

Chapter One

Noemi Vidal walks through the two long lines of starfighters in the hangar, helmet under one arm, head held high. She doesn't wave to her friends like she always used to—until six months ago.

Now no one would wave back.

Chin up, shoulders straight, she tells herself, taking what comfort she can in the familiar smells of grease and ozone, the hiss of repair torches, and the thump of boots on tarmac. *If you want them to see you as a fellow soldier again, you act like one. You don't back down from mech fire, so you won't back down from this.*

But Earth's warrior mechs only aim at the body. Noemi has shields for that. The distance between her and her fellow squadron members aims at the heart, for which no protection has ever been invented.

"Vidal!" That's Captain Baz, striding across the hangar with a dataread in her hand. She's wearing her uniform, a dark-patterned hijab, and the first smile Noemi's seen all day. "We're putting you on close-range patrol today."

"Yes, ma'am. Captain, if I could—"

Baz stops and comes nearer. "Yes, Lieutenant?"



"I wanted to ask—" Noemi takes a deep breath. "You haven't put me on Gate patrol in months. I'd really like to take on a shift sometime soon."

"Gate patrol's the most dangerous gig there is." Baz says it matter-of-factly as she scans through her dataread. Everyone on Genesis knows that the Gate ties them to Earth and the other colony worlds on the Loop, holding one point of a wormhole in place and making instantaneous cross-galactic travel possible. It also makes possible the war that's devastating their world. "Most pilots would be glad to stick a little closer to home."

"I'm willing to share the danger." More than willing—by now, Noemi's very nearly desperate. Defending Genesis is what gives her life meaning. She hasn't been allowed to truly defend her world for months, not since her return.

It takes Baz a few long seconds to answer. "Listen. That day's going to come, okay? We just have to give it time."

The captain is on Noemi's side, which helps a little. That doesn't mean Captain Baz has it right. In a lower voice, Noemi says, "They won't trust me again until I'm pulling a full load."

Baz weighs that. "Maybe so." After another second's contemplation, she nods. "We'll try it." Her voice rises to a shout. "Ganaraj, O'Farrell, Vidal's with you today! Let's get up there, people—gamma shift's ready to come home."

The other two pilots stare at her from across the room. Noemi simply heads straight for her starfighter.

She's going to earn their acceptance the only way she can: one flight at a time.

Wait and see, she tells herself. Soon they'll like you just as much as they did before.



She figures it shouldn't be hard. They never liked her that much to begin with.

Ten percent of the time, Gate patrols are the worst, most frightening duty assignment of all. At irregular, unguessable intervals, Earth sends Damocles ships full of warrior mechs—Queen and Charlie models, designed only to kill. They've more than decimated Genesis's antiquated defense fleet in the past five years; every battle they win brings them closer to the day warrior mechs will land on the surface of Genesis, unleash a ground war, and begin reclaiming Noemi's planet for Earth's use. Every battle alarm has to be sounded as soon as possible. The starfighters on patrol are expected to engage Damocles ships immediately, without waiting for backup. Most don't survive.

However, the other 90 percent of the time, Gate patrols are boring as hell.

In the pilot's seat of her starfighter, Noemi circles the Gate at the outer perimeter; Arun Ganaraj and Deirdre O'Farrell stick closer. She's still close enough to watch the monstrous thing in the sky, a massive silver ring illuminated along its various panels so that it shines in the darkness of space. It's orbited by various bits of debris from the war, from metal shards no bigger than splinters to chunks larger than her starfighter.

An entire ship remained hidden in that debris for thirty years, until Noemi discovered it, and inside she found—

"You seeing that?" Ganaraj's voice comes over the speaker just as her screen brings up the Gate in greater detail. The faint shimmer in the middle of the ring has taken on a familiar, ominous look—a cloudiness like a pond about to frost over.

“Yeah, I see it,” Noemi says.

“It might be nothing.” Ganaraj sounds like he’s trying to convince himself. *“Doesn’t always mean something’s about to come through.”*

“Usually doesn’t,” Noemi agrees, as she zooms in tighter on the image and sets her weapons to ready. Segments of old wreckage and shrapnel from past battles often create the illusion of incoming traffic. Even a faint hint of intrusion is danger enough to set her on edge.

