

Chapter One

It felt like I was flying.

My sneakers gripped the pavement and pushed off again, one after the other. Leg muscles and implants worked together to send me soaring down the sidewalk. I could feel the contact with hard concrete through my soles as electronic and biological nerves interfaced. The implants that formed my lower legs and right knee were as much a part of me as my elbows, which pumped by my sides.

In. Out. In. Out. My lungs dragged in fresh air and sent out old in measured breaths. My muscles cried for oxygen, but I pushed on. At the corner, checking my speed, I took a wide turn, dodging a small poodle in the process. It yapped. Mr. Ward yelled something about slowing down at the same time I shouted an apology. Instead of slowing, I increased my speed.

One more lap. My hair streamed in the gentle morning breeze, brown strands occasionally creeping into my mouth. I brushed it back, wishing I had tied it. But the wind tugging at my hair felt good, like I could jump from the sidewalk and the breeze would carry me away.

Reaching the end of my urban course, I slowed to a walk, letting my breathing rate decrease as I glanced at my stopwatch. 16:32:03. Yes! I thrust my fist in the air. A new personal best for four miles. Smiling with satisfaction, I jogged toward home. Although I still hadn't beaten Annabeth's record of 16:29:32, shaving two seconds off a time I had been fighting for the past month made for a great birthday present.

Two blocks from my house, I stumbled, catching myself against a car charger, one of the many identical gray poles scattered through Snowvale. Glancing back, I frowned when I saw no sign of abnormal cracks in the pavement, much less a stone that could have caught my sneaker. With a shrug, I pushed away from the cold metal, took one step, and collapsed again. My left leg had given out.

My heart rate had been slowing down, but now it picked up. For a brief moment I was five years old again, waking up in a hospital bed unable to move my legs. I shook the memory away and ran my hands over my lower left leg, the cybernetic section, seeking any sign of damage. Had an upgrade malfunctioned? Both leg implants had gotten fresh upgrades last Christmas. If one had failed, my parents could get it replaced under warranty, but I could be stuck with crutches or a wheelchair until the new part came in. I shuddered. What horrible timing that would be, with track meets beginning next week. No. It couldn't have failed.

After scooting myself across the concrete on my butt, I grabbed the charging pole, then used it to pull myself up as I pushed with my right leg. At first I let my left leg hang without any weight on it, but it felt perfectly normal. Taking a deep breath, I leaned on my left foot. Nothing happened. I took a few experimental steps in place, but my leg showed no sign of buckling again.

The breath I had held slipped out in a sigh of relief. Perhaps I had tripped on a crack after all, and the sudden impact caused something to briefly slip out of alignment. It was unlikely,

but possible. I would have to talk to Dr. Peck about it, in case a part did need replacing. As my pulse steadied, I laughed at myself. Even if a part did fail, a replacement would arrive in a few days and Dr. Peck would have it installed in no time. There was no reason to panic.

Shaking off the lingering feeling of dread, I dashed home.

My house lay tucked within a chest-high white privacy fence. Bushes and early spring flowers nudged against the green siding. Dad prided himself on keeping the small lawn neat, and it showed in the rake marks that circled through the thin new grass and across the gravel drive. As I made my way to the front door, I nudged some small gray pebbles into the ruts left by Mom's car. She still drove a grounder, and the tire tracks bothered Dad as much as the mileage.

I opened the front door, its handle cold against my skin.

"Surprise!" The combined shout of my mother and older brother crashed into my ears. I stared. In my absence they had filled the entryway with balloons and the much-worn Happy Birthday banner, which still sparkled despite its fading colors.

"I'm turning sixteen, not ten, you know," I laughed, punting two balloons back inside before they could complete their escape. I stepped in and closed the door before any more balloons got the same idea. Wading through the sea of latex, I slipped off my sneakers and turned to kick them toward the shoe rack.

"Happy birthday, Viki!" My brother ambushed me from behind with a bear hug, his sharp chin bumping against my head. He hadn't shaved yet. I could feel the bristles poking into my scalp as his jaw moved. "Are you ready for cake? Mom managed to program the cook with a new recipe she thought you'd like."

"Mmph," I said, having no air with which to reply otherwise. It was a family tradition to have cake for breakfast on our birthdays, and I had been looking forward to it since I left on my early morning run.

