



### CHAPTER 3

# CRACKED

Wes turned to look at the mirror.  
“What’s wrong?”

“I thought I saw something move,” Cat said, shaking her head. She kept watching the mirror but nothing happened. “I must have imagined it.”

The doors to the hall opened, making them both jump. Cat sat down on the bench closest to her, and Wes sat beside her. The public walked in, taking seats in front of the stage, until the hall was completely full. Cat could see people standing at the back and spilling out of the door. It was almost time for the meeting to begin.

A side door at the top end of the hall opened and Mike and Lucas stepped out, followed by a woman with dark skin and grey hair — the Mayor. She took her place on the stage, and Cat’s dads stayed by the door, across the room from Cat and Wes.

As the Mayor began to speak, the mirror caught Cat’s attention again. It was taller than her. The glass was scratched and the reflection warped. The gold frame around it was shaped into a beautiful pattern. Four silver posts linked by red-velvet rope kept anyone from getting too close.

A crack ran from the top to the bottom of the glass and, as Cat watched, the crack seemed to widen. Cat blinked and looked again. There was something moving behind the glass — a shadow.

Cat nudged Wes with her elbow. “The mirror,” she whispered. “Do you see that?”





## CHAPTER 2

# WATCH

“We have researched the preferred food items for humans.” Egg laid the table with four types of bread and a bowl of ketchup.

“No thank you,” Anika said when she was passed a plate.

“The humans will eat. The humans must eat.”

As they picked at the food, a screen came down from the ceiling. They were shown thirty minutes of people decorating cakes and falling off skateboards. Emily was desperate to grab Jiro, or one of the others, and ask them to explain

what was going on. But every time she turned away from the screen or tried to whisper, Egg gave her a hard stare. She reminded Emily of Mrs Evans, the history teacher, who would make them work in silence, then glare at them, waiting for the chance to put someone in detention.

Except, Emily had the feeling Egg would do something worse than put them in detention. She tried her best to smile and look interested as a man in the video made roses from yellow icing.

“Please excuse me,” said Egg.

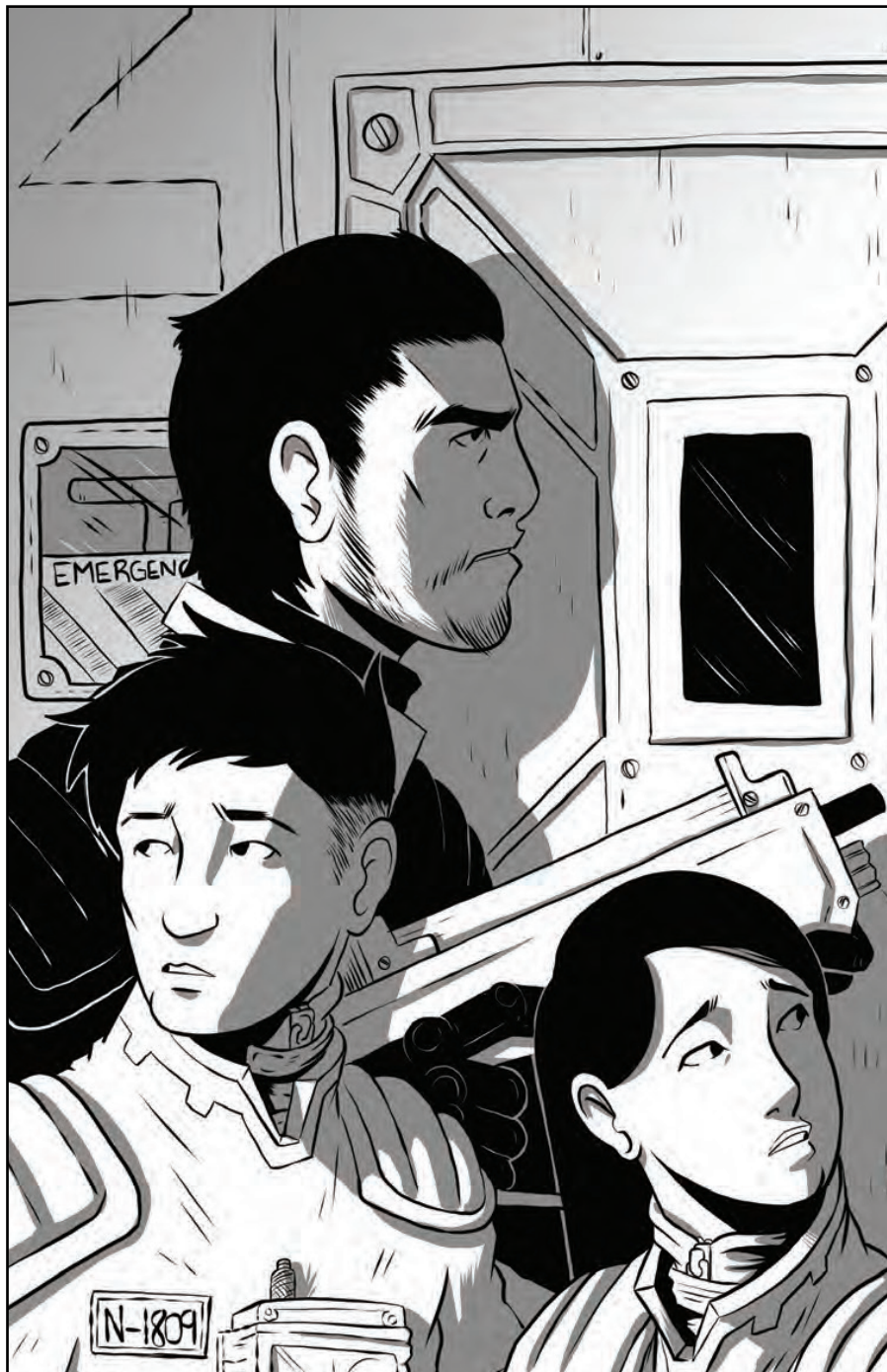
The moment Egg stepped out of the room, they all started talking.

