

Chapter One

In three weeks, Noemi Vidal will die—here, in this very place.

Today is just practice.

Noemi wants to pray like the other soldiers she hears around her. The soft ebb and swell of their whispers sounds like waves against the shore. Zero-G even makes it look as if they're underwater—their hair fanning out from their heads, their booted feet swaying out from their launch harnesses as if caught by the tide. Only the dark star field outside the few small windows reveals how far they are from home.

The troops around her share a mix of faiths. Most of the People of the Book are seated close together: The Jews clasp hands with each other; the Muslims have been seated in one corner, to better pray toward the distant dot in the sky where Mecca lies. Like the other members of the Second Catholic Church, Noemi has her rosary beads in hand, the small stone-carved crucifix floating near her face. She clutches it tighter and wishes she didn't feel so hollow inside. So small. So desperate for the life she's already given up.

Every single one of them volunteered, but none of them is truly ready to die. Inside the troop ship, the air seems

electrified with terrible purpose.

Twenty days, Noemi reminds herself. I have twenty days left.

It's not much comfort to cling to. So she looks across the row at her best friend, one of the noncombatants who is here only to map potential trajectories for the Masada Run. Not to die in the process. Esther Gatson's eyes are shut in fervent prayer. If Noemi could pray like that, maybe she wouldn't be so scared. Esther's long golden hair is pinned up in thick braids that ring her head like a halo, and Noemi feels her courage kindle back into flame.

I'm doing this for Esther. If I don't save anyone else, at least I can save her.

For a while, anyway.

Most of the soldiers harnessed near Noemi are between the ages of sixteen and twenty-eight. Noemi is only seventeen. Her generation is decimating itself.

And the Masada Run will be their greatest sacrifice.

It's a suicide mission—though no one uses the word *suicide*. Seventy-five ships will strike at once, all running at the same target. Seventy-five ships will blow themselves up. Noemi will be flying one of them.

The Masada Run won't win the war. But it will buy Genesis time. Her life for time.

No. Noemi looks at Esther again. *Your life for hers.*

Thousands have fallen in the past few years of this war, and there's no victory in sight. This spaceship they're on now is almost forty years old, which makes it one of the newest in the Genesis fleet. But each glance shows Noemi another flaw: the patching that hints at a past hull breach, the scarred

windows that blur the stars outside, the wear on the harnesses that anchor her and her fellow soldiers into their seats. They even have to limit the use of artificial gravity to conserve power.

This is the price Genesis pays for a pristine environment, for the health and strength of every living thing on their world. Genesis will make nothing new while something old still functions. Her society's oath to limit manufacture and industry has profited them more than it cost—or it had, before the war erupted again, years after all the weapons factories had been shut down, after new fighter ships had been built.

The Liberty War had seemed to end over three decades ago; of course they'd trusted in their victory. Her planet had begun scaling back. The scars of the war still lingered; Noemi understands that more than most. But even she, along with everyone else, had believed they were truly safe.

Two years ago, the enemy returned. Since then, Noemi has learned to fire weapons and how to fly a single-pilot fighter. She's learned how to mourn friends who had fought beside her only hours before. She's learned what it's like to look over the horizon, see smoke, and realize the nearest town is now only so much rubble.

She's learned how to fight. Next she has to learn how to die.

The enemy's ships are new. Their weapons are more powerful. And their soldiers aren't even flesh and blood. Instead they have mech armies: robots, shaped like humans but without mercy, without vulnerabilities, without souls.

What kind of cowards go to war but refuse to fight it themselves? Noemi thinks. *How evil do you have to be to kill another world's people and risk none of your own?*

Today's just a practice run, she reminds herself. No big deal. You'll fly it through, get it down, so when the day comes, no matter how scared you are, you can—

Orange lights along each row begin to flash, warning all troops that the artificial magnetic gravity is about to kick in. It's too early. The other soldiers exchange worried glances, but the threat galvanizes Noemi. She shifts herself into position and takes a deep breath.

Wham! Hundreds of feet slam onto the metal floor at once. Noemi's hair tumbles down to her chin, kept back from her face by the padded band she wears at the top of her forehead. Instantly she snaps into battle mode, untethering herself from her harness and reaching for her helmet. Her dark-green exosuit feels heavy again, but it's supple, as ready for battle as she is.

Because it sounds like the battle is waiting for them.

"All warriors to their fighters!" shouts Captain Baz. "Signs indicate we've got ships coming through the Gate any second. We launch in five!"

