

CHAWL GIRL RISING

IF YOU'RE HUMAN, THERE'S HOPE.



"Like Ray Bradbury meets Kurt Vonnegut...I could barely put this book down."



goodreads

T. K. Young

Chawlgirl Rising

a novel by

T. K. Young

Chapter 1

Lucas

Location: Airspace above Jaipur, India

The Year 2118

Once on his orphanage's flickering tablet Lucas had found images of India's jade jungles, women wrapped in glowing saffron, the cobalt veins of rivers that coursed with the murmurs of the gods. Now as his shuttle roared toward yet another city's erasure that riot of vanished color haunted his mind. He wondered if it would make the relocations easier if he carried no memories, felt nothing for those he'd leave to die.

There wasn't enough water to produce enough food. There wasn't enough fuel to desalinate more water. And when the Energy Ministry identified a city that could no longer be sustained by the Hegemony's dwindling resources it sent Lucas and his fellow control officers to staunch the bleeding.

"Fifty kilometers to target," Karam called from the co-pilot's station.

"Bring up the visual," Lucas said from his jump seat in the shuttle's cabin.

Jaipur's scrawl flickered in Lucas's eyepiece. Stuffed between a ring of mountains, the city's outskirts were a mass of raw-boned concrete pierced by neo-mughal minarets. Further ahead, the setting sun throbbed between its skyscrapers like a spilled vein. A funnel of ash wept from the city's center, obscuring the water tower with the failed valve that had prevented the Ministry's traders from remotely withdrawing the tank's precious d-sal.

"How many people are still down there?" Lucas asked.

"At least two million," his analyst answered. "And Luke, most of the relocation trains have already left."

"So they already know they won't be saved. Jesus."

One minute to target, the pilot's artificially generated voice whispered through Lucas's ear piece.

"Bring us lower," Lucas said.

His pilot, an implant, throttled the shuttle into a long glide toward the water tower. Slumped unconscious in his seat, the boy controlled the craft's onboard computers with his mind. Pus leaked from the electronics glittering against the pilot's bare scalp, and he reeked of months unwashed. Only the slight flutter of his chest and the sweat pooling in the brown hollow of the boy's throat showed he still lived. Implantation was a cruel fate to choose, but agreeing to meld your mind with the Hegemony's computer systems was one of the only ways to guarantee your place in the relocation lotteries. And if the relocations didn't work, if even forced labor was not enough to increase the Hegemony's food and water production, then every citizen in Asia would face far worse.

The shuttle roared past photovoltaic windows clogged with tan film, wind turbines that chopped the air above mummified rooftop gardens. These desperate attempts at renewable energy hadn't been enough to pump more than a few thousand liters of d-sal the hundreds of kilometers from the coast, and Lucas had come to reclaim even that pitiful supply. He told himself that his duty was a mercy, lessening the burden on other cities that could still sustain themselves. This was the mantra that hardened him against despair.

Thirty seconds to target, the pilot said.

Black smoke clouded the shuttle windows. Lucas touched the bracelet that wrapped his forearm, felt the tingle of its processors drawing current from his muscle tissue. His eyepiece extrapolated a view based on the shuttle's current course, showing the water tower's blue bulb thrust above seared parkland and dry reservoirs. Before the planet's warming the tower would have looked out on an oasis of green and growing things in the middle of the bustling city. Now the land surrounding the tower was what the Hindus called shmashana, the bed of corpses.

Cremation fires roared everywhere Lucas looked. Rows of shrouded bodies lay waiting for their turn on the pyres while naked figures smeared with gray ash roamed the ranks of the dead and dying. These were the Aghori, the followers of Shiva. The ascetics shuffled through the chawls and alleyways of the Hegemony's cities, collecting the bodies of those who succumbed, performing the unclean antyesti funeral rituals, lighting the fires that sent the dead skyward along rivers of cloud. They'd given their lives to death, and death sustained them. To Lucas they were the most vile symptom of the world's cancer; if he was to turn executioner, it would be of these men who called themselves holy.

The shuttle broke into a patch of clear sky. Lucas zoomed in on the water tower's base, studying the thicket of piping erected by water pirates who'd overpowered the contingent of Hegemony Guardsmen ordered to protect the tower until he could arrive. Those who found no place in the relocation lotteries turned desperate, murderous. The people said that energy control officers existed merely to make sure the Hegemony's citizens obeyed the law while they died of thirst or starvation, and they were not wrong.

