




TARNISHED
ARE THE
STARS

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CHAPTER ONE

There was nothing quite like the first *tick* of a new heart.

The silver TICCER stuttered to life in Anna's palm, its metal pulse a metronome moving in time with her own clockwork heart.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

Grandpa Thatcher threw down his instruments with a clatter.

Anna's gaze snapped to the surgical table, where their young patient lay motionless, chest open. "What is it?"

"His condition is more severe than I thought." Thatcher leaned forward to get a better look. "Glasses."

Hands shaking, Anna pushed Thatcher's spectacles up the bridge of his nose. Complications in surgery were more common than not, but her grandfather's desperate tone still hit Anna at her core. She set her teeth at the memory of the last time this boy before them had gone under her knife. She'd held the scalpel steady but pressed too hard, splitting skin, severing arteries. Warm blood ran over her fingers, and Thatcher's voice boomed across the table as he pushed her away, reclaiming control.

The boy had lost an arm that night, and Anna had lost her nerve. She blinked the memory away.

Thatcher pointed a gloved finger at the boy's chest cavity. "Tell me what you see."

The old man's wheelchair required a short operating table, so Anna, who stood taller than even the boys her age, had to stoop to see properly, struggling to look past the wavy hair and upturned lips that made the boy more human than patient. She squeezed her eyes shut, then opened them on rigid valves and a thickened heart muscle.

"It's enormous!"

"We're surgeons, Deirdre-Anne. *Enormous* is not an appropriate medical term."

Anna inhaled through her teeth. "It's hypertrophic."

"Good." Thatcher's fingers danced across the instrument tray. "And what does that mean?"

"He needs a TICCER, as you suspected."

Thatcher grabbed the cauterizer in acknowledgment of her correct answer.

He wouldn't ask her to help.

She didn't want him to.

He'd taught her everything he knew, but Anna wouldn't cut. She hadn't even considered it for years—not since her first surgery, not since the incident with the boy's arm. She was used to holding someone's life in her hands, pulling apart and piecing together the delicate machinery of TICCERs, but that was metal.

Flesh was different.

Flesh was fragile.

The TICCER rattled from her hands onto the instrument tray, her fingers shaking too hard to hold it. "I need to go."

Thatcher shook his head and tutted. "Don't be foolish. Your work here isn't finished."

Anna froze, her feet poised to flee. “Well, *I* am.”

“Once made, a mistake cannot be *unmade*.” He glanced at the instrument table, drawing her eyes with his; silver steel stared back. “To turn your back on this—all this good you could do—is childish.”

Anna let out a long, loaded breath. “*I was* a child. What did you expect from a twelve-year-old?” The memory of a scalpel whispered in her hand.

“It’s been six years, Deirdre-Anne. You were Roman’s doctor then, too.” Thatcher indicated the boy on the table with his chin. “*He’s* a child, and there’s only ever been space for one in my operating room.”

For a moment, Anna held his gaze. She didn’t speak. She didn’t breathe. The only sound came from the ticking of their young patient’s new heart.

Anna’s eyes met her boots. “Then you won’t be needing me.”

Thatcher didn’t look up, but his words chased her out the door: “Don’t run from this, Deirdre-Anne. Our fears always catch us in the end.”

Anna’s breath overtook her, ragged and consuming, as the door swung shut in her wake. She peeled off her gloves and plunged her hands beneath the tap, breathing slowly to match the meter of her heart as water spilled across her skin. She scrubbed and scraped, washing away every trace of their argument with anti-septic before stepping into the kitchen, where Roman’s mother waited for news.

The older girl sat slumped over the table, dark curls spilling over her brown skin, chin propped on tired hands. Anna doubted Ruby had moved at all since she’d been planted there with a mug of peppermint tea, Thatcher’s signature comfort. Ruby had looked

downright wild the night prior when she'd appeared at Anna's doorstep carrying an unconscious Roman. Now she looked worn, her deep brown eyes tired with sleepless anxiety.

Anna had seen her fair share of beleaguered loved ones waiting for news, good or bad. She'd sat with new widows and orphans, but Ruby gave her pause. Only six years had passed since Ruby had adopted the infant with one arm. Ruby's eyes had been sleepless then, too, but at least she'd had Dalton, her late husband. How unfortunate that her son fell ill so soon after her husband's death. Tragic, some might have called it.

But in Mechan—their hidden seaside village of outcasts—tragedy hung in the air like fog; it was their maker, their neighbor, their constant companion.

"How's Roman?" Ruby's voice cracked.

"Thatcher's still working on him." Anna wished she had more comforting news and a gentler tone to offer her best friend, but making promises, as Thatcher always said, wasn't a surgeon's business. Anna snatched Ruby's empty mug and filled it with water. "Here. You need to stay hydrated."

Ruby took the mug and pulled out the chair beside her. "Would you sit with me?"