“Or it could be a bunch of mechs coming through to dice us all.” O’Farrell makes herself sound happy about it, so happy the sarcasm is unmistakable. *“But you’ll just want to give them milk and cookies and send them home again, won’t you, Vidal?”*

“Pack it, O’Farrell,” Noemi snaps back.

“Well, that’s what you do, isn’t it? You love mechs sooooo much that you’d rather leave Genesis exposed to war and death than destroy a freakin’ hunk of metal—”

Ganaraj cuts in. *“Could we pay attention to the Gate, everybody?”*

“Never stopped,” Noemi says. But her cheeks feel like they’re burning, and her pulse throbs angrily in her temples. She can handle it when they pick on her, but not when they turn on Abel.

When she found that ship six months ago, she also found the mech inside it: Mansfield Cybernetics Model 1A, the pet project of the one and only Burton Mansfield, and the single most advanced mech ever created.

Model 1A prefers to be known as Abel.



At first, Noemi saw him the same way everyone else on Genesis does: a machine fashioned in the shape of a human but with no soul inside. An enemy, one she could use before destroying. He was the tool that could blow up the Genesis Gate—sealing Genesis safely away from Earth forever, winning the war in one split-second blast.

However, blowing up the Gate would've meant blowing up Abel with it, and by the end of their journey through the colony worlds of the Loop, Noemi knew that Abel was far more than a machine. She could no more have killed him to destroy the Gate than she could've sacrificed a child on an altar.

God asked for that, once, whisper her old catechism lessons. She's getting better at ignoring those. Maybe too much better—

Red lights flash on her starfighter console. Noemi's hands tighten on the controls as she spots the signal. "We've got something coming through."

By now, though, their sensors are telling them the same thing. "*Confirmed*," says Ganaraj, fear threading through his voice. "*But it's not a Damocles*."

"*A scout ship*," O'Farrell suggests. "*Getting advance intel before the Queens and Charlies come through*."

"Since when do mechs use scout ships?" Noemi zooms in tighter on the intruding ship.

No. Not a ship. Something else.

The metal object is shaped into meter-long delicate points that extend in every direction from the small spherical center. To herself she whispers, "It's like a star"—the way she pictured them as a child, pretty and shining, not monstrous and powerful. The prettiness makes it more ominous.



“Is it a bomb?” Ganaraj asks.

Noemi knows it’s not. She can’t say why she knows it, but she does. Call it intuition.

O’Farrell provides more concrete confirmation: “*Scans negative for explosives.*”

The Gate shimmers once more, and another star bursts through. Then another. As Noemi stares, the stars keep multiplying until her sensors give her a final count of a hundred and twenty. They rush through space, a constellation as brilliant as it is terrifying, streaking toward Genesis.

“*Inform command, and let’s stay on them,*” Ganaraj commands. He’s been a lieutenant nine weeks longer than Noemi has. “*The second we get clearance, we’re blasting these things to oblivion.*”

Noemi would blast them now and trust that clearance would follow later. There’s less than no chance that Captain Baz and the other higher-ups are going to allow anything from Earth to get close to home—explosives or not. But Ganaraj is in charge, and Noemi’s on thin ice, so she grits her teeth and flies tight on the stars as long as she can—

—which isn’t that long, because they’re spreading out, widening the distances between them. When the stars first emerged from the Gate, Noemi’s three-fighter patrol could have destroyed them in a quick spray of blaster fire. Every second that elapses makes targeting more difficult and time-consuming. The stars zip through the solar system, miniature mag engines making them glow bright in the darkness, traveling fast enough to reach Genesis within fifteen minutes. Noemi scans the “stars” nonstop and knows the others are doing the same. The results on her screen reveal nothing about what these things are or what they could mean.



Maybe they're peace offerings, she thinks. It's a private joke. There's no way Earth would make an offer, not now. The situation in the larger galaxy has grown more dire than ever. Earth won't be habitable much longer, and the other colony of the worlds can only house so many more millions of people; that leaves billions who need a place to live, billions who would destroy her world the same way they destroyed their own. The Liberty War began thirty years ago because her people realized they had a moral, religious duty to protect their planet.

Despite their lower technological reserves, they held out for decades, even enjoying a period of relative quiet. But in the past few years, Earth has resumed the fight with a vengeance. Genesis is the only prize worth claiming—anywhere, for anyone.

"Ganaraj," she says. "They're getting too far apart."

