to let the girl know that she was indeed being condescending, "I know what you're here about, so let's just cut to the part where you go away and try the next shop." She immediately turned back to her book, noticing some new grey strands through her frizzy red hair as she pushed it away from her face.

"Please give me a chance, Mrs. Ferriday!" Jak begged. "I'll do anything you ask!" Another moment of silence followed, before the woman's face turned back from her book, an eyebrow raised.

"Kid, why do you even want to do this? It's not like any of us earn a killing. Especially not a little hobbyist shop like me." Mrs. Ferriday was right, and Jak knew it. Electoynic was a niche shop which sold small robotic beings. With the advancements over recent years, it had become much easier and cheaper for these to be produced. Gimmicky shops with droll names just like Electoynic had been popping up all over the

place. However the fad was over, and people were starting to realise that these robots weren't all that special anymore.

The really special things were a totally different breed of robots – androids. Especially Professor Jonah Zanders' Adaptive Android Defenders line. The A.A.D. were on the news all the time, saving the world from some threat or another.

In a nutshell, interest in robotic cats was waning. Who wanted a cat when there were robotic superheroes out there?

“Please give me a chance,” Jak started, the usual begging routine kicking in. “All I want is to do some repair work. I'll keep myself busy and I'll keep out of your way. I can even take things home and do them there if it's too much trouble.”

Mrs. Ferriday was looking at her in a different way than she was used to – Jak's eyes lit up and her heart skipped a beat.

“How much?” She asked after the longest silence of the younger girl's life.

“Depends... on the amount of work, I guess.” Jak replied, playing this part by ear. Ferriday drummed her fingers slowly against the glass case beneath her, evaluating Jak before briskly walking to the back of the room. Jak couldn't help but stare as she walked away, wondering what would happen next.

Of all things, the woman returned with a small plastic bag, the contents a mystery to Jak.

“This thing is useless,” Mrs. Ferriday explained, passing the bag to Jak for inspection. “Some kid somehow managed to total it, wasn't interested in getting it fixed. I can't really afford to give you any parts or money for this, but have a play around with it. If you can get it in some kind of working order, I'll give you a second thought.” As Jak took the bag, Mrs Ferriday shrugged, returning to her former position, her eyes returning to her book.

Jak took a moment to inspect the contents of the bag – a large metal ball, painted blue about the size of her head. It was pretty scratched up and dirty, but it appeared to have a beak. She figured it was a bird of some kind.

She left the store, excitement overwhelming her plans to try and repair this thing. She hardly stopped to think about what kind of mess it must be in until she was half way home.

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The trick to getting anything done in the Flint house was finding a few metres of breathing space, away from everyone else. Jak paced through the house, in thought, starting in her own room.

Jak shared a room with her two sisters, Gladius and Ann. While the room was definitely big enough for their beds and Gladius' modest school desk, there definitely wasn't enough room for much else. Jak ruled the room out. She wouldn't want to risk ruining any of Gladius' school supplies anyway.

Next there was Ted and Robbie's room, but she ruled this out just as quickly. As much as she loved her rowdy youngest brothers, she just knew that leaving her project alone with them for five minutes would end in catastrophe.

So Jak poked her head into the kitchen.

Where have you been?

I've just been around town...

Right

Jak strongly suspected she had seen the bag, but was grateful she hadn't said anything further.

"The restaurant called while you were out. They've asked if you could start at eight."

Jak checked the clock. It was only a few minutes after five. She could easily take a look at her project before getting ready.

"Do I need to call in?" Jak asked.

"No," Ann said, pulling her dark hair out of her face. "I already said you'd be in."

"Of course," Jak replied, her tone slightly annoyed. She left the kitchen before Ann got onto one of her lectures about how they needed the money. Ann was Ann, after all. At eight, she was begging their parents to let her drop out of school to get a job and earn the family some money. Now she was ten, and had finally accepted her fate. She would continue her education until fifteen, just like all of her siblings.

Once she hit fifteen, they would have another look and decide whether she had the grades to

continue with school, or whether a job would be smarter. Everyone had told Jak she just wasn't suited for school (she personally thought that her teachers hadn't been suited to her); if she'd asked to continue she had already known what the answer would be. She could imagine, in her mother's sympathetic voice, "Honey, we just don't have the money..."

Oh her parents room! It would have been ideal, but it was their only safe haven.

The lounge room? floor was carpeted, and still in reasonably good condition. So no, she just couldn't ruin it.

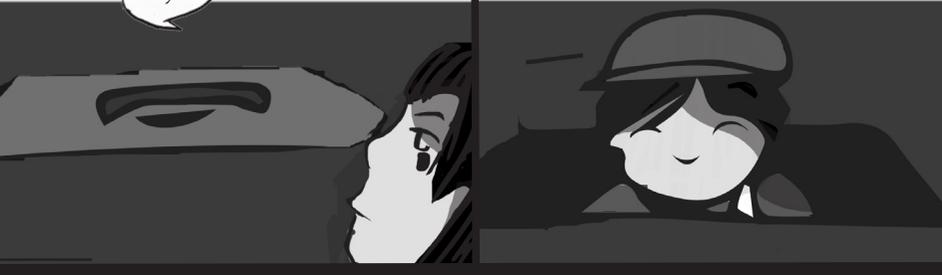
That left her with one option she headed towards the hatch that lead up to the attic.



Knock

Alby...

Knock



So what's this then?

It looks like some sort of messenger bird type thing? Mrs. Ferriday said if I can get him working, there's a chance more work will come *my way*.



“Good luck,” Albert said, his attention returning to his textbook. Jak gritted her teeth slightly.

Considering how small the little robot was, the electronics would have been a tight fit in the first place. Because of all the cluttered grass, Jak was having a hard time figuring out exactly what was wrong with it. *Once I get this cleaned out a bit, I'll have to get some of my basic books out again...* She thought as she pulled some of the grass out. However the more she pulled out, the more mess there was, especially around wing areas.

”Had too much fun, didn't ya?” She quietly asked her project as she carefully teased out the grass. She kept her voice low, despite the fact Albert was in another world. “Flew too close to the grass...”

She felt a sort of instinctive camaraderie with her little project.

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Three weeks, extensive fiddling and a fresh coat of paint later, Jak proudly pushed open the door of Electoynic. In true form, Mrs. Ferriday's eyes

remained on her book for a few moments before raising up to see who was letting the cold air in.

In her doorway, stood the strange Flint girl with her destroyed messenger bird, flying as bright and as energetic as new.

Gossip about Jak Flint spiked again in Idona. Maybe it was because of her new constant companion, the little messenger bird she had named Icarus, whose voice programming was restricted to a little “Tweet” noise.