Anna picked at her fingers; she'd cleaned them thoroughly, but she couldn't shake the feeling that a spot of blood lurked beneath one of her nails. "He's in good hands, Ruby. Thatcher's the best."

That was true: Thatcher *was* the best. His invention, the TICCER—Tarnish Internal Cardiac Clockwork-Enabled Regulator—had saved the lives of every citizen of Mechan. With steel and a scalpel, he mended all their hearts. He gave each patient who crossed through his operating room a chance to survive, and he'd given Anna a chance to learn.

Anna balled her shaking fingers into fists. Roman was in good hands—the only hands that could save him.

“Stay with me.” Ruby grabbed Anna’s wrist, her touch humming with frantic, desperate energy. Four years Anna’s senior, Ruby was usually the calm to Anna’s storm, the shield to Anna’s sword.

Not today.

Anna glanced out the window to see the beginnings of light. “It’s almost dawn. If I don’t leave for the market soon, I’ll be late.”

Ruby’s face fell. “Why don’t you stay home today? I could use the company, and the Celestial Market is dangerous.”

“You know I can’t.”

Though Ruby had never been to the Celestial Market—never even left the protection of Mechan—she’d certainly heard plenty about the Settlement. The convergence of so many people planet-side was enough to make anyone in Mechan nervous. Residents of the Settlement knew better than to leave their walled city, but the annual fair brought double the officer presence. If one of them stumbled across the secret village, hidden though it was in the crook of rocky cliffs miles away from the Settlement, it would be the end of their carefully protected refuge.

Ruby rested her head against Anna’s side. “I thought you might reconsider. That new decree—”

“What new decree?”

The crease in Ruby’s forehead deepened, her dark skin wrinkling in waves. “The runners brought it back yesterday.” She withdrew a crumpled bulletin from her dress pocket. “The Commissioner’s calling you out, Anna.”

The long-awaited thirty-fifth Tech Decree had been penned in familiar, thin letters:

Tech Decree Thirty-Five

By order of Commissioner Fremont in the year 2892, the individual known as the Technician is wanted for the illegal creation, installation, and propagation of human-augmentation technology.

Anna gulped. She'd lasted three years, running her business carefully and quietly outside the Commissioner's notice. She'd paid, blackmailed, and begged for silence, but it seemed someone had finally broken. Or perhaps the Commissioner had known all along, choosing now to strike, certain the Celestial Market would lure her out.

"I'll be okay." Anna waved off Ruby's concern. "This is only a formality. If he had anything on me, he wouldn't have used my alias."

Ruby pursed her lips. "I don't like the idea of you wandering about with a bounty on your head, especially with all those officers around."

"The officers won't know me from any other merchant, I promise." Anna's voice played assertive, but she tugged her copper braid with her free hand. "I've been running tech into the Settlement for three years now. If the Commissioner hasn't caught me yet, I doubt an official warrant will do much."

"Stay. *Please.*"

Anna shook her head, prying Ruby's fingers from her arm with difficulty.

"Just come back, all right?"

Staying to comfort Ruby was the safer option, but Anna couldn't fix Ruby's pain with nuts and bolts. She'd take her chances

with the officers. Evading them would be easier, if more dangerous, and her clients needed her help, both in the Settlement and at home. She and Thatcher made do with what the runners could steal from the Settlement, but with the coin Anna earned from the market, she could stock her grandfather's operating room for a month without breaking the law. Well, without thievery, anyway.

"I'll be fine, and so will Roman." She fought hard to keep a grimace off her face. She wasn't supposed to make promises like that.

As Anna reached the door, she took one last look at Ruby, face pressed against the table, eyes closed in sleepless rest. Anna would be fine, like she said. She always came back.

The sun's yellow face greeted Anna outside. Its rays sprinkled golden light up the cliff face, tangling with the silvery threads spiderwebbing across the rocks. Veins of cold metal turned ethereal in the early morning sun, almost as if the town mined gold instead of iron and zinc. Soon the inhabitants of Mechan would wake and fill the street with morning bustle, and she preferred to avoid the whispers and stares of her neighbors, the disapproval seeping through their words.

Ducking into her workshop behind Thatcher's house, Anna collected her cart before heading toward the mossy ridge overlooking the secret town below. Leaving behind a cluster of small homes, built with mismatched materials like patchwork quilts rising up from the earth, she pulled her cart onto the elevator and started the crank. When she reached the top, Anna couldn't see a single chimney, the entire town shrouded in the shadow of the cliff.

Mechan had grown at an uneven rate. Nestled between a cliff and the rocky shore, there was no room for farmland. The townspeople's supplies were limited to their small gardens, the ore they mined, and whatever the runners could smuggle out of the Settlement.

