

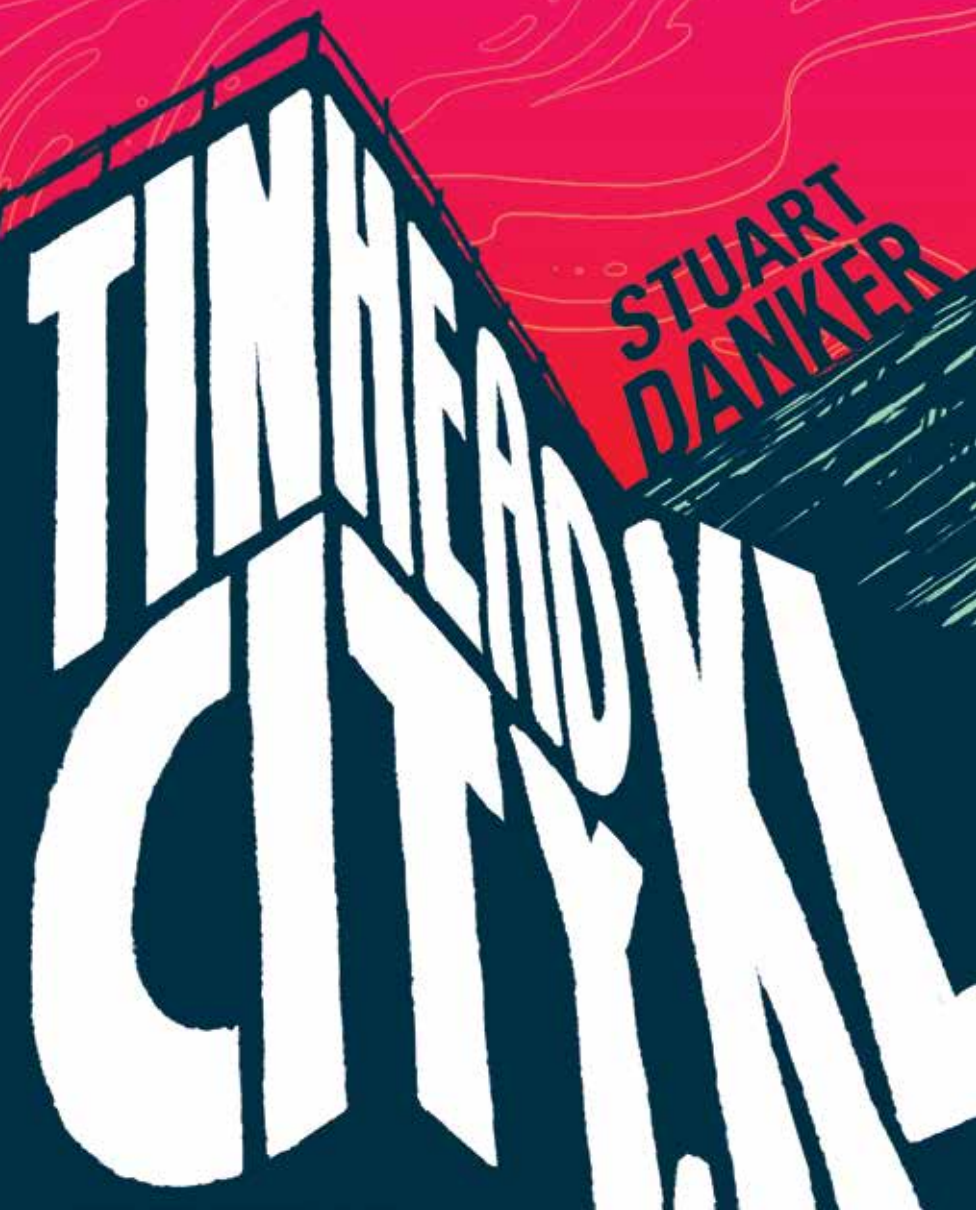
“A fast-paced thriller that will keep you on the edge of your seat.”

—**Teo Xue Shen**, author of *Children of the Ark* and *18 Walls*

LONGLISTED



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**TINHEAD CITY, KL**

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STUART  
DANKER



EPIGRAM

To Mum and Dad,  
who have always had my back



ZACH OFTEN RODE the train not to get somewhere, but to earn a living. Presently, he sat beside a patchwork of steel not unlike the shape of a humanoid. Known to the inhabitants of KL as a Justicar—and colloquially as a tinhead—that thing sat motionless in its designated docking bay, idle only until some law needed enforcing.