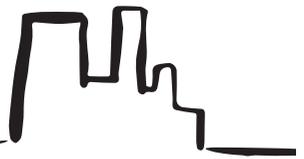
Perhaps it was because a little messenger bird sometimes appeared at the restaurant she worked at, smaller dishes kept nice and warm within its head cavity.

Or perhaps it was because Jak had taken the initiative to install a little laser in Icarus' beak, put together clumsily from old pieces of machinery lying around her house. Needless to say, nobody messed with Jak when Icarus was about. The laser wasn't even close to deadly. It wasn't even particularly dangerous. However Icarus had a remarkable enthusiasm for using it.

Though maybe the gossip was a combination of all of these things, along with a final factor. If you wanted anything robotic repaired, you could go to Jak Flint. She didn't undercut anyone, she only took payment on completion, and she was completely honest and transparent.

This wasn't the bad type of gossip she had been pinned with before. The Idonians' opinion of Jak began to soar.

More than anything else, the small town people began to wonder what the robotics prodigy would be doing with her future.

Queentia 

“Ooph,” Jak sighed as she put down the box next to the others, before turning to fetch another. Icarus, her robotic messenger bird, opened up the small storage compartment in its head. It carefully tilted forwards to allow a smaller box to slide gently beside them, as he had been instructed to do.

“Do you want to take a break?” Albert asked as Jak turned back towards the door to collect another box. He was carrying a box of his own, into his room.

“God, yes,” Jak replied, completely exhausted. “But we still have way more to go, don't we?” Albert's only response was a snort, as he appeared again from his room, on route to the front door. Albert was moving to the city of Queentia to continue his studies at the Military Academy. If you agreed to enlist, the academy paid for your degree, and then gave you a job at the end. If you

had a high score from school and were interested in electronic engineering, what more could you ask for?

Jak had seen her opportunity, and resorted to tenaciously begging Albert to let her come with him. He didn't take long to agree. She had even seen a rare moment of enthusiasm from Mrs. Ferriday, when she had told her the news.

“Queentia... couldn't have picked a better place,” the woman had said the last time they spoke, as she looked over Jak's last repair job back in Idona. Jak hadn't planned to do the job and it was a tiny bit rushed; however Mrs. Ferriday had asked, and Jak was eternally in her debt.

That said, they had already had this conversation, so Jak just responded with a shrug.

“You always dream big, kid, don't ya?”

“Impossible, more like it.” Jak muttered. She could only be like this around Mrs. Ferriday – the older woman just grinned.

“Now come on, Jacky,” she said with a laugh. Mrs. Ferriday was the only person who Icarus had never been inclined to use his laser on for using that name... unfortunately. “If you'd said that a year ago, I would have agreed. But a year ago, I wouldn't be stressing about losing my number one repair monkey.”

“You going to give me a few more nicknames before I go?” Jak asked with a smirk, earning her a half-hearted attempt at a swipe from Mrs. Ferriday.

“Huh! And there I was thinking I was going to miss you!” Carefully, Mrs. Ferriday carried the repair job into the back room. She returned, giving Jak her full attention. “Can I ask you a question?”

“When has me saying ‘no’ ever stopped you?” Jak asked, meeting her gaze. Mrs. Ferriday gave a short bark of laughter before regaining her composure.

“Why Icarus?” She asked, pointing to the bird. Icarus gave a cheerful ‘tweet’ of recognition.

“The reason he was so hard to fix, is that he was so full of grass from flying too close to the ground,” Jak said, earning a nod from Mrs. Ferriday. “So I named him Icarus, after the Greek legend who melted his wings by flying too close to the sun.”

“Heh, I figured as much. However he’s kinda like a Phoenix, thanks to you. A bird that rose again from the ashes. Just remember, if you’re going to fly too close to the sun, you’ve got to pick yourself right back up from the ashes and start flying again.” Mrs. Ferriday gave her a very serious look. Jak glanced back between Icarus and Mrs. Ferriday a couple of times. Unfortunately Mrs. Ferriday wasn’t the best at being inspiring.

“So... Icarus Phoenix, then?” Mrs. Ferriday smiled again, and Icarus gave another ‘tweet’ as if in approval. “I’ll still call him Icarus... for short.”

Jak mounted the stairs leading from the fifth floor down to the fourth, preparing for yet another trek to get back down to collect another box. In order to keep it within their price range, she and Albert had moved into a very small unfurnished two-bedroom apartment. Considering Jak’s bedroom was roughly the same size as her mattress, she

had been tasked to get as many boxes as possible into the hallway.

Once Jak reached the ground floor, she found Tom ready to load her up with another box. He and Albert ascended the stairs behind her, carrying Albert’s desk between the two of them. She waddled up the stairs under the weight of the box, terrified of falling backwards and crushing them both.

However despite the discomfort of the apartment and the struggle of moving, Jak forced herself to resist complaining.

“Hey, Icarus Phoenix?” Jak asked.

“Tweet,” her bird replied, in his usual high-pitched tone that annoyed everybody except for Jak.

“You ready? Because we are probably going to be doing a lot of falling down here.”

“Tweet?” He responded. Jak figured that regardless of what level of artificial intelligence he had, he had no idea what she was talking about.

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Jak, with all confidence in her resume, promptly set to finding a job in Queentia. Realising that she had vast experience in a restaurant nobody had heard of, and some experience in repairing machines in a town that nobody had probably heard of, she promptly settled for a low-end job in a nearby restaurant to pay bills.

Her problem was more or less the same as it had been in Idona, though. Even though she had better future prospects in Queentia, how did she get there from where she was now? She had looked into robotics courses, but they were all way too expensive. She figured she could look for an apprenticeship, but the businesses around Queentia actually had standards. She figured her chances of finding another Mrs. Ferriday were pretty slim.

As she drudged back to the train station after her shift, she reflected on Mrs. Ferriday's one real attempt at being inspiring. Despite how droll and cliché it had been, she realised it really did apply to the situation she was in now. She had a little smile to herself at the thought.

Unfortunately the nice memory didn't help relieve her situation. She still didn't want to get up for work the next day. Despite how much she enjoyed falling asleep on her mattress, she wasn't quite ready to go home, either.

It was only mid-afternoon, so Albert wasn't likely to worry about her for a couple more hours. Jak paused on her way, taking a glance at herself in a nearby office window. She looked alright. She definitely looked weary enough to have had a full day's work behind her, but at least the pressures of having the last job she wanted weren't showing.

So instead of taking the train home for an afternoon snooze, she decided to head into downtown Queentia for a while.

She hadn't really got a good look at the city, despite the fact she had been there four months. Most of her time had been spent between working, house work and desperately searching for any electronics prospects which might come her way.