“Why are we watching this?” Emily asked, keeping her voice low in case Egg returned.

“They think this is what humans like. They’re trying to make us happy,” Jiro whispered back.

“Are we in danger?” asked Habiba.





“No,” said Mei. “I don’t think so.”

Hiro strode over to a glass panel set into the wall next to one of the doors. He smashed it with the end of his gun and grabbed a red lever inside.

“Cover your ears,” he said.

Nikko clasped his hands to the sides of his head.

Hiro yanked the switch and it let out a high, screeching alarm. After a few seconds, he pulled it up again.

“There,” he said. “If there’s anyone on the ship, they’ll know where we are.”

Nikko peered down the long corridor, waiting for dark figures to appear around the corner. No one came.

“My guess is that the ship broke down and was abandoned,” said Hiro. “The distress signal set itself off by mistake as the computers died.”





whole flight to Norway. Blah blah blah, doing algebra before he was potty-trained, or whatever.

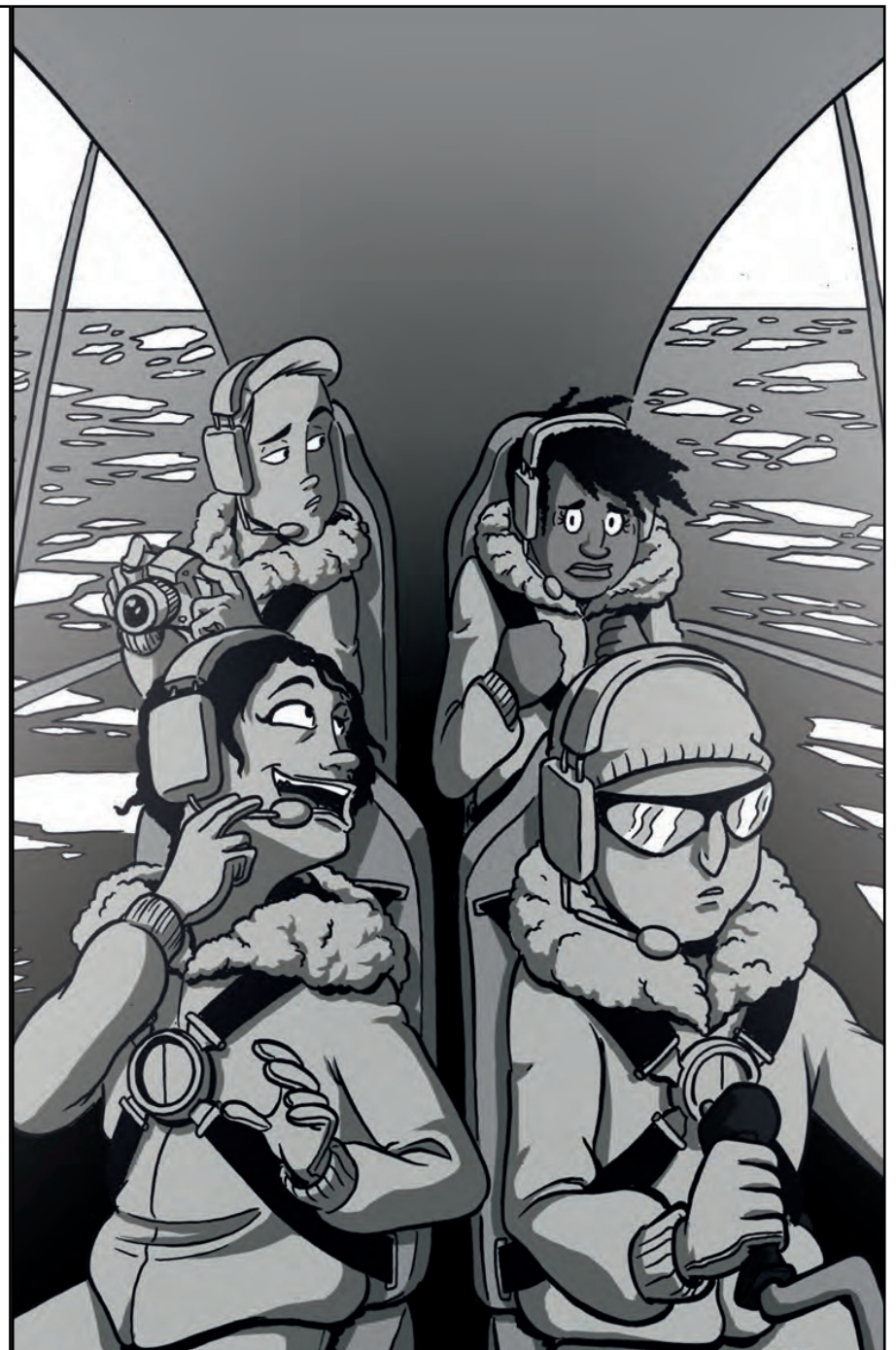
“There are only twenty places in STEMvision, so they only take the best.” Miles scanned Taylor from head to foot. “That’s the idea, anyway.”

