

# Generation 24

*Everything I know is a lie.*

The thought blared through Zane's mind like alarm beacons as he stared at the text on the screen.

*Everything is a lie. Everything is a lie!*

There was a shout in the distance. Zane jumped, startled out of his daze. His eyes darted to the doors, two sheets of thin metal in between him and the corridor. Ridiculously easy to open once he'd set his mind to it with no more than a few minutes fiddling with the scanner pad, but now only a flimsy barrier between him and peril.

More shouts followed the first, funneled to his ears through the metal-plated corridors. They had found his distraction.

Zane turned back to the computer junction, his fingers dancing over the keypad with a renewed frenzy. He rolled down his sleeve and pressed his forearm against the screen, the metal of his armpatch cutting into his skin. A bar appeared on the screen, beneath the blinking word 'loading.'

"Come on, come on, come on," Zane muttered, running his fingers through his disheveled rust-brown hair. This stars-cursed file was taking as long as the age of the universe to download. His eyes darted from the screen to the door and back again. The shouting was getting louder.

A cold tingle zipped up his arm. The computer beeped. 'Download complete.' Zane yanked his arm away from the screen. As he was turning toward the doors, a *BOOM* shook everything from the support beams in the ceiling to the nails in the floor. Zane stumbled, but caught himself against the wall, his ears ringing. He took a moment to steady himself before he moved to the doors of the alcove and pried them open. The yellow block letters spelling out 'Terminal Access' and 'Authorized

Personnel Only' on the outside split as the doors opened with a *smish*. The hallway beyond was thick with shadows, lit only by the steady yellow beam of a gaslight further down. It was still, no sign of movement, but in the distance, the shouting had turned to screaming, and it was much louder now.

With a deep breath, Zane stepped out into the corridor. He scanned his surroundings again, and then broke into a run, heading away from the commotion. Steelplated double doors with labels marked in the same yellow script flashed by him as he careened down dark hallways and around corners. When a hallway opened up into a wide lobby of sorts, he skidded to a stop in front of one of ten elevator doors lining the far wall and banged his fist on the lowest button.

As the minutes crept by with nothing but the relentless *hummm* of the engines all around to keep him company, the nerves in Zane's stomach grew until he was so jittery he began to pace. *What am I doing?* He berated himself. *Setting off an explosion in the Captain's Commissary, breaking into a terminal? Hacking the ship's systems? I don't have the support of the Broken Circuit or even have a plan for what to do next. Only...* Zane lifted his arm and stared at the outline of the armpatch beneath the fabric. His nerves fizzled out as resolve settled over his shoulders like a warm coat. *Only this is too important for me to fail.*

A chime *dinged* as the elevator arrived. Zane scrambled inside, whirling around to punch a few buttons on the control panel. The shouting had faded somewhat now, but he still held his breath until the doors slid shut and the car began to move.

Zane slumped against the doors, allowing himself a moment to relax. His gaze drifted to the triple-pane viewport on the opposing wall of the cube-like elevator. With the glare of the fluorescent lights, he saw not the view, but the face of a man staring back at him. Tall and lean, the man wore a gray jumpsuit stained with sweat and grease. His skin was pale and dark circles beneath his eyes spoke of sleep-periods spent doing everything except sleeping. Zane reached for a button on the control panel and switched the elevator's lights off. His reflection in the viewport was replaced with an awe-inspiring sight. Five great wheels glittering with reflective panels and bright lights like the one

he was ascending to, all rotating in perfect unison around the core of the spaceship *Terra*. Beyond was the velvety black shroud of outer space, broken here and there by pinpricks of stars.

Zane watched, mesmerized as always, until he felt the tugging at the left side of his body; a sign that the artificial gravity was kicking in. He pressed a button on the panel on the sleeve of his jumpsuit, switching off his magboots and allowing himself to drift down to the ceiling that was rapidly becoming the floor. His body became heavier and heavier until the elevator glided to a stop. The doors opened onto another lobby, beyond which was a wide corridor with elegant lights set in the large gaps between the doors sporting engraved name-plates that suggested residential quarters. Zane hurried down the hallway, navigating a few turns before he arrived at a grate at the end of a side corridor. Zane heaved it aside and slipped into the service passageway. He clung to the ladder with one hand as he used the other to slide the grate back in place.

Fifteen minutes later, Zane emerged from a similar grate, though this one was tinged with rust. A few steps in a crouch brought him to the intersection between two narrow corridors, the air permeated with the musty reek of mildew. He listened for a long moment, but heard no footsteps or shouts, nothing but the *drip drip drip* of a leaking pipe somewhere in the distance. Zane set off down the corridor to the right at a brisk pace, weaving through the cramped maze-like residential sector of the lower decks until he came to one door in particular.