"The pump house looks clear," Lucas said. "I don't see anyone moving."

"That's strange," Karam said. "What would have scared off the pirates?"

"Set us down as close as possible," Lucas ordered.

Confirmed.

"Something's not right here Luke," Karam said.

"Nothing ever is anymore."

Karam flipped his eyepiece against his forehead and twisted back to face Lucas. The analyst was a squat, powerful man with a Nepali's barreled chest. Clay pockmarks covered his brown skin, and his sad eyes met Lucas's from under a thinning smear of black hair.

“Luke thermal imaging counts at least three thousand citizens still alive in the park,” the analyst said. “Once they realize what’s happening you’re not going to have much time before they reach you.”

From his jump seat, Lucas checked the pistol at his hip, the knife sheathed against his spine. He closed his eyes, feeling the cabin’s thick heat, the deck throb against his boots, the thumb-greased tablet he’d once cradled in childhood. Then he tapped out a pill from the vial he carried in his breast pocket and chewed. A long time ago he’d sworn an oath to protect his adopted country at all costs, and that duty was the only salvation that remained. One more life among the loss of millions would matter little.

“The d-sal in that tower can keep a lot of people alive somewhere else,” Lucas said. “Set us down.”

∞

Nithin

Jaipur

Nithin watched as the Hegemony shuttle sagged to the ground like some kind of rusted insect come to spread its disease. A fevered ache burned everywhere in him, as if in these last moments his wrecked body wanted only to join the legions of dead surrounding him and cast itself alight. But he would not succumb, not yet.

A control officer burst from the shuttle into the crumbling twilight, sprinting toward where Nithin crouched at the base of the water tower. A man who believed, as Nithin himself once had, that he did the right thing.

“Come,” Nithin called. “It is time.” But he received no answer from his sister, and when he turned to check she was no longer behind him. “Where have you gone?” he cried and limped out from the water tower’s shade. “Shakti!”

He found the girl surrounded by Aghori halfway down the tower’s hillside. They were stroking his sister’s skin with ash worm fingers, tottering on legs of sinew and swollen joints as they guided her away from him. The sadhus stank of death and lies, and Nithin drew his knife as he ran for them.

“She is not your god!” he screamed.

∞

Lucas

The air reeked of charcoal and rendered offal. Lucas skidded through the ashes, the soles of his boots melting in the savage heat that bled from the reservoir’s concrete. The water tower stood on a small rise, sixty meters tall and topped with a tattered green and blue flag bearing the Hegemony’s ashoka chakra insignia. Pirates had trampled the chain link fencing protecting the tower’s pump house, bludgeoned or shot the overwhelmed Guardsmen, and began drilling their piping into the tower’s base. But then, with trillions of liters of d-sal in their grasp, they’d fled.

Lucas drew his pistol and scanned the grounds. Half-finished welds squealed in the breeze. Flies chewed at the soldiers’ corpses.

“This happened hours ago,” he said to Karam. The microphone in Lucas’s bracelet captured his voice and broadcast the question to the shuttle. “What would have made them run?”

“Luke,” Karam’s voice filled his earpiece. “Citizens headed in our direction. We’ve got maybe three minutes.”

Lucas glanced back at the shuttle below him on the hill. Its tilt thrusters bunched on the dry earth, ready to fling the ungainly craft skyward at any moment.

“Copy,” Lucas said. “I’m going in.”

Failed attempts to force entry scarred the pump house’s iron doors. Graffiti covered the building, screaming Down with the Hegemony! Equal consumption for all! in Hindi and Kannada and English. Sweating, Lucas held his bracelet up to the building’s access scanner. A cracked display panel flashed to life and displayed a flickering code. Lucas tapped his bracelet.

“This is Energy Control Officer Lucas Seraph, Action Authorization ID 208416, to Ministry Control. Requesting access to Energy Control Junction 0412. Entry code 749731.”

A moment of electronic static, and then a voice from hundreds of kilometers away in the Spire whispered through his earpiece.

The action is confirmed.

The door groaned open, showering Lucas with rust. Gasping, he slipped into the pump house’s unbearable heat. Feeble lights flickered on as the door clanged shut behind him. Drenched in sweat, Lucas made his way down an iron staircase that spiraled into a cramped underground control room. Computer terminals and manual release valves studded the walls. He found the pump house’s access scanner set below a small corner monitor and lifted his bracelet. The monitor flashed and a keypad appeared. He typed in the diagnostic code that every control officer memorized when they joined the Ministry.