Anna trudged along the winding path, past the crag jutting out of the ocean like a jagged finger, toward the Settlement's red waterwheel. A large astronomical clock shone bright against the highest tower, sunlight reflecting against numerals etched in gold. The severe geography of the island served as Mechan's shield from the Commissioner's prying eyes, separating their coastal village from the flat farmland surrounding the Settlement. Though Mechan was only an hour's brisk walk from the Settlement gates, not a single officer had stumbled upon their village. The Commissioner had sent them, to be sure, but the people of Mechan could not be found so easily. Or maybe the Commissioner's officers were just incompetent.

The Settlement's city gates swarmed with people when Anna arrived. She longed to slip among the shadows and sneak into the Settlement like she usually did. Her fingers itched for the rope ladder hiding in the ivy along the clock tower, but there was too much security today, and her cart would never make it over the wall. She counted a dozen officers dressed in the Commissioner's maroon and gray, and half as many in icy blue—the Queen's colors. Perhaps Ruby had been right to worry—but no, the precautions made perfect sense with the influx of visitors.

"Papers," barked a youthful officer as Anna approached.

The officer held out a hand for Anna's documents, complete with her fake identity—a farmer's daughter from just around the bend—and the Commissioner's forged signature. The guard took

one bored look at it and waved her through, more concerned with the crowd of Orbitals than a simple farm girl.

For most of the year, the Orbitals stayed confined to the Tower—the cylindrical space station where most of the population, including the Queen, lived. But on the day of the Celestial Market, the Tower’s most illustrious (and irritating) came down from their palace in the sky to walk among their earthly subjects, complete with security detail.

“Visitors must submit to a screening upon entering or exiting the bullets,” shouted one of the Queen’s soldiers in the formal accent of the Tower, hollering over the crowd and pointing her stern finger at the large, metal vessels in the western field. They shone in the sunlight, a glittering horizon of silver pods. “Please be advised: Importing and exporting without a permit is illegal, and all Orbitals will be subjected to scanners upon returning to the Tower.”

Anna ignored her and brushed past the Orbitals dressed from head to toe in silver-and-gold costumes, enormous hats with bells and feathers adorning their rather inflated heads. Beneath a canopy across the dusty street, actors from the Tower recited poetry in grand tones. Their leader announced to the rapt audience that they’d weathered the perils of space to bring the planetary colonists a “singular historical experience.” Anna found their performance to be a singular torment.

Though Tech Decree Eighteen proclaimed the Celestial Market a celebration of culture to honor the memory of Former Earth, and to remember its demise at the hands of technology, Anna couldn’t imagine anyone among the crowd presented a true, historical portrayal—except perhaps the planetary citizens who gawped openmouthed at the Orbitals’ descriptions of death and

doom. Their horrified reactions were real, just as the Commissioner would want them to be. After all, with tech to fear, they would have no room for dissent.

None of the Orbitals' hyperbole or the officers' thinly veiled anti-tech rhetoric served so well a reminder of the true danger she faced as the wooden gallows set at the very heart of the market. A freshly hanged body spelled a reminder of the fate awaiting her if she were caught, its metal leg on display for all to see. Two stone slabs towered above on either side of the forbidding stage, engraved by hand with all thirty-five Tech Decrees—including the newest addition—to drive the warning home. Subtlety had never been one of the Commissioner's strengths.

Anna shuddered and turned from the sight, edging her cart in between a flower vendor and a candy stand where she couldn't quite see the gallows. With any luck, Anna would disappear into the background between two high-profile booths, noticed only by those who knew what to look for. She quickly changed from her soft linens into her market costume—a monstrous entrapment of brocades—and unpacked her wares onto her makeshift, rickety table, placing each locket carefully on the once-white tablecloth. Her intricate designs of interlocking gears would go unexamined by most of the marketgoers, who would ignore her in favor of more garish vendors.

A smiling older gentleman, whom Anna knew only as Mr. Second Tuesday Evening, approached, velvet purse in hand. He was one of her oldest customers, but still he used her secret code, circulated among her trusted patrons before each market day.

"You look ever so familiar." He winked. "I do believe I know your aunt Edith."

Anna smiled at him, the scripted exchange of pleasantries rolling off her tongue. “Any friend of my aunt’s is a friend of mine.”

“These are lovely.” Mr. Second Tuesday Evening gestured at the lockets in an unnecessary, but still appreciated, display of over-acting. Since the inception of her business, he had spread the word of her workmanship to several of his high-powered friends, serving as a middleman for those customers who couldn’t afford the same risks he took. “A dozen should do it.”

Anna chose twelve lockets, scribbling notes onto small slips of paper, denoting the details of their meeting in the form of a riddle. She carefully placed each note in its corresponding locket and secured all twelve latches before handing over her merchandise, the chains already beginning to tangle in her fist.