Queentia was a pretty cool place to be stuck, all things considered. The weather had been heating up a bit, and the town was naturally a fairly warm place. However there were enough tall buildings around the place to give the streets a bit of shade, except for around the middle of the day. The buildings varied from old masonry to the newer ones, made almost completely from glass. She took a look up into one of the shaded glass offices as she walked past, observing the daily life of office workers – from slaving away at their desks to having a chat around the coffee machine.

“Oh my god!!” A voice interrupted her observations sharply. After a mere moment the first voice was joined by a chorus of shouts. Jak turned her own head around, to see what the commotion was about.

Someone bumped into her as she turned around, picking themselves up with a quiet apology before sprinting off in the other direction. She could see quite a few people doing the same thing, as everyone remaining stood dumfounded, staring in front of themselves.

She noted a few kids had taken the initiative to get out their phone cameras to record the goings on.

“Icarus...” She said quietly as she wrapped her arm around her companion, holding him protectively. As much as she didn’t want him to fly any closer to the conflict, she couldn’t bring herself to look away.

Idona had been such a small town. Nothing there had ever happened that could compare with this. So something like this happening...

Above her, two of the A.A.D. line androids were chasing after another machine across the glass planes of the modern buildings.

Her mouth was open, gaping as the three ran past her. She couldn’t get a clear visual on the machine leading the other two. It wasn’t one she had seen before, unlike the A.A.D. androids. But from her cursory glance, it appeared different. Less human.

The creature they were chasing was some kind of long-limbed humanoid coloured in white and gun metal grey. Despite apparently being made of

metal, its limbs skimmed lightly along the top of the buildings, just like a water skimmer.

She noted A.A.D. Four giving pursuit. He took a moment to turn to the crowd, giving a very cool wave before turning his concentration back to the chase. Comparing the A.A.D. line to older superheroes, Four was basically like Superman. An unbeatable war machine when it comes to it, but from his interviews, he gave the impression that he wouldn't hurt a fly. Unless that fly was two-storeys tall and attempting to destroy humanity.

Not far behind was A.A.D. Two. Every part the Batman, to Four's Superman persona; Two was moody, brooding and mysterious. He was covered head-to-toe, and nobody was totally sure why. She had seen a lot of fanboys and fangirls suggest that he was covered in cool scars, adding to his "jerk who needs a hug" image.

The other reason for the Superman/Batman comparison was evident in the combat situation. Four was exploiting his more advanced adaptive abilities, his own form changing into something that would increase his aerodynamics, but

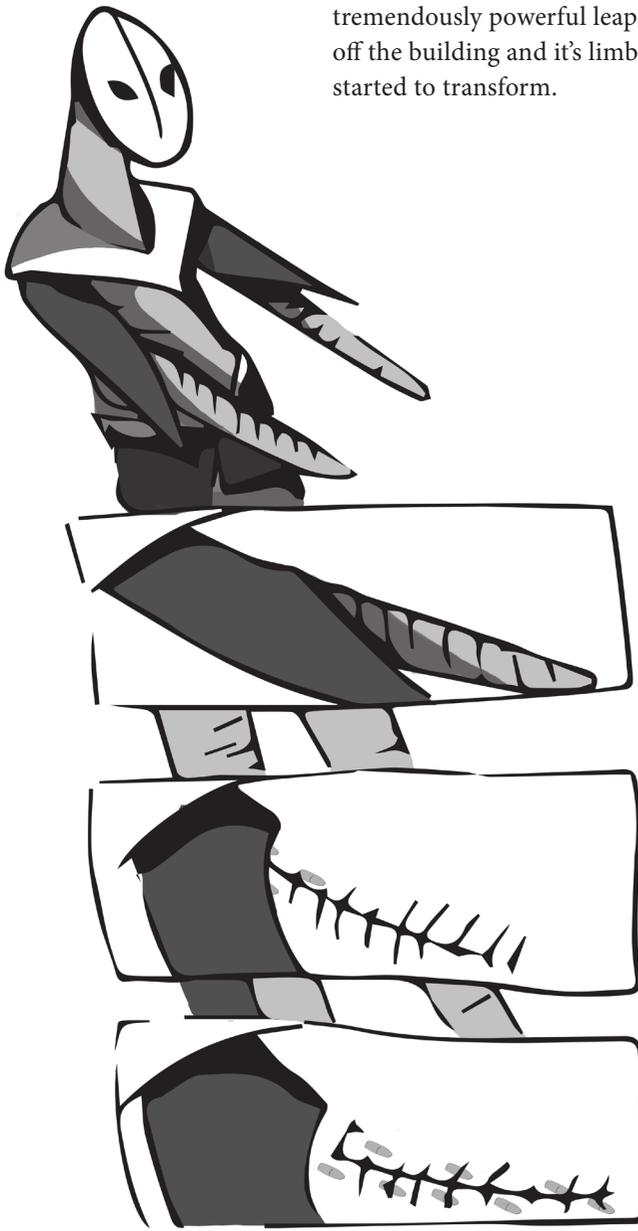
distributing his weight evenly to keep up a reasonable speed on the unfavourable glass surface.

Two, on the other hand, had slipped away while he was behind. He slipped down into a nearby building; thankfully the glass panes on this building were split to include a window section, which had been left open. With his more solid footing he zipped through the large building, bellowing at the occupants to evacuate the upper levels, before reaching the other side and coming back up in front of the strange machine while it was preoccupied with Four coming up behind it.

The A.A.D. androids were exactly what it said on the tin. Adaptive androids, created for the purpose of defending mankind. However each generation was slightly different from the last, in various ways. While Four, a newer model, exploited superior adaptive abilities, Two had been around since the early days of Professor Zanders' work, and was very street-smart and tactical.

The skimmer dodged remaining untouched despite the two-on-one situation.

Getting nowhere, it took a tremendously powerful leap off the building and it's limbs started to transform.



Two GO! Make sure everyone's safe!

RIGHT!





“Tweet!” Icarus exclaimed, waking Jak from her state just in time – some debris from the building above her was tumbling down. Jak picked up speed as she ran, narrowly avoiding the debris from her own building, counting her blessings before she felt a massive blow to the head.

Jak hit the ground, hard. She was distantly aware of a familiar high-pitched sound, but she couldn’t quite place the source. She tried to move her body, starting with her feet, legs, fingers, arms, but found none of it responsive.

Gradually, she could feel lucidity coming back. Her vision cleared, though it was mostly obscured and the scant light stung her eyes. She forced them shut, as the high-pitched noise started up again.

“Tweet! Tweet!” It said. As the tweeting continued, Jak came back to her senses more and more. She was Jacqueline Flint, currently laying under tower debris and lucky to be alive. Her entire body felt like it was on fire, and she probably had several broken bones. Icarus, her robotic messenger bird was calling out to her.

