

MECH ACADEMY: PILOT

by

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Tobian crosses his arms and looks away from Valettia who merely shakes her head in annoyance and takes a step with the slow moving line. Tobian petulantly follows.

VALETTIA (CONT'D)
...two found already out of a million. That's a lot of zeroes between us and the link.

TOBIAN
Aren't you tired of being poor and ordinary?

Before Valettia can respond, she hears a non-human voice hidden within the wind. It doesn't speak with words, but song like a cross between sped up humpback and slowed down red tailed hawk.

EXT. DREAM: SKY - DAY

For a moment, Valettia is in a dream, flying high above the ground. Clouds race past her to either side. She turns over, her face towards the sun, her hair flapping in the wind.

TOBIAN (OS)
Hey...

EXT. OCEANSIDE HIGH SCHOOL - CONTINUOUS

Valettia blinks and she's back to reality in line in the middle of the soccer field.

TOBIAN (CONT'D)
...line's moving.

There's enough space ahead of her that it takes several paces to close the gap. She glances up at the mech and once again the song slides across the wind.

EXT. DREAM: SKY - DAY

She blinks and is flying again. Only this time she hears the song more clearly, with added trills and clicks like a dolphin layered with Ekaterina Shelehova's Earth Melodies. Valettia reaches up to feel her hair flapping in the wind.

TOBIAN (OS)
Earth to Val.

EXT. OCEANSIDE HIGH SCHOOL - CONTINUOUS

She blinks and is back in the field. She's still touching her hair, but now it hangs under gravity's familiar pull.

VALETTIA
I don't understand.

TOBIAN
What don't you understand? How lines work?

VALETTIA
Of course.

She quickly advances to her place in line.

Tobian glances around.

TOBIAN
Are you daydreaming about Clint again?

VALETTIA
I was...

Valettia glances, she spots a tall, blonde boy several dozen behind her in line and instantly colors with a blush.

VALETTIA (CONT'D)
...flying.

TOBIAN
Did you drink enough water today?

VALETTIA
Yes. I think.

The line moves and they take a step together. Valettia shivers, holds her arms and glances up to the sun. A bead of sweat appears on her temple. For a moment, the crowd noise fades and Valettia's heartbeat pounds, but the line moves again and the moment passes.

Before the siblings stands a SOLDIER (20s) in full uniform of jacket and pants. On the shoulder is the blue and silver flag of the United Earth Congress, with the silver being the land of the Earth.

SOLDER
Valettia Reyes!

Valettia waves.

SOLDER
Please, this way.

The soldier points a hand towards the tent.

INT. MILITARY FIELD TENT - CONTINUOUS

Stand mounted lights illuminate the tent where no outside light shines through. Several tables and computers surround a single TESTING CHAIR that wouldn't be out of place in an upscale dentist's office. Men and women in white coats surround the chair. The TESTER (40s) stands apart from the rest.

TESTER
Please, sit.

Valettia does. She squirms, but can't quite seem to get comfortable in the chair.

The tester holds a HALO, a simple metal band that looks like the unpretentious crown of a warrior king or queen.

TESTER
This is a HALO. I'm going to slip
it over your head and I want you
to tell me what you feel.

As soon as the band settles into place on Valettia's head, tendons strain on her neck and her eyes squeeze shut from extreme pain.

EXT. DREAM: SKY - DAY

She is in the dream again. This time she dances to the song, leaping through the air -- an arabesque to a pirouette.

Screams fill the dream. Of fear. Pain. Need. She pauses on toe and listens. So many voices.

VOICE #1 (OS)
Run!

VOICE #2 (OS)
This way!

VOICE #3 (OS)
Inhibitors!

But one voice is clearer than the rest:

TOBIAN (OS)
VAL!!!

EXT. OCEANSIDE HIGH SCHOOL - CONTINUOUS

She blinks and is back in the tent. Through the opened flap, she sees Tobian standing outside as the metal body of the Mech-I crashes down upon him.

END TEASER

ACT I

INT. GULFSTREAM 550 - DAY

TARKU (19, male, Chinese) stares out the window at the Pacific Ocean far below like he's watching paint dry.

MAI (OS)
The Americans found their third candidate.

Tarku glances at his mother, MAI (50s, female, Chinese). Across from her, his father, HUI (60s, male, Chinese) stifles a laugh.

MAI
No laughing. They have dead.

She points to a screen. Tarku follows the point, sees a news feed of a Mech-I spinning like a ballerina, hands above its head before it crashes to a grassy soccer field full of panicked students.

The text across the bottom of the screen reads: *Thirty injured. Two dead. Circumstances of full mech activation under investigation.*

Hui doesn't bother to look up from his tablet.

HUI
They test candidates too young.

Tarku swallows and holds his hand against his stomach. Turning to look back out the window, a flicker of nervous fear crosses his face and he mutters under his breath:

TARKU
Better than too old...