Her dread vanishes, scorched away by warrior instinct. Noemi joins the lines of soldiers separating into squadrons and hurrying down the narrow corridors that lead to their individual fighters.

"Why are they here?" murmurs one round-faced guy, a newbie just ahead of her in line, as they dash through a tunnel with missing panels and exposed wiring. His skin has gone death-white beneath his freckles. "Do they know what we're going to do?"

"They haven't blown us up yet, right?" Noemi points out. "That means they haven't found out about the Masada Run. It's lucky we were up here when they came through, so we can fight them off farther from home. Okay?"

The poor new kid nods. He's shaking. Noemi would like to be more comforting, but the words would probably come out wrong. She's all rough edges and sharp elbows, her heart hidden so well by a quick temper that almost nobody ever recognizes she has one. Sometimes she wishes she could turn herself inside out. That way people would see the good in her before they saw the bad.

Battle brings out her bad side, where it's actually a positive. Anyway, no point in trying to improve herself now.

Esther, who's directly ahead of the boy, turns and smiles at him. "It's going to be all right," she promises in her soft voice. "You'll see. When you're in your fighter, your training will kick in, and you'll feel braver than anything." He smiles back, already steadier.

After Noemi was orphaned, she hated the world for existing, she hated other people for not hurting as much as she did, and she hated herself for continuing to breathe. As kind as the Gatsons had been to take her in, she couldn't miss the looks Esther's parents gave each other—the exasperation of doing so much for someone who couldn't or wouldn't appreciate it. Years went by before Noemi could feel any gratitude, or much of anything at all besides anger and bitterness.

But Esther never made her feel bad. In those first awful days, even though they'd been only eight years old, Esther had already known not to try comforting her friend with cheap words about memories or God's will. She'd known all Noemi needed was for someone just to be there, asking nothing of her but making sure she knew she wasn't alone.



How come none of that ever rubbed off on me? Noemi thinks as they hurry through the final corridors. Maybe she should've asked for lessons.

Esther shifts to the side, guiding the scared boy ahead of her to fall into step by Noemi's side. Immediately she says to Noemi, "Don't worry."

Too late. "You don't have a fighter today. Only a scout ship. You can't go out into battle in that thing; you should just monitor us from here. Tell Captain Baz."

"What do you think she'll say? Sit here, get some knitting done? Scouts can transmit a lot of valuable info during a skirmish." Esther shakes her head. "You can't keep me out of *every* fight, you know."

No, just the worst one. "If you get hurt up here, your parents will kill me, and that's if Jemuel doesn't get to me first."

Esther's face does this *thing* every time Noemi mentions Jemuel: Her cheeks pink with pleasure, and she presses her lips together to hold back her smile. But her eyes look as stricken as if she'd just seen Noemi lying wounded and bleeding on the floor. Once, Noemi had been glad to see that—to know that Esther cared about Noemi's heartbreak as much as her own happiness—but now it's just irritating. She says only, "Noemi, it's my duty to be out here. The same as yours. So let it go."

As usual, Esther's right. Noemi takes a deep breath and runs faster through the corridor.

Her division reaches its launch array—a line of small, single-pilot fighter ships as sleek and streamlined as darts. Noemi jumps into her pilot's seat. Across the room, she can see Esther doing the same, with just as much purpose as if she



could really fight. As the translucent cockpit canopy locks over her and Noemi clamps her helmet into place, Esther gives her a look, the one that means *Hey, you know I'm not really upset with you, right?* She's good at that look, especially for someone who almost never loses her temper.

Noemi gives her the usual smile back, the one that means *Everything's fine*. Probably Noemi *isn't* good at that, because Esther's the only person she ever shows it to.

But Esther grins. She gets it. That's enough.

The launch-bay panel begins to open, exposing the squadron's fighters to the cold darkness of space at the farthest reaches of their solar system. Genesis is hardly more than a faint green dot in the distance; the sun she was born under still dominates the sky, but it appears smaller from here than either of her planet's moons looks from the surface. For that first instant, when there's nothing before Noemi but infinite stars, it's beautiful—beyond beautiful—and she thrills at the sight as if it were her first time seeing it.

And as always, she wishes her most secret, most selfish wish:
If only I could explore it all—

Then the panel opens fully to reveal the Genesis Gate.