“H... Help,” She managed to splutter out as her breathing started to catch up to her thinking. Her arms finally responded to her flailing, and she could feel the sandstone debris around her giving way a tiny bit. She breathed in slowly, freeing herself a little as she gave a solid push.

Jak sat up and reassessed the situation. She didn’t appear to be bleeding out, and now that her senses were returning the pain wasn’t as bad as she’d thought it was. She carefully sat herself up, coughing a little more as she inhaled some dust from the debris.

Icarus quickly joined her again, his tweeting calming down as she slowly patted his head. She tried her best to take a few deep breaths, still slightly compromised by the dust, before picking herself up slowly. She let Icarus go again as she stepped over to a nearby window, leaning on the sill.

She looked up at the skyline, suddenly remembering that an epic battle was going on above her. She knew she was disregarding her own safety again by not getting out of there as quickly as she could; but she was silently sure that

her parents would force her to go back home after this mess. She figured, with the logic that only Jak could muster, that she may as well hang around and get a thrill out of the scene.

From her vantage point, she could see Four obviously struggling to avoid a steady stream of machinegun fire, apparently slightly wounded.

“Come on!” He yelled, just loudly enough that it may have been for the benefit of anyone still around, and not just a taunt. “Is this all Monroe’s got?”

However his words did make sense. Professor Abel Monroe was sort of like the ‘bad guy’ to Professor Jonah Zanders, who had created the A.A.D. It was a typical classic story. They were two University colleagues, who had turned into sworn enemies engaged in a fight to the death.

Nobody was totally sure why Monroe had gone nuts. Jak actually had a couple of books by him, and had read a few more. After all, in spite of everything he was just as much of a genius as Zanders was. The unfortunate thing was that

as Zanders had gotten older and more brilliant, Monroe had gotten older and tragically madder.

Jak watched Four evade the skimmer’s attacks, his movements growing clumsier and clumsier. Two assisted where he could, but mostly attempted to keep out of sight, probably planning some kind of counter-attack.

But Jak was confused. If this was meant to play out as a war of attrition, surely the superior A.A.D. androids would outlast the skimmer. It had to run out of bullets sooner or later, at the very least. What could Monroe’s plan be, besides being a cartoon supervillain by launching wave after wave of inferior enemies at the protectors of the world? Could Four have been wrong and Monroe wasn’t behind this?

Four was struggling. The longer he spent dodging, the more tired he looked. Where earlier he had almost looked like he was having fun with the skimmer, he was now noticeably slower, his obnoxious taunts no more.

The skimmer seemed to have noticed too. The barrage of bullets stopped for a few moments,

and Four stood up straight for a moment. A mere moment after he had regained his composure, the skimmer was onto him. It zipped forth rapidly, picked Four up with only one of its metallic arms, and with unbelievable force threw him from the building, through the rubble on the street.

Jak's hand flew to her mouth, as dust rose from Four's unmoving body only a few metres away. Taking another cursory glance up at the skimmer, who was thankfully trying to find Two, she cautiously crawled over to him, cradling her own sore frame. She crouched down next to him, trying to think of how she could help the android. Despite his injuries, Four blinked suddenly, looking up at her with his bright green eyes.

"Hey, what's wrong?" Jak asked, seating herself carefully next to him. Despite the fact he had taken a serious pummelling, she knew it wasn't an insincere question. Four had been all over the news saving the world at the head of the A.A.D. – seeing him in this kind of state was pretty unusual.

"I don't mean to sound suspicious, but who are you?" Four responded. Jak was taken aback, but

not due to the question. Four's voice sounded dry and crackly. The skimmer must have hit his voice box or something; that would explain why his taunts had suddenly dropped off. Seeing Four up close in this state, he looked not only weak, but young. Despite the fact he would be years older than her, his features reminded her of boys her own age.

He looked sick, too. His skin was so pale and thin she could see some machinery underneath, ticking along.

"I'm Jacqueline Flint... uh, I'm nobody really," She added. "I know bits and pieces about robotics." She knew she was good, but she was no Jonah Zanders. "Maybe I can help?"

Four shook his head, "Sorry, sweetheart." He laughed shakily, smiling. "That thing didn't hit me with some kind of magic weapon, I was just being stupid." She looked at him, puzzled. "Listen... the thing that lets me change my appearance, and keep on fighting for so long? It's nanites."

Jak paused.

“Should... you be telling me this?” She asked, before realising it was probably the last thing on Four’s mind at this point in time.

“Why not? Monroe pretty much knows how we tick, he just doesn’t know how to do it himself.” He laughed again, sounding worse than the previous one. “Doesn’t mean he’s not bright enough to work out how to win, though. Anyway, those nanites. I have a basic body, similar to any other android. But around that are my nanites; when I need to run faster, or be tougher in certain areas, I can remotely control them.”

“I guess with something like that, you could even grab your own arm and reattach it when it was shot off?”

Four laughed again. “You saw that, huh? Sorry if I scared you.” His laugh quickly turned into a sigh as he started sitting himself back up, still in a fairly vulnerable position. “However even us miracle machines aren’t limitless. That skimmer... it kept shooting at me. It must have known. Or maybe Monroe programmed it to hit me until the nanites were compromised...”

“Is there some way you can get them working again?” Jak asked, aware of how stupid her question sounded.

“There is, yeah,” Four looked forward, thoughtfully. “It doesn’t take a lot, but it consumes some resources. To put it simply, I have to eat.” From above, they heard a loud bang. They could see Two leap from one building to the other, pursued by a spray of gunfire. “Gah, there’s no way Two can handle that thing on his own!” Four tried to pick himself up again, failing to get out of his sitting position.

“Hang on, what do you mean by eat? Maybe we can find you some food.” Jak placed her hand on his shoulder, gently trying to keep him down. There was no point in Four doing more damage to himself by trying to be a hero.

“I haven’t seen anything here. Not on the level I need, anyway. I’d need a whole lot of human food, or maybe some kind of contraption. Lots of metal.” Four took a slow look around him, obviously perusing the nearby area for something to help. However, a thought was starting to form in Jak’s mind. Four looked back at her, suddenly

looking worried. “Hey, you look wounded. You’re not bleeding, are you?”

“Icarus,” Jak called, ignoring his question for a moment. Icarus came to her side, letting out a little tweet. Four let out a gasp from behind her.

“But... he’s yours.” He said. Jak simply nodded.

“First machine I ever fixed for a job.” Jak gave Icarus a tight hug, forcing herself to hold back tears. Icarus let out an affectionate tweet.

“Jacqueline, I can’t...” Four began, but Jak held the little bird out to him persistently.