MAI
You will do wonderful, dear.

TARKU
Yes.

HUI
Today our company's riches will grow.

Tarku continues to stare out the window.

EXT. PACIFICA: ESTABLISHING - DAY

Dozens of skyscrapers of a modern city float atop the Pacific Ocean. Increasingly smaller building surround the central downtown, until eventually beach peninsulas spiral out like the arms of the Milky Way. Encircling all is a narrow barrier. Inside it, the waters are a golden blue-green, outside it, a cold dark and deep blue.

EXT. PACIFICA: AIRPORT TARMAC - DAY

Tarku follows his father and mother down the ramp from the Gulfstream to the orange tarmac where DOCTOR CARTWRIGHT (50s, female, Canadian White), DEAN MALLIK (50s, male, American Black), and MAJOR YIP (50s, male, Japanese) wait. Hui and Mallik shake hands.

HUI

I am grateful for you taking time
for the test.

MALLIK

A small favor for a large ally.

The adults lead the way across the tarmac, and a reluctant Tarku follows them.

INT. MECH HANGAR - DAY

The only difference from an airplane hangar is the contents: MECHANICAL TYPE: STRIKER "MECH-S", a tall and slender mech that gives the impression of being stretched more than shaped, graceful like blown glass. Red and green pulses along the skin like a sin curve modulating under variable stress. Swords cling to forearm sheathes, ready to slide forward with violent intent. The shoulders bulge with rocket pods. Tarku slowly circles the mech, taking in every angle like a kid at a museum.

MAI

Tarku, please, they are ready.

Tarku finally looks away from the mech.

TARKU

Why is this mech armed?

Mai and Hui exchange a look.

HUI

After what happened in America, is
this safe?

The Doctor, Dean, and Major exchange glances.

DEAN MALLIK

What happened in America was a
fluke--

MAJOR YIP

--we will take every precaution--

DOCTOR CARTWRIGHT

--you have nothing to worry about.

Tarku cringes as the Doctor's placating tone, but follows
her to a testing chair from before.

DOCTOR CARTWRIGHT

I'm Doctor Cartwright.

She holds up a HALO.

DOCTOR CARTWRIGHT

This is--

TARKU

--a HALO.

Doctor Cartwright smiles and nods.

DOCTOR CARTWRIGHT

That's right, a Heightened
Awareness Link Operator. It'll
facilitate your communication with
the mech.

TARKU

If I have the link.

DOCTOR CARTWRIGHT

Everyone has the link. Some merely
have it stronger than others.

Tarku sits in the chair, pensive.

DOCTOR CARTWRIGHT

I just need you to relax, and tell
me what you feel.

She slips the HALO over Tarku's head. He frowns and glances
to Mai who squeezes her hands together and Hui who checks

his WRIST MANAGER -- an elaborate smart watch with holographic display.

DOCTOR CARTWRIGHT
What do you feel?

TARKU
I feel...

Tarku looks back at his father who won't look back.

MAI
Are you doing your exercises?

Mai takes a step towards Tarku.

HUI
Yes, the exercises!

Hui finally looks away from his wrist manager.

HUI
Remember the breathing. The
mantra!

Tarku closes his eyes and begins to mutter softly.

TARKU
Look inward to see. Numbed skin
can feel again. Hear not one thing
but all. Be of the world and
outside it.

Mai holds a needle in her hand. She jabs it into Tarku's palm, causing his hand to clench violently. Simultaneously, the hand of the mech clenches into a fist.

MAI
The finger moved!

She squeezes her hand tightly around Tarku's wrist and uses her other hand to wipe the bead of blood from his palm.

HUI
Give the boy space!

DOCTOR CARTWRIGHT
What do you feel?

TARKU
Pain.

DOCTOR CARTWRIGHT

What kind of pain?

He opens and closes his fist.

TARKU

Hot.

HUI

I told you he would have the link.

Hui vigorously shakes hands with Dean Mallik.

HUI

Xiha enterprises will gladly
increase the supplies we provide
for Mech Academy!

DEAN MALLIK

Yes, there are many details to
finalize. Please, let us discuss
them in private.

Mallik leads Hui away.

TARKU

Does that mean I made it?

Doctor Cartwright, still leaning over the chair, smiles
falteringly.

EXT. OPEN PACIFIC - DAY

The Mech-I skims across the slowly rolling ocean.

INT. MECH-I COCKPIT - INTERCUT

Inside the mech, KAITO (22, male, Japanese) grins like a
toddler on a swing. An ocean wave swells and the mech
accelerates to lance through the water leaving twin
spiraling puffs of ocean thrown skyward at the point of
intersection.

A voice speaks cleanly over wireless coms:

MAJOR YIP (COMS)

Don't get the hardware wet.

KAITO

Just some fun.