Apparently, that time was now. The tinhead purred, its joints whizzing and clacking, and what had once stood at Zach's shoulder now towered one head above him. And as someone whose height was registered as 185 centimetres in MutiaraCorp's database, Zach seldom had to look up to anyone—or anything.

He followed the robot as it thumped down the train car, its footsteps almost as loud as the squeals on the track. An active tinhead almost always meant a disturbance, and *that* meant time for profit.

Hard to believe that these things were an extension of the law now, unlike in the old stories his dad used to tell him. About times when policing was still in the realm of humans, when it was a more compassionate line of work, despite the corruption.

A commotion in the third car promised Zach exactly what he had hoped for. Worst-case scenario, he could sell some painkillers. Best case, the antidote to the suppression drug.

He didn't wish the victim ill, of course; it broke his heart every time he saw a suppression. Benefitting from other people's pain

wasn't what he'd hoped to do for a living, but Zach had to eat.

Still, the guilt of wringing someone dry did go away every time he administered an antidote, even if his clients called him an extortionist along the way. It was nothing personal. He was doing what he could for money. What else would you expect from a kid who had no skills in a world with no jobs? If only his dad were here.

"Leave me alone, you damn tinhead!" shouted the offender, his wispy hair swaying as he turned from the Justicar to the curious onlookers who were trying to avert their eyes. "Bodoh betul la. I have worker's status, so I deserve to be on this train, just like everyone else!"

Justicars weren't particularly bright, even if they looked the part. They weren't built for problem-solving, and probably burned more energy speaking than they would handling a riot.

A long whir. Then: "Please provide Uniband for inspection."

"Good. That's right. Run the damn thing so you pieces of junk can leave me alone." The stranger stuck out his wrist.

One of the Justicar's fists retracted into its forearm, and a wand emerged in its place. Strips of green light shone from the end of the wand, illuminating the stranger's arm from elbow to wrist.

Another whir. "Azmin Ali...worker status...terminated. Tier-two infraction incurred. Penalty...suppression."

Azmin's eyes, framed by hair stuck to a sweaty forehead and cheeks, widened so much that Zach was worried they'd pop right out.

"N-no. Th-they said my pass would still be valid till I got home! Termination's not official yet... I-I'm still a worker!" He yanked his hand from the Justicar, staggering backwards from the effort.

"Please cooperate...or harsher measures will be implemented."

"No, please! It's Mutiara's fault! Check their systems. They would know! They should know! O-or run the scan again!"

A tier-two infraction for a misdemeanour? Zach welcomed money in the bank, but this seemed a little much. Someone

should look into reprogramming these tinheads. MutiaraCorp's employees were still human after all.

"Please, no. I'll pay. I'll get the money. I'll get it by the end of the week, please."

"Please cooperate... This is your second warning."

"C-c'mon. There's no need for—ow!"

A syringe had replaced the tinhead's wand, which was now lodged in Azmin's Uniband. A brief hiss punctuated the growing tension in the car. Those who hadn't left were quickly evacuating. Azmin howled, the squeals of the undercarriage an oddly apt backing track.

Having done its job, the Justicar backed up and pivoted before clanking its way back to the docking bay. A little whimper followed the sound of steel doors closing behind it.

Azmin crouched, his fists clenched tight, on the verge of hyperventilation. He would have a long two days ahead of him once the drugs take hold.

Zach approached him. "I can help you," he said.

Azmin turned around with a start.

Zach nodded at the man's Uniband. "I can help you with that."

A sneer. Somehow, he still had it in him to play the tough guy. "What you want?" Azmin asked in Malay.

"Three chits," Zach answered.

"You're crazy. You're all bloody crazy. Three chits? I'll sit through the entire suppression before I give you three damn chits."

It was easy to identify first-time offenders. They shun help, but end up paying the most later on. Why? Because these drugs were designed to trigger the maximum pain a human body could endure. No normal person experiences even half of that in their lifetime. Try a suppression once, and you'd sell even your mum for some relief the next time. Had Azmin been a repeat offender, he would not have bargained at the sight of a dealer like Zach.