“Don’t say that. Look how many people are at risk here. Your own brother could die if you don’t get back out there.” He looked straight up at her, his mouth opening for another comment. Noticing her grim expression, he gave her a quick nod. He held Icarus to his chest, closely; a grey goo spread from the front of his body, enveloping and rapidly dissolving the little robot.

Four took a few more moments, before standing up, looking a bit livelier again. He glanced back

up to the battle on the skyline, before turning back to Jak and nodding.

“Thank you. Stay safe, Jacqueline Flint.” He said, solemnly, before running off to join the fray again.

“Just Jak is fine,” Jak called after him, realising it was probably the stupidest line possible. Jak lay back down in the rubble as he sped away, watching as he quickly ascended the nearby buildings. Having had the time to re-evaluate the battle with the skimmer, Four sped towards it rapidly, dodging as many bullets as possible before knocking it down with a hard blow.

She missed the rest of the fight. Feeling exhausted, sore and depressed, she closed her eyes and slipped from consciousness.

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Jak woke in a hospital room. She figured it must have been nearby, as Albert was sitting in the chair next to her bed snoring softly. She instinctively turned around to look for Icarus, before realising she would never

see him again. She started to sob, the tears coming uncontrollably.

This woke Albert up right away. He rose to comfort her in silence. Jak tried to get some words out to describe what had happened, but they wouldn't come; she simply cried into his shoulder for a while. When the tears finally stopped coming, she no longer felt like talking about it.

“That’s fine, but one of the nurses gave me something for you,” Albert said, returning to his chair. He grabbed a letter from the table next to it, with her full name written on it.

Jak forced herself to sit up, a little tender, and open up the envelope. Inside was a single-page letter in deliberate, but fairly neat handwriting.

Hi Jak,

I didn't think it was appropriate for me to start hacking to try and find your email, so I thought I'd be better off leaving you a letter.

Honestly, I can't thank you enough for what you

did back there. When you get the chance, head to the upper quarter. 44 Caroline Street. Just say who you are. They'll let you in.

Four

Jak re-read the letter several times, bewildered. It was strange enough to receive actual hand-written letters, let alone one from a celebrity. Coupled with her memories of the clash with the skimmer, the whole experience felt totally unreal.

+++

A couple of days later she was released from the hospital. She headed home and took the rest of the day off, but as soon as she woke the next day, she made a beeline for 44 Caroline Street. She stood in front of the gate for a long time, feeling inadequate even though she had tried to dress up a little.

Finally opening the gate, she walked through a garden which seemed to be mostly wildlife, before approaching the main door of the tremendous building. She sighted an intercom on

a pillar nearby the door. She took a deep breath as she pressed the button.

“Hello?” An overly synthetic voice asked.

“Hi, this is Jacqueline Flint.” She started, but wasn’t sure what else to say. A few moments of silence followed before the door flung open, revealing a much healthier-looking Four.

“Jak!” He exclaimed. She was amazed that he’d picked up her passing comment as he’d run off to the battle, but he obviously liked the name. He quickly took her hand, leading her into the house. “I’m so glad you finally came by. I was starting to get a little worried.”

“I was only discharged from hospital yesterday,” She said, following him into the house. She wasn’t really able to do anything else with his hand around hers so tightly. The house was clean and white. It was like a stereotypical rich people house from movies, until he led her past the first room. After that the furniture was darker, but still very tasteful, and magazines and other things littered the coffee tables and any other surface.

“Upstairs is where the others and I have our rooms,” Four explained, leading her through another door to a room with a staircase against the side of it. As he led her up, letting go of her hand as they walked past the staircase, she realised that the wall was grubby with finger marks. Just like the halls of her family home. She was happy to know that some things never changed.

Four stopped at a door which proudly wore a large “KEEP OUT!!” sign. “Here we go,” He said, disobeying the sign despite its insistent exclamation marks. He opened the door and signalled for Jak to enter first.

She did, finding herself faced with a narrow staircase which appeared to lead down through the first storey, into some kind of basement. Uncharacteristically caught up in the romance of it, she slowly climbed down the staircase, preparing herself for what was to come.

The basement was large, and quite clearly a laboratory. She could hear beeps and boops from pieces of machinery, and there were numerous projects laying around in boxes, or neatly heaped

onto tables. As she looked around, she saw him for the first time.

The greatest man alive.

Professor Jonah Zanders.

Zanders was a large man. There wasn't a bit of fat on his entire body, but he was well over six foot tall, and one of the broadest-framed human beings Jak had ever seen. Despite the fact that the man must be well into his sixties, she reckoned he could take any one of his creations in a wrestling competition.

"H- Hello, sir," She greeted, unsure exactly what was going on. She looked to Four, who was grinning madly. Jak figured he must have been enjoying her shyness, but that couldn't be it. There was no hint of mockery in his grin.

"Come on, Dad, show her what you did!" Four coaxed, as Professor Zanders took a moment to look her up and down. He gave a long, suffering sigh, before taking a few long, purposeful strides to a bench top. He picked up a small box before turning back to her, opening it with a little flair.

"I... Icarus!" Jak exclaimed. Icarus Phoenix opened its eyes, before enthusiastically flying out of the box, landing in Jak's arms. She gave him a tight hug as he let out a string of high-pitched tweets.

"I would say it suffices, then?" Zanders asked, his deep voice breaking Jak's trance before she could start crying again.

"Yes, oh yes," Jak said, looking back up at the man. "But how?"

"Well, when I 'ate' Icarus, I made a point of backing up his memory files," Four explained, still grinning madly. "So when I got home, I told Dad all about what you'd done and asked him to see what he could do." Zanders let out a little intentional cough, which sounded remarkably like the word 'begged'. Jak looked back and forth between the two, overwhelmed by thankfulness.

"Thank you... I really mean it, thank you," She hugged Icarus as tight as she could, Four's grin somehow getting wider.

“Hey, for what you did back there... that whole mess was my fault.” His expression turned a little serious, his smile fading apologetically.

“Four said you repaired the bird originally?” Zanders interrupted, shoving the awkwardness aside. It seemed he had already briefed Zanders on it. Jak gave a short nod in reply. “Good work, very good. Honesty, the old Be-80s are scarce these days. It took me a bit of time; had to work from scratch.” He looked at Jak thoughtfully, “Any minor repairs, I’m sure you’ll be fine with. But if there’s anything structural, or a bit more serious, come back to me.”

With that, Zanders turned back to work without waiting for Jak’s response. Jak was amazed; the man was so generous in offering his assistance, but obviously wasn’t full of himself. Four signalled for her to follow him, and introduced her briefly to A.A.D. Five who was doing some work at the other end of the lab. A.A.D. Six was around the place cleaning.

It seemed that Two and Three had already escaped from their duties. With Four acting as

her tour guide, Jak suspected she was also a tactic to get out of his own work.

