

BEKBEKA / BOOK 01

Zeth Mnguni - Genesis

Chapters 1-3 illustrated preview edition



Novel chapters with a lighter rotating Panel Door preview after each chapter.

Kool Geek Creative Arts

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A Small Door Before The System Opens

Zeth Mnguni begins Genesis at twenty-one, carrying a brilliant mind, academy discipline, KB's faith, Gogo's blessing, and the keys to a white Polo Vivo.

He thinks Apex Sentinel Systems is the start of a clean professional future. What waits inside the building is older than his ambition, closer to his family than he understands, and already filed under his name.

This preview edition gathers the opening movement: Chapter 1, The Grass Mat, Chapter 2, 3 January, and Chapter 3, Orientation, with a light rotating sample of live Panel Door pages after each chapter.

Chapter 1: The Grass Mat

Before the yard, there was sunlight.

Zeth remembered it in pieces, never as a whole thing.

His mother's laugh first. Warm, sudden, filling rooms before she entered them. Then his father's hand over his, guiding a small screwdriver into the back of a toy radio Zeth had already broken twice. A house with polished floors. A swimming pool he was not allowed to run around. The smell of his father's shirts when Menzi Mnguni lifted him from the couch and carried him half-asleep past adult voices.

In those memories, everyone still had time.

Then the light changed.

Camera flashes. A gate closing. His father on television, but not the way fathers were supposed to be on television. Menzi's face looked too still under the headline. Diego Duma's voice came from somewhere behind glass, smooth one moment and sharp the next. Zeth remembered his father's hand striking a desk, not hard enough to break it, but hard enough to make the little boy in the hallway stop breathing.

Then his mother crying without sound.

Then men at the house.

Then a woman's hand pulling him back from a doorway.

Then nothing kind.

The nothing became whistles.

Academy mornings. Grey tracksuits. Cold water on his face before sunrise. Beds folded tight enough for inspection. Shoes in a line. Boys who learned not to cry because crying made the instructors patient, and patient

instructors were worse than angry ones. A bell at five. Running before breakfast. Coding after homework. Fighting drills in a hall that smelled of floor polish and old sweat.

"Again, Mnguni."

He remembered falling.

"Again."

He remembered getting up.

"Again."

Zeth opened his eyes.

The sky above him was white-blue and too wide. A fly worried the air near his ear. Somewhere beyond the wall a taxi hooted twice, a sharp township complaint that needed no translation. He was lying on a grass mat in KB's front yard with his phone held above his face, the appointment email glowing like it had personally come to collect him.

Apex Sentinel Systems Internship Appointment

He had read the subject line so many times it had stopped looking like English.

The yard around him looked like three lives had crashed into one another and decided to stay. The house was one of the older Soweto houses, the bigger apartheid-era kind with thick walls, a low front fence, and rooms added over time by people who did not wait for permission to need space. It was not pretty, but it stood with a stubborn chest-out dignity, like an old woman at a funeral refusing to sit.

The front yard was half home, half workshop. A strip of tired grass survived near the washing line. The rest was hard-packed earth, oil stains, bricks, a cracked basin full of bolts, and two tyres leaning against the wall like they were also waiting for work. Delivery bikes crouched near the side gate. One

had its seat off. Another wore a taped-up mirror. A spanner lay in the dust beside a child's plastic sandal.

And behind all of it, clean enough to look rude, sat the white Polo Vivo.

Freshly washed. Bonnet still not perfectly aligned. New wipers. Polished headlights. Tyres blacked. The car looked like it had been pulled from a better neighbourhood and forced to learn humility overnight.

Zeth lowered the phone.

KB came around the Polo with an open quart in one hand and a rag in the other. His T-shirt was dark with sweat down the chest. Grease lived under his nails. He had the walk of a man who had been busy since morning and had already decided to call that a personality.

He pushed the bottle toward Zeth's face.

"My man, they'll rescind their offer if you keep staring at that email like it owes you damages."

Zeth turned his head away. "It's not even twelve."

"That is why I'm not saying drink. I'm saying smell success."

"Success smells like warm beer?"

"In Soweto? Sometimes." KB wiped his hands on the rag, then reached into his pocket and threw the keys at him. "Ayi, isilungile, ntwana."

Zeth caught them against his chest.

For a second he did not move.

KB dropped onto the grass beside him, not lying on the mat but close enough to claim it. He stretched out with a groan, bottle resting on his stomach, eyes closed like a man who had just completed open-heart surgery instead of arguing with a starter motor.

"Don't make that face," KB said.

"What face?"

"That face you make when somebody loves you and you start calculating tax."

Zeth sat up. The Polo keys were warm in his palm. The plastic tag was still on them, a cheap blue thing with ZETH written in black marker. Behind the car, one of KB's drivers was rinsing mud off a silver Corolla. A delivery rider sat on an upside-down crate, eating kota with both hands and watching them like this was better than television.

"I get your insistence in paying my rent as the MD," Zeth said, turning the keys over, "but I haven't contributed much since that thirty grand I gave you four years ago. Now this car as well. I feel like I'm taking too much from the business."

KB opened one eye.

"The MD?"

"That's what you call yourself."

"Because I am."

"Of a business whose office is your gogo's yard."

"Apple started in a garage."

"You don't own a garage."

"That's why we are better. We started outside."

Zeth tried not to smile and failed.

KB sat up, serious now, or at least serious enough for KB. "Listen here. There is no this business without you."

"There is."

"There isn't."

"You built it."

"With what? Hopes? Prayer? My good looks?" KB pointed the quart at him.

"That skorokoro came because you saved your bursary money like a madman. Everybody else at res was buying sneakers and dating girls with expensive hair. You came here December with thirty thousand rand and a face like you were committing fraud."

"It was not thirty. It was twenty-eight and change."

"You see? Witchcraft. Who remembers change from four years ago?"

"People who don't have money."

KB laughed once, then shook his head. "You gave me a start, Z. When I had nothing. You believed before there was something to believe in. So don't come here with this thing of 'I haven't contributed'. Awukho uChristmas ngaphandle kwe-Ultra Mel. You understand?"

Zeth stared at him.

"Did you just compare me to custard?"

"The important custard. The one that makes poor December look middle class."

The delivery rider on the crate choked on his kota.

Zeth looked away before the smile became something softer. KB saw too much when he wanted to. He had always seen too much. In high school, when the academy locked boys into silence and called it discipline, KB had been the first person outside those gates who looked at Zeth and said, "You're hungry," instead of "You're strong."

Gogo had fed him before asking his surname.

That had been the beginning of family.

A voice floated over the fence from the street.

"Awu, Zeth. Wena ngeke uhambe ungavalelisanga?"

Zeth closed his eyes.

KB's grin arrived before Zeth opened them.

Thobile Mathonsi stood on the pavement beyond the short fence, one hand on her hip, the other holding a plastic bag from the spaza. Everybody called her Thobi when they wanted sweetness and Mathobi when they wanted to start nonsense. She was three years older than Zeth and had the calm danger of a woman who knew exactly when men were lying, especially when the man was Zeth.

Her hair was tied up in a scarf. Gold hoops caught the sun when she tilted her head. She was not dressed for anyone, which somehow made it worse.

Zeth lifted himself onto one elbow.

"Lutho, sthandwa sami. Ngisendleleni nje. Ungibona ngilinde lesi dakwa silale so he won't cry when I leave."

KB stood so quickly beer sloshed over his fingers.

"Mathobi, Thoby, iyahamba lenyoni yakho," he called, stepping over Zeth's legs. "Uzosala nami."

Zeth grabbed for the bottle before it spilled on the mat. KB slapped his hand away, then used the same hand to push Zeth's shoulder.

"Don't listen to this one," KB told her. "He has been emotional the whole day. Even the car started crying."

Thobile leaned her forearms on the fence. "The car is too clean for him."

"Thank you," KB said. "I told him."

Zeth stood and dusted grass from the back of his jeans. "You both done?"

"Never," Thobile said.

There had been a time when he would have walked straight to the fence and tried to turn her teasing into a promise. Eighteen, still in matric, already too serious for his own face. Thobile had been the first woman to make him feel seen as a man and young as a boy in the same breath. He had mistaken that for forever with the confidence only a wounded teenager could have.

He had once bought a toy ring from a street vendor and presented it to her behind the spaza after two ciders.

She had laughed so hard she cried, then kissed his forehead and told him to go pass mathematics.

At the time, it had felt like cruelty.

Later he understood it was mercy. Thobile had a child already. A life already. Wounds already. She had told him once, drunk and honest in the back seat of the first skorokoro, that she was not going to be the woman who took a boy with a future and made him small.

Zeth had argued.

Zeth had argued for years.

Eventually he stopped arguing and accepted the smaller thing she allowed: friendship, heat when both of them were lonely, laughter over walls, and the strange tenderness of people who never became what they almost were.

"So you are really leaving us for town?" Thobile asked.

"Maboneng is not overseas."

"For people with rent, it is overseas."

KB nodded. "This one has parking underground now. Next week he'll speak through the nose."

"I already speak through the nose," Zeth said.

"No, you speak like a scholarship." KB pointed at him. "Different disease."

Thobile laughed. Zeth let the sound land where it wanted.

Across the street, a man in blue overalls shouted at a teenager for leaning on his gate. Somewhere a woman complained that KB's boys had left oil water running toward her side. KB turned his head and shouted back that the oil was older than her marriage and she must not start. The delivery rider abandoned his kota to move a bike before the argument became evidence.

Then a small boy kicked a ball under the Polo.

Everybody froze.

KB turned slowly.

"Whose child is this?"

The boy pointed down the road and prepared to deny his own name.

Zeth crouched, reached under the car, and rolled the ball back. "Next time aim for the Corolla."

"Why the Corolla?" the driver asked.

"It has suffered before."

"This is why we don't miss you," KB said, but he was smiling.

The neighbourhood rearranged itself around the moment. The woman at the gate kept complaining but softer. The boy ran. The rider moved the bike. Thobile checked something in her plastic bag and looked at Zeth again.

"Come say bye properly later," she said.

KB made a wounded noise. "Properly?"

"Not you."

"I am also leaving emotionally."

"You are going nowhere, Kabelo."

"Exactly. That is why I need comfort."

Thobile rolled her eyes and began walking. After three steps she looked back at Zeth. "Don't let them make you boring there."

The words caught him off guard.

"I'm already boring."

"No," she said. "You are just scared people will notice you're not."

Then she was gone, plastic bag swinging against her thigh.

KB watched Zeth watching her.

"Ayi," he said softly. "That one will make you write poetry and lose weight."

"Shut up."

"You see? Already defensive. Poetry loading."

Zeth threw the rag at him.

Inside the house, Gogo's room was dim and smelled of camphor cream, sunlight on blankets, and the tea she never finished while it was hot. The television played low in the corner with the volume nearly off. A newsreader moved her mouth above captions about politics, secrecy, and some minister denying something with the confidence of a person who had practised in a mirror.

Gogo lay propped against pillows, smaller than Zeth wanted her to be. Her eyes, though, were still sharp enough to search him.

"Udlile?" she asked.

Zeth smiled. "Yebo, Gogo."

"Liar."

KB, behind him, clicked his tongue. "Hayi, Zethi Selebi. 'My hands are clean,' stomach empty, face guilty. This is why you're a hacker, ntwana. In real life you can't lie."

Gogo ignored him. "Come here."

Zeth went to the side of the bed and bent down. Her hand came up slowly to his cheek. It was dry and warm. For a moment he was not twenty-one. He was fourteen, standing in this same room with academy bruises hidden under his shirt, pretending he had only come because KB was forcing him to watch a movie.

Gogo had looked at him once and known.

Not everything. Just enough.

"You will call," she said.

"I will."

"Not when you need something. Just call."

"I promise."

"And eat."

"I promise."

"And don't fight at work."

KB laughed. "Hawu, Gogo, it's an office."