"James," Mom scolded, shaking her head at him. "I told you I wanted to claim the cake as my own creation."

Escaping my brother's iron grip, I wrapped my arms around Mom's shoulders and planted a kiss in her blond curls. "Don't worry, Mom. Cake is cake, right? Is it chocolate? No marzipan, right?" Anything almond-related had become a family in-joke of sorts, ever since I had been rushed to the hospital because of the previously unknown allergy on my third birthday.

She gave me a quick hug, laughing as she pulled away. "No marzipan," she promised. "It's an old recipe for Black Forest cake." Mom shooed us toward the dining room. "Your father said to save him a piece."

Poor Dad, having to work on a Sunday again. I grinned. "I'm sure we could save one piece."

James chuckled. "He can have my share, if you don't get to it first."

"There are leftover waffles from yesterday if you don't want cake." Mom's tone warned that he had better try the cake first.

Despite her waffles being delicious, fluffy creations that begged to be drowned in syrup, I had no interest in them today. The tall, chocolate-frosted cake waiting on the dining room table was too alluring.

As I sank into a straight-backed chair, James perched a birthday hat on my head. A huge slice of cake sat on a glass plate in front of me. Mom always used the best dishes for celebrations, and the good silverware, too. Not that I cared. It could have been served on a paper plate with a plastic spork and I still would have dug in. I took a bite of the moist cake, savoring the flavor. Dark, dark chocolate with a hint of cherries.

“This is amazing! Thanks, Mom.” I beamed a smile at her before popping another forkful in my mouth.

After a few bites, James started pushing the rest of his slice around his plate. “I changed my mind, I want waffles.”

“Why don’t you get Viki’s presents first?” Mom took his plate and headed for the kitchen.

I finished my first piece of cake and started serving myself a second as James darted out of the room. He returned a moment later, carrying a pile of presents wrapped in shiny red and blue paper, and proceeded to dump them unceremoniously in my lap. I grabbed one before it could tumble to the floor. When I glared, he smiled and produced another present from behind his back, setting it on the top with a flourish.

Mom arrived, passed James a plate of waffles, and sat down. Before I could start ripping paper off, they started singing “Happy Birthday.” It sounded like a third person was singing as well, and I realized Mom had placed a handheld projector on the table. A miniature holographic recording of Dad’s face sang along, slightly off-key and not quite in sync. I grinned.

“Want help opening them?” James eyed my pile of gifts.

I shook my head. “I can handle it.” Tearing open the first package, my smile widened. New speakers to replace the three-year-old monstrosities that crackedled if I cranked them up too high. “Thanks, James!”

“My ears thank me, too,” he retorted.

The other packages held smaller things. A few new shirts, most sporting some atrocious saying or another in gaudy colors. One had “Baby Cyborg” written in bright green on a pink background with a huge robot face beaming out from over the letters. No doubt they were Dad’s idea. They’d go into the pile of clothes I never wore. A new bottle of nail polish—dark violet this time, which matched the flecks in my blue eyes. A gift card for my favorite music store at the mall. And, of course, neon socks sporting some odd animal. This year it was platypuses, and I raised my eyebrows at Mom.

“Really?”

She nodded, smiling. “Your father helped pick those out.”

Of course he did. I could imagine him laughing as he pictured my reaction to them. Chuckling, I set the socks on top of everything else and retrieved my cake. There was no big present this year, but with James going off to college next fall, my parents had been saving as much money as they could. I did my best to hide my disappointment. “Thanks for all the stuff. James, you might want to get out your fancy headphones. I need to test these speakers out.”

Instead of scowling as he normally would, James smirked. “Go on, then.”

I waved a fork full of cake at him. “Let me ea—” The cake slipped off the fork and plopped in my lap, covering my sweats in crumbs and smears of frosting. I shook my head and went for another forkful. “Let me eat my cake first,” I said, stuffing my face.

James shrugged and began to devour his waffles, but something in his expression struck me as odd. He looked like he was holding in laughter. I declined a third slice of cake and carried my spoils upstairs, hoping he hadn’t filled my room with balloons.

The moment I walked into my room, my entire body went slack with shock. I shrieked and almost dropped my precious speakers. Setting everything in a jumbled pile on the floor by the door, I approached my desk cautiously, staring at the brand-new computer sitting next to my old machine.