It was fun, and with Icarus following her around tweeting at everything, she felt even better. After he had showed her around the place, Four told her to come back any time she wanted. Jak promised to take him up on the offer.

Caroline Street I

“None of us have ever really been great gardeners,” Four explained as he led Jak to sit down in the yard. It was a warm Sunday, and Jak didn’t have work so she had decided to head down to Caroline Street to hang out.

She had spent a vast amount of time over the last few months hanging out with Four and his brothers. It felt weird that she had gone so quickly from having Albert and Icarus being her only friends in the world, to her, Albert and Icarus hanging out with a bunch of androids who were basically like cool teenagers.

“So you just let it run wild, then?”

“No way,” Two said, suddenly appearing and leaning back against the veranda fence. “A friend of Dad’s comes every month or so to neaten it up.”

“Hey, Two. Where have you been?” Four’s voice held its usual curious tone, a slightly mischievous look on his face. Two rolled his eyes – or his eye, at least. Only one eye was visible, the other hidden by his hair.

“I was in Austin,” Two said with stressed patience, “For a week. I actually remember telling you this several times.”

Four pouted. “Yeah, you did, but... you didn’t take me with you!” He looked at Jak, faking a plea for sympathy. “I mean, come on? How mean is that!” Jak, having dealt with the eternal disputes of four younger siblings, decided to opt out.

“I’m so staying out of this,” She said, laughing a tiny bit. Icarus gave her a tweet of approval, and the two of them went into the house.

“Awww,” For called out after her. “Hey, can you get me some lemonade while you’re in there?” She shook her head back at them, but made her way to the kitchen. She had just finished pouring three glasses when Zanders made an appearance, wearing an old lab coat. It was splattered all over from oil, and various other substances.

Jak slid a glass in his direction, collecting a fourth one from the cupboard. Icarus sat on the table, watching Zanders, who was watching Jak.

No-one spoke until Zanders broke the silence.

Jak How would you deal with say... Building a new machine, but using a method which involved creating billions of smaller machines, which are programmed to work in harmony.

So, like a hive mind?

In a sense. But not quite. Each machine would have to work independently, every single one of them capable of becoming the queen ant at a moment's notice. Otherwise, he would end up not a machine but a robot ant colony

So rather than having a single unit controlling the entire machine, each small machine would be capable of controlling itself independently, but still contribute to the end goal... Like a super-fast democracy. It would have to act like a personality.



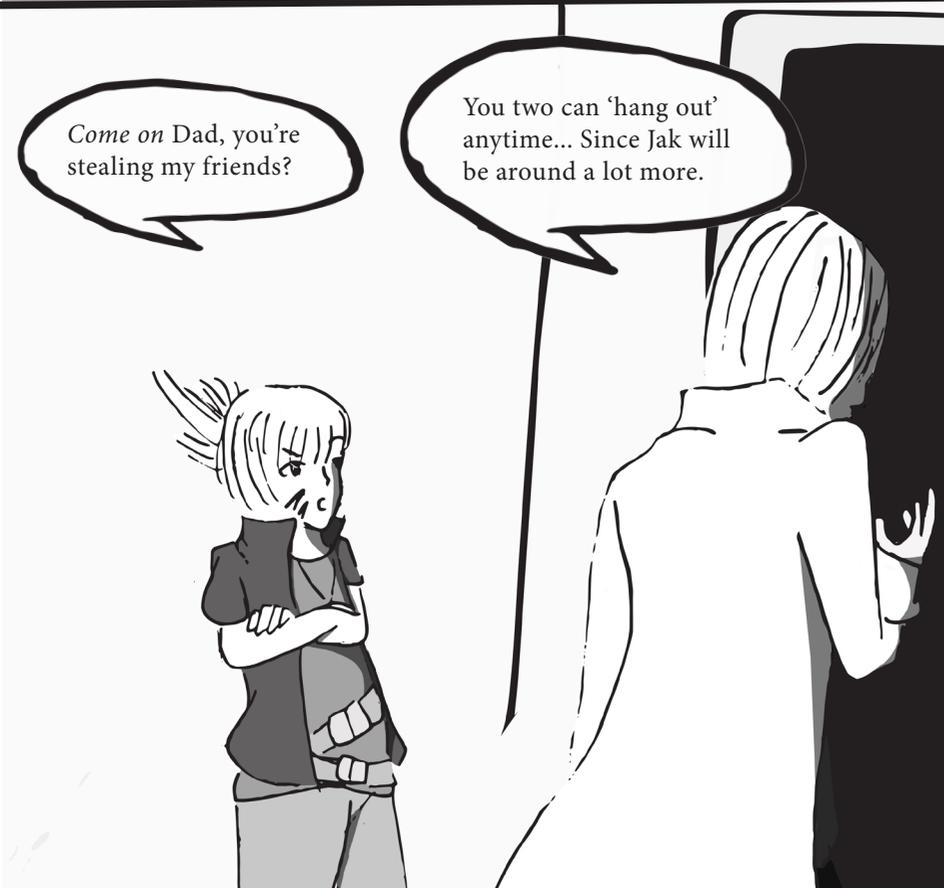


I know how to...
JAK! Let's go to the lab.



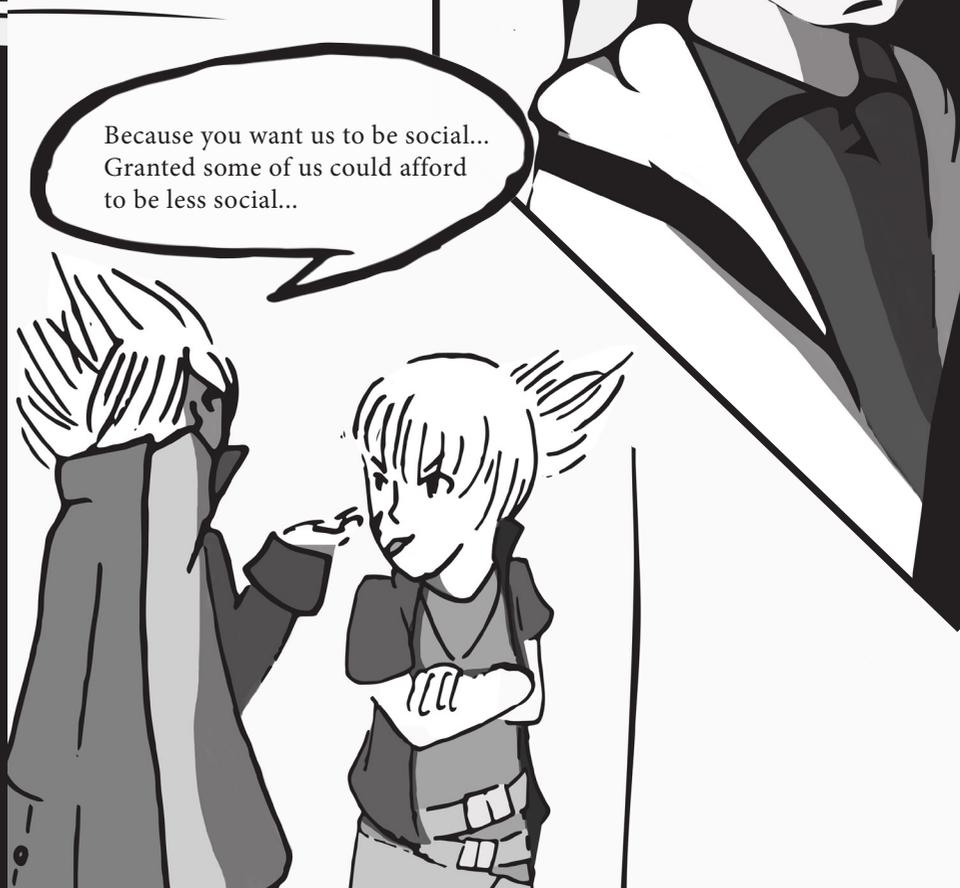
I'm sorry?