She looked past Zeth. "A fool with a swivel chair is still a fool. He just hurts you with paperwork."

KB lifted both hands. "Yoh. HR is not ready for you."

Gogo's thumb moved once across Zeth's cheek. "Your mother would be proud."

The room went quiet in a way that had weight.

Zeth swallowed. "You think?"

Gogo's eyes softened, but not with pity. She had never given him pity. Pity was for strangers and funerals. Gogo gave instruction.

"I know."

He hugged her carefully because her bones felt too close to the surface now. She held him with surprising strength for three breaths, maybe four. Then she tapped his back.

"Go. Before this one cries outside and blames dust."

KB made a sound from the doorway. "My sinuses are private."

Outside, the sun had shifted. The Polo looked even whiter, the yard even dirtier around it. Zeth put his bags in the boot: laptop, clothes, two pairs of shoes, a small box of documents, and the few personal things he did not trust anyone else to move.

KB walked around the car again, checking things he had already checked.

"Oil is fine. Water is fine. Tyres are fine. If it makes that sound when you turn left, ignore it."

"What sound?"

"Exactly."

"KB."

"It's character. All cars need character."

Zeth closed the boot. For a moment neither of them joked.

KB held out his hand. Zeth took it. The handshake became a pull, then a hug, hard and long. KB smelled of grease, beer, sun, and home.

"Don't go there and become small," KB said into his shoulder.

"I'm going for an internship, not prison."

"Same thing if you let rich people talk too much."

Zeth laughed against him.

KB pulled back first and slapped his chest. "I'll come check you next Saturday. Bottle of gin. Not that expensive one you pretend to like. Real gin."

"There is no real gin in a plastic bottle."

"There is if real men are drinking it."

"You are going to embarrass me in my new building."

"That's the point. People must know you have relatives."

Zeth looked at the house, the yard, the bikes, the driver rinsing the Corolla again for no reason, the delivery rider licking sauce off his thumb, the window behind which Gogo was probably pretending not to watch him leave.

He had been taken from a house once.

This time he was leaving one by choice.

It felt worse in a way he did not know how to explain.

He got into the Polo. The seat was too clean. The steering wheel still had that second-hand shine from whatever KB had wiped it with. When he turned the key, the engine caught after one uncertain cough.

KB pointed at the bonnet. "Character."

Zeth shook his head and reversed slowly out of the yard.

At the gate he stopped.

KB lifted the quart in salute.

Zeth lifted the keys, realised that made no sense because he was driving, and lifted his hand instead.

Then he went.

Soweto moved around him in late-afternoon layers: boys with school-holiday dust on their legs, women carrying plastic chairs, men under car bonnets, music from somewhere unseen, smoke from meat, sunlight caught in satellite dishes. At a stop street, he saw a father balancing a toddler on his hip while arguing with a mechanic. The image struck too close to something old. For half a second the mechanic's blue overalls became his father's white shirt. The toddler's hand became his own.

Then a taxi hooted behind him and the memory broke.

"Sharp, sharp," Zeth muttered, and drove.

By the time he reached Maboneng, the city had changed its accent. Buildings stood closer together. Art on walls. People on pavements with bags, phones, cigarettes, plans. Security guards at entrances. Restaurants pretending not to be expensive. The kind of young people who looked like they had chosen themselves carefully before leaving the house.

His apartment building's basement smelled of concrete, damp, and car exhaust. The Polo's headlights slid over painted numbers until he found his parking bay. He sat there after switching off the engine, listening to it tick itself quiet.

For the first time all day, no one was talking.

His phone lit up.

KB: Don't scratch my car.

Another message followed.

KB: Your car.

Another.

KB: But don't scratch it.

Zeth smiled in the dark.

In the lift, a woman with red braids and a laundry basket looked at him, then at the bags by his feet, then back at him.

"Moving in?"

"Trying."

"This building tests people."

"I test well."

She smiled. "We'll see."

On the next floor, two women got in laughing, smelling of perfume and outside. One looked him up and down without shame. The other looked at the Polo keys in his hand.

"New neighbour?"

"Depends who is asking."

"Someone who knows which washing machines steal coins."

"Then definitely new," Zeth said. "I still trust machines."

"Shame."

"Pray for me."

"We don't pray for handsome men in this building. It makes them worse."

That made them laugh. The red-braided woman hid her smile in the laundry basket. Zeth looked at the lift numbers and tried not to look as pleased as he felt.

His apartment was small enough that the door nearly introduced you to the whole place at once. Kitchenette to the left. Bathroom straight ahead. Living room with a two-seater couch that KB had called "executive" because one leg had been fixed with a brick. A mattress leaned against the wall, still wrapped in plastic. Boxes waited with the patience of unpaid accounts.

Zeth dropped his bags.

He meant to unpack.

He meant to shower.

He meant to iron his shirt for the morning, check the route to Apex again, charge his laptop, call Gogo like he had promised, and maybe message Thobile something clever enough to prove he was not thinking about her.

Instead he sat on the two-seater couch.

Then he leaned back.

Then the room shifted sideways and sleep took him without asking.

His phone slid from his hand onto his chest, screen still open to the appointment email.

Outside, Maboneng kept moving.

Inside, Zeth slept under the glow of the future, too tired to see the past moving toward him.

Panel Door Preview: The Grass Mat

A rotating selection of 2 live Panel Door page-scene(s) from Chapter 1.
The full visual set lives in the Panel Door download.

Page 04 - Zeth waking on the grass mat



Some mornings do not wake you; they return you. Under the thin green weave, tomorrow waits with its shoes already on.

#Bekbeka #Zeths #TheGrassMat #ZethMnguni #Soweto #ComicBookPage

Page 09 - Gogo's room



Some rooms are built from prayer and old fabric. Here, truth does not shout; it waits until he sits down.

#Bekbeka #Zeths #GogosRoom #TheGrassMat #AfricanStories #SouthAfricanComics

Chapter 2: 3 January

Zeth woke before the alarm.

For one confused second he did not know which ceiling had found him.

It was too low to be the academy dormitory. Too cracked to be the house from before. Too quiet to be KB's place, where even sleep had to make space for taxis, neighbours, bottles, engines, and somebody shouting somebody else's business over a wall.

This ceiling was his.

That made it worse.

The phone on his chest glowed in the dim room, still open to the appointment email. Sometime in the night his hand had closed around it like proof. The battery sat at fourteen percent. His neck had gone stiff from the two-seater couch, and one of his legs had slipped off the edge so that his socked foot rested on a cardboard box marked SHIRTS / DOCUMENTS / RANDOM in KB's handwriting.

The alarm was set for five.

The time was 04:37.

Zeth stared at the numbers until they stopped being numbers and became accusation.

Academy body, he thought.

That was what Thabo used to call it after training, when Zeth would arrive at the dojo before the lights were on and pretend he had come early because the taxis were unreliable.

Academy body.

It woke before whistles. It ate before hunger. It stood before orders. It learned the hour by pressure in the bones. Nobody had told Zeth to open his eyes, but somewhere inside him a bell still believed it owned the morning.

He sat up slowly.

The apartment was not unpacked enough to be messy with personality. It was messy with arrival. Boxes leaned against the wall in small defeated towers. His mattress, still wrapped in plastic, stood upright like an embarrassed guest. A black suit bag hung from the handle of the built-in cupboard. The kitchenette counter held a loaf of bread, a tin of instant coffee, two mugs from a supermarket sale, and a packet of noodles he had bought because independence apparently came in chicken flavour.

The two-seater couch had given up under him during the night. Its right side sagged lower than the left, the brick under the front leg doing the work of furniture and engineering at once. A thin brown throw, which he did not remember pulling over himself, lay twisted around his waist.

For a moment Zeth considered leaving it like that.

No one was watching.

No instructor would walk in with a clipboard. No older boy would laugh if the fold was soft. No whistle would split the room because a corner sat loose.

He stood, folded the throw anyway, and placed it squarely over the back of the couch.

Then he straightened the couch cushion.

Then the brick.

Then the box his foot had knocked.

He lined his shoes beside the wall, toes facing out, heels touching the skirting.

Only when the room looked less like a man had lost consciousness inside it did he breathe properly.

"Sharp," he said to no one.

His voice sounded too loud.

He picked up the phone and read the email again.

Apex Sentinel Systems Internship Appointment

Dear Mr Mnguni,

He hated the way that line still worked on him.

Mr Mnguni sounded like somebody with a bank balance, a father somewhere, and a mother who called to remind him to iron properly. It sounded like a person who belonged to a surname without flinching. In the academy they had used surnames like inventory. Mnguni, move. Mnguni, again. Mnguni, report. Mnguni, explain.

Dear Mr Mnguni sounded different.

It sounded chosen.

He scrolled through the letter: reporting time, reception instructions, identity document, temporary access registration, orientation room, dress code. The email said casual, but Zeth did not trust casual from institutions. Casual was how people with the right parents dressed down and still looked correct. Everyone else guessed, and guessing was where punishment liked to hide.

He had read all of it before. He had memorised it. He could have rebuilt the email from memory and still he checked, because checking was the only kind of prayer he trusted.

The phone buzzed once in his hand.

KB: If you wake up late on your first day I am repossessing my belief in you.

Zeth looked at the timestamp.

04:39.

He typed back.

Why are you awake?

The response arrived before he could put the phone down.

KB: Business never sleeps.

Another bubble.

KB: Also your gogo's bladder has unionised.

Then:

KB: Your gogo says eat.

Zeth sat on the edge of the couch and stared at that one for longer than the others. Your gogo. KB always wrote it like that when he wanted the words to enter the room and sit with Zeth. Not my gogo. Not Gogo. Your gogo.

Zeth typed:

Tell her I will.

He did not type that he had no appetite. He did not type that the apartment felt strange in the dark. He did not type that for a second after waking he had wanted the old yard, the oil stains, the shouting, even KB's warm beer pushed under his nose like a bad joke dressed as love.

KB would see too much through the omissions anyway.

KB: Liar.

Zeth smiled despite himself.

The bathroom mirror was too small and hung slightly crooked. It cut him at the shoulders, which was maybe a mercy. His hair had flattened on one

side. A crease from the couch ran across his cheek. He looked young in the parts of his face that still belonged to sleep, and too old around the eyes.

Cold water fixed what it could.

The shower coughed before producing heat. Zeth stood under it with both hands against the tiles and let the water drum on the back of his neck. Today had been waiting for him for years. It had been waiting in exam halls, bursary offices, academy dormitories, dojo floors, computer labs with broken chairs, and KB's yard while they counted money under a bare bulb and pretended the first skorokoro was a fleet.

Apex Sentinel Systems.

Software engineering track.

Duma Genesis Technologies.

Those names should have made him feel tall.

Instead, underneath the excitement, there was a thin wire of fear pulled tight enough to sing.

He turned the water colder for the last thirty seconds because old habits enjoyed surviving without permission.

The shirt had been ironed two days earlier at KB's house under Gogo's supervision, which meant it had been ironed like it owed her money. Zeth took it from the suit bag and shook it once. White. Plain. Better than anything the academy had issued but still cheap enough that the collar had its own anxiety.

He buttoned it slowly.

The tie took three attempts.

Not because he could not tie one. Zeth could strip and rebuild a laptop fan with a pocket screwdriver, break a man's wrist if given no better option, and

write code through a fever. A tie was not difficult.

This tie, today, had opinions.

The first knot sat fat and stupid. The second leaned left. The third was acceptable if nobody looked closely, which meant Zeth untied it and started again.

"Control your inputs," he muttered.

On the fourth attempt, the knot sat clean against the collar.

The jacket was not new. Nothing important in Zeth's life had ever been new the first time he needed it. KB knew a man who knew a cousin whose boss had lost weight and sold three suits for cash. The sleeves were nearly right. The shoulders were close enough. In the mirror, with his jaw tight and his hands smoothing the lapels, Zeth almost looked like the version of himself the email had addressed.

