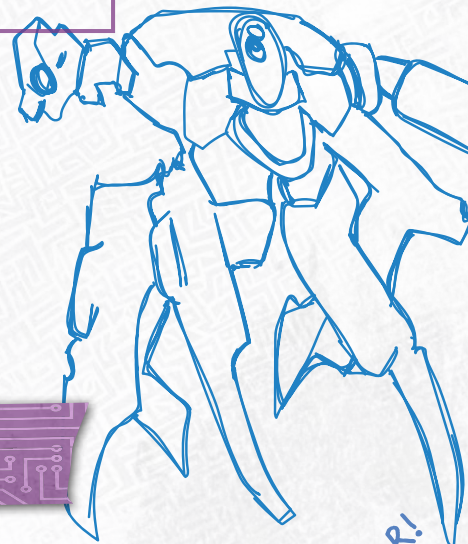




## CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION

Ooooooh, story time!



Waker goes BRRRR!

## THE TIES THAT BIND

"Junk."

A boy lay on his side in the shadows of a crane, the orange sleeves of his too-large jumpsuit rolled up past his elbows. He casually tossed a broken piece into a growing pile nearby, not slowing his pace as he continued disassembling the engine. "Junk." Another piece was pulled from the engine and discarded. The boy worked quickly, the wrench in his gloved hand moving mostly by feel, he'd long grown past the point he needed to see what he was doing. Instead, his eyes were screwed tightly shut, to better focus on what his fingers were doing.

Nearby, a slightly older girl stood with a heavy pulser rifle resting in the crook of her arms. She wore a coat that perfectly matched the younger boy's jumpsuit, right down to being several sizes too large. Her body was relaxed. A transparent visor sat astride her eyes, its violet color matching her unruly hair. "Are you almost done?" she asked in hushed tones, leaning forward to look around the side of the crane. There was a gentle rattling from the latest piece in the boy's hand as he muttered, "Fun, but still junk" and tossed it aside.

"Aleixo!" the girl hissed, resisting the urge to kick her younger brother. The boy's eyes popped open, and he glanced towards her. "What?!" his voice held all the irritation and volume a ten year old's could, causing his sister to jump, and raise her pulser as she scanned the perimeter.



“What, Izabel,” he enunciated her name as clearly and rudely as he could, dragging it out for emphasis. “What is so importan-” She didn’t bother looking back down at him, (he always hated it when she talked to him without looking at him). “Our lives, for one. Time, for another.” She nodded her head slightly, indicating the sky, “Sun’s goin’ down. We need to get movin’ while there’s still light.” Aleixo’s questing wrench found a hold on something, and his dark eyes flicked towards the sky as he swore under his breath, gritting his teeth.

“What was that?” Izabel scolded, narrowing her eyes in what she hoped was a properly chastising look. She was only four years older than him, but she did her level best to try to pass on the wisdom and manners their parents had imparted. If Aleixo noticed, it didn’t phase him. He twisted the wrench harder, “I SAID it’ll be finished when it’s done! I don’t wanna leave until we get somethin’ to trade for actual food with old Samora. I’m tired of emergency bars!” If he hadn’t been so focused on the wrench, he would have been shouting.

“They. Taste. Like. Garbage!”

Every word was bitten off in a mix of frustration and determination, as he braced his arm and twisted with all of his might. As the last word left his mouth, there was a loud bang as the piece came loose, and the wrench slipped, smacking against the metal housing. When the reverberations stopped, a slight buzzing sound



remained, as well as a dull blue light, both emanating from inside the machine.

Izabel’s head jerked towards Aleixo, her mouth open and his name on her lips, before she caught sight of both the light and the self-satisfied smirk on his face. His hands came loose

and he held the part up, shoving it into Izabel’s face. “See?” he said loudly, “Somethin’ like this! That old River’s sure to give us something for a functional energy converter... Even if it is half-dead.” He tapped the side of the glowing cylinder, and sighed. He brightened almost immediately however, his eyes locking with

*They DO taste like garbage!*



Izabel's as he practically danced in place with his prize. "And you said this thing didn't have anything worth grabbin'!" He patted the crane lovingly, his glove leaving a grease-stained handprint on the side.

In spite of herself, Izabel felt the corners of her mouth drift upwards. As annoying as he could be, she had to admit the kid was good with a wrench, and he had a nose for when a grab was worth the energy. She reached out to take it, intending to congratulate him and admit she'd been wrong.

Until she heard the sounds of people coming down the nearby streets.