Well, obviously I'll be taking you on as a
aprentice. Come on girl! Why else would
I tolerate you around the house so often



Come on Dad, you're
stealing my friends?

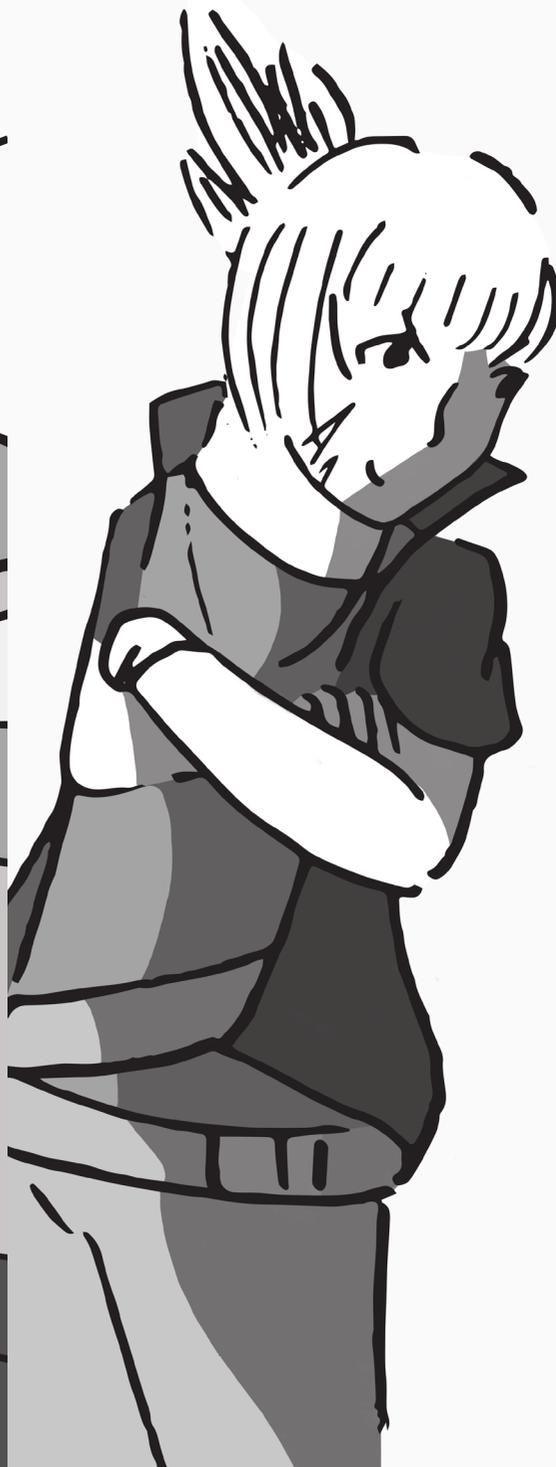
You two can 'hang out'
anytime... Since Jak will
be around a lot more.



Because you want us to be social...
Granted some of us could afford
to be less social...



Four's face had a satisfied expression on it, as though the whole thing had been his plan.



Location Unknown....

Jak blinked slowly, her eyes feeling crusty. It felt as though she had been asleep for a very long time, but she still felt tired. As she opened her eyes, something clicked and the glass above her began to move away quickly.

“It’s moving!” A voice said. She sat up, rubbing her eyes slowly before turning in the direction of the voice. There were four people in her room. But they weren’t people, not exactly. Their expressions were too cold, their features too angular... too perfect. These were androids, looking down at her. But not any androids she had seen before, and not friends. All four of them had guns pointed at her. She moved a little more quickly in sitting up, and one of them jumped and fired. Luckily the bullet bounced off her sleeping capsule. She wasn’t sure what was going on all of a sudden, but if they were this quick to shoot, it probably wasn’t good.

Being sure not to make any sudden movements, she slowly hid her hand moving her fingers steadily across her palm towards the tabs, pulling on the middle tab at the base of her palm a small metal disk with a red circular centre appeared in her hand. With practiced ease she tossed it to their feet, ducking for cover on the other side of the capsule. The explosion wasn’t massive, however it was designed to be as silent as possible, and it quickly dispatched the four androids at such a close proximity. She limped away from the capsule, her body slowly coming back from her induced sleep. Her movements were getting more fluid, but she was still far too stiff to run.

She also had no idea where she was. The corridor she entered had a lot of screens on it, but other than that it was all metal, with no windows or any sign of the outside world. Perhaps the screens were there instead of windows, she thought. Most of them were cracked, some showing obvious bullet holes.

“This way!”

“It’s not like she could have gone anywhere else!”

Great. She had company. She glanced around herself and ducked into a small room, holding her breath as she waited. Once she could see them approaching, she subtly lobbed out another explosive, taking down her new pursuers before re-entering the hallway.

The only things she could find were more long corridors and empty or scantily-furnished dark rooms. She was trying not to panic, but she really wanted to get out of the place. It was pretty scary, and the metal building was extremely cold. Her worries increased when a door at the end of the corridor started to open.

She tried her best to press herself against a wall behind some kind of tall cupboard. Again, she silently tossed a small explosive once they had closed the door.

What could have happened to security? Jak wondered, sneaking carefully through the door. None of the androids I've seen have uniforms, or any kind of identification; and judging by the broken monitors, it looks like this place has been broken into...

She followed the hall, lost. Seeing a door which was slightly bigger than the others. It looked important. An exit?