Rude. Maybe Taylor didn’t take her GCSEs in the womb, like Miles. She’d struggled at school for years — especially at tests — until someone noticed she was dyslexic.

She had a lot of catching up to do. But she had a real knack for science. The ideas and explanations made perfect sense to her. It was the physics teacher who told her about STEMvision and helped her apply. The scheme sent teenagers all over the world to take part in real research projects.

There was a jolt. The helicopter swayed to the side then dropped several feet. Taylor’s breakfast threatened to appear again.

“Only turbulence,” said Rosa. “The wind is wild here.”





## CHAPTER 3

# GOING LIVE

At 7.30pm on Sunday evening, they had a final rehearsal. Luke was all in black kneeling out of sight of the webcam. They'd found another cardboard box to put the puppet's box in. That would make the unboxing even more exciting, Jack hoped.

The big, wooden box was in sight of the webcam, but just sat there, as an interesting background. Jack couldn't unbox it, but he could talk about it and drum up some interest, maybe.

As the countdown started for his 8pm live broadcast, he and Luke did a thumbs-up sign to one another.

Three, two, one — Jack clicked on his signature music and held up the Jack Unboxed card that he always had in front of the webcam before he made his appearance. He slid the card aside after a few seconds, faded down the music and dazzled the viewers with his perfect smile.

“Hi, guys! Welcome to Jack Unboxed, the awesome channel where I’ll be unboxing some great items. And have I got an amazing item for you tonight!”

Looking at his computer, he could see what the viewers could see. He could also see how many followers and views his channel had. Still only three followers. Total views: 10.

He kept on smiling and chatting, telling them about looking in his great-grandad’s attic and finding this long cardboard box.

Views: 11.

Great! At least he wasn’t talking to himself. He chatted on. If there was one thing he was good





down and the leaves settled again, but somehow there was still a faint, distant whisper.

As a spooky peace fell on the clearing, Sasha felt as if she could almost make out tiny voices.

“Find the forest relaxing and calming, do you? Like to get away from your computers, your phones, your technology? A nice change from your TVs blaring out fake sounds and pictures, giving out false hope?” said the voice on the wind.

While the other students closed their eyes again as Miss Honeywell instructed, Sasha closed hers too. She strained to hear where this noise was coming from, trying to figure out what it might be.

“Do you leave here with a deep sense of peace? How nice! But we have something important to tell you. We don’t want you here. We don’t need you. We haven’t asked you to enjoy our earth, to abuse our land. We were here before you existed