The Gate is an enormous, brushed-silver ring of interlocking metal components, dozens of kilometers wide. Within the ring, Noemi can glimpse a faint shimmer like the surface of water when it's almost too dark for a reflection, but not quite. This would be beautiful, too, if it weren't the greatest threat to Genesis's safety. Each Gate stabilizes one end of a singularity—a shortcut through space-time that allows a ship to travel partway across the galaxy in a mere instant.

This is how the enemy reaches them; this is where all the battles begin.

In the distance Noemi can make out the evidence of some of those past battles—scrap left over from ships blown to pieces long ago. Some bits of the debris are mere splinters of metal. Other chunks are enormous twisted slabs, even entire blasted-out ships. These remnants have settled into lazy orbit around the Gate's gravitational pull.

But they hardly matter compared to the dark gray shapes speeding away from the Gate, slicing into their system. These are the ships of the enemy, the planet determined to conquer Genesis and take their lands and resources for its own forever: Earth.

They poisoned their own world. Colonized Genesis only so they could move billions of people here and poison it in turn. But worlds that sustain life are few and precious. They're sacred. They have to be protected. That's what Noemi intends to do.

The signal lights flare. She releases her docking clamps as Captain Baz's voice speaks to the squadron via her helmet mic: "*Let's get out there.*"

Disengage clamps: Check. Noemi's ship floats free of its moorings, hanging weightless. The others rise beside her, all of them ready to scramble. Her hands move to the brightly colored panel before her. She knows each button and toggle by heart, understands what each light means. *Systems readouts normal: Check.*

Ignition: Check.

Her fighter leaps forward, a silver comet against the blackness of space. The shimmer in the Gate brightens like

a star going supernova—a warning that more Earth forces are on the way.

Her hands tighten on the controls as she sees the Gate burst into light, and ships begin to crash through, one after the other.

"We have five—no, seven confirmed Damocles-class ships!" Captain Baz says over comms. *"We caught 'em by surprise. Let's use it."*

Noemi accelerates, her silver fighter streaking toward the farthest Damocles vessel. These long, flat, boxy ships are unencumbered with artificial gravity or extensive life support, because they aren't for carrying humans. Instead, depending on ship size, each Damocles carries anywhere from a dozen to a hundred mechs, each one heavily armed, programmed for battle, and ready to kill.

Mechs aren't afraid to die, because they aren't even alive. They have no souls. They're pure machines of death.

Pure evil.

Noemi's eyes narrow as she sees the first hatches open. Thank God, these are smaller ships, but they're still carrying a powerful mech force. If they could just blast one or two of the Damocles ships into atoms before they launch their deadly cargo—

Too late. The mechs shoot out wearing metal exoskeletons, with just enough sheathing to keep the robotic warriors inside from freezing in the coldness of space. As the Genesis fighters approach, the mechs begin to shift position. They spread their limbs wide to expand their shooting range, like carnivores pouncing on prey. As long as Noemi's fought, as hard as she's trained, she still shudders at the sight.

"Attack sequence—now!" Baz calls, and battle cries echo through Noemi's helmet. Noemi spins her fighter left, choosing her first target.

Over comms, one guy yells, *"Kill 'em all!"*

Blaster bolts from the mechs slash through the air toward Noemi, fiery orange streaks that could cripple a fighter in moments. She banks left, fires back. All around her, Genesis fighters and Earth mechs scatter, formations dissolving in the chaos of battle.

Like most people of Genesis, Noemi believes in the Word of God. Even if she sometimes has questions and doubts the elders can't answer, she can quote chapter and verse on the value of life, the importance of peace. Even though the things she's blowing out of the sky aren't truly alive, they're . . . human-shaped. The bloodlust stirred up inside her feels wrong in a way that all her righteous fury can't entirely cure. But she powers through it. She has to, for the sake of her fellow soldiers, and for her world.

Noemi knows what her duty to God is right now:
Fight like hell.

Chapter Two

As Abel floats in zero-G, in the dark quiet of a dead ship's equipment pod bay, he tells himself the story again. The black-and-white images flicker in his mind with total accuracy; it's as if he's watching it projected upon a screen, the way it was shown centuries ago. Abel possesses an eidetic memory, so he only needs to see things once to remember them forever.

And he enjoys remembering *Casablanca*. Retelling himself every scene, in order, over and over again. The characters' voices are so vivid in his mind that the actors might as well be floating in the pod bay beside him:

Where were you last night?

That's so long ago, I don't remember.