He didn't know it yet, but he'd be willing to give ten times

the price Zach had quoted him when the drug hits. Zach fished around in his pockets and produced a black card. “For when you need me,” he said.

Azmin took it and examined both sides. “Sial. You even want me to pay for a cryptocall? What do you take me for? Hey, asshole! Where you going?”

Zach was already making his way to the next car, blending in with the rest of the commuters. *I can't do this forever*, he thought. *I can't stand seeing people like this*. Still, this job was made for him. He never got high off his own supply, not because he didn't dare, but because he couldn't feel anything. Weirdly enough, one shot of vodka or toddy—depending on how much money he had to spend—would do the trick, but injecting vials of Jet into his Uniband did naught. It was the perfect credential for this job though.

Holographic advertisements flashed across the train windows, reminding Zach to stay powered with Ethon energy drink. *Noise. This is all just noise*. He reminded himself to keep his eyes on the prize. Right now, his only goal was to earn enough chits to buy an EMP slug and replace the one his dad gave him.

“I'll come back for you,” his dad had said, “and this slug will be your ticket out.”

As invincible as the Justicars were, they did have a weakness: set off an electromagnetic-pulse slug within ten metres of one and it's permanently fried, along with any other electronics in the vicinity. Too bad that owning a slug meant the death penalty. No questions asked, no trial needed.

Zach had an EMP slug once, but he'd loaned it to Darlene. This was why he wished he wasn't so soft-hearted. In KL, that meant getting taken advantage of. Darlene—who had showed up at his door one day, who was old enough to be his mother and who had mentioned knowing his dad—had told him the exact stories his dad used to tell him. Said she wasn't supposed to come

over, was in a bit of a pickle and asked if she could borrow the EMP slug his dad had left him.

All the details had checked out, so naturally Zach thought his moment of escape had come. That was until she'd disappeared with the slug, never to be heard from again. This was one year ago. And that was a stupid move. He knew better than to trust strangers, even those who knew more about Zach's dad than he did. He didn't take it personally, though. That was how his world worked: rely on yourself and don't trust anyone.

For now, money had to come first. If he could somehow work his way up to 1,000 chits, then he could get himself another EMP slug. Even if his dad couldn't make it back for him, he'd be able to get out of KL on his own. Besides, wasn't there a rebel faction that ran in the fringes of the city? The Brotherhood or something? Wouldn't they be able to help him get out of here? Find his dad, perhaps?

The train jerked to a halt and Zach got off at the stop. There was no need to continue riding today. He strode through the tunnels, the metallic odours a stark reminder of where he was—the underbelly of KL, a city known only by those two letters. They had stood for something once, but ever since MutiaraCorp took over and seceded from the rest of the country, only the letters remained as a reminder of what this place was called. That was over ninety years ago. Now, the city contained more tinheads than humans, and their numbers just kept rising.

Zach's Uniband vibrated. He had another potential victim—or client, whichever way you wanted to put it—three blocks away. A few chits at a time would have to do for now.



ZACH EXITED THE underground and was greeted by air he'd learnt to tolerate. A tang of steel wafted wherever he went in KL, and that was when the usual miasma of garbage, grease and human refuse wasn't present.

The more privileged among them would at least be able to seek refuge in their homes, which were fitted with air filters. For Zach, fresh air was never an option.

He made his way through Market Street, making sure to give a wide berth to stores with casters out front. The Uniband fused to every citizen's wrist was fully accessible by these junk transmitters.

It didn't matter if you were on an urgent call; the casters would transmit ads and holograms right into your Uniband, forcing you to watch or listen to whatever was being peddled. Fortunately, the transmitters had a short range, so Zach simply stayed at least three metres away from them. Still, from the dark alley he had turned into, Zach could see ads light up in front of other pedestrians.

"Drink Ethon and speed through your day! The only energy drink to br—"

"Too much smog at home? Careway can help. No filter change nee—"

"Meet willing partners in your area, for when you want consens—"

Zach had thought of hacking his Uniband once. But he hadn't

found someone good enough who could do it without breaking the tamper seals. Get caught with a tinkered system and you were looking at a harsh camp sentence, or even capital punishment.

There was talk about people in the rebel forces who had the skills to hack a Uniband, but he didn't know anyone. In fact, the only person he knew who had any technical know-how was his mentor, Dice, and that old man was only affiliated to himself. So hacking would have to wait.