Dear Mr Mnguni.

He held the look for three seconds.

Then he looked away.

The small box of documents sat on the kitchenette counter where he had left it after failing to unpack. Identity document. Certified copies. Bank letter. Academic records. Appointment printout. A plastic sleeve with certificates from the academy, each one too clean, each one carrying the Duma Foundation crest like a stamp of ownership.

Underneath them, wrapped in tissue and tied with old thread, was the bracelet.

Zeth knew it was there before he opened the box.

He opened it anyway.

The bracelet was made of small blue and white beads, frayed at one end where the string had begun to lose its argument. It was too small for his wrist now. Maybe it had always been too small. He did not know whether it had belonged to his mother or whether she had bought it for him from somewhere and he had turned the memory into something softer. Childhood had holes. The mind filled holes with whatever let it keep walking.

But he remembered Ayanda's fingers tying it around him.

He remembered her laughing because he kept asking if it made him faster.

He remembered her saying, "Only if you run toward good things."

The memory came so suddenly that his chest tightened.

Zeth folded the tissue over the bracelet and put the certificates back on top.

Not today.

Today needed edges.

He made coffee too strong and toast too dry. He ate standing by the counter because sitting down felt like a negotiation with nerves. Halfway through the second slice, he caught himself calculating the drive: Maboneng to the Apex offices, early traffic, possible roadworks, parking, security processing, reception delay, human incompetence allowance.

The appointment letter said arrive by 07:45.

Zeth planned to be outside by 07:00.

Early was not eagerness if you stood properly.

At 05:51, the phone buzzed again.

Thobile: Don't become boring today.

No greeting. No explanation. Just the instruction.

Zeth read it twice.

He typed: Too late.

She replied with a laughing face made from punctuation and one word.

Liar.

Everybody had chosen the same insult this morning. Maybe that was family too.

The city outside his window had begun to colour itself in. Maboneng before sunrise was all edges: security lights, wet pavement, locked doors, a bakery smell from somewhere already working, a bottle rolling lazily in the gutter as if returning home from a better night than his. A man in a security jacket smoked beside the entrance across the road. Two women in heels walked quickly, laughing too loudly for the hour. A taxi slowed, collected a man who appeared from a doorway, then shot away before the door was fully closed.

Johannesburg did not wake.

It changed shifts.

Zeth took his laptop bag, the document folder, and the Polo keys. At the door he paused, looked back at the room, and felt the strange fear that if he left it now it might stop belonging to him.

Then he locked up twice and checked the handle once.

The basement was colder than the apartment. The Polo waited under fluorescent light, clean white body holding thin green reflections from the painted pillars. For a second Zeth saw it in KB's yard again, impossible and shining among oil stains. He walked around it because KB would somehow know if he did not. Tyres. Bonnet. Wipers. No scratches.

He got in.

The car started after the same uncertain cough.

"Character," Zeth said.

The parking gate lifted with a slow electric groan. He eased into the morning.

At that hour the city still had gaps in it. Maboneng gave him brick walls, painted signs, security gates, delivery vans, and men carrying crates with the grim patience of people who had never been impressed by sunrise. The Polo moved carefully through them, too clean for some streets and not clean enough for others. Zeth kept both hands on the wheel.

The radio found static first, then gospel, then a morning host laughing with the aggression of someone paid to be awake. Zeth turned the volume low. News came between adverts for furniture, insurance, and a sale that sounded like a threat.

The State Records Protection Bill was mentioned in the same voice people used for weather and crime: expected, serious, already exhausting. Civil society groups were planning more statements. Government spokespeople denied the Bill was meant to hide corruption. A minister said responsible citizens had nothing to fear from responsible classification.

Zeth stopped at a red light behind a taxi whose back window carried the words NO FEAR JUST GEAR in peeling letters.

"Responsible citizens," he said.

The taxi rolled back slightly before the light changed. Zeth gave it space. KB's voice entered his head without asking.

Don't scratch my car.

Your car.

But don't scratch it.

The city sharpened as he drove north. The buildings changed their posture. Glass appeared. Then more glass. Pavements widened and grew serious. Men in pressed shirts walked as if late for money. Women in heels crossed

roads without asking for permission from cars. Security booms multiplied. Even the trees looked employed.

At a big intersection, traffic held him long enough for the billboard to change.

First a bank.

Then a luxury apartment development.

Then Diego Duma.

His face filled the morning above the road, smiling down with the calm of a man who had never had to explain himself at a gate. Grey suit. White shirt. No tie. A look built from warmth, discipline, and expensive dentistry. Under him, in clean blue letters:

DUMA GENESIS TECHNOLOGIES

Securing Africa's Information Future

Zeth's stomach tightened.

It happened before thought. Before envy. Before ambition. A small internal closing, like a hand over a door.

He looked away, then looked back.

Diego Duma was everywhere if you paid attention. Business magazines. Tech conferences. Newspaper columns about innovation. Interviews about young Africans building the continent's future. Zeth knew the name the way everyone knew it, with the shallow familiarity of public faces.

But the smile on the billboard touched something old.

Not a memory exactly.

A temperature.

A room behind glass.

His father's voice, low and dangerous.

Another voice answering smoothly enough to make the anger look unreasonable.

The taxi behind him hooted.

The light had changed.

Zeth pressed the accelerator too hard, corrected, and moved with the traffic.

"Nerves," he said.

The word sat badly in the car.

He tried another.

"First day."

Better. Ordinary. Useful.

He kept driving.

Apex Sentinel Systems occupied three floors of a building that looked like it had been designed by people who believed sunlight should apply for permission before entering. The sign outside was brushed steel. The letters were tall, clean, and cold.

APEX SENTINEL SYSTEMS

Below it, smaller:

A Duma Genesis Technologies Company

Zeth turned into the visitor lane at 06:54.

The security guard in the booth looked at him through the window, then at the Polo, then back at him. He was older, with a grey moustache and eyes that had spent years deciding people were lying before they started.

"Morning."

"Morning, sir."

"Staff?"

"Intern. First day."

The guard's eyebrows shifted by one millimetre. "Orientation starts later."

"Yes, sir."

"You are early."

"Yes, sir."

The guard looked at him for another moment, then lowered his eyes to the clipboard. "Name?"

"Zeth Mnguni."

The pen stopped.

Not for long. Half a second maybe. Less. A pause small enough to deny. Then the guard found the page, ticked something, and passed a visitor parking slip through the window.

"Basement two. Bay V-twelve. Take your ID and appointment letter to reception."

"Thank you."

The boom lifted.

Zeth drove in carefully.

Basement two smelled like all basements: concrete, dust, old water, and cars worth more than houses. The Polo looked suddenly humble between a black Mercedes and a silver BMW whose tyres seemed personally educated. Zeth parked in V-twelve, straightened the car twice, switched off the engine, and sat with both hands still on the wheel.

06:59.

He was not late.

That should have been enough.

He checked the document folder again anyway. ID. Appointment letter. Certified copies. Bank letter. Academic transcripts. Academy certificate.

His thumb rested on the Duma Foundation crest.

He put the folder away.

The lift from the basement opened into a lobby too polished for ordinary footsteps. Light ran across the floor in long rectangles. A glass wall showed the street outside waking into money. On the opposite side, turnstiles stood before a bank of security gates and a reception desk staffed by a woman whose smile looked professional enough to survive complaints.

Behind the desk, a screen cycled through company messages.

WELCOME TO APEX SENTINEL SYSTEMS

INTEGRITY. PRECISION. TRUST.

Then:

DUMA GENESIS TECHNOLOGIES: BUILT FOR WHAT COMES NEXT

Zeth stood near the entrance and waited.

People arrived in clean streams.

They tapped cards, pressed fingers, leaned toward scanners, stepped through gates, and became absorbed by the building. Nobody looked surprised by glass. Nobody looked at the floor to check whether their shoes belonged. A man in a navy suit laughed into a phone and said something about Pretoria. Two women walked past discussing a client presentation. A courier argued with security about a package that apparently contained

nothing dangerous except someone's impatience.

Zeth watched all of it.

The academy had taught him how to enter rooms.

Shoulders level. Chin neutral. Hands visible. Eyes moving but not hunting. Never look lost. Lost boys were corrected. Lost men were used.

At 07:18, another young man entered the lobby carrying a laptop bag that looked more expensive than Zeth's jacket. Blond hair. Blue shirt. No tie. He glanced at the security desk, at the turnstiles, then at Zeth. For a second their eyes met with the quick mutual assessment of people who might be forced to share a table later.

The young man smiled slightly, as if the building had told a private joke.

Zeth looked away first.

Not today.

At 07:31, the receptionist called him.

"Mr Mnguni?"

The title landed again.

Zeth walked to the desk. "Yes."

"You're here for the internship orientation?"

"Yes."

"ID, please."

He gave it to her with the appointment letter. She checked the letter, then the ID, then her screen. Her nails moved quickly over the keyboard. A small printer behind her coughed out a temporary badge.

"You'll need to complete biometric registration before the gate opens," she said. "Right index finger on the scanner."

Zeth looked at the black glass pad mounted beside the desk.

"Registration?" he asked.

"Standard first-day access."

Of course.

Standard.

He placed his index finger on the scanner.

He expected the machine to think. He expected the receptionist to ask him to lift and press again, roll the finger, try the thumb, clean the pad, wait for some supervisor who knew the software password. Systems did not usually accept new people gracefully. New people were friction.

The scanner flashed green almost immediately.

A soft tone sounded.

On the receptionist's screen, a line appeared before she could finish reaching for the mouse.

MNGUNI, ZETH

ACCESS PROFILE: PROVISIONAL INTERN

STATUS: ACCEPTED

The receptionist smiled. "There we go. Fast one."

Zeth kept his finger on the glass for half a breath too long.

"Mr Mnguni?"

He lifted his hand.

"Sorry."

"No problem." She clipped the temporary badge into a plastic holder and passed it to him. "Please wear this visibly. Orientation is on the third floor. The lift will only open after seven forty-five, so you can wait by the seating area."

Zeth took the badge.

His name sat under the Apex logo like it had always known where to print itself.

He walked toward the seating area, then stopped beside the turnstiles.

Behind him, someone else's scan failed. The gate gave a low rejecting sound. The man cursed softly, wiped his finger on his trousers, and tried again.

Zeth looked at his own fingertip.

Apex had never taken his print.

Not in the interview. Not in the appointment process. Not in any office he remembered.

The academy had.

Home Affairs had.

Bursary administrators had.

Doors from childhood had opened and closed around fingerprints, forms, signatures, approvals, and adults who always seemed to know where he was supposed to go before he did.

He told himself there were databases. Shared systems. Preloaded files. Efficient onboarding. Duma Foundation candidates probably arrived packaged for companies like this, certificates and biometrics already tied with a neat institutional ribbon.

It made sense.

That was the problem.

The gate in front of him opened with a clean green light.