"Regulations state—" Ganaraj breaks off. *"We have clearance. Take these things down."*

Four and a half minutes. It took four and a half minutes for that decision to be made. But that's Genesis's leadership for you, all the way from the top of the Elder Council to midlevel military command—always cautious, always hesitant, always waiting to be acted upon instead of taking the initiative to act—

She catches herself. All her life, she had revered the Council, trusted in their judgment, and followed their guidance even when that meant volunteering for the suicidal Masada Run. Then came her journey through the Loop of colony planets and Earth itself, a trip that opened her eyes to other perspectives on the Liberty War . . . and made her acutely aware of the Council's fatalism. Even after her report made it clear that

Earth had new vulnerabilities due to the changing political situation throughout the worlds, the Council hadn't canceled the Masada Run. Only "postponed" it until some unknown future date. And all these months later, the Elders have yet to take one concrete action to capitalize on the intel Noemi has given them.

At least she can take action now. Noemi targets the first star and tightens her fingers on the triggers. It dies in a cloud of bluish dust and a brief flash of light quickly snuffed by the cold of space—as satisfying to her as any explosion could ever be.

If only she could blow them up faster! They're casting a wide net now, clearly preparing to encircle Genesis itself, which wells larger through her cockpit window, its green-and-blue surface placid beneath this strange assault. The stars have individual targets, she realizes, and those targets are all over her world. Her hair prickles as it stands on end. "Ganaraj, we need backup ASAP."

Another star flares bright with energy as her blaster hits it, then disintegrates—that one was hit by O'Farrell, who yells, "*We can take these things out on our own!*"

Noemi shakes her head, as though O'Farrell could see her. "Maybe, but we can't take that chance."

"*I've asked ground to weigh in,*" Ganaraj says. "*Hang on!*"

Hang on? These stars are about to enter atmosphere and he still wants to get approval? Noemi bites back her frustration and resumes firing, targeting every star she can scan.

But she can't scan them all any longer. Their three ships fly farther apart as each tries to take out the stars aimed at the three major continents of Genesis. One after another, Noemi

blows them to bits—but they’re too spaced out. Too far. In the same moment that she decimates her twentieth star, she sees one glow bright with the heat of atmospheric entry. Then another glows as it enters the far horizon. And another, and another—

Don't focus on what you can't do, she reminds herself. Focus on what you can.

In the end, according to scans, forty-seven stars make impact with the surface of Genesis. Every single star hits a populated landmass, most of them in or near major cities and transit hubs; not one lands in the ocean, despite her planet being 60 percent covered with water. This suggests targeting. Yet the stars don’t explode on impact, or smash into governmental buildings, or do anything else obviously destructive. One of them lands on a monorail track, damaging it slightly, and another gouges out a thick gash in a public park. But that’s as serious as the property damage gets, and the reported injuries are minor—small cuts from debris, a minor transit accident when a driver was so startled he failed to watch signals, and one person who fainted in fear and bruised her head in the fall.

No one is seriously hurt—only Noemi’s reputation is.

“Ganaraj reports that you repeatedly argued against getting approvals from command,” says Captain Baz as she sits in her office. Noemi stands in front of her desk at attention. “In other words, you wanted him to ignore standard protocols.”

“Captain, we’re allowed to use discretion on our patrols. Shooting down projectiles sent from the Earth system is well within that discretion.”

“Arguably.” Baz’s voice is dry. “Almost certainly, in fact. But not explicitly. The problem isn’t that you wanted to shoot them down, Vidal. It’s that you advocated against your commanding officer contacting *his* commanding officer, which can sound an awful lot like urging him to rogue action.”

“*Rogue action?*” Noemi manages to hang on to her temper, but it’s close. “Forgive me, Captain—I meant to say, shooting down those stars hardly constitutes ‘rogue action.’”

Baz nods tiredly. “Those are Ganaraj’s words, not mine. And if you feel that’s an unfair interpretation of your actions, I agree.” She leans back in her desk chair, loosing her head scarf like she sometimes does when it’s only women around. “You’ve had to deal with that a lot the past few months. The others are hard on you. It’s tough, and you’re holding up despite the pressure. That takes guts. Don’t think I don’t notice.”

Noemi swallows down the lump in her throat. “That means a lot, ma’am.”