She didn't wait to see if Aleixo had heard, snatching the cell from his hand and tucking it into the pack on her back before grabbing her brother's hand and hurrying quickly from the raised platform to the street below, darting towards a random doorway across the way. The two had

barely made it inside and tucked themselves tightly against the walls when a group of people came running around the corner, gripping weapons of their own and looking about hungrily.

"It came from this direction, I'm sure of it!"

Izabel took a deep breath, and steadied herself, hoping the group would just pass them by. The world hadn't fallen so far that most people would hurt a pair of children, but one never knew. At the very least, the group would almost assuredly relieve them of what little salvage they'd managed to find. She resisted the urge to peek around the doorway, and forced herself to take soft, shallow breaths. Aleixo had held on to his wrench, and fortunately, he'd remembered to grab his tool pack. If they were very lucky, these people wouldn't know they'd been there, and chalk it up to a Waker.

*They do a LOT of running like me!*





Of course, that hope was dashed almost immediately. "Look!" one of them shouted, no doubt pointing at the hand print Aleixo had left behind. Izabel winced and shifted herself slowly and quietly to a kneeling position. "Spread out! Find whoever was here!" The voice was loud, and it did not sound friendly.

The Grabber Twins, as many called them, were no strangers to danger. They'd been part of this lifestyle from the moment they'd been born. Izabel had followed their father's lead, and was a deadly shot with the hunting pulser she now gripped tightly. Part of that training, however, had been to know when to fight and when to run. Taking on a fully armed party of competing Grabbers? That was beyond her. Aleixo, although brave, was far more skilled with tools, and with vehicles, than he was with weaponry. Izabel was going to have to be the one to protect them.

She smiled, though more for Aleixo's sake than her own. They were a team. They had to be, just to survive this life, but she still always had the urge to comfort her brother. He would do his part to rescue them. But first, she had to do hers.

Her hand rose to the visor she wore, turning on the infrared function. It was always dangerous to use that level of technology, but the risk was less dangerous than if the Grabbers got hold of them, and they could use the darkness in the building to cover their getaway. Aleixo took a deep breath, and lowered the protective goggles over his eyes. They didn't have the same functionality as Izabel's, but they looked cool and made him feel better. He didn't need to be told to keep quiet, they'd been in enough similar situations that he knew that. Slowly, with Izabel leading the way, they crept through the ruins of the old building, moving down a hallway, and shutting the door quietly behind them. The sound of the Grabbers' search faded almost instantly. Not long after, they heard someone enter the building. The twins listened to the frantic sounds of searching in the rooms behind them as they made their way towards a window, keeping their steps slow and deliberate. The window frame was centuries old, but parts of the glass remained. The twins looked at each other, knowing that they would have to risk it. They each took another steadying breath, looking at each other. They mouthed the words, "Hang tight," before Izabel smashed the glass out with the butt of the pulser.

Aleixo went first, practically diving through the frame, and rolling onto the sidewalk outside. Izabel passed her brother the hunting pulser before she clambered through, the sounds of shouting and pursuit already starting behind them. By the time the first competing Grabber made it to the window, the twins were halfway down the block. As they ran, their boots pounding the destroyed pavement beneath them, they could hear people following them through the window, and others coming around the far side of the building. Still, Aleixo had a wide grin, tossing his sister the pulser mid-run. He knew something their pursuers didn't. The twins had a trump card up their sleeve, and then they'd show them what real speed was.

The twins took a hard left down a nearby street that had remnants of old vehicles lining the sides. The group was following far too closely for Izabel's comfort, but they should still make it. Halfway down the street, the twins darted into the gaping mouth of a half-crumpled building, Aleixo's hand already going to his neck. He gripped the shiny silver key that hung there, and pulled hard, breaking the string that held it even as he threw himself into the seat of the vehicle hidden within. Izabel didn't look back as she threw herself into the passenger side. Aleixo slammed the key home and twisted, the vehicle roaring to life.

Though the twins called it a "car", in reality, it had started life as an Everan Off-Road Emergency Vehicle. It had a sleek body that hailed back to old Earth dune buggies, down to an open passenger cab, covered only by a rail frame. While once it had been silver, with cobalt accents stretching across its aerodynamic form, it now bore a color scheme that could charitably be called "subdued". The twins' father had always sworn that the layers of dirt and paint covering the "car" in geometric shapes and whorls were meant as camouflage to confuse Wakers, but their mother quietly said he'd just gotten bored with gray-green paint. Each wheel attached to a separate arm, coming together in a cantilevered suspension system. The original tires had long since been replaced with puncture-proof tires that could stand up to even the worst terrain Evera could throw at them. However, by far the biggest modification was the one Izabel was most familiar with: the free rotating, heavy-duty plasma charger that had replaced the back-seat. The twins had installed it themselves after their parents died. They hadn't seen much point in keeping the extra seating. Other people would only slow them down. Izabel, however, didn't think that



would be necessary this time around. There were a lot of the other “Grabbers”, but they were clearly a disorganized mob of scavengers, barely worthy of the title.