It was a beauty. Not quite top-of-the-line, but close enough to suit my needs, and it had sleek silver curves accented with darker gray. I ran my hand over the body of the computer, all but salivating. I had been looking at new interfaces for months, ever since my current one started to have issues, and now one had simply appeared on my desk.

“Ahhhhh!” I couldn’t hold in another scream of delight.

The sound of laughter made me spin around. James and Mom watched me from the door, both grinning. Mom held a video camera, the red light blinking to signal a recording in session.

I groaned. “Did you really have to film that?”

“Your father will want to see your reaction when he gets home tonight.” Mom turned off the camera, then checked her watch. “My shift starts soon. James, you’re on dish duty.”

“Fine,” he grumbled. “Happy birthday, Viki. Don’t blast my eardrums with the new sound system or it might be accidentally and maliciously destroyed.”

I shook my head at him, having heard that threat more than once. “Mom?” My voice stopped her on her way out the door.

“Yes?”

“Thank you!” I said, meaning those words more than I’d ever meant them before. I knew how much a computer like this must have cost my parents.

She smiled. “I’m glad you like it. Thank your father when he gets home. It was his idea.”

“I will.” I turned back to the machine. The small power button depressed almost imperceptibly under my finger. A soft whisper hummed inside, then it powered on, the screen coming to life with a soft blue glow. As I sat down in front of the computer, I felt my thighs beginning to cramp, and reminded myself to stretch later. For a second, I recalled the glitch from earlier, but my leg felt normal, and I dismissed the thought, excited to play with my new machine.

Another push of a button, and my old computer started booting as well, sluggish and noisy as usual. With a nudge I tilted it so I could see the screen while focusing on my new interface. Sitting next to a brand-new machine, my old computer looked even more shabby than its five years of existence warranted. I wondered how long it would take for my files to transfer.

As I set up my new machine, a ping from my old one told me it had finally woken up and was waiting for the login password.

“Abracadabra,” I said, not bothering to glance over. Both the word and my voice patterns formed the entry code, and it would ping again when it was ready for use.

The second ping was followed by a cheerful, “Good morning, Viki.”

And immediately after that came, “What. Is. That?”

I sighed. “Good morning, Halle.” My AI friend tended to be suspicious of new electronics; I could still remember how closely it had monitored the new kitchen robot after my parents brought it home. Not that I blamed my friend. As a rogue AI, Halle had good reason to be worried about anything that might mean new Government tracking software.

“Why did you not tell me you were getting a new computer?”

I leaned back in my chair and folded my arms, frowning in the direction of my old computer’s camera. “You didn’t think I’d keep this one forever, did you?”

“It works fine,” the voice emanating from the speakers grumbled. “You might have at least warned me.”

“I didn’t know myself. It’s my birthday present.” The words didn’t quite feel real yet, and I reached forward to touch the new computer’s screen. It responded immediately, asking if I wanted a fingerprint or voice-activated login. I touched voice, and it asked for a password.

“It is your birthday today?” Halle asked.

I laughed at my friend’s feigned note of surprise. “You know it is. Same day every year.” The new computer beeped, wanting confirmation on my password. It had recorded our voices. I shook my head and pressed no. “Abracadabra.” Yes, that was my password, I confirmed.

Another ping, then the desktop loaded. Everything was ready. All I needed to do was transfer my files and install a few programs. Grinning, I went to fetch my new speakers.

“When are you getting rid of this machine?”

“As soon as my files are transferred,” I replied, synching the speakers and arranging them on either side of the new interface.

A crackling sigh jittered over the old speakers in a squeaky blast.

I frowned toward the old computer’s camera. “Tone it down, please.”

“Sorry.” Halle sounded more sulky than sorry. Rap music started playing, one of my least favorites.

Sighing, I turned off the old speakers and synched the new ones to my old computer. The rap music had stopped, but Halle’s voice came through sharper and clearer than I’d heard it in a while.

“...should not silence me like—Oh. That sounds much better.”

“Welcome back,” I snarked, and collapsed into my chair again. “Computer, begin file transfer.”

“Why not just ask me to do it? I need to scan the machine anyway.”

“Wouldn’t want to waste your time, Halle. I’m sure an advanced AI like yourself has better things to do, like finding new ways to beat me at chess.”

I smiled as laughter resonated from the speakers. With us, chess always had the same outcome—Halle victorious—but it still remained my favorite game. One day I would find a way to defeat my friend.

