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Opening extract from

Scavenger 1: Zoid

Written by

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Published by

Macmillan Children's Books

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First published 2014 by Macmillan Children's Books
a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited
20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Basingstoke and Oxford
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-1-4472-3148-6

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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My name is York. I'm fourteen years old – leastways, that's by the Half-Lifes' reckoning. Years don't mean much in the Biosphere – nor months or days for that matter. There are no days or nights here the way there were on Earth.

I've seen pictures of Earth; the Earth we left behind a thousand years ago. The Half-Lifes have shown me. Trees, mountains, rivers; sunsets over deserts, moonrise over the oceans . . . There's none of that here in the Biosphere, only light from the hull lamps illuminating the twists and tangles of the tube-forest that surrounds the Inpost.

The Inpost is home. My home. It's the only home I've ever known – or am ever likely to know. A run-down mash-up of tech-sheds and mech-galleys hidden deep beneath the tangle and scuzz of the tube-forest. OK, it can smell of sweat and gunk-grease, and the holo-simulations aren't up to much.

But it's safe. For now. At least, that's what Bronx says.

Bronx is the chief tech of the Inpost. He makes and mends. Scanner sights, stun-pulsers, cyber-implants – you name it, Bronx can construct it from zoid-junk. Everything it takes to keep us secure. All one hundred and twenty-six of us – not counting the two Half-Lifes, who aren't alive exactly, but aren't quite dead either. They're our ancestors, from the Launch Times, their consciousness downloaded into mind-tombs.

There are all sorts living in the Inpost, and everyone does their bit. Fixers, growers, watchers, salvagers, sanitizers, cook-techs, bev-servers . . . And then there's me. I'm a scavenger. There aren't that many of us. Not surprising really. Considering. We hunt zoids out in the tube-forest, kill them any way we can, then bring their

parts back to the Inpost for Bronx to use.

It's a dangerous job, but someone has to do it. Out in the tube-forest not even Bronx can keep you safe.

Just ask Dek, my best friend. I've known him as long as I can remember – ever since the nursery hub. We both lost our parents in the last big zoid attack. Not that either of us can remember. We were only babies back then.

That was when Bronx moved the Inpost from the turbine banks to Quadrant 4. Here, beneath the convection lakes in the middle of the tube-forest, we're hidden from even the most advanced zoids.

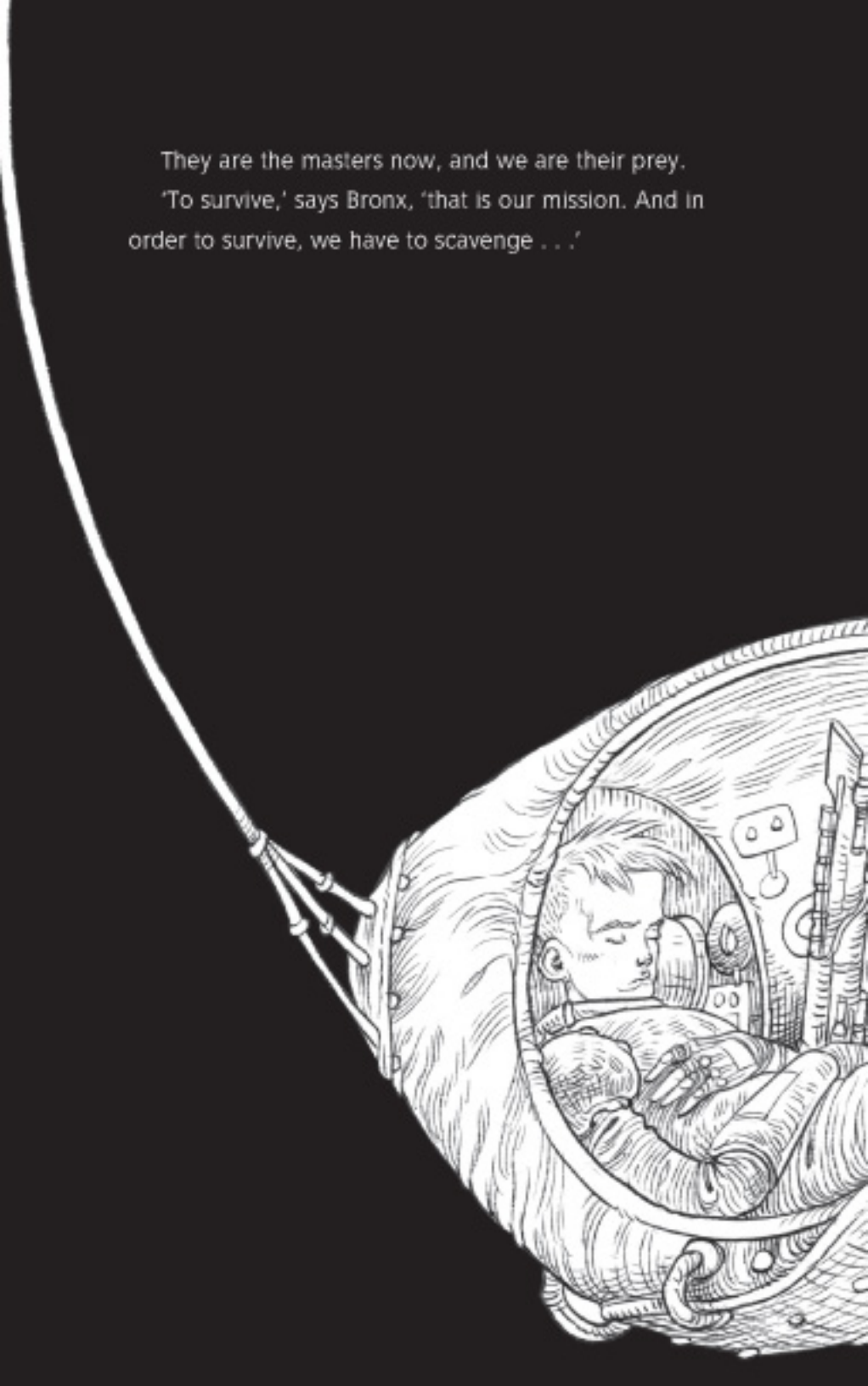
Not that they've given up looking.