INT. SOUTH BAY HOSPITAL: WAITING ROOM - INTERCUT

Major Yip grins a moment, but almost immediately becomes solemn, and takes a step towards a window overlooking the Pacific.

MAJOR YIP

We should review your operation.

KAITO

I paid attention during the briefing.

MAJOR YIP

This one is delicate.

KAITO

A blossom.

MAJOR YIP

Yes.

Another wave approaches and Kaito squints, accelerating the mech. Below the mech, a pair of dolphins break the surface. He races past them, puncturing this wave just as cleanly as the last.

KAITO

What I don't get, is why?

MAJOR YIP (COMS)

Because candidates of this caliber are rare.

KAITO

That part, yes. But why me? I appreciate the extra flight time, but this isn't my usual mission specification.

Major Yip doesn't break his gaze from the horizon.

MAJOR YIP

To be a military leader, you must understand suffering.

END INTERCUTS

EXT. SOUTH BAY HOSPITAL: HELI-PAD - DAY

With engines flaring, the Mech-I drops gracefully to the roof of the building.

INT. MECH-I COCKPIT - CONTINUOUS

Kaito pulls the HALO from his head, and pauses a moment as vertigo and nausea race through him. He looks up with a clear focus.

EXT. SOUTH BAY HOSPITAL: HELI-PAD - CONTINUOUS

From outside, the front of the mech opens upward like a clam, revealing Kaito seated inside.

Major Yip crosses the roof to meet him.

MAJOR YIP
Master Cadet.

KAITO
Major!

Kaito climbs down from a retractable ladder, pulls himself into a hasty ready and salutes. Major Yip returns the salute.

MAJOR YIP
The family is waiting. I'll start the conversation, and if I need, I'll bring you in to give a personal explanation of how the link works.

KAITO
Understood.

INT. SOUTH BAY HOSPITAL: WAITING ROOM - DAY

Valettia, VALETTIA'S FATHER (50s, male, American White) and VALETTIA'S MOTHER (50s, female, American Latino) rise to shake hands with Major Yip. Kaito watches the Major and the family. Valettia's Father lowers his head and stares at the floor when not being directly addressed. Valettia's Mother's fingers tighten around Valettia's shoulder in spasming contractions. Valettia herself has the thousand yard stare.

MAJOR YIP
...but perhaps Master Cadet
Kishimoto can explain it better.

Kaito takes an awkward step forward, bows his head slightly.

KAITO
Please, call me Kaito.

He looks directly at Valettia.

KAITO (CONT'D)
And you go by Valettia?

She glances up for a moment, catching Kaito's gaze, then looks back at the horizon, her voice hollow and flat:

VALETTIA
Some people call me Val.

KAITO
Val, then. I'm terribly sorry to hear about your brother. Please, remember his injuries are not your fault.

VALETTIA
I dropped a mech on him.

KAITO
Not your fault.

Valettia fights back a sob.

KAITO (CONT'D)
When I was tested for the link, all I managed was to make the arms move a little. And my link scores are near the top of the Academy. What you did was a miracle.

VALETTIA
No.

Valettia wipes her eyes.

VALETTIA (CONT'D)
My brother will never walk again...a curse.

Kaito takes a half step forward, reaches out towards Valettia, but stops short of actually touching her.

KAITO
Please, Valettia...Val.

Kaito lets his outstretched hand fall to his side.

KAITO (CONT'D)

Forgive me for my rudeness in your time of...suffering...but Pacifica brought Anshari and mechs and technology we only are beginning to understand. But it also showed we are not alone and that we have a duty to be ready if hostiles come next. The link might not feel like it now, but you have a gift.

INT. SOUTH BAY HOSPITAL: INDIVIDUAL ROOM - LATER

Tobian's lower body is in casts and he breathes through an oxygen mask. Kaito knocks, then enters. Tobian looks to the newcomer, his eyes widen. His first words are muffled by the mask, so he pulls it off and repeats:

TOBIAN
You're from the Academy?

KAITO
How did you know?

Tobian points to Kaito's shoulder, where underneath the blue and silver flag of the UEC is a RED SHIELD with a SILHOUETTE of Mech-I.

TOBIAN
I'd recognize that anywhere.

KAITO
It does kind of give me away.

Kaito stands at a loose ready at the end of the bed.

TOBIAN
I was going to go...

Tobian stares at his cast encased limbs.

TOBIAN (CONT'D)
...but I got crushed by a mech.

Kaito smiles with empathy.

KAITO
I'm very sorry for that.

TOBIAN
It wasn't you that did it. It was my sister.

KAITO
You can't blame her.

TOBIAN
If she hadn't--

KAITO
--stop.

All friendliness drops from Kaito's face.

KAITO (CONT'D)
It is your duty to forgive her.