It's a good story, one that holds up to repetition. This is fortunate for Abel, who has now been trapped in the *Daedalus* for almost thirty years. Roughly fifteen million, seven hundred and seventy thousand, nine hundred minutes, or nine hundred and forty-six million, seven hundred thousand seconds.

(He has been programmed to round off such large numbers outside of actual scientific work. The same humans who made him capable of measuring with perfect precision also find



the mention of such numbers irritating. It makes no sense to Abel, but he knows better than to expect rational behavior from human beings.)

The nearly complete darkness of his confinement makes it easy for Abel to imagine that reality is in black and white, like the movie.

New input. Form: irregular flashes of light. The drama stops cold in Abel's mind as he looks up to analyze—

Blaster bolts. A battle, no doubt between Earth and Genesis forces.

Abel was marooned here in just such a battle. After a long silence, warfare has reignited in the past two years. At first he found that encouraging. If Earth ships were again coming to the Genesis system, they would eventually find the *Daedalus*. They would tow it in to reclaim everything inside, including Abel himself.

And after thirty terrible years of suspense, Abel would finally be able to fulfill his primary directive: Protect Burton Mansfield.

Honor the creator. Obey his directives above all others. Preserve his life no matter what.

But his hopes have faded as the war has churned on. No one has come to find him, and no one seems likely to do so in the near future. Perhaps not even in the distant future. Although Abel is stronger than any human being, and a match for even the most powerful fighter mechs, he can't tear open the air-lock door separating him from the rest of the *Daedalus*. (He tried. Despite knowing down to the hundredth decimal point the ratios working against him, Abel still tried. Thirty years is a long time.)

Neither Abel himself nor this ship would have been abandoned lightly. Abel has run through the various scenarios

many times, but he can't accept it. Mansfield could have fled to save himself, meaning to return for Abel, but he was simply never able to. Then again, the battle intensified so much that day that any human escape from the *Daedalus* might have been impossible. In all probability, Mansfield was killed by enemy troops on the same day Abel became trapped.

And yet, Burton Mansfield is a genius, the creator of all twenty-six models of mech that currently serve humankind. If anyone could devise a way to survive that last battle, Mansfield could have.

Of course, Abel's creator could also have died in the years since. He was in his late middle age thirty years ago, and with humans, accidents sometimes happen. Perhaps that is why he hasn't come. Surely only death would keep Mansfield away.

There is another possibility. It is the least likely of all plausible options, but not impossible: Mansfield might still be aboard, but in cryosleep. The cryosleep chambers in sick bay could keep a human alive with minimal life support for an indefinite amount of time. The person inside would be unconscious, aging at less than one-tenth the normal rate and waiting for a rescuer to bring them back to life.

All Abel would have to do is get to him.

Before he can find Mansfield, however, someone must find him. So far, however, Earth's forces have spent no time searching the debris field for functioning ships. Nobody has found Abel; no one is even looking.

Someday, he tells himself. Earth's victory is inevitable, whether it comes in another two months or two hundred years. It's entirely possible for Abel to live that long.

But Mansfield would surely be dead by then. Maybe even *Casablanca* won't be interesting after that many years—

Abel tilts his head, peering more carefully at the sliver of star field he can see through the pod bay's window. After a moment, he reaches out to the closest wall and pushes off, bringing himself closer to the view. In the ultra-thick glass, he has to look through his own translucent reflection, with his short gold hair fanned out around his head as though he were in a medieval manuscript, gilt-edged.

This battle is coming nearer to the *Daedalus* than any other ever has. A few fighters are already on the edges of the debris field; if Earth's forces continue separating the Genesis troops from one another, some of the mechs will soon be very close to his ship.

Very, very close.

He must determine a method for sending a signal. It would have to be a low-tech solution, and the signal could only be very basic. But Abel doesn't need to send information to a human, doesn't have to worry about the limitations of an organic brain. Any small pattern amid the chaos might attract the attention of another mech—and if it has a chance to investigate, its programming will compel it to do so.

Abel pushes against the wall to propel himself through the pod bay. After thirty years, he is all too familiar with the few pieces of equipment in here with him, not one of which can help him power up the ship, open the pod bay door, or communicate directly with another vessel. But that doesn't mean they're useless.

In one corner, suspended a few inches from the wall, is a simple flashlight.



Helps with repairs, Mansfield had explained, his blue eyes crinkling at the corners as he smiled. *Humans can't rewire a spaceship with nothing but their memory of the schematics. Not like you, my boy. We need to see it.* Abel remembered smiling back, proud that he could replace weaker humans and serve Mansfield better.