“Luke,” Karam’s voice crackled through his earpiece. “Thermals show at least four hundred on approach. We can’t stay here.”

“Something’s wrong...” Lucas said as he studied the diagnostic’s results.

The tower’s system showed no mechanical failures. Its valves were all functioning normally. But why hadn’t the facility responded to the Spire’s remote commands and emptied its

reserves? Lucas pulled up the facility's logs, found the traders' transfer requests. Each one had been overridden somehow, which meant...

He shoved away from the flickering monitor.

"Karam it's a trap," Lucas called. "You need to get out of here!"

A burst of static flooded his earpiece.

"Karam do you copy?"

But there was no response.

Scanning the valves jutting from the wall, Lucas found the pipe labeled "return" in Hindi and grasped the ring's simmering metal. He twisted with all his force but the valve wouldn't budge. He tried again, heaving against the rusted grips, but his sweat-slicked hands lost their hold and it was no use.

There had to be a tool, something he could use for leverage. He tore open a locker wedged against the far wall, found only a bucket stuffed with ancient magazines. There was nothing underneath the computers, nothing beneath the staircase. Finally, he found a wrench propped behind an intake pipe. Wedging the tool between the return valve's spokes and bracing his shoulder underneath it, he squatted and drove himself against the heavy spanner again and again until the valve's seal finally cracked and spun loose.

The pump house lights flashed a deep red. Pressure moaned through the pipes like the howl of the wounded earth itself. And as the deafening roar of trillions of liters rushing away from Jaipur filled his ears, Lucas ran back to the terminal and entered the shutdown code that would prevent any water from ever reaching the city again. The system accepted his command, and he turned for the shaking staircase.

"Tower 0412 is reserve positive," he shouted as he climbed. "Karam if you can hear me I'm coming out. But I hope to god you didn't wait for me!"

Nithin

“You cannot cry,” Nithin said. Squatting in front of her, he slipped his knife back into his belt and then took his sister’s arm. “Not ever, do you understand?”

He tried to pull Shakti back toward the water tower but she resisted, instead watching one of the dying Aghori as the man grasped and released palmfuls of dirt in some final reflex.

“I can still feel their minds,” Shakti said.

“That is being the old part of you,” he hissed. “That is not being real...choti behen look at me!”

He grasped his sister’s shoulders, studying what remained of her. Shakti’s bindi glimmered pitifully from the center of her forehead, while her large ears and two overlapping front teeth jutted from her narrow face. Age and starvation and disease could no longer touch her; she was just as she’d been when he’d taken her to Rama Setu twenty five years ago. The only difference was the depth in her eyes, the confusion and hurt his own desperation had imprinted upon her.

“You’re not being like the holy men,” Nithin said. “They would use you, make you something you’re not. Do you understand?”

“But the voices say that...”

Nithin slapped his sister hard across the face. Then he jerked Shakti back toward the water tower.

“The voices come from your head, not the gods,” Nithin said. He peered back through the thick haze toward where the dying sadhu still gathered fistfuls of earth. “The Aghori lie like everyone else. You must master the voices Shakti, or we have no hope at all.”

Lucas

The pump house door squealed shut behind him, and Lucas ran into the arms of the doomed. Hundreds of mourners surrounded the water tower, blocking any chance of escape.

“Sahib be giving us d-sal please!” they cried to him through cracked lips.

“Are you the relocation? Are we saved?”

“Please babaji take us with you!”

Sores and vitiligo puckered their skin. Ragged kameez hung from their matchstick limbs. Many wore no shoes, trailing bloody footprints as they shuffled over the razor wire, but he could not help them. During the first relocation the Ministry had learned that control officers who carried food and water were targets after they’d tracked a missing officer’s bracelet to a cannibal butcher hidden in one of the chawls.

“Karam do you copy?” Lucas said.

“Ferengi, white man! You have d-sal. You do!”

“And rice, chana. We must have food!”

Evening winds peppered Lucas’s face with ash and grit. The fading sun had drained all color from the sky. He couldn’t raise Karam, couldn’t see if the shuttle remained in the empty reservoir behind the crowd. Swollen eyes and twisted bodies filled his view.

“All of you will need to go to the railway station to check your place in the relocation lottery,” Lucas called. “Every citizen may choose between farming in Nepal, mining in Jharia, or working along the coasts at the d-sal plants and kelp factories.”