Baz sighs again. “Ganaraj won’t be happy we didn’t put you on report. It might be a good idea to . . . take a break from flying for a while. We’ll find something for you to do on the ground. Preferably a duty you can fulfill all alone, without anybody else to piss off.”

“Yes, Captain.” This solution strikes Noemi as one that will compound the problem. “But I need to find a way to be a part of the squadron again. More than I was before, if possible. I think that would be better.”

Always, she’s stood at the fringes. Sometimes she feels like she’s been lonely her entire life since her parents died. Esther was the only childhood friend who ever understood her, and

Esther's grave is in the heart of a star all the way across the galaxy.

Baz doesn't seem to see it that way. "You've always been independent, Lieutenant Vidal. That's not a bad thing. Learn to embrace it. Not everyone has to be a 'people person.'"

It's all Noemi can do not to laugh. That's not something she's likely to be mistaken for.

Since Esther's death, she's only been special to one person. One who saw her more deeply than even Esther ever did.

One nobody else on Genesis would admit is a *person* at all.

The captain's tone turns gentler, more thoughtful. "Some Second Catholics meditate, I know. Do you?"

"I've tried. I'm not very good at it."

"That's the secret about meditation—nobody's good at it." A quick smile flashes across Baz's face. "You need to find center, Vidal. You need to refocus. If you do that, I think the people around you will sense it."

"Maybe so," Noemi replies politely. She gives this about a zero percent chance of success.

Either Baz doesn't pick up on Noemi's skepticism or she doesn't care. "The next time you meditate, I want you to ask yourself two questions. What are you fighting, Noemi Vidal? And what are you fighting for?"

The questions resonate more deeply for Noemi than she would've thought. Disconcerted, she stares at the floor as she nods.

"You're free to go," Captain Baz says. At least she won't push the meditation thing any further. "Try not to step on any toes on your way out?"

“Yes, Captain. But—I wanted to ask about the stars. Have the scientists figured out what they are yet? What they were supposed to do?”

Baz shrugs. “So far nobody has a clue. Nothing obvious has shown up. Nothing not-so-obvious, either. Maybe it wasn’t official, or serious. Maybe some Earther with more money than sense decided to make harassing us his new hobby.”

“Maybe,” Noemi says. But she can’t bring herself to believe it. Those projectiles from Earth could only have been intended to do them harm.

If they failed, that means others will be coming. This time, she won’t have a chance to shoot them down.

Chapter Two

Half a galaxy away, on a lush resort island off the coast of China, Abel is crashing a party.

“Thank you,” he says to the George model who hands back his identibadge, the one Abel personally programmed with false data. George mechs are only equipped with enough intelligence for uninteresting bureaucratic tasks, and this one performed only routine checks, all of which Abel had taken into account. It would take a far deeper inquiry to discover any issues. Even a human would’ve been unlikely to determine that the man walking into the party is not actually named “Kevin Lambert,” is not a lifelong resident of Great Britain, and is not a potential investor in Mansfield Cybernetics.

The party fills a large, oval, translucent bubble suspended not far above the ocean, surrounded by a few smoky side rooms and corridors that wind around it like the precious-metal setting around a jewel. So far, attendees number approximately two hundred and seventeen; he’ll finalize this count once he’s certain he’s accounted for people who might be in bathrooms or hallways. There’s at least one service mech for every three partygoers, a mixture of Dogs and Yokes handing around food

on trays, a couple of scantily clad Fox and Peter models no doubt provided for after-party entertainment, and three Oboes in the corner, playing music just loud enough to ensure people can still converse.

Abel's information about popular music aged badly during the thirty years of his confinement. He's still catching up. After nearly a century of slower, gentler, neoclassical music, up-tempo tunes have returned to popularity. This song, with a hundred and forty beats per minute, is clearly meant to echo a human heartbeat in a state of excitement, thus stimulating listeners on both conscious and subconscious levels

Then he stops analyzing the music and simply asks himself, *Do you like it?*

Yes. He does.

A slight smile on his face, Abel walks into the heart of the gathering. He's surrounded on all sides by the rich and beautiful—slim bodies garbed in richly patterned kimonos, jackets and trousers cut to emphasize attractiveness, and silk dresses that do little to conceal every curve and plane of the bodies within.

Only 3.16 meters beneath the transparent flooring, the dark water ripples past, waves forming under their feet to break on the distant shore. Soft bands of light sweep downward repeatedly as if the illumination were flowing along the walls into the sea.