Aleixo pressed his foot onto the pedal, his grin widening with every rev, before he put it into gear, and surged into the street. The boy laughed as he saw the looks on the other Grabbers’ faces turn from excitement, to confusion, and then utter terror in less than an second, before the group scattered, and ran. He considered gunning the engine and running down at least a few of them, but he glanced to Izabel, who gave him a long-suffering look and shook her head. She utterly despised cowardice and disorganization, but it wasn’t worth the clean-up. And she still had to set the best example she could. So Aleixo executed a perfect three-point turn, and drove back the way they’d come. This Grab was over, and it was time to move on.

If they hurried, they’d be able to make it to New Mossgrove before midnight, and get some sleep. Dust flew as the buggy tore down what remained of the road, and the twins fell into a companionable silence. Aleixo adjusted his circular, purple-rimmed safety goggles and looked towards the sun, flipping the visor down and catching a glimpse of the old drawing stuck there. Two little figures had been traced in crayon, sitting in the back of a crudely drawn vehicle, while two much larger figures in matching orange and white jumpsuits sat in front. A word bubble coming off of one of the larger figures stated simply, “Hang tight!” All of them were smiling happily. Unconsciously, he reached out to touch it with his gloved fingers, idly remembering that his mom had traded part of an old printer to get him those crayons after a bad Grab. The thought made him glance over to where his sister was staring off into the distance. He wondered sometimes what she was thinking, but tonight, there was no need to wonder. Neither of them needed to say anything. A half-dead energy converter wouldn’t let them break even, let alone turn a profit. He considered asking if she wanted to try another spot, but he knew what she’d say. She’d want to take her time, and plan. Normally, that was a good thing. It had saved their lives on more occasions than he

could count. Like today. They’d only been so close to the vehicle because Izabel constantly insisted they stay nearby. Caution and planning were good things. But those alone wouldn’t pay for food.

And he was so tired of those emergency bars.

Without another thought, he turned onto a side street. They were on the outskirts of the old city now. If they hurried, they’d probably be okay. “Hey, dork. You turned the wrong way.” Izabel said, pointing in the direction they’d been going. “I know!” Aleixo called, “But there’s something up here I want to check out first!” It wasn’t a lie. Technically. Even if the “thing” he was talking about was literally anything that had a chance of some decent salvage. It wasn’t particularly likely these days, (all of the good stuff out here had been picked over hundreds of times already), but even a small chance was better than none. Izabel looked at him through her visor, and shook her head, but didn’t say anything.

They drove in silence for almost half an hour on the old highway before something caught Aleixo’s eye. It was a short, squat building with a closed door. That in and of itself wasn’t strange. However, between that, and being just barely visible from the main highway, with an access road only visible from the direction they’d been driving, it might just have escaped other salvagers’ notice. Or at least, that was what the young Grabber was hoping.

The tires crunched on gravel as the boy pulled to a stop, tucking the vehicle beside one of the stout pillars that held up the shaky-looking overpass. He jumped out, lifting his goggles and grabbing his tool pack. “I don’t like this.” Izabel muttered softly, looking once more at the rapidly-setting sun. After a moment’s consideration, Aleixo grabbed his electron-cutting tool from the back, plugging it into its power pack. If the door was locked, or if something else happened this time, he wanted to be ready. “You never like what I pick,” he pouted at her, already starting towards the building’s steel door. “That’s because you don’t pick!” she said, keeping her voice down, “Picking involves considering. Planning. Any kind of thinking

Glue. Ooops.  
Gloops!

GLOOPS



whatsoever! You don't do any of that! You just sort of... Do things." He still didn't know how she managed to make her words sound so loud without raising her voice. He wondered if it was one of those "older-sibling" things she talked about.

"Well excuse me if I don't waste entire days playing peek-a-boo with old junk!" This time, he wasn't looking at her. He'd see how she liked being ignored! He bent low, and examined the door, finding no lock. There was also plenty of rust flaking off the door itself, but none on the ground, which was a good sign. It meant that no other Grabber had gone through this door. Or at least, not for a long time. He pushed open the door, trusting Izabel to follow him in, even if they were sniping at each other. She did. They were still a team. Even if he was being an irritating little snot at the moment.