Zach's Uniband signalled his destination, which was around the corner, where he would find client number two. Today was shaping out to be a good day indeed. He stepped into the junction and was greeted by a lone figure convulsing on the ground. No Justicars, no passers-by, just one stranger gurgling white foam from the mouth.

An unusual quiet settled over Zach as he cautiously approached the figure. She was skinny and covered in rags too big for her, her eyes bulging out of their sockets. The veins on her face were turning black, and her jaw was opening and clamping shut. He'd seen this before. It was the death serum.

"Shit!"

Zach rummaged through his pockets, fumbling with vials that clinked amid the urgency. He squatted beside the woman and tilted her head to the side so that she wouldn't choke.

Out came a handful of vials, each glistening in different colours under the neon lights and the setting sun. Green. He was looking for green. As Zach flicked through the vials in his palm, one rogue cylinder rolled away and fell to the ground, shattering and marking the concrete with the liquid.

"Dammit!" That would've covered a month's worth of groceries.

He continued sorting the mess and found what he was looking for. In one swipe, he deposited the vials back into his pocket, yanked a miniature gun from his other pocket, loaded the vial into the chamber and jabbed it into the woman's Uniband.



This was mostly a prevention serum—one you’d administer *before* facing capital punishment. Zach hoped that the manufacturer’s instructions weren’t that exact.

*Please. Please work.* He held the woman’s head in his hands, her cropped hair poking into his palms. Within seconds, she stopped trembling and Zach found himself breathing again.

The glazed look disappeared from the woman’s eyes, and she stared at Zach as if seeing him for the first time.

“I didn’t do it,” she said.

“Do what? Who did this to you?”

“Tinhead...I didn’t touch no tinhead.”

A death sentence for touching a Justicar? Granted, it was a criminal offence, but it didn’t warrant capital punishment.

“Don’t worry. You’re going to be fine. I just gave you—”

Her calm breaths reverted to gurgling, and every muscle in her body tensed, as if a surge of current ran through her. She grabbed Zach’s hand and muttered a few unrecognisable words, sputtering blood all over his jacket in the process.

“Dammit, woman. Don’t you die on me. Don’t you—”

Then her eyes rolled back and she was gone.

“Hey!” Zach said, shaking her. She flopped limply in his arms. “Hey! Wake up!” He put his finger under her nose, then felt her neck for a pulse. That was when he decided that no amount of shaking was going to help. He pried his other hand out of her surprisingly strong grip and sat there to collect his thoughts.

He couldn’t wrap his head around this. Capital punishment in the streets? The usual MO was to take the suspects back to headquarters, *then* impose the death penalty if they had to. What was becoming of KL? He swivelled his head around to see if there were any Justicars nearby.

Nothing.

Then, self-preservation took over. He’d lost what could have

been a substantial source of funds for nothing. This would definitely set him back. It’s not as if his suppliers would give him a discount because he’d made a few boo-boos. But before he could even think of damage control, his Uniband vibrated yet again.

The caller ID was blank. A cryptocall. That’s weird. Surely, Azmin from the train wouldn’t be feeling the symptoms yet. Zach tapped “Private” to channel the call directly to his cochlea, instead of taking it through his Uniband speaker.

“I didn’t think you’d call so fast,” Zach said.

“Uh...hello? I need to pass you something, mister.”

A child’s voice.

“Who’s this?”

“A friend. That’s what the lady told me to say.”

“How’d you get this number?”

“I can’t say, but I have to tell you this: ‘No good deed goes unpaid.’”

“This isn’t the time for games, kid.”

“I’m serious, mister. Please come to Ko Industrial near the Klang River so I can pass you some stuff. Please? Or else I won’t get paid. I’m wearing a yellow—”

“Hello? Hey, kid. You there?”

The line cut off. Figured. Zach didn’t even know children could afford cryptocalls. What an interesting day. He was tens of chits short, so he was certainly in the mood to accept gifts.

Zach looked up Ko Industrial Pier on his Uniband. On any other day, he wouldn’t even have entertained the thought. But today, he was prepared to see how deep the rabbit hole went.