The dataread tucked into Abel's black silk jacket pulses once. Rather than pull it out, he simply taps his chest pocket and localizes the range of his hearing. The crowd's murmuring instantly becomes muted.



"How's it going down there?" asks Harriet Dixon, who works as the pilot of Abel's ship, the *Persephone*. She's generally full of bubbly optimism, but she gets nervous when she can tell Abel isn't telling her the full story. *"Finished trading the 'big and sparkly' yet?"*

He snags a glass of champagne from a nearby Yoke's tray to complete his image as a partygoer. "Not yet."

This is untrue. He sold the diamond they mined from a meteor near Saturn as soon as they made landfall on Earth. His other tasks do not concern Harriet and her partner, Zayan Thakur. Involving them would only put them at risk. Abel has begun calculating the morality of lying in more complex ways, of late.

"As long as you're not losing it at a casino," Harriet says. *"That stone's going to fetch us enough to live on for months! If you manage it right."*

"I will," Abel says. In fact the price he got could probably pay for a full year's operating costs. He will cut Harriet and Zayan in for equal shares of the haul, but he has chosen to distribute larger windfalls in smaller, scheduled installments. When he met his crew members six months ago, they were very near the point of starvation. The natural psychological result of such privation is the impulse to spend any funds as quickly as they come in, sometimes on pure extravagance. This isn't unique to Harriet and Zayan; most Vagabonds are so used to living on scarce resources that they're often unsure how to handle prosperity. Such luxuries don't tempt Abel.

His one temptation lurks at the far edge of the Earth system, monitored by security satellites—the Genesis Gate.



The pathway that would lead back to Noemi, and probably to his own death.

Sometimes that journey seems worth the price.

"I promise I won't gamble it away," Abel adds. "I should be back on the *Persephone* within two hours."

"*You'd better be.*" That's Zayan, clearly shouting over from his ops station. "*Or we'll turn Earth upside down looking for you.*"

"*Security stations, too.*" Harriet's picked up on the fact that Abel uses false identification and tries hard to avoid interacting with Queen and Charlie models. She is highly intelligent, but understandably has not figured out precisely why he avoids them. No doubt she's assumed he's in trouble with the law on some system or another. "*You're the luckiest Vagabond I ever saw. But everyone's luck runs out someday, Abel.*"

Abel doesn't have "luck." He simply has a better understanding of probabilities than any biological life-form. The effect is much the same. "You won't have to search any security stations. I promise." As a George model steps to the acoustic center of the room, he adds, "I'll be in touch once I'm done here. Captain out."

No sooner does he silence the dataread than the music stops midbeat. The human partygoers fall silent just as quickly as the mech band.

A spotlight falls over the George, who calls, "If we may have your attention, the program is about to begin. Our Mansfield Cybernetics presents your host for tonight, renowned scientist and philosopher Dr. Gillian Mansfield Shearer."

Applause breaks out across the room as a woman in her early forties walks to the heart of the light. In the distance

Abel overhears someone whispering, “I can’t believe she’s here tonight. I thought she would’ve sent a representative—”

“This is important,” says that person’s companion. Abel doesn’t bother looking to see exactly who it is. Gillian Shearer is his lone point of focus. The brilliance makes her red hair gleam. At 154.12 centimeters in height, she stands shorter than the average human female, but her posture and intensity suggest greater power. The plain black dress she wears looks out of place in this room of glamorous gowns and silk suits—as if a funeral attendee had suddenly walked into the party. It hangs slightly loose on her, as though she had lost a great deal of weight in a hurry, or she is one of those humans who considers fashion a waste of time.

Dr. Shearer has a strong nose, and her hair has a widow’s peak. These are features she and Abel share, because they inherited them from the same DNA.

Abel is Burton Mansfield’s creation; Gillian Shearer is his daughter.

Abel steps halfway behind a taller partygoer. Probably Gillian’s human eyes can’t make out anyone’s features past the glare of that spotlight, but Abel’s taking no chances. She might notice his strong resemblance to a younger Mansfield, or she might simply remember him.

Abel remembers her.

“I wish I could talk with Mommy again. Mommy always knew how to make it better.” Gillian looks up at him, tears welling in her blue eyes as he carefully applies the synthskin to her bloody knuckles; she says he’s better at it than the household Tare. In this moment she is eight years, one month, and four days old. “Daddy says someday I’ll get to talk to Mommy, but why isn’t it now?”