The computer beeped, and Halle fell silent so I could continue the commands. “Computer, confirm file transfer, personal data for Viki, to—” I glanced at the screen of my new computer, noting its name currently filling the background, white on black. “—Victory 2.0, local.” I pressed the accept file transfer option on the screen, not bothering to order the computer vocally. I’d never tested whether computers could tell commands for different machines apart, and although they were supposed to be smart enough to do that now, with the camera sensing which direction the user faced, I didn’t feel like experimenting.

A progress bar popped up and slowly filled with green.

“Are you done with voice command?” Halle asked.

I nodded and jazz music began to play. We’d realized years ago that my family might be worried if I was constantly talking to myself or a mysterious voice. Since then, music had made the best cover-up, although sometimes Halle and I disagreed on what counted as “good” music.

“Are you going to transfer, too?” I asked.

“Of course. It would be faster to do so via the Cloud, however, rather than locally. Enough of me is stored on the Cloud that I would prefer not to break contact, even for the moments it would take to jump.”

I nodded. “As you wish.”

An image appeared on the screen of my old computer: a white cat standing over the progress bar. Halle sniffed at the bar, then trotted over it and pawed at one of the icons, opening my folder of homework assignments. “English is due tomorrow.”

Groaning, I clicked the appropriate file. My fingers danced over the keyboard, typing random letters as I tried to think what to write. “Thanks for the reminder. Any suggestions?”

“For an essay debating the pros and cons of Artificial Intelligence? I am not the best person to ask.”

“I suppose you’re a bit biased.”

The cat meowed and sat down in the corner of the screen. “You could say that.”

I jotted down a few possible titles before minimizing the screen. “I need some mental stimulation first.” A single click called up the chess program. “Maybe today will be my lucky day.”

“I doubt it.” The cat yawned, showing sharp, glistening teeth, then walked over and batted one of the white pawns. The piece moved forward two spaces. “Your move.”

Essays were officially the worst invention ever. It had taken me most of the day to write this one. I read over the four double-spaced pages one last time, then sighed. I had been working on the paper for so long that “AI” was beginning to look misspelled.

Glancing at the progress bar on my new computer, I was surprised to see it full of green, the word “Complete” blinking underneath. Apparently I’d been too focused on the essay to hear the alert; or perhaps the electronic guitar currently wailing over the speakers had overpowered the small ping.

“All right.” I transferred the essay to my email, since I didn’t want to bother with a second computer transfer for a single file. “Halle, are you moving or what?”

The cat, curled up on the launch menu button, raised its head. “Did you finish the essay? Want me to read over it?”

“I’m sure you’ve already read it three times, rewritten it twice, and prepared a speech for why I should use your version.”

My new speakers were amazing. I could clearly hear the derision in Halle’s snort. “Only needed to read it once.”

“And?”

“The verdict? It could be better.”

My shoulders moved up and down, and I pressed the send button for my email. “I really don’t care. It’s just a stupid English essay.” Pushing back from my desk, I ran my hands through my hair. “Ugh, I need to shower. How about you transfer while I’m doing that? I’m dying to see how good the graphics are on my new computer. We could play Realmshards.” Halle and I had started playing the multiplayer online game a few years ago and become somewhat addicted. Between my avatar’s magical attacks and Halle’s avatar’s healing, we made a pretty good raid party and could double-team many of the world bosses.

“You should probably install the program, then.”

“Could you do that?” I asked, already headed for my closet.

“As you wish.”

I glanced over my shoulder in time to see the cat trot off the screen, tail twitching. Its coat had changed a bit, to black tipped ears and tail—Halle’s way of saying it was nervous. Or annoyed. Sometimes it was hard to tell.

Mom had done laundry that morning. I dug through the piles of neatly folded clothes to find my favorite pajamas, staticky from the dryer as usual. No matter how many times I asked, she refused to hang them to dry. Normally I hid them under my pillow, out of sight, but she had done the sheets as well, if my perfectly made bed was any indication. Even the comforter had been tucked in. Dad called her old-fashioned sometimes, but I didn’t mind it too much, except when my favorite pajamas were full of static. I tucked them under my arm, wincing at the occasional prickle of electricity, and left my room.