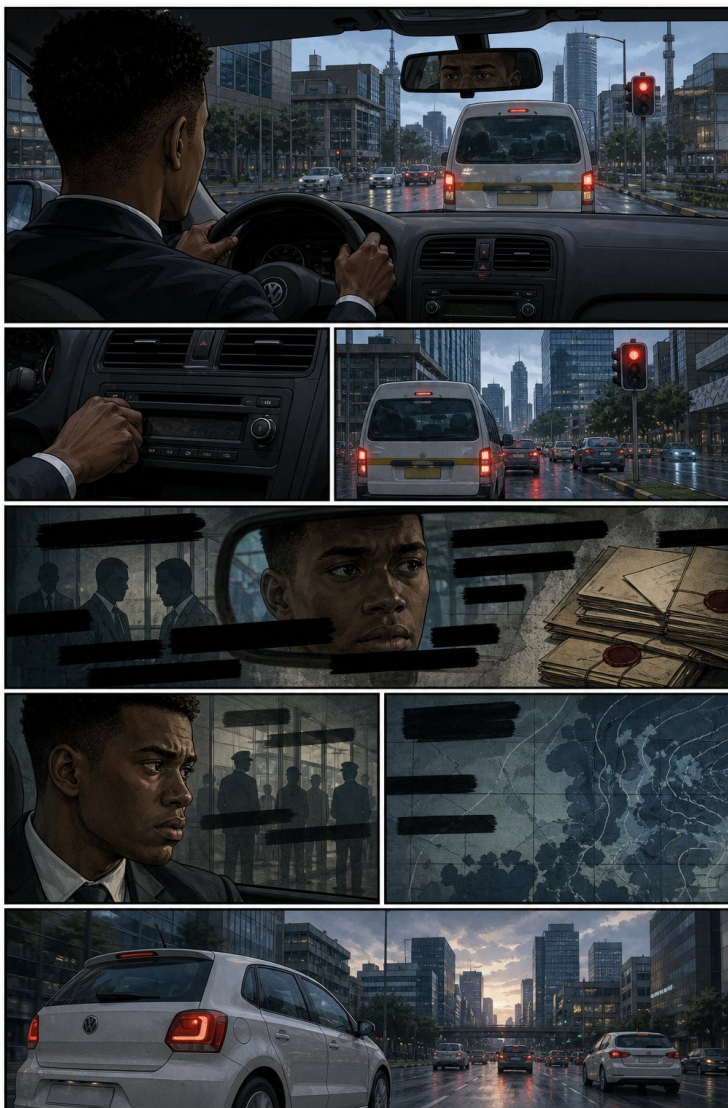
Zeth stepped through.

The system already knew him.

Panel Door Preview: 3 January

A rotating selection of 2 live Panel Door page-scene(s) from Chapter 2.
The full visual set lives in the Panel Door download.

Page 07 - Responsible citizens



The news called fear responsible and kept moving.

#Bekbeka #Zeths #StateRecordsProtectionBill #JohannesburgTraffic #Genesis #PanelDoor

Page 10 - Bay V-twelve



He was early. Early still did not feel like enough.

**#Bekbeka #Zeths #PoloVivo #ApexSentinelSystems #DumaFoundation #Genesis
#PanelDoor**

Chapter 3: Orientation

The gate closed behind Zeth with a sound too soft for the size of the thing it had done.

Not a bang.

Not a warning.

Just a clean click behind his back, as if the building had decided the matter and moved on.

He stood on the other side of the turnstiles with his temporary badge clipped to his jacket, his folder under one arm, and his right index finger still feeling warmer than the rest of him.

The system already knew him.

That was nonsense.

Systems did not know people. Systems knew records. Names. ID numbers. Photographs flattened into rectangles. Fingerprints converted into patterns. Permissions assigned by people who never had to see what those permissions did to a life.

Zeth knew that.

He had known it since he was old enough to understand that adults could use the word "file" when they meant "boy."

So he told himself the scanner had not known him. It had known an onboarding record loaded by HR. Or the Duma Foundation Academy had sent biometric confirmation ahead. Or Apex Sentinel Systems shared some secure compliance system with the foundation, and the receptionist had not felt the need to explain because receptionists were not hired to narrate infrastructure to nervous interns at seven in the morning.

All of those explanations made sense.

The fact that they made sense did not comfort him.

He moved away from the gate.

The lobby had been designed by people who believed anxiety could be polished out of a room. The floor reflected light in neat white rectangles. The reception desk curved like it had never held paperwork with coffee stains on it. Thin planters divided the waiting area from the main path, their leaves glossy and obedient. Above the lift bank, screens rotated through corporate sentences that sounded expensive.

INTEGRITY. PRECISION. TRUST.

Then:

SECURE SYSTEMS FOR A CHANGING AFRICA.

Then:

APEX SENTINEL SYSTEMS WELCOMES THE 2011 INTERN COHORT.

There it was.

Proof that he belonged, at least in the grammatical sense.

Zeth walked to the seating area and took the chair closest to the wall. It gave him a clear line to reception, the gates, the lift, and the glass doors facing the street. The academy had never formally taught boys how to sit in waiting rooms, but everything useful had a version of itself in training.

Back to a solid surface.

Hands calm.

Eyes moving.

Need hidden.

The badge pressed against his chest when he sat. He looked down.

ZETH MNGUNI

PROVISIONAL INTERN

The font was too neat. Too final for plastic that would be thrown away at the end of the week.

People kept arriving.

The first wave looked like power on schedule. Men in dark suits with leather shoes that did not make noise. Women in heels, fitted jackets, and faces already arranged for meetings. A man with silver hair walked through the gate without slowing and a younger employee near reception straightened as if his spine had received an email. Two women passed Zeth arguing about a tender presentation in low voices. One said "legal will never clear that phrasing" and the other said "legal clears what legal is told to understand."

Zeth watched them disappear into the lifts.

That was the company he had dressed for.

Then the next wave arrived.

A man in cargo shorts came through the gate wearing sandals and a hoodie with LINUX CONF 2008 faded across the back. His calves looked cold. He balanced a laptop under one arm and a takeaway coffee in the other, pressed his thumb to the scanner, and yawned through the green light.

A woman with pink headphones around her neck walked in wearing black jeans, a T-shirt with a cartoon robot on it, and sneakers that had been loved past respectability. Her lanyard swung with three access cards and what looked like a USB drive shaped like a tiny circuit board. Security did not blink.

Behind her came a man in grey sweatpants, a zip-up fleece, and flip-flops. He said "morning" to the receptionist with the exhausted intimacy of someone who had deployed something at two in the morning and had not yet forgiven daylight.

Zeth looked at his suit.

The jacket was not new. Nothing important in Zeth's life had ever been new the first time he needed it. KB knew a man who knew a cousin whose boss had lost weight and sold three suits for cash. The sleeves were nearly right. The shoulders were close enough. In the mirror, with his jaw tight and his hands smoothing the lapels, Zeth had almost looked like the version of himself the email had addressed.

Now, under Apex light, he looked like he was waiting to sell life insurance to somebody's uncle in 1996.

He sat very still.

The email had said casual.

Casual was not an instruction. It was a trap pretending to be a mood.

At the academy, vague instructions were where punishment lived. Dress appropriately. Behave normally. Prepare properly. Respect the room. Boys who guessed wrong were told they should have known better. Boys who guessed too little were called lazy. Boys who guessed too much were mocked before being corrected.

So Zeth had dressed for no correction.

He had dressed for doors.

A cleaner pushed a trolley past him. She glanced at his suit, then at his badge.

"First day?"

Zeth looked up. "Yes, ma'am."

She smiled. "You look like you are going to fire somebody."

He almost laughed. It came out through his nose.

"Not today," he said.

"Good. Start small."

She rolled the trolley away.

At seven forty-five, the lift display above the silver doors changed from locked to available. The receptionist lifted her hand toward Zeth.

"Third floor, Mr Mnguni."

He stood too quickly, then slowed himself down as if speed had been the mistake. As he crossed the lobby, the blond young man from earlier stepped through the gate behind him. Blue shirt. No tie. Slim beige trousers cropped above expensive shoes. A jacket hung loose over one shoulder like it had agreed to participate only part-time.

The young man saw Zeth, then the lift.

"Third floor?" he asked.

His accent was South African but private-school polished, the kind of English that did not need to announce its passport because the vowels had already done so.

"Yes," Zeth said.

"Internship?"

Zeth nodded.

The young man smiled again, that small private smile from the lobby.

"Good," he said. "I was starting to worry I had dressed like a minor scandal for the wrong building."

The lift opened.

Zeth stepped in.

The young man followed.

For three floors they stood side by side, reflected in the lift doors.

Zeth saw himself first. Dark suit. White shirt. Tie too severe. Folder clamped under his arm. Shoes polished until the cracks tried to look intentional.

Then he saw the young man beside him. Loose jacket. No tie. Shirt open at the throat. Hair arranged with the careless precision of money pretending it had not met a mirror.

Two versions of wrong.

Only one looked deliberate.

"Ruan," the young man said, offering his hand.

Zeth shook it. "Zeth."

"Zeth," Ruan repeated, as if testing the shape. "Strong name."

"It was there before me."

Ruan's smile widened properly for the first time. "Useful. Saves effort."

The lift opened onto the third floor.

Apex's orientation room had glass walls on two sides and a view over a slice of Johannesburg that looked washed and organised from that height. The city always performed better at a distance. Close up it had potholes, shouting, burnt oil, and men selling phone chargers between lanes. From the third floor, it looked like a plan.

Inside the room, a long table had been arranged with eleven places. Each place had a notebook, a black Apex pen, a lanyard, a sealed envelope, and a bottle of water. A screen at the front displayed the same message from the lobby.

WELCOME 2011 INTERN COHORT

Most of the interns had already arrived.

Zeth counted automatically.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight.

With him and Ruan, ten.

One empty chair near the front.

He hated that he counted. He hated more that counting helped.

The room had its own language, and everyone else seemed to speak at least some of it. The men had mostly read casual as chinos, golfers, button-down shirts, neat sneakers, and haircuts that belonged to barbers with appointment books. The women had translated it into blouses, cardigans, dark jeans, flats, clean dresses, and jewellery quiet enough for HR but not quiet enough to be mistaken for school.

No one wore a full suit.

Except Zeth.

Ruan was not in a full suit, but he still pulled attention. His clothes did not say nervous. They said chosen. The kind of outfit a rich boy could wear on the first day of a corporate internship because if anyone questioned him, it would become evidence of his creativity.

Zeth took a seat near the middle. Ruan sat beside him without asking.

Of course he did.

Names floated across the table as people introduced themselves in small clusters before the official beginning.

Lesedi Mokoena, data science, Wits honours, round glasses and a face that seemed to be listening to everything at once.

Priya Naidoo, legal and compliance, Durban, sharp bob, sharper notebook, smile warm enough to hide the fact that she was already evaluating clauses in the welcome pack.

Tumi Khumalo, corporate communications, relaxed posture, expensive phone, someone in her family definitely knew someone in someone else's family.

Arno van Rensburg, business analysis, rugby shoulders, watch too large, confidence worn like aftershave.

The others blurred at first into clean shirts and polished ambition. Zeth stored what he could. Names could wait. Patterns could not.

Who interrupted.

Who apologised.

Who knew how to make strangers laugh.

Who said "my dad" as if the phrase came with a security clearance.

Arno looked at Zeth's tie.

"You came prepared, hey?"

It was not cruel. That was almost worse. Cruelty gave a person somewhere to put anger. Polite amusement just entered the body and made furniture.

Zeth looked at him.

"That was the plan."

"Respect." Arno lifted both hands. "My mother tried to put me in a blazer. I told her, Ma, relax. In engineering, if we're wearing closed shoes, it's already a black-tie event."

A few people laughed.

Zeth smiled like he had found it funny at the correct speed.

Ruan leaned back in his chair and looked down at his own shoes.

"I wore leather," he said. "So I am basically senior management."

The laugh moved toward him more easily.

Zeth glanced at him.

Ruan did not look smug. He looked pleased that the room had shifted without anyone bleeding.

That annoyed Zeth.

Then, against his will, he was grateful.

The eleventh intern rushed in at 07:58 with damp hair, a backpack, and the expression of someone who had negotiated with traffic and lost on appeal. A woman in a charcoal dress entered behind him carrying a tablet and the kind of smile that made everyone sit straighter without being asked.

"Good morning, everyone."

The room quieted.

"My name is Nandi Mthembu. I manage graduate programmes and early-career development for Apex Sentinel Systems. Welcome."

She said welcome as if it had a policy number.

The interns straightened, smiled, nodded, arranged themselves into opportunity.