Aleixo had stopped just inside the door, holding his hand up and finger-spelling the word for light. Their parents had learned sign language after one of them lost some hearing in an accident. Some of the Spears they used to trade with taught it to them. Apparently, enough of their people were born without hearing that most of them knew it. Even though their mom's hearing had healed, eventually, they'd still used it. It made both trading, and exploration easier, and they'd taught it to their children at the same time they taught them to speak. It still came in handy.

Izabel reached up to her visor and clicked it on, a violet-tinted light shining out ahead as she took the lead with pulser raised. At first, all she illuminated was an old hallway, with racks of plastic containers, covered in strange markings. Some were whole, their contents still inside. Others had fallen to the ground and spilled the remnants of a grey-coloured powder on the floor. She pointed it out with her left hand, finger-spelling the word for danger. She wasn't sure exactly what kind of chemicals had been in those containers, but she also didn't want either of them finding out. Especially not the hard way.

Further in, her light illuminated an old flickering screen, barely visible under a thick coating of dust. However, it was legible enough to read. According to the header on the screen, this had been an old utility building at some

point. More than that was difficult to make-out. She also wasn't particularly willing to keep looking, as there wasn't a whole lot of value in the system. She carefully swept her light across floors and walls as they went, looking for anything that might have some decent salvage inside.

After several hallways worth of crumbling cement walls and useless junk, they came to another door. Each of them took a side, listening carefully for any sounds of breathing, or electrical humming. Either could be problematic. However, hearing nothing, Aleixo carefully leaned over to grab the knob, and pulled it open quickly as Izabel entered, her pulser rifle sweeping across the room before she waved her brother in after her.

They stood at the top of a flight of stairs that led downwards into what appeared to be an old basement. Izabel glanced at the younger boy, hoping that she'd find a look of fear, or any other sign that he might be willing to turn back. Of course, she found only that stubborn look he got when he was going to be a brat about something, so she steadied herself, and started down the stairs. Aleixo brought up the rear, looking around with his cutting tool at the ready. It hadn't been designed as a weapon, but Izabel knew from at least one past experience that, as a last resort, it worked equally well cutting through danger as anything else. She hated that Aleixo had needed to do that. But she'd long ago learned that, if they were going to survive in this life, they were going to have to do some uncomfortable things. It didn't mean she had to like it though.

The bottom door was open. They carefully pressed themselves against the side of the door, before Izabel and her pulser led the way. This was something else their parents had taught them. The proper way to enter a building that could be dangerous. They didn't always do it like this. But here? In a building with no light but theirs? It was dangerous enough that even her brother didn't want to risk more than he had to. Even when he was being a little snot, he was still a very good Grabber.

Another short hallway opened up into a much larger room, inside which an old light flickered on as soon as they entered, revealing what appeared to be an old supply



basement. More chemicals sat in large plastic barrels a gated off alcove, while nearby there were cleaning supplies from brooms and mops to automated vacuum cleaners, and a few mechanical devices Izabel didn't recognize. Her brother had pushed past her almost without thinking, and had slung his cutting tool over his shoulder, screwdriver in hand, eyes fixed on the possibility of salvage.

The older girl had stopped dead in her tracks. Motion-activation was almost never a good thing. It usually meant that there was too much technology still active in the area. Too much technology meant Wakers.

"Aleixo." She said, her voice sharp as she scanned the room, that bad feeling deepening the longer they stood in the flickering light. Once more, her brother's hyperfocus was keeping him from listening. "Aleixo!" The ten-year old looked up from the circular vacuum cleaner he'd already opened, recognizing the tone in his sister's voice. He looked around the room then, "...You didn't turn on the

lights, did you?" Izabel shook her head. "We need to go." Aleixo said. He tucked the circular device up under his arm. There was some really good salvage inside. But it was better if he disassembled it outside, where they could get away if-

A sharp inhale from his sister brought his attention back to the room behind them, and where a single red light blinked on one of the unfamiliar machines. Aleixo's heart sank when he saw it, while the bad feeling in the pit of Izabel's stomach opened into a yawning chasm of despair. Originally, it had looked like a metal cylinder just slightly taller than a full grown man, with a metal rod sticking up from the center. There was a soft whirring sound, and pieces of the cylinder's casing separated with a hiss of releasing pressure. Six mechanical "arms" emerged from the cylinder, finding their footing as the red light blinked.

"Waker!" the twins shouted in unison, Aleixo heading for the door as Izabel fired a shot at the mechanical monster.





Whether it was shielded, too large, or she'd simply missed, the Grabber girl would never know. She'd left the room before her finger had even left the trigger. "Go, Go, GO!" she shouted, hurrying her brother up the stairs. He'd already discarded whatever device he'd been working on. They couldn't risk the extra weight. They'd never seen this particular Waker design before, and that meant that they had no clue how fast, tough, or strong it was. All they knew was they needed as wide a head start as possible, while it was still booting up.