You see, to zoids, humans are vermin, no different to the critters that infest the tube-forests. They're out to eradicate us from the Biosphere. To wipe us out. Maybe we're the only ones left. Maybe there are others. There's no way of knowing without leaving the tube-forest. And that's not an option. So we hide – and hit back any way we can.

It wasn't always this way. The Half-Lifes tell us about the Launch Times when robots served mankind, maintained the Biosphere and looked after our needs. Then something in the robots changed. The Half-Lifes can't tell us what. But the robots rebelled. They became killer zoids and took over.

They are the masters now, and we are their prey.

'To survive,' says Bronx, 'that is our mission. And in order to survive, we have to scavenge . . .'



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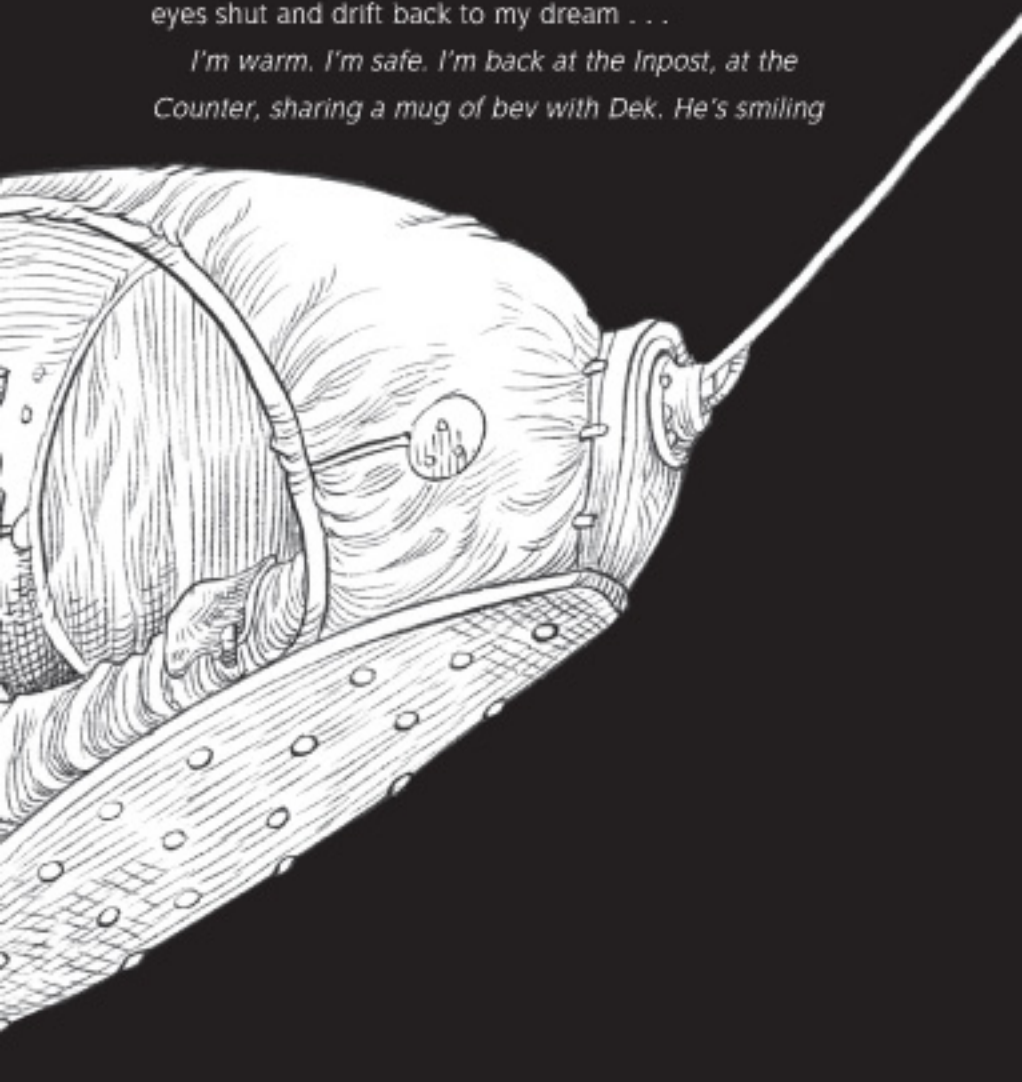
Bleep.