And yet he could never hold humanity in contempt, because Mansfield was human, too.

Grabbing the flashlight, Abel launches himself toward the window again. What signal should he send?

No message. Only a signal. Someone is here; someone seeks contact. The rest can come later.

Abel holds the light to the window. He has not used it during the past decades, and it still holds sufficient charge. One flash. Then two, three, five, seven, eleven—and so on through the first ten primes. He plans to repeat the sequence until someone sees him.

Or until the battle ends, leaving him alone for many more years to come.

But maybe someone will see, Abel thinks.

He isn't supposed to hope. Not like humans do. Yet during the past several years, his mind has been forced to deepen. With no new stimulation, he has reflected on every piece of information, every interaction, every single element of his existence before the abandonment of the *Daedalus*. Something within his inner workings has changed, and probably not for the better.

Because hope can *hurt*, and yet Abel can't stop looking out the window, wishing desperately for someone to see him, so he will no longer be alone.

Chapter Three

Captain Baz shouts, "*Incoming!*"

Noemi steers sharply downward, spiraling through the twisted metal remains of newly destroyed mechs. But the Damocles ships keep spitting out more and more of them—far too many for her squadron to handle. Only the Masada Run volunteers came out today, only to practice. They weren't planning to fight a full mech assault, and by now it shows.

The mechs are *everywhere*, their oversize exoskeleton attack suits streaking through the battered ships of her squadron like a meteor shower raining fire. As they approach, the exosuits unfold from metal-beamed, sharp-edged pseudo-vessels into monstrous, metal-limbed creatures capable of smashing through the Genesis lines as if they were punching through paper.

Every once in a while, as one of them zooms past her ship, Noemi gets a glimpse of the mechs themselves—the machines within the machines. They look just like human beings, which sometimes makes it hard for newbies to shoot. She hesitated herself in her first firefight when she glimpsed what seemed to be a man in his mid-twenties, with deep tan skin and black

hair much like her own; he could've been her brother, if Rafael had had the chance to grow up.

That very human hesitation nearly ended her life that day. Mechs don't hesitate. They go for the kill, every time.

Since then she's seen that exact same face looking back at her dozens of times. It's a Charlie model, she now knows. Standard male fighter, ruthless and relentless.

"There are twenty-five models in standard production," Elder Darius Akide had said, the day he addressed her training class for the first time. "Each has a name beginning with a different letter of the alphabet, from Baker to Zebra. All but two of these models look completely human. And each one is stronger than any human can ever be. They're programmed with only enough intelligence to perform their core responsibilities. For manual-labor models, that's not much. But the fighters they send against us? They're smart. Damned smart. Mansfield left out only the levels of higher intelligence that could allow them to have something like a conscience."

Noemi's eyes widen as her tactical screen lights up. Her hands tighten on her weapons controls, and she fires the instant the mech flies into range. For one split second she sees the thing's face—*Queen, standard female fighter model*—before both exosuit and mech shatter. Nothing's left but splinters of metal. Good.

Where's Esther? They haven't flown within visual range of each other for a couple of minutes now. Noemi would like to signal her, but she knows better than to use comms for a personal message in the middle of combat. So she can only look.

How am I supposed to find anyone in this? she asks herself as she swoops in over a few more of the mechs, blasting as fast



as her weapons will work. Their return fire is so ferocious that black space momentarily turns brilliant white. *The invasion forces keep getting larger. Earth keeps getting bolder. They'll never let up, not ever.*

The Masada Run really is our only hope.

She thinks about that scared kid shivering as the troops ran to their fighters. His call sign hasn't appeared on her screen in a while either. Is he lost? Dead?

And Esther—scout ships are almost defenseless—

Finally the fighting around her breaks for a moment, and she has a chance to scan for Esther's ship. When she finds it, she feels a moment of elation—it's intact, Esther's alive—but then Noemi frowns. Why is Esther all the way over there?

Then Noemi realizes what she's looking at. Horror injects adrenaline into her veins.

One of the mechs has turned away from the battle. Just—left the fight. She's never seen a mech do anything like that, and it's heading toward the debris field near the fallen Gate. Is it malfunctioning? Doesn't matter. For whatever reason, Esther decided to tail the stupid thing—probably to investigate what it was up to. But now she's isolated from the Genesis troops who could protect her. If the mech finds what it's looking for or receives an override from its Damocles, it will turn on Esther in an instant.