Mr. Second Tuesday Evening dropped a handful of coins into her palm and disappeared into the crowd without further ado. Over the next year, Anna would see to the mechanical needs of Mr. Second Tuesday Evening’s friends, mostly fixing knickknacks for those secure enough to harbor tech in their own homes, but if she was lucky, he’d bring her a mechanical limb or an eye to fix. Though she relished working with metal of any kind, she preferred to fashion useful accessories from it as opposed to the purely decorative sort surrounding them in the market. Even if she couldn’t mend everything and everyone, each bolt and cog she tightened against the skin of her clients brought her closer to redemption, closer to forgiving herself for destroying Roman’s arm years ago.

The next hour brought few visitors her way, leaving Anna with nothing to do but twiddle her thumbs. She tried not to watch the theater troupe’s finale, which culminated in a haunting rendition of “Tech, We Worship Thee” as they drowned in poisonous sludge

and gas, their exaggerated performance a nevertheless effective reminder of Former Earth's fate at the hands of humanity's over-reliance on technology, however vague the surviving histories made it out to be. No one would leave the Celestial Market with any doubt tech was responsible for destroying the planet that Earth Adjacent was meant to replace.

The audience, which had enthusiastically clapped and whooped throughout, meandered away amid hushed whispers and furtive glances, evidently deeply moved. Anna watched them go, following the crowd's progress from her cart.

"Hello, miss!" A squeaky voice, louder than Anna would have preferred, brought her attention back to her own stall. "I'd like to make an appointment."

"I'm sorry," Anna said quietly, hoping to bring the girl's register down. Her new customer looked to be about Anna's age, and she stood unevenly, like one of her legs was longer than the other—perhaps the effect of an ill-fitting prosthesis. Anna hadn't seen the girl before, but new customers weren't uncommon, so she prompted her. "I only sell trinkets here. Perhaps you're thinking of my aunt?"

The girl's green eyes lit up, and a blush spread across her cheeks. "Yes, yes! Edith!"

Anna didn't trust the sudden churn of her stomach, but whether her discomfort stemmed from the girl's clear disregard for caution or the way Anna's skin warmed when the girl smiled, she didn't know. Anna took the girl's coin and wrote out a riddle, but as a young man approached the cart, the girl stammered a half-formed excuse before scuttling away, leaving both her locket and money.

Anna's eyes lingered a moment on the girl's golden hair before turning to her new patron, a clear-eyed boy about her own age

with limbs too long for his body and a hat that added inches to his already considerable height. Her muscles clenched as he leaned across the cart, fingers brushing against the lockets. She kept her papers blank until point of sale for this very reason, but the girl's abandoned locket wasn't empty, and it would be far from innocuous if this new patron took it. It was too late to hide it within her skirts, so Anna lifted her eyes to greet the newcomer.

“What can I do for you?”

“Good morning, miss.” The dandy offered her a hesitant smile with not a single tooth missing. Though his extra-large hat and well-tailored coat suggested wealth, his accent grounded him. Had he been from the Tower, his pronunciation would have been tighter and clipped over the vowels. “These are charming.”

“Thank you, but certainly *charming* is not elevated enough for a gentleman like yourself.” It was a gamble, but he had lily-white skin, unmarred by sun, that could belong only to a merchant or noble.

“Not at all!”

On the surface, he sounded elite, but a hitch in his voice marked the end of each sentence, and he carried his shoulders off-kilter as though an invisible force pulled on his left side. Something about him—his walk—no, his smile—no, his rhythm—was familiar.

“I rather prefer art that celebrates the roughness of the world.”

Anna clenched her teeth. From extracting the ore and creating the steel alloy to melting the metal down and pouring the molds, her lockets were no more than a vehicle for her true business dealings. She had never thought of her craft as art, but neither did she think her lockets were particularly rough. The word ground against her insides like two mismatched gears.

He dug into his pocket and produced a gold coin, the sort no one in Mechan would have any use for, let alone change. Before Anna could protest, he looped his fingers through the chain of the silver locket she'd prepared for her last customer. "I'll take this one."

"No!" Anna grabbed wildly for the locket, but it swung out of reach. "It isn't finished." The lie felt hollow, like lukewarm tea—a mistake the moment it hit her tongue.

He held the locket just out of her reach, coughing a little as he surveyed it. "I like it. There's beauty in something incomplete." He bowed, tucking the locket into his pocket and pressing his palm against his chest. "You have a good day, miss."

"Don't bow. You look ridiculous," Anna scoffed, speaking without thinking. The dandy's brow furrowed at the insult, but she plowed on. "At the market, we shake hands."

He took her hand in his and she flinched, neither intending nor expecting him to take her at her word.

"Nathaniel." He pointed to himself.

A sharp rhythm beat against Anna's palm.

"Anna."

In the wake of their introduction, the stillness pulsed with the impossible *tick, tick, tick* of a heart that wasn't hers.