The sound in my ear is soft and muffled. I keep my eyes shut and drift back to my dream . . .

I'm warm. I'm safe. I'm back at the Inpost, at the Counter, sharing a mug of bev with Dek. He's smiling



and teasing me because Lina, the girl who works at the trough-gardens, has just walked into the Circle.

It looks as though the whole of the Inpost has gathered, coming down tunnels from the sleep-bays and the work-hubs to crowd into the central space. Fixers from the clothing stores are swapping jokes with salvagers from the metal-shop. Sanitizers have abandoned their floor-polishers and hover-sweeps and are mingling with the growers in the hydroponic trough-gardens on the upper gallery, admiring the new harvest. A couple of watchers have left their monitoring stations and are playing soundscapes on music decks, while others, old and young, dance.

Lina comes towards me. I smile and hand her a mug of bev. No sweetener. Just how she likes it. Caliph, my pet skeeter, comes skittering through the legs of the crowd and jumps up onto my shoulder. He licks my face. Dek leans forward and ruffles the fur behind Caliph's ears, and I notice that instead of a cybernetic limb, his arm is real – and I'm happy because now we can go scavenging together, just like we used to before that killer zoid shot him up on the solder-walkway.

'You and me,' I say, 'we're a team.'

'Zoid whackers!' he says, and we raise our mugs.

Then I'm dancing, Lina on one side, Dek on the other, and the whole of the Inpost has joined in. Suddenly I hear Bronx's voice and, turning, I see him at the entrance to the tunnel that leads to the Half-Lifes' chamber.

'The Half-Lifes,' he says, and I can hear the excitement in his voice. He's thirty-seven, but has always looked older, worrying about us all. But not now. Now he looks younger than I've ever seen him look. Youthful almost. 'They know why the zoids rebelled. They know how we can defeat them. They know how humans can take back the Biosphere . . .'

Bleep.

I sit up, still drowsy. Rub my eyes. Tap my earpiece.

Bleep.

There's a zoid close by.

Bleep.

Suddenly I'm wide awake. I've been careless, not masking my heat-sig. And careless can mean dead, out here in the Open Halls.

I flick the coolant switch of my bodysuit and shiver as the flak-panels chill my skin. I hate sleeping cold, but I should've known better. I crawl out of the sleepcrib, climb to my feet and tap my wrist-scanner. The sleepcrib folds itself up – *flip-flap* – into the backcan strapped to my shoulders.

Bleep. Bleep.

If I'm lucky, it's a workzoid. A tangler or a sluicer. Neither of them have been programmed with much intelligence. On the other hand, it could be a killer.

Blip. Blip. Blip. Blip. Blip. Blip . . .

I move along the raised walkway, scanning the tube-forest through my recon-sight. I'm looking for the zoid's heat-sig.

And there it is.

A fuzz of orange surrounded by a rippled blue halo. It's a workzoid signature – and it's coming my way.

I catch a flash of movement. Then another. The zoid's laying cable. A tangler.

The bleeping becomes a single shrill note that whines in my ear. The zoid is directly beneath me. I brace myself. My heart's thumping. You only get one chance at a kill . . .