## ◀ 2.5 ▶

*“Listen, Zach,” the man said, hurrying across the room, tossing pieces of clothing and equipment into his backpack. “Remember what we talked about? About me needing to be away? Well, that time’s now.”*

*“You’re leaving? So soon?” The boy was old enough to recognise the urgency of the situation, but that didn’t mean he was emotionally equipped to deal with it.*

*“I’ll explain everything one day when I have the chance.” His father knelt before him and grabbed his shoulders, slinging the backpack over his shoulder as he did so. “You’re twelve now and you’re going to have to be a man. I’ll be back—no, don’t look at me like that—I promise you, I’ll be back, okay?”*

*“Where are you go—”*

*“It’s getting hot, Joseph. We gotta go!” said a woman from outside. The hands clutching the boy’s shoulders tightened a little bit more. “There’s an EMP slug in the drawer. Whatever you do, do not sell or use it until I tell you to. I’ll let you know when, and that will be your ticket out. You have to trust me. Can you do that?”*

*“Y-yes.”*

*“Good. I’ll send you some chits soon. I’ll be out of touch for a while. Until then, you wait for me.”*

*“Why can’t I come?”*

*“You will. Just not now. I’ll be back for you. Remember that.”*

*That was the last time the boy saw his father.*



THE SUN HAD fallen below the horizon long before Zach arrived at Ko Industrial. He noticed a few citizens tending to their businesses under the collective gleam of the streetlights and moonlight. One passer-by in a black hoodie extended his left hand with two fingers pointing down. The street sign for “Justicars in the area”. It reminded him of the stories his dad used to share about motorists flashing their headlights to oncoming traffic to warn others about roadblocks ahead, back when people still owned cars. Nowadays, only corporate bigwigs had that privilege—and people who were lucky enough to inherit one. Of course, the most natural thing for the latter was to become cabbies. It was one of the better ways of earning a living in the city, provided you didn’t mind putting yourself at risk by picking up the occasional junkie.

Zach gave the passer-by the slightest of nods to show his thanks. Now, where was this kid? Didn’t he say he was wearing a yellow shirt? Nobody wore bright colours anymore; they’re harder to keep clean. Still, it was best to remain alert in case this person turned out to be—

“Psst.”

Zach jumped sideways, almost sending him over the rails and into the rubbish-infested river below.

“Mister. Over here.”

He looked for the source of the voice, but couldn't make out anything in the dark.

"Here, beside the dumpster."

It took a while, but finally the kid emerged, his youthful face floating mid-air. There was nothing beneath the head except for a periodic crackle, like being on a hologram call with bad reception. *Is that an invisible suit? Just what kind of friends does this kid have?*

Zach balled his fists, ready to get jumped. He craned his head to get a better view behind the dumpster. The crackles continued, and the boy's torso emerged out of thin air. True enough, hints of a yellow shirt popped out from under his black vest.

"Nice gear," Zach said. "Where'd you get that from?" That invisible suit could fetch a lot of money. Much more than an EMP slug would, that's for sure. It wasn't as if anyone else was around to stop Zach from ripping it right off anyway. He wouldn't do it, though. He was just worried that someone else might.

The boy stepped back. "Zach, right?"

"How'd you know it was me?"

The child held up his Uniband, a holo of Zach's face hovering above it.

"All right. So what's this about? And don't mess around with me, kid. If I find out you got me here as a prank, I swear it's the last one you'll ever pull."

The child stepped back again, keeping the dumpster between them. In his hand was a silver rod the length of his palm. Zach didn't need to get closer to see what it was. He could recognise that device from anywhere. It had been on his wish list for a long time. *So, not only does this kid have an invisible suit, but he also has an EMP slug. Just what have I got myself into?*

This wasn't some runt off the street. He was either a very good thief, or well-connected. Even then, people seldom carried both of these high-ticket items at the same time. Zach kept expecting

a trap to be sprung, to be thwacked over the head and to wake up in a tub without his organs. They wouldn't need to take him by surprise either. Thanks to his skinny build, Zach doubted he'd be able to stop anyone from robbing him where he stood. Still, it wouldn't bode well to show any emotion. He had to maintain his poker face.

"Careful with that, kid. Wouldn't wanna set it off now."

"It's for you," the child replied. "The lady said to tell you that Darlene sends her regards, and that she's waiting in the New Republic."

Now he had Zach's attention. *So she's still alive? Can I trust this kid? How could he know about Darlene otherwise? Could he be working for MutiaraCorp?* So many questions rushed through his mind, distracting him from the slug being waved in front of his face.