Zeth opened the notebook at his place. The first page was blank except for the Apex logo at the bottom corner. He clicked the pen once, stopped, then placed it parallel to the notebook spine.

Ruan noticed.

Of course he did.

Nandi began with history.

Apex Sentinel Systems had started as a small security software company focused on access control and compliance tools. It had grown into one of the country's most trusted providers of secure identity systems, public-sector infrastructure support, and enterprise risk technology. It had been strengthened through strategic partnerships. It had become part of the wider Duma Genesis Technologies family.

The screen changed.

A photograph of Diego Duma appeared behind Nandi's shoulder.

Zeth's pen stopped moving.

Diego looked younger in the corporate photograph than he had on the billboard, but not by much. Some men aged by becoming softer. Diego Duma seemed to age by becoming more expensive. Grey at the temples. Smile controlled. Suit perfect. Eyes warm enough for the camera and cold enough for the contract behind it.

"Many of you know Mr Duma's story," Nandi said. "A pioneer in African technology investment. A believer in secure infrastructure as a democratic necessity. A man who has built companies, bursary programmes, and partnerships across the continent."

Zeth wrote nothing.

Across the table, Tumi looked impressed in a way that might have been genuine or well-practised. Arno nodded like the photograph confirmed

something he had already chosen to believe. Priya wrote democratic necessity in her notebook and underlined necessity once. Lesedi watched the slide without blinking.

Ruan leaned slightly toward Zeth.

"You Duma Foundation?" he asked softly.

Zeth kept his eyes forward. "Academy."

"Ah."

There was no insult in it.

There was still a door in it.

Nandi moved on to values.

Integrity. Precision. Trust.

Responsibility.

Excellence.

Confidentiality.

The words filled the screen in heavy white letters. Each one landed like furniture being placed inside a room he was expected to live in.

"We work with sensitive systems," Nandi said. "Government clients. Financial institutions. Large private-sector partners. Records that affect people's ability to move, work, trade, travel, and prove who they are. That means trust is not a slogan here. It is an operating condition."

Zeth wrote that down.

Trust is an operating condition.

He did not know yet whether he believed it or only wanted to remember who had said it.

"There are a few rules we take seriously from day one," Nandi continued.
"No external drives. No copying internal documents. No forwarding work material to personal email. No discussing client systems outside approved channels. No exploring environments you have not been assigned to. If you can access something, that does not mean you are authorised to use it."

Zeth looked up.

The sentence stayed in the room after she moved past it.

If you can access something, that does not mean you are authorised to use it.

The academy had said the same thing with doors.

Being able to open a cupboard did not mean you were allowed to eat.

Being able to run faster than another boy did not mean you were allowed to arrive first.

Being able to solve a problem did not mean you were allowed to know why the problem existed.

Ruan drew a small square in the corner of his notebook, then shaded half of it.

Zeth looked away before Ruan could catch him watching.

The morning divided itself into sessions.

HR forms.

Tax forms.

Banking details.

An explanation of leave, though nobody looked brave enough to imagine taking it.

A talk from legal about confidentiality agreements. Priya's posture changed during that one. She did not sit straighter because she was already straight. She simply became more present, like a blade being taken from its cover.

A man from compliance told them that Apex did not punish mistakes quickly if mistakes were disclosed quickly.

Zeth wrote:

Mistakes must confess before people do.

Then he scratched a line through it because it sounded too dramatic for a notebook that might be seen by HR.

At 09:46, the lights dimmed automatically.

Nandi smiled at the room.

"Before we break for tea, we have a short welcome message from Mr Duma."

The screen went black.

Then Diego Duma filled it.

This time not a still photograph. Moving. Breathing. Smiling.

"Good morning, Apex interns."

His voice settled into the room before the speakers had finished adjusting.

Zeth's hand closed around the pen.

"You are joining us at a very important time," Diego said. "Across Africa, institutions are learning that the future does not arrive all at once. It arrives through systems. Through records. Through trust. Through young people willing to build what previous generations only imagined."

The room listened.

Zeth tried to listen with it.

He heard glass.

Not the glass wall of the orientation room.

Older glass.

Thicker.

A man speaking behind it, voice smooth one moment and sharp the next.

His father's hand came down on a desk.

Not hard enough to break it.

Hard enough to make a child stop breathing.

"Ayanda, take him out."

Was that his father's voice?

Or someone else's?

There had been papers on the desk. A chair knocked slightly aside. Menzi Mnguni's shoulders, broad and shaking with anger he was trying not to let become fear.

Diego's voice continued from the screen.

"At Duma Genesis Technologies, and here at Apex Sentinel Systems, we believe responsible innovation begins with disciplined curiosity."

Disciplined curiosity.

Zeth tasted metal.

The memory moved away from him before he could grab it.

That was how the old things behaved. They arrived without permission, left without explanation, and punished him for not being ready.

"Mr Mnguni?"

Zeth blinked.

Ruan was looking at him. Not openly. Sideways, polite enough to become deniable.

"You good?"

Zeth loosened his grip on the pen.

"Fine."

The pen had left a small blue point in the page where it had been pressed too hard.

On-screen, Diego smiled at all eleven of them.

"Welcome to Apex," he said. "Build carefully. The country will need what you make."

The video ended.

The lights came back.

Everyone clapped.

Zeth clapped too, because not clapping would have been information.

Nandi thanked the screen.

Then she told them they could take ten minutes for tea.

People stood. Chairs scraped. The room woke into conversation.

Zeth remained seated for half a second longer than everyone else.

Ruan stood beside him.

"That man could sell a firewall to a candle," he said.

Zeth looked at him.

Ruan's face was innocent.

Too innocent.

Zeth surprised himself by laughing.

It was small.

It helped.

"You always talk like that?" Zeth asked.

"Only when surrounded by values."

Ruan gestured toward the door.

"Tea?"

Zeth stood. "I need the bathroom."

"Corporate survival rule number one: never ignore infrastructure."

"You made that up."

"All rules are made up by someone. I am simply entering the market early."

Zeth left before he could laugh again.

The bathroom on the third floor was too clean. It smelled of lemon and cold water. The mirrors were broad and bright. They did not flatter him.

He stood before one of them and looked at the suit.

The jacket sat on his shoulders with the effort of a thing trying its best. The tie cut a dark line down his chest. The shirt collar had begun to tighten around his neck as if it knew too much. His face looked older than it had in the apartment mirror that morning. Not more mature. Just more visible.

He removed the tie first.

The relief embarrassed him.

Then he took off the jacket.

Underneath, the white shirt was acceptable. Still too formal, but no longer a full confession. He rolled the sleeves twice, then unrolled them because the fabric fought him. He rolled them again, slower. Better.

He folded the tie into the inside pocket of the jacket, then held the jacket over his arm.

Now he looked like a man who had survived a meeting.

Not like a man who had misunderstood one.

He stared at himself.

"You are not here to be dressed correctly," he whispered.

The bathroom door opened.

A man with a beard and a black hoodie walked in, saw Zeth speaking to the mirror, and made the quick generous decision to pretend he had not.

"Sharp," the man said, nodding at the jacket.

Zeth picked up his folder. "Thanks."

"No worries. Client meeting?"

"Intern."

The man paused with his hand under the dryer.

"Yoh," he said. "HR did you dirty."

Then he laughed, not unkindly, and washed his hands.

Zeth laughed because there was no other exit.

When he returned to the orientation room, the jacket over his arm felt louder than when it had been on his body.

He left it folded on the back of his chair and joined the others near the tea station outside the room. Coffee urns. Tea bags. Biscuits arranged with corporate optimism. Small cups that made everyone hold their hands like careful people.

Lesedi stood beside the sugar.

"You okay?" she asked.

Zeth looked at her.

"Yes."

"You had the face people get when a video uses the word innovation too many times."

He glanced toward the room.

"Maybe I am sensitive to innovation."

Lesedi smiled. "Healthy. It spreads if untreated."

He liked her immediately and distrusted that too.

Arno was telling a story about a school tour to Parliament. Tumi laughed at the right moments while scanning the room as if laughter was part of a larger strategy. Priya stood with another intern, already discussing whether the confidentiality agreement had overreached on personal devices.

Ruan appeared with two cups.

"Coffee," he said, passing one to Zeth.

Zeth took it. "I didn't ask."

"You looked like a person planning to ask too late."

"You always this helpful?"

"No. First day special."

The coffee was bad.

Zeth drank it anyway.

The next session began with the track placements.

Nandi tapped her tablet. "You will spend today together, then begin shadowing in your assigned teams from tomorrow. Some of you will rotate across departments over the next two weeks. Two of you are going directly into software engineering."

Zeth did not look up too quickly.

"Ruan Bekker."

Ruan lifted his hand lazily. "Still here."

"And Zeth Mnguni."

The room turned toward him with polite curiosity.

Zeth nodded once.

Software engineering.

The words entered him with a clean, dangerous joy.

He kept his face still.

Ruan leaned closer. "Bad luck, Mnguni."

"For who?"

Ruan made a thoughtful face. "Management, probably."

Zeth looked down before his smile could become public.

Nandi moved through the other placements. Data science. Compliance. Business analysis. Public-sector solutions. Communications. Infrastructure. Each intern received a future version of themselves and tried not to hold it too tightly.

After that came more rules.

Where they could go.

Where they could not go.

How to use the intranet.

How not to use the intranet.

How to report suspicious behaviour.

How suspicious behaviour included "unusual curiosity regarding unrelated systems."

Zeth wrote that phrase down exactly.

Unusual curiosity.

There was no such thing.

Only curiosity that had annoyed someone powerful enough to rename it.

By 10:52, the jacket on the back of his chair had become a separate person in the room. It sat behind him like an uncle waiting to complain. Every time Zeth shifted, the plastic garment cover whispered from where he had folded it underneath, because KB had insisted the suit deserved protection even if the world did not.

He needed to put it in the car.

Not because anyone cared.

Because he did.

That was worse.

He waited for a pause between sessions. Nandi stepped outside to take a call. Interns opened laptops, checked phones, whispered, stretched. Zeth looked at the door, then at Ruan.

Ruan was drawing another square.

"What time is break?" Zeth asked.

Ruan looked up. "Now-ish."

"No, I mean official break."

"Official?"

"I need to get something from my car."

Ruan's eyebrows lifted with a softness that was almost mercy.

Before he could answer, the hoodie man from the bathroom walked past carrying a laptop and a mug that said I COMMIT, THEREFORE I AM.

Zeth turned to him without thinking.

"Sorry. What time is break?"

The man stopped.

He looked at Zeth.

Then at the badge.

Then at the jacket.

"Break?" he said.

"Yes."

"My bru, this is not high school. If you need to go, go. Just don't disappear so long we have to make a ticket."

Ruan coughed into his fist.

Lesedi turned away, but her shoulders betrayed her.

Zeth felt heat rise from his collar into his face.

"Sharp," he said.

The hoodie man pointed at him with the mug. "Also, don't say sharp too much in meetings. They will make you do minutes."

Then he continued down the corridor.

This time everyone near enough laughed.

Zeth laughed too.

It was either that or die standing.

"He has a point," Ruan said.

"About high school?"

"About minutes. Terrible fate."

Zeth picked up his jacket, tie hidden inside it, and took his folder because leaving documents unattended felt like leaving a child near traffic.

"I'll be back."

"I will tell them you went to fight the dress code."

"Tell them I won."

"Brave. Premature, but brave."

Zeth left the orientation room before Ruan could make him smile again.

The corridor outside had quieted. Doors stood closed along both sides, each with a small sign and an access panel beside it. Software Engineering. Boardroom 3A. Public Sector Solutions. Server Operations. Records Intake.

Zeth slowed at the last one.

Records Intake.

The sign was plain. The access panel beside the door glowed red.

Behind the frosted glass, figures moved. Not clearly. Shadows. A trolley. Someone carrying what looked like document boxes.

Zeth looked away.

Unusual curiosity.

He kept walking.