Noemi's duty allows her to defend a fellow fighter who's in extreme risk. So she banks left and accelerates so hard the force shoves her back in her seat. The blazing firefight around her darkens until her view of space is again clear. The Genesis Gate looms, surrounded by armed platforms. Any ship that



approaches without Earth-signature codes gets destroyed. Even from across the galaxy, Earth keeps Genesis in its laser sights.

As she speeds toward Esther's location, Noemi looks less at her sensor screen. The view from the cockpit shows her enough. Esther's scout ship zips around the mech, using energy bursts from the sensors to muddle the mech's workings, but that doesn't accomplish much. So far the mech is dodging the bursts expertly. Apparently it's headed toward one of the larger pieces of debris—no, not debris, an abandoned spaceship, some kind of civilian craft. Noemi's never seen anything like this ship: teardrop-shaped, roughly the volume of a good-size three-story building, and with a mirrored surface that has dulled only slightly over the years. It must have been all but invisible to the naked eye until recently.

Is the mech going to bring that ship back to Earth? The ship was abandoned, obviously, but it doesn't look seriously damaged from here.

If Earth wants it, then Noemi intends to keep them from getting it. She imagines destroying the mech and recapturing this teardrop ship for the Genesis fleet. Maybe it could be outfitted with weapons, turned into a warship. God knows they need another.

Then again, this mech is a Queen or a Charlie. She and Esther will be in for one hell of a fight.

Bring it on, she thinks.

Noemi cuts her speed as she gets closer. Esther and the mech are almost within weapons range—

—then the mech turns, shifting its aim. It stretches its exoskeleton arms and clasps Esther's recon ship like a flytrap

plant snapping shut around a bug. The way they're positioned, the mech must be right above Esther, the two of them looking into each other's eyes.

Weapons! But Noemi can't shoot the mech from here without blasting Esther, too. In ordinary combat, she'd fire anyway. Any pilot captured like that is dead already, and at least she could destroy the mech . . .

—but this is Esther, please not her, please—

The mech releases one arm, draws it back in a startlingly human movement, and punches straight through the hull of Esther's fighter.

"No!" Noemi's scream deafens her in her own helmet. It doesn't matter; she doesn't need to hear—she needs to save Esther.

Ten minutes. Our exosuits give us air for ten minutes. Go, go, go—

The mech releases Esther, swivels toward the abandoned ship, then stops, finally picking Noemi up on its scanners. She fires before it can even aim.

In a flash of light, the mech explodes into so much tinsel. Noemi zooms through what's left of it on her way to Esther, metal splinters clicking against her cockpit shell.

Can we get back to the troop ship in time? No, not with the battle still raging. Okay, then. This abandoned ship. I can restore life support, maybe; if not, it'll probably have oxygen I can use to re-up Esther's reserves. First-aid supplies. Maybe even a sick bay. Please, God, let it have a sick bay.

She feels as if she's praying to nothing. To no one. But even if God doesn't speak to her, surely he'll listen for Esther's sake.

Noemi's visor fogs slightly. She has to hold back her tears, though, or else they'll float through the helmet and blind her at the worst moment. So she bites the inside of her cheek as she swoops down toward the devastated scout ship. "Esther? Can you read me?"

No reply. By now Noemi is out of communications range for the other Genesis fighters. If Captain Baz even realizes they're missing, she won't hear Noemi's broadcasts, won't know to send help. Maybe they've both been written off as dead already.

"We're going to make it," Noemi promises Esther, and herself, as she edges her fighter closer. Now she can see how badly the scout ship's been mutilated—metal shredded into shards—but Esther's helmet seems to be intact. Is she moving? Yes. Noemi thinks she is. *She's alive. She's going to make it. All I have to do is get us to that ship.*

One switch throws a towline into space, and the magnetic clamp catches Esther's hull. Quickly Noemi scans the mirrored vessel in front of them. There—a docking-bay door.

Powered by magnetic sensors, the plates of the circular door fan open automatically. Noemi's so grateful she could weep.

It's always seemed to her that her prayers are never answered, that nobody up there has ever heard her pleas. But God must be listening after all.

Chapter Four

The Genesis fighter blasts the Queen model, demolishing it, and Abel feels hope shatter within him—an almost physical sensation. It's as if his inner framework had collapsed.

I must perform a full self-diagnostic at my first opportunity.