Zane stopped just before the door. His hand went to the sleeve on his opposite arm where he felt the solid square shape of the armpatch embedded into his flesh. It wasn't going anywhere. He raised hand, but froze just shy of the door. *Why am I hesitating now? Just knock*, Zane scolded himself. *It's already done. There's no going back.* He squared his shoulders and rapped his knuckles on the door.

After several long minutes, Zane was about to knock again when the knob turned and the door creaked open a few inches. "Who's there?" The voice was hesitant and guarded and painfully familiar.

Zane stepped closer, leaning down so his face was caught in the light escaping the crack.

“Asti, it’s me.”

The door swung wider, revealing a woman with tight black curls tucked beneath a faded burgundy kerchief. She stared at him with dark eyes beneath thick eyebrows, her olive skin ashen. The light emanating from inside the cabin cast her broad frame in shadow, and that combined with the hard look on her face made her seem to tower above him. “What in the stars are you doing here, Zane?” She demanded.

Zane’s hand went to the armpatch again. “Can I come inside? We need to talk.”

“What?” Asti yelped, recoiling. In a fierce whisper, she continued, “no, you can’t be here. What if someone sees you?”

“Then let me inside before one of your neighbors does see us.”

Zane’s heart lifted as Asti seemed to consider for a moment, but she shook her head. “No. Do you know how much danger you’re putting us in by coming here?”

“I know, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have come here, but—”

“No buts. Leave.” She started to shut the door.

Zane sprang forward, wedging his boot in the doorway before Asti could close it. He shoved his sleeve down and brandished his arm like a laserrifle so the armpatch caught the light. A small circle in the center of the metal square glowed a spectral blue. “Like I said, we have to talk.”

The color drained from Asti’s face. Her grip on the knob loosened, and Zane seized the opportunity to shoulder his way inside. Asti’s cabin was small and dim, furnished with a cot opposite a desk below a single gaslamp.

Asti shut the door and turned slowly to face Zane. “You did not—”

“Yes, I did.”

“You went to the core, snuck into a command post, and hacked the systems?”

Zane winced. “Technically, it was just one of the relay terminals.”

“That isn’t any better! You still went into a restricted area and stole information.” Asti froze as something seemed to occur to her. “That explosion half an hour ago, that was you?”

Zane stiffened, but there was no use denying it. “Yeah. That was my distraction.”

Asti’s face contorted with rage. “That’s enough. You are in big trouble, Zane, and I want no part of it. The Enforcers are probably hunting you right now and you’ll lead them right to my door.” She tried to push him toward the exit. “You have to leave. *Nom.*”

Zane planted his feet, refusing to move. Despite Asti’s powerful muscles from long shifts repairing pipes in the service passageways of Wheel 1, Zane was bigger and taller and try as she might, she couldn’t get him to budge. “No, not until you hear me out.” Something eased within him and his expression softened as he gazed down at Asti. “I was careful, I promise. I used all of the methods that you and Zara and Kelton taught me. They won’t track me here. So please, will you hear me out?”

Asti stared at him for an eternity before she nodded curtly. “Fine. But you need to leave as soon as you’re done.”

“Deal.” Zane fought a grin. He wasn’t sure why, but he felt as though he had won a great victory. “Can I use your pad?”

Asti said nothing, but she crossed to the desk, opened a drawer, and pulled out a small gray device. She held a hand out in invitation to Zane.

The scrape of the chair legs as Zane pulled it out was deafening in the otherwise quiet cabin. Zane sat and spent a few minutes tapping at the screen before he pressed his arm to it. He was uncomfortably conscious of Asti standing behind him as the file took an agonizingly long time once again to load. At last, the pad chirped. Zane stood, offering the chair to Asti. “Here’s the file.”

“You want me to read it?” Asti asked, raising her eyebrows.

“It will explain things better than I can.”

Asti shrugged and leaned forward so she could read the tiny text. Zane waited, watching her as the minutes ticked by. After five minutes, he began to fidget. After ten, he began to pace. Six steps, then turn. Six steps, turn again. Six steps. Turn.

There was a long audible sigh and Zane froze, cringing internally. He knew she hated it when he paced. But as Asti turned in her seat, it wasn't reproach he saw on her face but horror. She lifted a hand to her mouth. Her fingers, calloused but somehow still delicate, were shaking. “You were right,” she whispered. “This is huge.”

Zane wasn't sure what to say, so he settled for a grim nod.

“Is it true?”

“Yes. Well, as far as I could tell,” Zane amended.

“We—the spaceship *Terra*—we come from a planet? An actual planet?”

“Yes.”

Asti turned back to the pad. The end of the file was on the screen where there was a single image, a breathtaking marble of green and blue, brilliant against the backdrop of space. She traced the curved edge of the planet with a finger.

“It was called Earth.” Zane stepped up beside her, standing so close their arms nearly brushed.

“It was beautiful.”