At the lifts, only one button worked for his badge. Ground. The basement button ignored him. He pressed ground and told himself he could walk from there to parking. The lift arrived empty.

On the ground floor, the lobby had changed texture. Morning rush had ended. Reception moved at a lower hum. Security stood near the gates speaking softly to a courier. A woman at the far side of the lobby seemed to be reading the building directory.

No.

Not reading.

Photographing.

She stood with her phone held low, angled just enough that it could be mistaken for checking a message if nobody looked properly. Her hair was pulled back. She wore a cream blouse under a dark jacket, jeans clean enough to pass a casual office rule, and a visitor sticker placed slightly crooked near her collarbone.

Zeth noticed the sticker first.

VISITOR

Under it, in smaller print:

L. DLAMINI

She noticed him noticing.

Her phone lowered immediately.

"If you are security," she said, "your suit is losing discipline."

Zeth stopped.

He still had the jacket over his arm.

"If you are a visitor," he said, "your sticker is losing altitude."

She looked down at the crooked sticker, then back at him.

"It is my first day being stickered."

"It shows."

"And you are?"

"Going to my car."

Her eyes moved over the jacket and folder.

"With evidence?"

"Laundry."

"At ten in the morning?"

"Apex values efficiency."

She smiled then.

Not politely.

Properly.

It changed her face quickly and then vanished, as if she had remembered she was doing something else with it.

"Lindi," she said.

"Your sticker said that already."

"Rude to trust stickers before people."

"Zeth."

"Does your badge say that too?"

"Unfortunately."

She leaned half a step closer, close enough that he saw a small ink mark on the side of her thumb. Not a tattoo. Pen. Someone who wrote by hand and forgot to wash all the evidence away.

"First day, Zeth?"

"What gave it away?"

"You still believe the arrows."

He glanced toward the wayfinding sign beside the lift.

Basement parking pointed left.

Visitor meeting rooms pointed right.

Records and operations pointed through a restricted corridor behind reception.

Lindi's body was angled toward the restricted corridor.

"And you don't?" he asked.

"I believe arrows were drawn by people who wanted fewer questions."

"That sounds inefficient."

"Only if answers are the point."

They looked at each other for one second too long.

The lobby noise thinned around them.

Zeth became aware of his own hand tightening on the jacket. Lindi became aware of his awareness. Her chin lifted slightly, defensive before amused.

"You work here?" he asked.

"Today I am being received here."

"That is not an answer."

"It is a beautiful answer. You just wanted information."

"Most answers contain some."

"Not in corporate buildings."

He should have left.

He did not.

"Why are you photographing the directory?"

Her expression did not change enough to count as panic. Good discipline. Bad luck.

"Why are you carrying your jacket like it testified against you?"

"Heat."

"The air conditioning is fighting for its life."

"Fashion heat."

"Ah." She nodded gravely. "Dangerous."

Zeth looked toward reception. The security guard had finished with the courier and was turning.

Lindi followed his gaze.

"Do you know where Media Liaison is?" she asked, louder now, performing for the room.

Zeth looked at the directory.

Media Liaison was not listed.

He looked back at her.

"Second floor," he said.

She blinked once.

"Thank you."

"The lift won't take you there without the right access."

"Then I suppose I should find the right person."

"Or the right arrow."

That smile came again, faster this time.

"Careful, Zeth. First days are when buildings decide what kind of person you are."

"I thought people did that."

"People are slower."

"Mr Mnguni?"

The receptionist's voice cut across the lobby.

Zeth turned.

"You need the parking gate opened?"

He looked back.

Lindi was already walking away from the directory, not toward the visitor meeting rooms and not quite toward reception. She moved like someone who had learned that hesitation was louder than footsteps.

At the corner near the lifts, she glanced back once.

Then she was gone.

Zeth stood there with his suit jacket over his arm and the feeling that he had just misplaced a question.

"Mr Mnguni?" the receptionist repeated.

"Yes," he said. "Please."

The trip to the basement took less than two minutes.

He placed the jacket and tie on the back seat of the Polo, then stood beside the open door longer than necessary.

The car smelled faintly of dashboard polish, old fabric, and KB's cigarettes, even though KB swore he never smoked inside vehicles unless the vehicle had personally offended him. The smell steadied Zeth. It reminded him that the building above him was not the whole world. There was still a yard in Soweto. A grass mat. Gogo's hand in his. Thobile's mouth saying his name like it had opinions.

He looked at himself in the driver's window.

White shirt.

Dark trousers.

No tie.

No jacket.

Still too formal.

Less trapped.

"Good," he said.

The basement did not answer.

On his way back, the fingerprint scanner accepted him again.

Fast.

Too fast.

The receptionist did not notice. Why would she? The scanner was supposed to accept people. A door opening was not a mystery to someone whose job was to watch doors open all day.

When Zeth returned to the orientation room, Nandi was mid-sentence.

"...so please keep your temporary cards visible at all times. Permanent access will be finalised after departmental sign-off."

Zeth slipped into his seat.

Ruan leaned toward him without looking away from the front.

"Victory?"

"Conditional surrender."

"Very corporate."

On the table in front of each intern, Nandi had placed a new plastic card. Unlike the paper badge at Zeth's chest, these were hard white cards with the Apex logo in the corner and a silver chip embedded near the bottom.

"These are your temporary access cards," Nandi said. "They are restricted to the lobby, third floor common areas, cafeteria, and your assigned department once your supervisor activates the placement. Do not lend them

to anyone. Do not tailgate through secure doors. Do not test doors. I know some of you are technical. Consider this my loving HR warning."

Some of the room laughed.

Zeth did not.

Do not test doors.

The cards moved around the table as interns checked names.

Ruan lifted his and inspected it against the light.

"Disappointing," he said. "I was hoping for a laser."

Priya, across from him, said, "Legal would never."

"Legal fears joy."

"Legal fears liability."

"Same family."

Zeth picked up his card.

It was cold from the table.

ZETH MNGUNI

INTERN COHORT 2011

TEMPORARY ACCESS

It looked ordinary.

Ordinary was beginning to feel personal.

Nandi directed them to tap the card against the reader beside the orientation room door one by one. The reader would confirm activation and print their department stickers from the small label printer on the side table.

Arno went first.

Green light.

BUSINESS ANALYSIS

Tumi.

Green light.

CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS

Priya.

Green light.

LEGAL AND COMPLIANCE

Lesedi.

Green light.

DATA SCIENCE

The room turned the process into casual conversation. People joked about how serious the machine sounded. Someone asked if infrastructure got better coffee. Someone else said legal probably had the best chairs.

Ruan went before Zeth.

He tapped the card.

Green light.

The small screen blinked:

RUAN BEKKER

ACCESS PROFILE: PROVISIONAL INTERN

TRACK: SOFTWARE ENGINEERING

The label printer coughed out a sticker.

Ruan peeled it off and stuck it carefully to the back of his notebook instead of the card.

Nandi sighed.

"Mr Bekker."

"Testing adhesion."

"Test compliance."

"Yes, ma'am."

He moved aside, smiling.

Zeth stepped forward.

The card felt heavier than it was.

He tapped it against the reader.

Green light.

The screen blinked.

MNGUNI, ZETH

ACCESS PROFILE: PROVISIONAL INTERN

Then the screen flickered.

For less than a second, the letters changed.

Not all of them.

Enough.

ACCESS CLASS: ARCHIVE / LEGACY

Zeth stopped breathing.

The screen corrected itself.

TRACK: SOFTWARE ENGINEERING

The label printer made a small, cheerful sound.

A sticker slid out.

Nandi reached for it.

"Software engineering," she said.

Zeth looked at the screen.

It looked back with ordinary words.

"Mr Mnguni?"

He took the sticker.

"Thank you."

His voice worked. That surprised him.

He returned to his seat.

Ruan was busy trying to align his sticker perfectly on the temporary card while Nandi watched him with tired disappointment. Lesedi was laughing softly into her hand. Priya was reading the back of the card for fine print.

No one had seen it.

Or no one had reacted.

Zeth placed the card on the table.

White plastic.

Black letters.

Silver chip.

Temporary access.

He tried to make the wrong line blur. Tried to tell himself it had been a screen refresh. A loading artifact. Residue from someone else's access profile. A meaningless flicker in a cheap reader attached to an expensive building.

All reasonable explanations.

Again.

His fingertip warmed where it had touched the first scanner downstairs.

Nandi began explaining lunch vouchers.

Ruan whispered something about whether vouchers counted as currency under legal tender law. Priya heard him and whispered that she would not represent him. The room laughed again, alive with people learning how to become colleagues.

Zeth looked at his card.

The card had corrected itself.

Zeth remembered the wrong line.

Panel Door Preview: Orientation

A rotating selection of 3 live Panel Door page-scene(s) from Chapter 3.
The full visual set lives in the Panel Door download.

Page 07 - Diego On Screen



The voice arrived polished. The memory arrived through glass.

#Bekbeka #Zeths #DiegoDuma #MenziMnguni #Genesis #PanelDoor

Page 09 - Not High School



Freedom arrived wearing a hoodie and saying go.

#Bekbeka #Zeths #Akusonalsikole #OfficeComedy #ApexSentinelSystems #PanelDoor

Page 11 - The Wrong Arrow



Some people follow arrows. Some ask who painted them.

#Bekbeka #Zeths #LindiDlamini #CorporateThriller #ZethMnguni #PanelDoor

Chapter 4: The Locked Folder

The tie stayed in the Polo.

Zeth stood in the parking basement the next morning with his hand on the car door and looked at it lying across the passenger seat like an old accusation.

Dark blue.

Slightly shiny at the knot from years of other men's fingers.

Folded once because he could not make himself throw it onto the seat like ordinary cloth.

He had worn the suit trousers again, because they were the best trousers he owned, but the jacket stayed on the back seat and the shirt collar stayed open. It made him feel unfinished. Exposed. Like he had walked out of the house halfway through becoming respectable.

The email had said casual.

Apex had meant casual the way rich people meant safe.

Chinos. Golfers. Clean sneakers that looked cheap only if a person had never had to check prices.

Engineers had meant something else entirely.

The day before, a man had walked past Zeth in cargo shorts, socks with sandals, and a hoodie with a faded logo for a conference in Berlin. Nobody had stopped him. Nobody had asked if he had lost a fight with a laundry basket. Nobody had checked whether his mother had tried harder.

He had access.

That was the thing.

A person could walk into the fifth floor dressed like he had given up on mirrors if the system loved his card.

Zeth looked at the temporary white card clipped to his belt.

MNGUNI, ZETH

SOFTWARE ENGINEERING

Plain black letters.

No wrong line.

No hidden class.

No ghost in the plastic.

He had checked it six times in the lift at Maboneng before leaving. Once in the car before starting the engine. Twice at red robots, which was stupid and dangerous, so he had forced himself to stop.

Temporary access.

That was all.

He closed the Polo and locked it.

The car chirped once.

The sound bounced around the basement.

A security camera in the corner turned slowly.

Zeth told himself it was not turning toward him.

That helped for almost three seconds.

By the time he reached reception, Apex was already awake.

The lobby did not look busy in a normal way. It looked choreographed. Coffee cups moved between hands. Shoes clicked over polished stone. A woman in a black dress spoke into a headset without changing expression. Two men in suits laughed at a private joke with the careful volume of people who wanted witnesses to know they were relaxed.

The turnstiles waited in a neat row.

Glass arms.

Black pads.

Green lights for the approved.

Red for the confused.

Zeth placed his card against the reader.

Green.

The gate opened.

No flicker.

He placed his finger on the scanner beside the second gate because the guard nodded toward it.

Green again.

Fast.

Too fast, but no faster than yesterday.

"Morning, Mr Mnguni," the guard said.

Zeth lifted his hand from the scanner.

"Morning."

The guard had not looked at his ID.

He had not checked a clipboard.