It was. The door led to the entrance of the building, a huge white room with a white desk at the centre, and a water feature near two huge doors. She blinked a few times, still growing accustomed to the sudden light after her sleep. Unfortunately, her accustomed eyes caught onto a few groups of robots and androids patrolling the new room. This wasn't going to help her escape either.

She went to retreat back into her room, but one of the androids pointed at her, shouting. All of the androids in the room turned to face her, drawing their guns. She slammed the door behind her, turning to face—another much bulkier android.

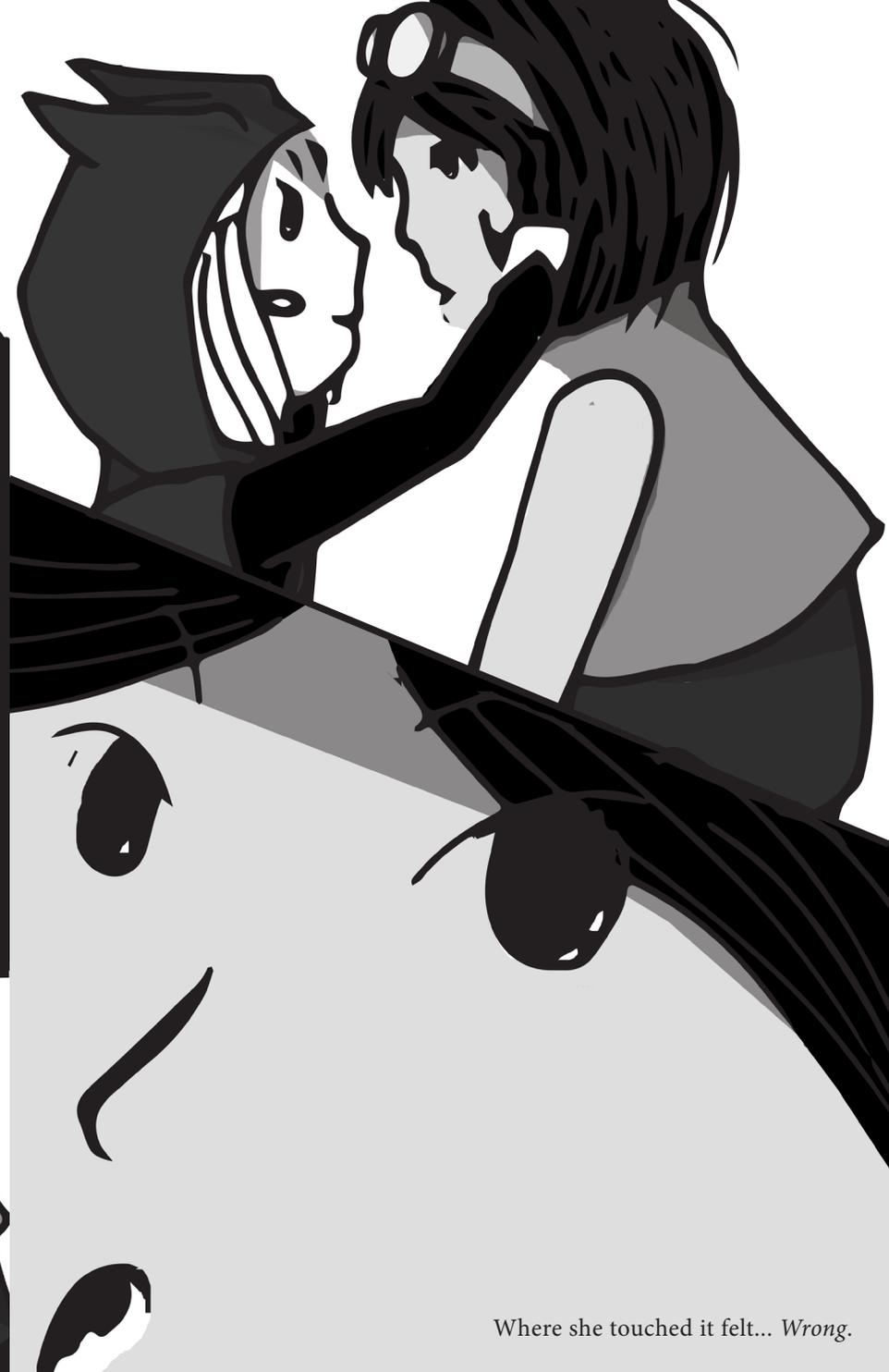
Jak sunk to her knees, too tired to fight, any adrenaline she had having run its course. As she waited for one of the creatures to do something to her, she felt a sudden silence cross them all. They were all dead still, facing towards her.

“Hello,” She looked up. Amongst the mismatched robots and androids around her, one stood front row and centre. A small girl, cloaked in red.



WHO ARE YOU?
Where am I?

You poor thing. Do you even know your own name? Oh Jak, my partner is an old friend of yours.

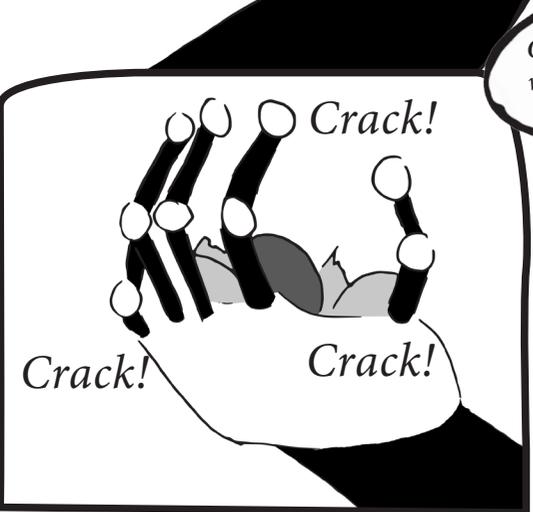


Where she touched it felt... *Wrong.*



GET AWAY FROM ME!

Grab!



Crack!

Crack!

Crack!

Oh Jak. We only want to help you.



All you have to do... Is help us.

Alright...

Something about her terrified Jak but at the same time she was surrounded. Jak had no doubt those around her would turn hostile in a moment if they had to. Still it felt like she had made a deal with the devil.

PROPERTY
OF
JAK FLINT

“In Idona, anyone who acted out of the ordinary was an object of scrutiny – and Jaqueline Flint was as far from the ordinary as Idonians came.”

Jak was a talented, albeit unemployed engineer from the small town of Idona. But everything changes when she in the big city of Queentia sees something truly fantastic.

Androids! The A.A.D developed to protect humanity, battling it out with a metal monster created by their father’s rival Abel Monroe. When Jak nearly loses her life to assist Professor Zanders’ most brilliant android, she suddenly finds her luck suddenly changing for the better.