He'd memorized the words long ago but could put no feeling in them; most who faced him were beyond listening. A scoliotic woman crawled at his feet, scooping handfuls of dirt into her mouth. Beside her a father held up a small body smeared with the green paste of dysentery.

"Please," the man cried. "Please my son is sick."

"The relocations take only the high gentry!" a man in a stained mundu called from the crowd. "If you leave we'll starve!"

"The Hegemony Guard is standing by at the relocation staging areas," Lucas shouted. "I can promise you that..."

"The promises of the Ministry are nothing!" an angry voice snarled. A gaunt man wearing the rags of a coal miner's jumpsuit was shoving his way through the crowd to reach Lucas. Rivers of pale sweat ran down the man's emaciated skull, and he swayed as if he held himself upright through sheer willpower.

Electronics jutting out from the man's shaggy hair flickered a dull amber. Like the shuttle pilot, this man was implanted. And suddenly Lucas realized he was facing the man who'd set the trap.

"You tampered with the water tower's programming," Lucas said. "You tried to keep the d-sal here."

"Yes," the man answered.

"Why?"

"So that one like you would come and take my sister back with you."

The man pulled a teenaged girl beside him. His sister wore what had once been a beautiful red sari trimmed with gold brocade and a bindi in the center of her forehead. She seemed better fed than the others, though nervous fear pinched her narrow face.

"You've served the Hegemony," Lucas said to her brother. "You know I can't do that."

“I served lies!” the implant roared. “Here, let her show you.” The man pushed within arm’s reach of Lucas, revealing a bloody knife at his waist. Lucas drew his pistol in reflex, and an angry exclamation rippled through the mourners.

“Stay back,” Lucas ordered. “The Guard will process everyone’s relocation assignment in order. I promise you that you won’t be forgotten.”

“Tell them the lottery is complete,” the implant’s eyes bored into Lucas. “Tell them their fate has been sealed.”

“If you abandon your position in the lottery it’s your choice,” Lucas answered.

“I had no choice!” the implant screamed. “But you, you kill for them without knowing why.”

“The relocations have to be done,” Lucas said. “There’s no other way.”

“You must listen,” the implant hissed. The man’s sister tried to shrink away from his grip but he jerked her forward. “It will all end soon. My sister is the only one that matters. She is the embodiment of everything. Please! Take her with you!”

As the man’s shaking arm reached for Lucas, the girl seemed to shimmer with heat mirage. Lucas retreated slowly, keeping his pistol trained on the implant’s bloodshot eyes, until the pump house’s cinder block scraped against his shoulders.

“Keep your distance!” Lucas cried. “All of you.”

“You must know what it is you do,” the implant said. “You must see.” The man drew his knife, opened his sister’s hand and sliced her palm. “She will show you the truth of what we are,” the implant said. He pushed his sister’s bloody hand toward Lucas. “She will show everyone.”

Sweat pumped down Lucas’s face. His pistol felt weightless, inevitable. Ash rained down and clung to his skin. His duty was to destroy the hope of these few so that others could live. And he’d perform that duty until he fell because it was all that remained of him.

The implant's knife flashed in the twisting light of the cremation fires.

"Please," the girl cried in English. "Please."

Lucas's finger tightened on the trigger. And his pistol roared like the last wail of madness at the end of the world.

The story continues...

In a drought-ravaged post-apocalyptic future, the voices in Shakti's head tell her how to survive. But when hegemony control officer Lucas Seraph murders her brother as he shuts off the water supply to another doomed city, Shakti is thrown into a desperate flight to understand and control the frightening powers growing within her. Pursued by death cultists, mutilated rebels, and the demons in her own mind, Shakti's only way back, her last chance to save billions of lives from the burning of the world, lies bound in the past of the very man who pursues her across the wastes...

Out Now!

[Chawlgirl Rising is available for purchase on Amazon.](#)

About the Author

T.K. Young is the author of the post-apocalyptic science fiction thriller [Chawlgirl Rising](#), the sci fi short story collection [A Perfect Society](#), and the flash fiction collection [When We're Afraid](#). His work has appeared in numerous publications, including the Journal of Microliterature, Rosebud Magazine, and Hopewell Publications' Best New Writing anthology. He once played a mean lead guitar in one of MTV's Top 10 DC-area bands and spends the time in between books running a small marketing agency in Arlington, Virginia.

Follow him on Twitter [@authortkyoung](#) or [Goodreads](#).