He had just known the name from the screen.

Reasonable.

Systems displayed names.

That was their job.

Zeth stepped through.

Ruan Bekker was waiting near the lifts with a paper cup in one hand and a pastry in the other, dressed like he had discovered a loophole in the idea of effort.

Loose jacket.

No tie.

Shirt open at the throat.

Hair arranged with the careless precision of money pretending it had not met a mirror.

"There he is," Ruan said. "The man has adapted."

Zeth looked down at his own shirt.

"I am still dressed."

"Progress is not always dramatic."

Ruan offered him the pastry.

Zeth looked at it.

"What is that?"

"Breakfast."

"It has icing."

"I said what I said."

Zeth took it because refusing food was disrespectful and because his stomach had been pretending discipline was nutrition since five.

The lift opened.

They stepped inside with a woman carrying three laptops, a man with a yoga mat under one arm, and an older accountant who wore a waistcoat like it contained moral authority.

Ruan leaned toward Zeth.

"For the record, if we see an engineer wearing shoes today, I will salute."

Zeth kept his face straight.

"You cannot salute in a lift."

"Of course you can. You just have to commit."

The woman with the laptops smiled at the floor.

The accountant did not.

On the third floor, most of yesterday's interns got out.

Lesedi waved as she moved toward the data science section with a notebook hugged to her chest. Priya walked beside Nandi Mthembu, already asking a question that contained three smaller questions inside it. Tumi was on her phone, laughing softly at something that did not sound funny enough to deserve it.

Arno glanced back at Zeth and Ruan.

"Good luck in the basement," he said.

"Fifth floor," Ruan said.

"Same spirit."

The lift doors closed before Ruan could answer.

He nodded slowly.

"I am beginning to think Arno was raised by motivational posters and unsecured loans."

Zeth bit into the pastry to hide the laugh.

The fifth floor opened into a different Apex.

The third floor had been glass and welcome speeches. The fifth had carpet tiles, whiteboards, screens, old coffee, low voices, and the restless hum of machines pretending not to work hard.

Nobody looked up properly when the lift opened.

That unsettled Zeth more than staring would have.

On the third floor, people had assessed him. Shoes. Shirt. Accent. Watch. Confidence. Which school. Which route in. Which people he knew.

On the fifth floor, people assessed screens.

A man in a Springbok jersey stood at a whiteboard drawing boxes inside boxes. A woman with silver headphones typed with both hands and one raised eyebrow. Someone laughed from behind a monitor and said, "No, if finance built it, the button is probably decorative." Two engineers argued about a server with the emotional intensity of family inheritance.

There were no motivational posters.

There was a laminated sign above the printer that read:

IF IT IS ON FIRE, LOG A TICKET BEFORE SCREAMING.

Zeth liked the fifth floor immediately.

Then he remembered the card.

He stopped liking anything.

A man rose from a desk near the far window.

He was not tall, but he carried stillness like height. Early forties, maybe. Tired face. Closely cut hair. Shirt sleeves rolled to the elbow. No tie. No jacket. A coffee mug in his hand that looked old enough to have a pension.

He looked at Ruan first, then Zeth.

Not shoes.

Not shirt.

Eyes.

"Bekker. Mnguni."

His voice was quiet enough that people had to listen properly.

"Yes, sir," Zeth said.

Ruan lifted the pastry. "Present and lightly sugared."

The man's gaze moved to the pastry.

Then back to Ruan.

"I am Sizwe Khumalo. For the next two weeks, I am your assigned supervisor. After that, if you survive me, someone with a nicer chair will decide where to put you."

Zeth straightened.

"Good morning, sir."

"Don't sir me unless there is a client in the room or you are about to confess."

Ruan pointed at Zeth with the pastry.

"He is going to struggle with that."

"I can see."

Sizwe turned and walked without checking if they followed.

They followed.

He took them past a row of desks where people had arranged their lives into small, defensive territories. Coffee mugs. Old rugby tickets. A toy robot. A photo of two children. A stack of manuals with folded corners. One desk had nothing on it except a keyboard, two monitors, and a single green apple.

Zeth tried not to look too hungry at the monitors.

At the far end of the floor, a glass door carried a small sign:

SECURE DEVELOPMENT

Under it, in smaller letters:

AUTHORISED PERSONNEL ONLY

Sizwe tapped his card.

Green.

The door unlocked.

He held it open.

"Cards," he said.

Ruan tapped first.

Green.

"Mr Provisional Intern," Sizwe said.

Ruan stepped through. "My family is very proud."

Zeth touched his card to the reader.

For one breath, his stomach went cold.

Green.

Nothing else.

The door clicked.

Zeth entered.

Inside, the air was colder. The desks were arranged in two long islands. A cabinet of old hardware stood against one wall: routers, access pads, broken card readers, barcode scanners, small black boxes with labels curling at the edges. On another wall, a screen showed status bars for systems with names that meant nothing to Zeth yet.

Green.

Green.

Yellow.

Green.

One red square blinked, then vanished.

Zeth looked away before his face could reveal that he wanted to know why.

"Rule one," Sizwe said, stopping beside two empty desks. "You are not here to impress me."

Ruan put a hand on his chest. "That is a personal blow."

"Rule two. You are not here to prove you belong."

Zeth did not move.

Sizwe looked at him for half a second longer than he had looked at Ruan.

"Rule three. If you can see something, it does not mean you should touch it."

Nandi's voice came back from yesterday.

If you can access something, that does not mean you are authorised to use it.

Zeth nodded.

"Yes, Si..."

He caught himself.

"Yes."

Sizwe's mouth did something that was not quite a smile.

"You learn fast."

"Only when threatened."

Ruan turned to him.

"There he is."

Sizwe pointed at the desks.

"Those are yours for now. Workstations are locked down. No external drives. No personal email. No software installs. No moving code out of the sandbox. No testing clever ideas on production systems. If you don't know whether something is production, assume it is and leave it alone."

He placed two thin folders on the nearest desk.

"Your login details are inside. Change the temporary password. Do not write your new one under the keyboard. Do not write it on a sticky note. Do not tell each other. Do not make it your surname plus the year. People with

degrees do this every week and then act wounded when attacked by reality."

Ruan opened his folder.

"Can I make it Arno's surname plus the year?"

"Only if you want Arno to become your threat model."

"He already is."

Sizwe looked at Zeth.

"You are laughing inside. That counts as workplace integration."

Zeth looked down.

"I was not."

"Then we have bigger problems."

For the first time since entering Apex, Zeth felt the tension in his shoulders shift by a fraction.

Not gone.

Just moved.

A woman appeared behind Sizwe with a tablet in one hand and a black notebook tucked under her arm.

She was in her thirties, with sharp eyes, short natural hair, and a green cardigan over a plain black top. She wore no badge lanyard. Her access card was clipped to her waistband like a weapon she did not need to display.

"You started without me," she said.

"They survived the first four minutes," Sizwe said. "I was encouraged."

The woman looked at Ruan, then Zeth.

"Mira Naidoo."

Zeth stood.

Ruan half-stood, realised it looked strange, then committed and stood fully.

Mira watched this without expression.

"Sit," she said.

They sat.

"I handle security analysis for this unit. Some of what passes through these systems is sensitive. Some of it is boring and sensitive, which is worse, because people become careless when they are bored."

She placed the tablet on Zeth's desk, not gently.

"If you wander, we see it. If you test a door because you are curious, we see it. If you tell yourself you were only looking, we see that too."

Ruan glanced at Sizwe.

"Is this still orientation or have we entered the threat portion?"

"All orientation is threat," Mira said.

Ruan nodded.

"Efficient."

Mira did not smile.

Zeth liked her less than Sizwe and trusted her more than most people on the floor.

That made him uncomfortable.

Sizwe handed each of them a printed sheet.

"Low-risk tickets. Internal tool bugs. You will work in the development sandbox. Read the ticket. Reproduce the issue. Fix only the issue. Write a short note on what you changed and why. Commit to your training branch. Nothing clever."

He paused.

"Especially you."

Zeth looked up.

"I have not done anything."

"That is why I am catching you early."

Ruan whispered, "Reputation speedrun."

Zeth ignored him.

The workstation was older than he expected.

Not broken. Not bad.

Just ordinary.

A black Dell tower under the desk. Two monitors, both slightly different sizes. A keyboard with shiny spacebar edges. Windows 7 with a corporate login screen and a wallpaper of the Apex logo floating over blue light.

Zeth typed the temporary password from the folder.

The system made him change it.

He made the new password ugly enough to offend memory.

The desktop loaded slowly.

Icons appeared one by one.

Apex Dev Portal

SentinelDesk

SecureDocs

Sandbox Shell

Eclipse

SQL Client

Build Monitor

Zeth read the names without touching anything.

Ruan was already clicking.

Sizwe made a sound in his throat.

Ruan froze.

"I clicked the portal."

"Was that your ticket?"

"My ticket requires the portal."

"Read the whole ticket before your fingers become leadership."

Ruan removed his hand from the mouse with ceremony.

Zeth opened his ticket.

SD-18472

Training Sandbox: Asset Register Search Returns Duplicate Rows

Priority: Low.

Assigned to: Mnguni, Zeth.

Environment: Dev / Training.

Description:

When searching the internal asset register by partial serial number, duplicate records appear for retired access hardware. Expected behaviour: show the most recent active record only.

Do not modify production data.

Do not alter role filters.

Do not update records outside the training dataset.

Zeth read it twice.

Then a third time because Sizwe had said not to prove anything.

The bug was simple.

Too simple.

It smelled like a test.

He opened the dev portal. Slow login. A security banner. A second password prompt. Then a dashboard with grey tabs and too many acronyms.

Ruan leaned back in his chair.

"My ticket says the cafeteria voucher export crashes when the surname contains an apostrophe."

Zeth looked at him.

"That is not a software bug. That is a cultural crime."

Ruan placed a hand over his heart.

"On behalf of O'Neill, O'Connor, and O'Malley families everywhere, I accept your support."

"You are Afrikaans."

"International solidarity."

The first real laugh escaped Zeth before he could stop it.

It was small.

Still his.

Across the room, Mira looked up.

The laugh died.

Ruan lowered his voice.

"She has admin rights over joy."

Zeth shook his head, but his mouth tried to betray him.

He opened the code.

The asset register lived in a training branch of an internal Java application that looked as if three generations of developers had argued with it and all of them had lost. There were tidy files beside old files. Clear comments beside cursed ones. A function that did one thing. Another that did one thing, then five more things, then apologised in a comment from 2007.

Zeth forgot the room.

That was the dangerous part.

At first he was careful because he knew he was being watched.

Then the code began speaking.

Not beautifully.

Never that.

Code was not music. People who said that had never spent three hours looking for a missing semicolon in a language that pretended to be helpful.

But code had rhythm.

It had habit.

It had lies.

The duplicate rows were not coming from the search function. They came from a join against the access hardware table. Retired devices remained linked to their old personnel assignments, and the display layer was filtering active users but not active hardware.

He wrote down the path.

```
`AssetRegisterSearch.java`
```

```
`AccessHardwareRepository`
```

```
`status != RETIRED`
```

Then he stopped.

He made himself reproduce the bug first.

Search.

Duplicate rows.

Screenshot saved to the training issue system, not desktop.

He checked the test data.

He checked the query.

He changed one filter.

Then wrote a small test because Thabo had once said a kick you could not repeat was luck, not skill. Zeth had extended that logic to almost everything.

Run.

Fail.

Good.

Fix.

Run.

Pass.

Run the broader training suite.

Pass.

He looked at the time.

Forty-three minutes.

Too fast.

He sat back.

Ruan was staring at his own screen with an expression of cheerful offence.

"Apostrophe bug?" Zeth asked.

"Worse."

"How?"

"They fixed apostrophes by deleting apostrophes."

Zeth turned slowly.

Ruan pointed at a line of code.