My bathroom was across the hall. I could hear some ancient composer’s music coming from James’s room, a few steps down. He probably had his girlfriend Sara over again. My poor brother. He didn’t like classical, but she did, and she had him wrapped around her little finger. I closed my bathroom door on the music; classical wasn’t a favorite of mine, either.

Hot water hit me full blast when I walked into the shower, and I slapped the control panel to dial it down. I stepped out half an hour later, well-steamed, and got dressed. Violins were wailing from James’s room. As I brushed my teeth, an odd beeping started, and I frowned.

Toothbrush dangling from my mouth, I walked into my bedroom. Thankfully, James hadn't come to investigate the sound. Maybe he couldn't hear it over the violins.

The beeping came from my new computer—sharp, shrill sounds even compared to the electric guitar that had been playing when I left. Mumbling around a mouthful of toothpaste, I asked, “Halle? Everything okay there?”

“We have some serious trouble. Well, I have some serious trouble.” The cat appeared, its fur black as ink and eyes a dark, dark green, almost filling the screen with its face. Something had terrified my friend. Halle almost never went completely charcoal. “I triggered something during the transfer.”

My pulse shot up. “Hold on.” I dashed back to the bathroom, threw my toothbrush in its holder and rinsed my mouth. Wiping my lips on my pajama top's sleeve, I returned to my room, shutting the door and locking it for extra measure. If James did hear the beeping, I didn't want him barging in. For once, I was glad his girlfriend was over to distract him.

“What happened, Halle?” My eyes moved back and forth, following the cat as it stalked around the screen. Pacing was never a good sign. The last time Halle had done that, I had downloaded a program against its protests, and my computer had gotten a virus. It had taken Halle over a week to root the entire thing out.

“I triggered a search code during the transfer. It pinged back to the Government, specifically the Search and Retrieval Bureau.”

“SARB.” I gulped. The Search and Retrieval Bureau were a massive organization with basically unlimited power, and they went after anyone and anything that the Government considered a threat, finding their targets far more often than not. Halle had kept a low profile for the past six years, but not without difficulty. SARB was the proverbial axe hanging over its head, and it seemed it would be falling sooner than either of us expected. “What are you going to do?”

“I erased the search code and hid my tracks, but not before an alarm was triggered.” The cat sat in the lower left corner of the screen, hunched down. Its fur stood on end. “If I attempt to check whether they responded to the alarm, I might trigger something else.”

“You're blind, then.” I swallowed hard. “Halle, you need to go off-Cloud.”

“How? Your computer might hold me, but not easily, and when you turn it off...” The cat scrunched down further until it was a round black ball of fur with narrowed green eyes. “I have no idea what would happen if you did that.”

“That part of you sleeps, or something, right?” I drummed my fingers on the desk. “Maybe—”

Halle's words began to spill out at a rapid pace. “Sleep is not applicable to me. It is more like part of me shuts down. If my entire self shuts down, who knows what might happen? I might not start again.”

“Deep breaths, Halle,” I said, even though my friend did not breathe in any sense of the term. “We have to stay calm.” My thoughts raced each other to a mental finish line. “What if I left my computer on? You can stop it from automatically shutting down.”

“I would be completely cut off from the Cloud.” Halle's head raised, but its ears remained flat. “If anything happened to your computer, I would die.”

I started combing my damp hair with my fingers. “You sure you don’t want to try copying yourself?” We had discussed it once before, but Halle had been very against it.

“No. There is no way of knowing what might happen. Would it be me, except in the form of a thoughtless program? Would my consciousness, whatever it is made of, be copied as well and there be two of me?”

“One is more than enough,” I mock-groaned. “Don’t do it!”

The cat gave me a glare, ears cocked back, green eyes slightly narrowed, and a glint of teeth in its mouth.

“We’ll think of something,” I said, my voice returning to a more serious tone. “Don’t give up hope.”

The cat sat back, raised a paw, and began cleaning itself. “I need to think about this for a while. Will you leave your computer on in the meantime?”

“Of course. Anything you need, Halle.” I wished I could reach through the screen and give my friend a hug. Wrapping my arms around myself, I watched the installation window for Realmshards and tried to think of something I could do. I wasn’t very familiar with computers. Halle always handled technology-related problems for me, and although a very good hacker might have been able to do something about the search code, I would have no idea where to begin. There had to be some way I could help, though. I just needed to figure out how.