Abel floats in the dark chamber of the pod bay, just one more piece of equipment suspended in the cold dark. Without gravity. Without purpose. How long will it take his internal batteries to wear out? They were made to last approximately two and a half centuries . . . but he is using very little energy, which means they might go on for twice as long. More. It could be more than half a millennium before Abel finally breaks down into mere scrap metal.

He can't fear his own death. His programming doesn't allow it.

But Abel can fear hundreds of years of solitude—never discovering what became of Burton Mansfield—never again having any use.

Can a mech go insane? Abel might find out.

At that moment, however, he sees one of the Genesis fighters tether the other and power forward. Are they—is it possible—

Yes. They want to board the *Daedalus*.

These are enemy troops. They are Genesis warriors. As such, they are an immediate threat to the safety of Burton Mansfield.

(Who might not be aboard any longer. Who could have died years ago. But Abel acknowledges these probabilities while still prioritizing the elimination of any risk to Mansfield's life—*any* risk, no matter how remote—above everything else.)

The Genesis ship is headed for the main docking bay. Abel reviews the ship's layout, and the *Daedalus*'s schematics flash before him as though projected on a screen. He has reviewed them often, these past thirty years; Abel has reviewed every piece of information he's ever been exposed to in an effort to keep himself from succumbing to sheer boredom. But the plans are more vivid now, the lines on the blueprints burning as brightly as fire in his mind.

Main docking bay: Level One. Two levels below my equipment pod bay. After three decades, Abel thinks of the room as his. *When the Genesis fighters enter the main docking bay, the unharmed pilot will no doubt attempt to reach sick bay in order to assist the injured comrade,* he calculates. *If the pilot's main goal were safety, rather than rescue, then that fighter would be speeding back toward the distant Genesis fleet.* Although a first-aid kit had been stored in the main docking bay, Abel doesn't know whether it's still there; even if it is, its contents would be unlikely to help anyone gravely hurt.

In order to leave the docking bay, the Genesis pilot will have to restore backup power. Assuming any damage to the Daedalus is not too severe, it is possible to do this from that

location. Any trained pilot should be able to do so within minutes if not seconds.

Abel's mind clicks through the possibilities, faster and faster. This is the first new situation he's faced in thirty years. His mental capabilities have not been blunted by this long time in storage. If anything, he feels sharper than before.

But there's an emotional component now. Hope has kindled into something far more exhilarating: *excitement*. Merely seeing anything outside this pod bay will be a thrill . . .

. . . but nothing can possibly match the knowledge that he will finally be able to search for Burton Mansfield. To find him. Maybe even to save him.

"Excellent," Mansfield said as he examined the puzzles Abel had just solved. "Your pattern-recognition ability is top-notch. You finished that in very nearly record time, Abel."

Although Abel was programmed to enjoy praise, particularly from Mansfield, he could still experience doubt. "Was my performance adequate, sir?"

Mansfield settled into his high-backed leather chair, a slight frown on his face. "You do understand that excellence would, by definition, include adequacy?"

"Yes, sir! Of course, sir." Abel didn't want Mansfield to think his language databases hadn't loaded properly. "I only meant—many of my test performances have beaten all existing records. These results did not."

After a moment, Mansfield chuckled. "Would you look at that? It looks like your personality has already developed enough to make you a perfectionist."

“ . . . is that good, sir?”

“Better than you realize.” Mansfield rose from his chair. “Walk with me, Abel.”

Burton Mansfield’s office was located in his house in London. Although the home had been recently constructed and on the outside looked like any other mirrored polygon in this gated, privileged community on the hill—on the inside, it might have been 1895 instead of 2295. Handwoven silk rugs covered the wooden floors. A grandfather clock ticked loudly in the corner, its brass pendulum swinging back and forth despite countless atomic clocks nested in the higher-tech machines all around it. Paintings by various Old Masters hung on the wall: a saint by Raphael, a soup can by Warhol. And even though the fire and fireplace were holographic, the house’s internal climate controls made it feel as though the flames glowed with heat.

Mansfield was a human male of average height, with dark gold hair and blue eyes. His features were regular, even handsome, if Abel understood the aesthetic principles involved. (He hoped that he did, because Mansfield’s younger face had been the model for Abel’s own.) Even the eccentricities of Mansfield’s appearance were striking and aristocratic—the widow’s peak at his forehead, a slightly hawkish nose, and unusually full lips. He dressed in the simple, Japanese-inspired style of the day, in a flowing open jacket and wide-legged trousers.