There it was.

```
`surname.replace('','')`
```

Zeth stared.

"They made O'Connor into OConnor."

"They made Ndlovu-Mthembu into NdlovuMthembu too."

"That is not in your ticket."

"No. My ticket is the crash."

"Then fix the crash."

Ruan looked wounded.

"And leave the names disrespected?"

Zeth heard Sizwe without turning.

"Fix the ticket, Bekker."

Ruan closed his mouth.

Sizwe had not looked up from his desk.

Zeth faced his own monitor again.

He opened the commit window.

His fingers hovered.

The card line rose in his mind.

ARCHIVE / LEGACY

He closed the window.

Not because of the line.

Because something in the broader test output had moved when it should have stayed still.

He scrolled back.

Most of the logs were ordinary noise.

Build paths.

Warnings.

Deprecated libraries.

Test dataset resets.

Authentication stubs.

Role simulation.

Then a line he had not noticed the first time:

```
`WARN RoleResolver - inherited role not found in active profile:  
archive_legacy_reader`
```

Zeth stopped.

The cursor blinked.

The line sat in the log like it had been waiting for him to become quiet enough.

He did not touch the keyboard.

He read the line again.

```
`archive_legacy_reader`
```

Legacy.

Not the same words.

Close enough to make the skin at the back of his neck tighten.

He looked around.

Ruan was muttering at the apostrophe problem.

Sizwe was on the phone, turned toward the window, saying, "No, I understand what the client requested. I am saying the client requested nonsense with confidence."

Mira was not at her desk.

Zeth looked back at the screen.

The warning had occurred during setup for the test environment, before his ticket's query ran. It had nothing to do with duplicate asset records.

He knew that.

He also knew that logs were full of unrelated nonsense. Legacy systems complained the way old houses creaked. Not every sound was a message. Sometimes a warning was only a warning.

He moved the mouse to the scroll bar.

Stopped.

No exploring.

No wandering.

If you can see something, it does not mean you should touch it.

He copied nothing.

He opened his notebook.

On a clean line beneath the ticket notes, he wrote:

`RoleResolver - archive\_legacy\_reader`

Then under it:

`Why on intern sandbox?`

He stared at the question.

It looked too guilty.

He drew a box around it to make it look like ordinary technical curiosity.

That made it worse.

He turned the page.

"You finished?"

Mira's voice came from behind him.

Zeth's hand closed over the notebook.

Too fast.

He knew it as he did it.

Mira's eyes moved from his hand to the screen.

Not suspicious.

Worse.

Interested.

"The duplicate search issue?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Already?"

"It was a filter."

"Most things are. People still build careers around finding the wrong one."

She leaned past him, close enough that he smelled soap, coffee, and something like rain on wool.

"Show me."

Zeth opened the test run.

Showed the failing case.

Showed the filter.

Showed the passing result.

He kept his voice even. He did not rush. He did not overexplain. He did not look at the earlier log line.

Mira listened without nodding.

When he finished, she said, "Commit it."

He did.

The commit message was plain.

`SD-18472 filter retired access hardware from asset search`

He clicked submit.

The training branch accepted it.

Mira watched the screen until the green check appeared.

"Good."

She straightened.

Zeth breathed.

Then the left panel refreshed.

It should have stayed on the asset register project.

Instead, for less than a second, the project tree expanded by itself.

A folder appeared under the root.

Grey icon.

Locked symbol.

Partial label.

`CIVIC-BBX`

Below it, one subfolder loaded before the tree collapsed.

`media\_flags`

Then a file name.

Only a fragment.

`R\_NKOSI.watch`

The panel snapped back.

Asset register.

Training branch.

Ordinary folders.

Zeth's mouth went dry.

He had not clicked it.

He had not searched for it.

He had not done anything.

Mira had seen.

He knew because she had stopped breathing too.

Not much.

Mira Naidoo did not seem like a person who gave away whole reactions.

But there was a pause.

Small.

Sharp.

Then her hand reached past him and took the mouse.

"Move."

Zeth moved his chair back.

Ruan looked over.

"Everything okay?"

"Eyes on your ticket," Mira said.

Ruan's chair turned back immediately.

Mira clicked through the dev portal faster than Zeth could follow. Logs. Profile. Session. Role cache. Ticket link. Build trace. Her face did not change, but her fingers were angry.

Sizwe's phone call had gone quiet.

Zeth felt him looking from across the room.

Mira opened the issue queue.

The ticket Zeth had just completed sat at the top with a green status.

She selected it.

Deleted assignment.

Deleted training branch link.

Closed related logs.

The green check vanished from Zeth's queue.

The screen refreshed.

No active tickets assigned.

Zeth heard his own heartbeat.

"What was that folder?" he asked.

Mira did not look at him.

"A display artefact."

"It had a lock icon."

"Many artefacts are ambitious."

"It had a label."

Now she looked at him.

Her eyes were not angry.

That was the frightening thing.

They were measuring him.

"What did you click?"

"Nothing."

"Don't answer quickly."

Zeth swallowed.

"I ran the test suite for the ticket. I committed the fix. The project panel refreshed by itself."

"Did you search for that label?"

"No."

"Did you access a restricted directory?"

"No."

"Did you write anything down?"

His hand was still half over the notebook.

He moved it away.

Not because hiding was useless.

Because hiding badly was worse.

Mira saw the line.

`RoleResolver - archive\_legacy\_reader`

Her expression closed.

"That was in the log," Zeth said.

"I can read."

"Then you know I did not invent it."

The sentence left his mouth before discipline could catch it.

Across the room, Sizwe lowered the phone from his ear.

Mira did not blink.

"Mr Mnguni."

The formal address hit harder than shouting.

"This is not university. This is not a puzzle room. This is not a dojo where the smartest person wins because he sees the opening first."

Zeth's jaw tightened.

Dojo.

It was not a random word.

He was sure of that.

Mira continued.

"You are an intern in a secure development environment. Your responsibility is to complete assigned work and report anomalies through your supervisor.

You do not collect strange strings. You do not build private theories. You do not turn curiosity into evidence."

Ruan had gone very still at his desk.

The whole room had not stopped, but Zeth could feel the small circle around him changing pressure.

He placed both hands flat on the desk.

"I saw a permissions warning after an access-card anomaly yesterday."

Mira's face sharpened.

Sizwe's did not move.

Zeth knew, immediately, that he had said too much.

But the words were out.

And because they were out, pride tried to dress them as strategy.

"My card displayed an access class for less than a second during activation," he said. "Archive slash legacy. Then today the logs referenced archive legacy reader. Then a locked folder appeared in my project tree. I did not access it. I wrote down the warning because it is a pattern."

Silence.

Not the whole floor.

Just the part of the world that had become Zeth's desk.

Mira looked at Sizwe.

He looked back.

Something passed between them.

Not surprise.

Recognition.

That was worse.

Mira closed Zeth's notebook.

"You will not write that string again."

"It already appeared."

"And now it is handled."

"By deleting my ticket?"

"By removing a bad training assignment."

"The bug was real."

"Many real things are still not yours."

Zeth looked at the screen.

No active tickets assigned.

Clean.

As if he had done nothing.

That bothered him more than the warning.

"Do I get a new ticket?"

Mira's mouth almost softened.

Almost.

"No."

Ruan made a small sound, then pretended to cough.

Mira turned to him.

"Mr Bekker."

"Yes."

"How is the apostrophe issue?"

"Respectfully, still rude."

"Fix only the crash."

"Understood."

She turned back to Zeth.

"You will spend the rest of the morning reading the secure development guidelines."

"I read them yesterday."

"Then today you will enjoy the sequel."

She took the mouse again and opened a document from the desktop.

Apex Sentinel Secure Development Guidelines

Version 4.7.

Two hundred and thirty-one pages.

Zeth stared at it.

Ruan turned his face away so completely that his shoulders shook.

Mira leaned closer, voice lower.

"Listen carefully."

Zeth looked at her.

"If you see a strange folder, you report it. If you see a strange role, you report it. If a door opens that should not open, you do not step through to

prove you are observant. You step back."

"I stepped back."

"Good."

She straightened.

"Keep doing that."

For a second, he thought she was finished.

Then she added:

"And forget what you saw."

The words landed too neatly.

Not advice.

Not a warning.

A practiced sentence.

Mira walked away with his ticket gone and his notebook line still alive under the cover.

Zeth looked at the secure development guidelines.

Page one explained the purpose of access control.

He did not read it.

On the other side of the desk island, Sizwe Khumalo lifted his old coffee mug and took a sip without looking away from him.

Ruan waited until Mira was far enough.

Then he rolled his chair closer by two quiet pushes.

"I have questions," he whispered.

Zeth did not turn.

"Don't."

"I said I have them. I did not say I was brave enough to ask."

Zeth kept his eyes on the screen.

The document blurred.

Two hundred and thirty-one pages of policy sat in front of him, explaining the difference between access and permission.

His completed ticket was gone.

His branch link was gone.

The log view was gone.

The folder was gone.

But in his notebook, under the closed cover, the wrong line waited.

In his head, another line sat beside it.

`CIVIC-BBX`

The locked folder had disappeared.

It had still looked back.

Panel Door Preview: The Locked Folder

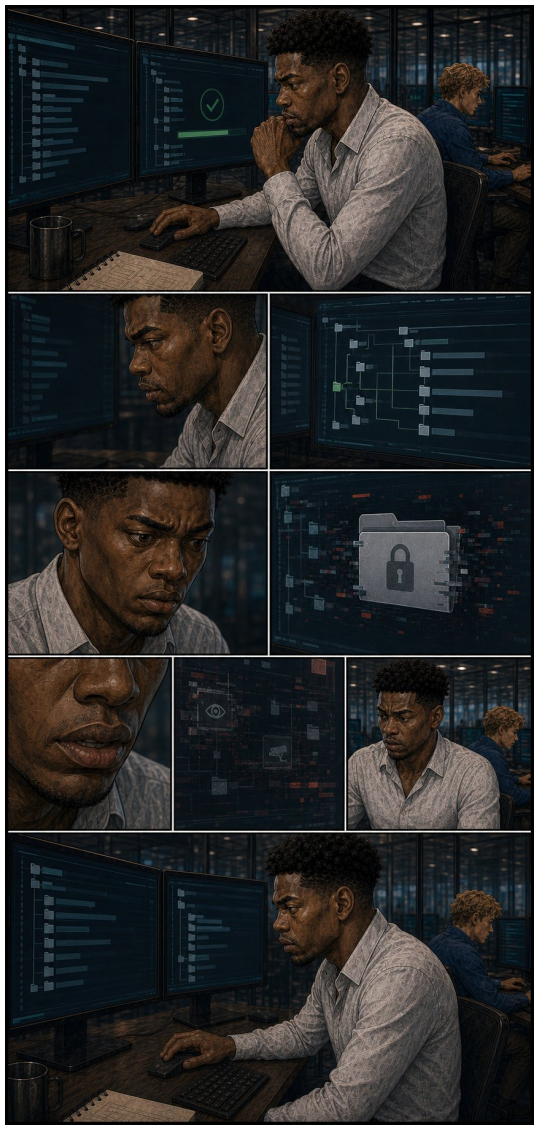
A rotating selection of 3 live Panel Door page-scene(s) from Chapter 4.
The full visual set lives in the Panel Door download.

Page 07 - Code Has Lies



Code did not sing. It lied in patterns.

#Bekbeka #Zeths #CodeHasLies #SoftwareEngineering #CorporateThriller #PanelDoor



The folder appeared like a mistake with a lock on it.

#Bekbeka #Zeths #CivicBBX #BlackBoxCivic #ApexSentinelSystems #PanelDoor

Page 11 - Mira Deletes The Ticket



Mira removed the ticket so cleanly it began to look imaginary.

#Bekbeka #Zeths #MiraNaidoo #AccessControl #CorporateThriller #PanelDoor