When they were halfway up the steps, they got part of an answer as it burst through the wall below in an explosion of concrete and steel while barely slowing down. Six legs stabbed into the ground and the walls in a staccato cacophony as it chased the siblings. There were no words. No chastisements and no apologies. There was no time and no breath. If they didn't get back to the car in time, they were going to die.

They all but flew through the darkened hallways by memory and Izabel's violet light, the sound of the Waker steadily gaining on them the entire way, the sound of metal on concrete echoing through the enclosed space making it difficult to tell how much of a lead they had. They pushed themselves as hard as they could, both trying hard not to imagine how close death was following. Finally, they could see the fading light of day in the distance, and every step brought both them and the Waker nearer. The light almost stung their eyes after the dark of the building, and Izabel miscalculated the angle of her step, bouncing off the frame of the door and nearly fell to the ground. In that moment, her life flashed before her eyes, and she expected the end before she felt the small hand of her brother take hers and pull her violently back to her feet. They lurched forward before both of them dove through the buggy's open frame, hurrying into position.

"DriveDriveDRIVE!" she found herself shouting, even as Aleixo started the engine.

"ShootShootSHOOT!" he was shouting, even as Izabel was scrambling into the backseat to take up her gunner's position.

The Waker was not far behind, already bearing down on the buggy as the younger of the Grabber Twins slammed his foot onto the accelerator, rocketing them forward. In an instant, the vehicle was back on the access road. "Hang tight!" her brother shouted over the sounds of the Waker still hurrying after. The wind whistled around them as they pulled onto the highway, matching the high-pitched whine of the plasma charger as Izabel charged it. Her first shot just barely went wide of the Waker. She swore as she charged another, the second ripping a hole into the pavement just behind the machine as the car swerved suddenly to avoid a missing patch of asphalt. Aleixo shouted something, but the wind tore his words away from her ears. She lined up her shot dead on this time, and inhaled as she eased the trigger on the plasma charger... Only for the vehicle to pull a complete U-turn on the highway, fast enough the left side wheels left the ground mid-turn.





The wheels landed with a horrific crashing sound, cutting off the first part of Izabel's cursing "-ll do you think you're doing?!" She shouted at her brother. "Are you trying to kill Us?!" "I told you! We have to go back!" he shouted, bringing them up to speed again. "WHAT DO YOU MEAN GO BACK?!" His sister shouted, trying to aim the plasma charger again, but finding her efforts frustrated as it did not swivel quite far enough. "Go past it!" she shouted, resolving if he got them killed, she'd murder him.

"I know! I know!" he shouted, pushing the engine to its absolute limit as it shot past the Waker. An arm licked out, barely missing the back of the vehicle. Izabel didn't even flinch this time. She brought the charger level, tracking the machine as the weapon's whine reached a crescendo, and a purple bolt of energy shot out, lancing directly through the center of the Waker. It jerked once, sparks flying, and then dropped to the ground like a puppet

with its strings cut. They slowed, but didn't stop. Both of them knew these things sometimes played dead. It was only after Izabel had shot each of the arms off that Aleixo stopped the vehicle nearby. Slowly. When it didn't move, he hopped out of his seat before Izabel had a chance to reach him, shooting past where the Waker lay to grab something off the ground.

The older sibling took a long moment to try to calm herself down, her entire body vibrating with the absolute need to grab her brother and shake him as hard as she possibly could. She just couldn't understand it. Aleixo was young, yes, and he was impulsive sometimes, he was ten. But he'd never been so thoroughly... Unprofessional before! He'd never almost gotten them killed before! He knew better! And for what? A piece of salvage? What use was it if they were dead?! She finally managed to stop shaking from a mixture of adrenaline and rage, and threw herself from the gunner's

seat, storming towards her brother with murder in her eyes.

When she was close enough to scream at him, she opened her mouth, and promptly closed it again, finally seeing what her younger brother was clutching so tightly. A crumpled piece of paper with old crayon drawings, the words "Hang tight" just barely visible through the new crinkles. Just like that, all the anger bled out of her, and the sharp words she was going to say evaporated into the cool evening air. She sighed, and held him tight to her chest. Partly so that he knew she still loved him. Mostly so that he couldn't see the tears welling up in her eyes. Later, she would help him smooth it out as best they could, and tuck it back up under the visor, hopefully more securely. But for now? She was just glad that they had made it.

"...I love you. Dork."

Some things will survive even the end of the world.