Abel, meanwhile, wore the same boxy gray coverall common to most mechs. The garment fit and was practical for all purposes. Why then did it sometimes feel . . . not right?

Before he could consider this question in depth, Abel was brought back to the moment by Mansfield, who was pointing at

the window—actually at the courtyard outside. “What do you see out there, Abel? No. Who do you see?”

Mansfield usually used *who*, not *what*, to refer to mechs. Abel appreciated the courtesy. “I see two Dog models and one Yoke model, all of which are engaged in garden work. One of the Dogs is tending your hydroponic vegetable plot, while the other Dog and Yoke are trimming the topiary hedges.”

“We need to work on your overenthusiasm for detail.” Mansfield sighed. “That’s my fault, of course. Never mind. My point is—if I sent you into that garden, you could take care of the hydroponics, couldn’t you? And trim the hedge?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Just as well as any Dog or Yoke?”

“Of course, sir.”

“What if I fell and broke my arm? Could you set it as well as a Tare model?”

The medical mechs were among the smartest and swiftest, but Abel could still answer, “Yes, sir.”

Mansfield’s blue eyes twinkled. “What if a Queen model broke in with orders to kill me? A Queen or a Charlie? What then?”

“Sir, you’re Earth’s most respected roboticist—no one would—”

“The question is theoretical,” Mansfield said gently.

“Oh. In theory, were a fighter-model mech to attempt to kill you, I believe I could defeat it in combat. At the very least, I’d be able to distract or damage it enough for you to escape or summon help.”

“Exactly. All the programming for the other twenty-five models—all their talents—every bit of that is inside you. You may only

equal your simpler counterparts in certain talents, but you'll excel in most of them. And not one mech ever built has the breadth of skills and intelligence that you have." The ghost of a smile played upon Mansfield's face as he studied Abel. "You, my son, are one of a kind."

Son. Abel knew this was not true in any literal sense; although he contained organic DNA patterned on Mansfield's own, he was primarily a mechanical construct, not a biological organism. Burton Mansfield had a true child of his own, a daughter who obviously takes precedence in every way. And yet—

"You liked that, didn't you?" Mansfield asked. "When I called you 'son.'"

"Yes, sir."

"So you're gaining some emotional capacity. Good." His hand patted Abel once on the back. "Let's hurry that along, shall we? From now on, call me 'Father.'" With a sigh, Mansfield looked out at the hoverships darting through the London sky. "Getting late. Tell the Dogs and Yoke to finish up, would you?"

Abel nodded.

"And when you're done, join me in the library. I want to get you started on some books and movies and holovids. We'll see whether fictional narratives can affect you."

"I'll be there soon," Abel said, before daring to add, "Father."

He was rewarded with Mansfield's smile.

A distant clang sounds through the ship. The framework shudders slightly—stubborn metal resisting motion after so long at rest. The main docking-bay door is opening at last.

Abel realizes he's smiling.

I'll be there soon, Father.

Once again he reviews the ship's schematics, imagining a three-dimensional model of the *Daedalus* floating in front of him. Abel mentally enlarges the area around the pod bay and searches for "defensive resources." Various possibilities come up, most of them emergency storage lockers, some nearer and more practical than others—

The auxiliary lights come on. For the first time in thirty years, Abel is no longer surrounded by darkness.

A human might hesitate, overwhelmed with shock, delight, or gratitude. Abel instantly angles himself, prepared for the moment a split second later when gravity comes back on. He drops two meters and lands on his feet and hands as silently as a cat. From there it's only one step to the door; his fingers fly over the keyboard with inhuman speed to input the unlock code, and—at last, at long last—the pod-bay door slides open.

Abel is free.

He doesn't celebrate. He doesn't laugh. He simply runs to the nearest "defensive resource" listed in the ship schematics. The locker remains undamaged, still sealed. Whatever happened to Mansfield and the others, they never used these. Is that good news—or proof they died instantly?

Abel punches in the ten-digit code. The door opens, revealing the locker's contents, and Abel's hand closes around a blaster. Now armed, he runs toward sick bay. If Burton Mansfield is in cryosleep there, his life may be imminently at risk. Therefore, the Genesis pilot remains an enemy intruder whose presence cannot be allowed. The pilot's swiftness in

restoring full power suggests an intelligent opponent. In other words, a dangerous one.

Abel will allow himself to be found by his liberator—the person who set him free after all this time—and then he'll shoot to kill.