“Yes, it was.” Though he pretended to be looking at the image, Zane studied Asti out of the corner of his eye, watching her forehead crease as she furrowed her brow. He had an inkling of the thoughts spinning through her mind; they were probably the same he'd had after discovering the mission report an hour and a lifetime ago.

“Wow,” Asti murmured. She looked up at Zane, her eyes shining brighter than any star, and he forgot how to breathe for a moment. “This is incredible, Zane. I can’t believe Old Jore was actually right.” Zane jumped back as she shot to her feet and began to pace. “Humanity was never supposed to exist in space. We had a planet, a home. And while it may be lost, there is a new one waiting for us.” She clapped her hands together. “This could be exactly what this ship needs to bring everyone together, upper-deckers and lower-deckers, civilians and crew. We’ve got a mission. A purpose. Wait.” Asti froze and turned to face him. “How long ago did the *Terra* start its journey? How far away are we from the new planet?”

Zane took a breath and let it out. “The report stated that it would take approximately twenty-six generations to reach the new home. Based on that, if my calculations are correct, we are the twenty-fourth generation.”

“We’ll never live to see it.” Asti’s face fell.

Zane extended a hand, his fingers brushing her cheek. When she didn’t pull away, he took her face in both hands, holding it tenderly. “No, we won’t, but in another sixty years, our grandchildren will. Maybe our children as well. That’s why we have to tell everyone.”

“What?” Asti stepped back, yanking her face out of his hands. To Zane, it felt like a slap. “You want to tell the entire ship?”

“Yes, I do,” Zane said. “Come on, think about it, Asti. We have been told for generations that this is all there is to our existence. This ship, this space, these lives we are born into. But that’s not true. Everything we have ever been taught is false. Everything the captain and council have ever said is a lie. We know that now, so we can’t sit by and let the lies continue.”

“But Zane, do you have any idea how much damage it’ll do if we make this public? What do you think will happen when people find out that we are headed for a planet, but the majority of the

population will never live to reach it? There'll be riots in the corridors and unrest on every level of the wheels. This will upend life as we know it."

"Is that what we've always wanted?"

"Not like this!" Asti shook her head vigorously. "Have you even thought about how dangerous it would be for us? The council will have Enforcers scouring every inch of the ship for us. There won't be anywhere that's safe."

"We can get the Broken Circuit back together. With their support, especially Zara's cunning and Renzo's tech skills, we can find a way to make sure this isn't traced back to us."

Asti put her hands on her hips. "The Broken Circuit no longer exists. We disbanded three years ago and for good reason, or have you forgotten?"

"Of course I haven't," Zane snapped. He stopped and took a deep breath, calming his temper. "I'm going to find a way to share this information, even if I have to do it alone. People deserve to know the truth."

"Why?" Asti asked, matching his soft tone. "To get their hopes up only to dash them again? What good will it do?"

"Because it's the right thing—" Zane broke off. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up as the smell of smoke wafted into his nose.

Asti frowned. "What is it?"

Zane cocked his head. "Something's burning."

The door exploded inward with a *bang!* Zane dove aside, but it caught Asti by surprise, slamming her into the back wall. Four towering figures covered in sleek silver metal crowded into the room, nearly filling the space with their bulk. Yellow lights glared from two holes in their otherwise smooth faces where their eyes should have been. Each held a laserrifle; the muzzle of the lead Enforcer's still glowed red-hot.

*Oh, stars.* Zane's heart thundered in his ears. He glanced to the wall where Asti lay unmoving. Blood trickled from a gash on her head, creating a scarlet pool on the floor. *Stay calm.* He swallowed before clambering to his feet, moving slowly as he felt eight yellow eyes tracking each move he made. *I have to stay calm.* He extended his hands above his head. "I'm going to resist. My companion and I will come with you, but we've—"

A blast took him in his chest. *What?* Zane stared down at the gaping hole in his middle. Smoke rose from the singed edges. The smell of burning invaded his nose again as his legs buckled beneath him.

"Zane!" Asti screamed, coming alert all at once. Her entire body ached and blood was dripping into her left eye, but she scrambled forward, reaching for the body of his body. *No, Zane. No, you have to get up. We have to go.*

Asti screamed again as ice-cold hands seized her arms, yanking her to her feet. She fought against the Enforcers, but their grips were stronger than vises and they dragged her from the room. The third Enforcer collected the pad from the table then followed them out, but the one remained, scanning the room with its beady gaze. It bent over the fallen body of the criminal, performing a quick search of his person. It stopped when it detected the distinct square shape of an armpatch beneath the culprit's sleeve. The Enforcer straightened, lifted its powerful foot and brought it down on the criminal's arm. The bone broke with a hollow *snap*, the armpatch shattering with it.

The Enforcer scanned the room one more time before it turned and exited the cabin, closing the door and concealing the devastation left behind.

*The criminal has been located and eliminated. His accomplice has been taken into custody. The stolen information has been destroyed.*

*Mission complete.*