"Take it, mister."

Zach gathered his wits and cautiously stuck out his hand, making sure to keep an eye on his peripheral vision. He still wasn't sure if this would turn out to be a set-up of some kind. An EMP slug, just like that? Being lucky was one thing. Scoring one this easily was borderline offensive.

But if this was for real, he wouldn't need to surf the trains any more. He could pack up tonight and leave, maybe head out to the New Republic. Not only could the EMP slug be useful for personal protection, but it could also fetch enough coin to fund his way out of this city—and, most important, through the border checkpoints. And if what this boy said was true, he could reconnect with Darlene in the New Republic and maybe start a new life there, with or without his dad.

It wouldn't be anything new. He'd always been alone. Right now, the closest Zach had to a friend was Minnie, which wasn't even her real name. Zach had given her that name because he didn't know what else to call her. She'd made her home out of

the bus stop opposite his shack, close enough for him to hear her scream random obscenities and nonsense. Sure, she woke him up sometimes, but other than that, she kept to herself. For some reason, Zach always shared his extra food rations with her. Maybe she was like a mother he'd never had.

One time he'd even felt grateful to her after she hurled rocks at the teenage troublemakers trying to break into his house. She'd caused enough commotion to send them skittering into the dark, according to his neighbours. What she didn't know was how she had saved his pharmaceutical stash, the equivalent of his life savings. Losing that would've meant losing all hope.

Besides Minnie, the only other friend in his life was Dice, but that's using the term loosely. The old man only cared for himself, but he did send rations Zach's way once or twice.

A yell brought Zach back to the present.

"It was just some drawing, is all! Let me go, man!" The voice came from around the corner, but Zach couldn't see its owner.

"Please cooperate, or harsher measures will be implemented."

"Screw off, tinhead. You gonna arrest me for a lil' bit of graffiti? Well, you can slap me with all the fines you want, but I'm not following you anywhere."

"Please cooperate. This is your final warning."

More muffled dialogue and sounds of scuffling ensued. The escalating chaos ended with a scream. Silence took over after that.

"Time to go now," the boy said.

Zach couldn't agree more, and before he could say anything, the child flickered out of sight, leaving the faint pitter-patter of footsteps in his wake. It was as if Zach hadn't even met the boy at all, yet the EMP slug in his hand told him otherwise. He pocketed it carefully and made his way back out the pier, keeping his eyes peeled for Justicars. The tinheads were cracking down hard on petty crimes today, and that was setting Zach on edge. The smell of rotten eggs and dead rats wafted from the river, but

still he stuck close to the banks to avoid the glare of the neon lights from the surrounding buildings.

Could it be that MutiaraCorp was waging war against KL's citizens? It didn't make sense. What would that achieve? As he jogged back to the subway, Zach spotted an oncoming couple and flicked all five fingers downwards, as if shaking a freshly washed hand. The street sign for "great danger".

He didn't know if the slug would work—there was no way to test it since it only had one charge—or if there would be any consequences from accepting something so valuable from a stranger, but he'd come to a decision. He'd go home, pack what little possessions he had and leave this city by dawn. Perhaps he'd stop by Dice's place to see if the old man could check out the slug, and if he knew anyone who'd be able to get him across the border.

He was done waiting for his dad. It was time Zach went and looked for him. He didn't know how he was going to do that, but maybe he'd find his answers in the New Republic.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stuart Danker is a Malaysian author who has written for a living for over nine years. Prior to that, he spent more than a decade flitting between jobs—as a hairdresser, accountant and roadie, to name a few—most of which serve as fodder for his stories today. *Tinhead City, KL* is his debut novel. He can be found at [www.stuardanker.com](http://www.stuardanker.com).



KL, Malaysia. Once glimmering. Now an oppressive wasteland under the corporate dictatorship of the sinister MutiaraCorp. Metallic cyborgs—called tinheads—trawl the streets, dealing swift and deadly punishment on anyone they deem to be criminals or dissenters.

Abandoned by his father, 19-year-old Zachary Ti learns to fend for himself in the gritty underbelly of KL. When he accidentally kills two of the tinheads, Zach is forced to join an elite rebel faction whose methods are more than questionable. Soon he is sent back into the fray of KL—but this time he is a wanted man.

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