Robin Mansfield died some months before Abel achieved consciousness. He has assumed Burton Mansfield believed in no supreme being, but perhaps the concept of heaven would comfort a child. "That would be very far in the future."

"It could be now! Daddy got it all wrong." Gillian's scowl is too fierce for her tiny face. "Instead he made you to take care of me."

"And for other purposes," he said, smoothing the synthskin with his fingertips, proud to have been chosen ahead of the Tare. "But I'll take care of you."

Perhaps he should remember her fondly. But everything that reminds him of Burton Mansfield has been poisoned for Abel, possibly forever—and that includes his daughter.

"Assembled guests," Gillian says. The greater depth and resonance of her voice is to be expected post-adolescence, but it nonetheless startles Abel. "For two generations, Mansfield Cybernetics has stood alone in its capacity to create, update, and perfect the artificial intelligences that support our society. It's now hard to imagine how we would manage without Bakers and Items to handle complex but mundane tasks, Dogs and Yokes to perform manual labor, Mikes and Tares to care for us when we're sick, Nans and Uncles to tend our children and our elderly, and the Queens and Charlies that keep us safe throughout the galaxy."

Polite applause briefly fills the room. A meter from Abel, a Yoke stands still, tray of champagne glasses in her hands, a useful object in human form. He cannot reject Gillian's assessment of a Yoke as no more than that; the sense of self within him—his soul, Noemi called it—is shared by no other

mech. But he still looks into the Yoke's eyes and wishes he could see another soul looking back.

Gillian gestures at a nearby screen, which lights up as the spotlight falls dark. Different models of mech appear in rotation—leonine Queens, designed to fight; humble Dogs for manual labor; silvery, inhuman X-Rays that project the faces of others. “We’re constantly updating and perfecting each of the twenty-five models of mech in current production. However, those models have remained fundamentally unchanged for decades—primarily because the service they provide is capable and consistent. But my father and I had another reason for maintaining the models as they are: We didn’t want to dramatically alter the market until we had an innovation worth altering our entire galaxy.” On the screen, the mech tanks growing shapes in rough human form shift into red bubbles—Force fields? A polymer? Abel can’t tell from visual input alone—with shadowy fetal shapes inside. Gillian doesn’t smile, but she lifts her chin so that her face is bathed in the crimson light of this vision of the future. “Now, at last, we believe we’ve made that breakthrough.”

Applause breaks out again, more enthusiastic than before, as the screen image shifts into the forms of two embryos with brightly glowing mech components in the area of the head. The embryos rapidly shift into fetuses, into infants, and then into two fully grown mechs—not a Charlie and a Queen, but with faces like the children those two models would have, if they could reproduce.

Now, it seems, they can.

“Organic engineering,” Gillian says. “Superstrong structures

within made up not of metal but of organic compounds, manipulated to create material far more resilient than bone. Mental capacity that will allow for greater individuality of programming while maintaining the essential separation between human and machine. Self-repairing capacities that go beyond healing minor injuries, rendering the next generation of mechs nearly immortal. We're calling them Inheritors: Mechs that can carry on the best of what came before, while helping us realize our ambitions for the future. That's what we believe we'll be able to offer this galaxy—not decades from now, but within the next two to three years."

Excited murmuring rises as the lights go up. Abel understands why. These people are anticipating not only better, more useful mechs, but also investment opportunities that will make them even wealthier than they already are. (He's observed that human avarice almost always outstrips human need.)

His principal thought is different from theirs: *Soon I'll be obsolete.*

In some ways. Not all. The new mechs will be limited mentally; they will not develop souls. Yet knowing any mechs, anywhere, will be more advanced than him in any way—it's a new sensation, one Abel decides he doesn't like.

He'd gleaned rumors of this, mostly through various bits of research chatter coming from Cray, in particular from Virginia Redbird. It was his curiosity about a potential new cybernetic line that brought him here. But he'd hoped the new mechs might be more like him. That they might be people rather than machines.

That he might no longer be alone.

Gillian says, “Organic mechs will be able to reproduce, thus reducing manufacturing costs.” Raising one eyebrow, she dryly adds, “Reproduction will be on command only, so no one need worry about any unwelcome surprises. And we’re pretty sure we can improve on nine months’ gestation time—something human mothers might be jealous of.”

As the crowd chuckles, Abel imagines the possibilities. The thought of a pregnant mech, carrying something that is more device than child—something intended only for servitude—revolts him profoundly. A human might call the reaction “primal.” All Abel knows is that he cannot abide the thought of it.

Gillian seems disquieted as well, her eyes downcast, but her tone is even as she continues describing her creations. “They’ll be cheaper to create and therefore to own. They’ll retain all the advantages of mech labor while removing the disadvantages. Tonight, I hope to speak with each of you personally about our research, and about the potential that lies ahead for our company, for your participation in our next great endeavor, and for the betterment of our entire society—all through the creation of the most sophisticated mech ever.”

Abel feels like this title belongs to him still, but mentioning him would undoubtedly upset the flow of her sales pitch.

“My father’s vision has transformed this galaxy once.” Gillian’s blue eyes have taken on the intensity of a gas flame. “His legacy has the potential to be greater still. Mansfield Cybernetics intends to lead the way not only in mech engineering, but also through a revolutionary vision of the future that promises to expand the capacities of humanity itself. With your help, we can transform the galaxy again . . . together.”



The loudest applause of the night breaks out as she steps off the dais and nods at the Oboes, who all resume their song on the very note where they left off. None of the Oboe mechs show the slightest reaction to this revelation. They're not programmed with enough intelligence to care.

Abel, however, will be thinking about Gillian's speech for a long time. It did not fulfill his hopes of finding another mech like him, but it is nonetheless significant—

His visual field of focus shifts upon identifying a threat: Gillian Shearer, who is staring straight at him.

Her look lasts only 0.338 seconds, not long enough to immediately betray him but more than long enough to create an unacceptable level of risk. Abel doesn't even glance backward as he turns to go.

He weaves through the crowd, moving against the tide of those pressing forward to get nearer to Gillian so he can hear more about this vision of the future she's offered. Walking speed must be calculated to balance the value of haste versus the cost of drawing attention.

His calculations must have been incorrect, however, because through the din he catches Gillian's voice. "That man—the blond one—he looks familiar, can you get—"

Abel ducks into one of the cloudy side passages that lead to bathrooms and food-preparation areas, finds a bathroom that's empty, and locks the door behind him. Then he kneels down and punches through the transparent floor.

The sound and spray of the waves roar into the room as he rips out a segment approximately forty by forty centimeters and jumps into the ocean.

Water closes around him, shockingly cold. He strokes and kicks through blue-black seaweed and tiny silvery eels, fighting the current, grateful for his unerring sense of direction and the ability to hold his breath longer than any human could.

They will find the damage to the floor in no less than three minutes, no more than ten. If Gillian fully recognized me, she will already have sent a signal to the security mechs on land. If she only suspects my identity or is unsure due to inferior human memory, she won't send the signal until the damage is discovered. In the latter case, he has a chance to make it to the *Persephone's* hangar. If the former—

He resolves to handle this negative outcome only upon its occurrence.

As soon as Abel's foot makes first contact with the shifting sand near the coast, he digs in, stops swimming, and starts running. Dashing straight out of the waves, he sees guests at a nighttime beach party skittering backward, laughing as a wild man bursts out of the waves to run past them. Sand sticks to his shoes and sopping-wet clothes, but it doesn't slow him down.

No point in restricting himself to human speed once he's off the beach. He accelerates past that within 1.3 seconds and aims directly for the hangar. With one hand he taps the dataread as he runs. "Harriet, Zayan, do you read me?"

"Abel!" Zayan's voice comes through instantly. *"Another couple minutes and we'd have been worried."*

"Worry now," Abel says. "Also start the engines now. Get ready for takeoff as fast as you can."

Harriet yells, *"We told you not to—"*

“Scold me after preparing the ship to fly.” He makes a quick time estimate of his possible capture as he runs beneath an elevated rail into a small, scrubby park. Every moment the sky grows darker as night becomes real. “If I’m not on the ship in ten minutes, leave without me, and the *Persephone* is yours.”

“Oh, God, Abel, what did you do?” She’s become more terrified than angry.

“Nothing, actually, but the authorities won’t believe that. Go.”

By the time he reaches the hangar 6.1 minutes later, his hair and clothes are almost dry from the sheer speed of his run. Abel doesn’t slow down as he heads toward the doorway to their docking bay, except for once when he sees a crowbar lying unattended near an old Vagabond junker. Stooping to grab it only costs him 1.3 seconds, and besides, if he’s going to run into resistance—

Approaching the door, Abel grabs the jamb and swings around the entrance, slamming the crowbar straight into the head of the waiting Queen, who was of course concealed in the spot on the other side of the wall her programming would’ve targeted as most strategically likely. She falls like the inert machinery she has become, and Abel tosses the crowbar back before covering the final distance to the *Persephone*. Its silver teardrop shape seems to shine in the dark bay. When the door spirals open for him, he’s finally back home.

“Immediate departure is advisable,” he calls, trusting the comm system to be on. Sure enough, the mag engines instantly fire and his ship takes flight. Whatever signal Gillian sent didn’t trigger a planet-wide alarm, or at least she didn’t know to target

the *Persephone* specifically, because he feels the ship escape planetary gravity without resistance.

When he walks onto the bridge, Harriet calls over her shoulder, "Have you gone completely mad?"

"I'm no more mad than I ever was," Abel replies.

This wins him a scowl from Harriet. "That's not as encouraging as you think it is."

Noemi's voice echoes in Abel's mind. *You're terrible at comforting people—*

"Doesn't look like we've got company coming," Zayan announces. "Our path to the Earth Gate to Stronghold checks out as clear." Gillian must not have fully recognized Abel after all—only saw him as an intruder, someone to check out at the nearest spaceport, not someone to chase down and entrap no matter what.

But she easily could have. In another fraction of a second, she *would* have. Abel had let his curiosity override his good judgment; in so doing, he had endangered not only himself but also his crew. This was unacceptable. He must be more cautious in future.

"What, are you *wet*? Did someone try to drown you?" Harriet demands.

"I'm much too good a swimmer to drown." Abel doesn't expect this correction to improve her mood; sure enough, her scowl only deepens. "I'm back, Harriet. Isn't that enough?"

"Of course it is." She glances back at him, her long braids falling past her shoulder as she does so. Both she and Zayan wear traditional Vagabond garb, loose flowing shirts and pants in vibrant patchwork colors. On the stark black-and-silver

bridge of the *Persephone*, the young couple seem as brilliant as butterflies. “We worry. That’s all.”

Zayan laughs. “Yeah, we’d never find another boss who pays as well as you do.”

A possibility occurs to Abel that had not presented itself before—an inexplicable flaw in his logic. “You could’ve taken off without me. The audio record of my last transmission would’ve allowed you to make a legal claim to the *Persephone*.”

“We’d never do that to you,” Zayan protests. “C’mon, Abel. Don’t you know that?”

Harriet looks at him again, but this time her eyes are less angry, more troubled. “Have you really never had a friend before, that you could think something like that? Besides Noemi, I mean.”

“No. I haven’t.” Abel isn’t sure he wants this conversation to continue. “I should change my clothes.”

Although he’s aware of his crew members staring at him while he heads off the bridge, neither tries to stop him.

Neither Harriet nor Zayan knows why their captain doesn’t fear drowning. Why he uses a constant series of fake IDs and stays out of range of security mechs as much as possible. They’re loyal enough not to ask. They are, as Harriet just said, not merely employees but friends.

Would they do things differently if they realized Abel wasn’t human? That he was not only a mech but the special project of the revered Burton Mansfield himself?

If they knew that Mansfield wanted Abel back because Abel’s cybernetic body is the only one designed to contain a human mind—*Mansfield’s* mind, which can save the old man from his impending death—would they trade Abel’s life for Mansfield’s?

Those questions disturb Abel sometimes, but he prefers never to know the answers.

As far as he knows, only one human has ever valued a mech's life as equal to that of any other person. She's on the other side of the Genesis Gate—far away from him, forever.

What would Noemi Vidal say about the organic mechs? Abel feels certain her revulsion would match his own.

His mood darkens as he imagines the future of this technology: mechs becoming more and more humanlike. Someday, surely, a soul will awaken within one of them—but Mansfield learns from his mistakes. The next mech with a soul will be bound by programming so strong it will make Directive One seem like a mere suggestion.

We will no longer be individuals, Abel thinks, counting himself among these unmade brothers and sisters already. *We will no longer be free.*

We will be slaves.