END ACT I

ACT II

EXT. PACIFICA: BEACH - DAY

SARA (18, female, American White) and CASEY (18, female, American Latino) sit on the sand while the small waves of an artificial bay lap at their toes. The nearby water is golden from the submerged kelp beds, but farther out, past the wave barrier, is the dark blue of the deep Pacific Ocean.

CASEY
Are you excited?

SARA
No.

CASEY
Not even a little bit?

SARA
Do I look like I belong in the
army?

Sara leans back, showcasing a bright RED and YELLOW Hawaiian shirt and clashing BLUE shorts.

CASEY
You look like you belong in jail
the way you've murdered fashion.

The two of them share a laugh.

SARA
I'm going to miss this.

CASEY
Don't be so dramatic. There'll be
leave.

SARA
Not for two weeks.

CASEY
Finally some peace and quiet.

Sara slaps Casey playfully on the arm.

SAM, Sara's Dad, (40s, male, American White) walks down the beach in a wetsuit. He pulls up his diving mask to reveal a bright red ring around his face.

SAM
Girls. How's the beach?

CASEY
Perfect, as always, Mr. Braddon.

SAM
Good. Say high to your mother for me.

CASEY
Will do.

Sam pauses to scratch at his stubble.

SAM
Sara, I thought you were supposed to be hosting your tour by now.

Sara scrambles up the beach to her bag. She quickly searches the bag for her wrist manager. Pulling it out, she checks the time.

SARA
Oh no...got to go! Casey, see you in two weeks!

She's already up and running, pulling flip flops on while adjusting the bag on her shoulder.

SAM
Knock 'em dead, kiddo!

She rolls her eyes at that and responds sarcastically:

SARA
Two weeks!

EXT. PACIFICA: BEACH - CONTINUOUS

Sara continues running down the beach past a line of bungalows. As the sand gives way to concrete, there is a covered staircase leading down with a sign reading: HYPERLOOP. Sara pauses at the entrance and shudders before beginning down the stairs.

INT. UNDERCITY: HYPERLOOP - INDETERMINATE

Alien walls like polished obsidian are cut to hold inset tanks full of bioluminescent jellyfish. The floors aren't flat, but instead undulate like mild ocean ripples flash

frozen in place. A few human touches bring a sense of purpose to the space: ticket turnstiles, wall mounted lighting, and tacky entrance mats.

Sara follows the arcing corridor to a waiting HYPERLOOP RUNNER, a vehicle about the size and shape of an ARCIMOTO SRK only with both seats facing each other. Sara takes a seat and fastens her lap belt.

SARA
Mech Academy, South Gate.

VOICE ASSISTANT (OS)
Arriving at Mech Academy, South Gate, in three minutes.

The runner accelerates away into the gloom. The trip passes in a blur of light and dark.

When she comes to a stop, Sara unbuckles, and leaves at a sprint down the hallway, takes the stairs out of the Undercity two at a time...

EXT. MECH ACADEMY: SOUTH GATE - DAY

...and Sara runs full speed into a central plaza that's divided in half by an advanced composite fence that doubles as a solar collector. Standing in front of the ornate gates is Major Yip.

MAJOR YIP
You're late. And, you're out of uniform.

Sara glances down.

SARA
Uniform?

MAJOR YIP
You are a cadet. You represent Mech Academy.

Major Yip waves his hand up and down at Sara's clothes.

MAJOR YIP (CONT'D)
This is not Mech Academy.

SARA
I didn't think classes started until Monday--

Major Yip raises a single hand to silence her.

MAJOR YIP

Introduce the cadets to Pacifica
as scheduled. Afterward present
yourself to the barracks for
proper induction.

Major Yip turns abruptly and strides away. NYX (18, female, Brazilian) is a girl larger than most, who keeps sneaking glances at ASAHI (18, male, Japanese) who is a boy slighter than most. Next to them is JINDAYI (18, female, Indian) who wears a pink bow in her hair. Otherwise, the trio are dressed in new, immaculate white cadets uniforms.

JINDAYI

Hi, I'm Jindayi.

SARA

I'm Sara. This all of you?

Sara glances to the left and right, then sees one more cadet, this one wearing her uniform in a loose, sloppy fashion. When the cadet turns, Sara sees it's Valettia. Sara's eyes go wide. Jindayi turns to follow Sara's look and gasps, muttering an awed, half-whispered:

JINDAYI

The girl who made a mech dance!

EXT. PACIFICA: STREETS - DAY

The cadets load onto an open air trolley. Sara takes the driver seat. Nyx sits in the second row, halfway turned to steal glimpses of Asahi, who, seated in the third row, attempts to make himself as small as possible. Valettia and Jindayi sit in the fourth row.

JINDAYI

Hi, I'm Jindayi.

VALETTIA

Hi.

Words pour out of Jindayi in a rapid, nervous spatter.

JINDAYI

You have got to be the single most
famous person I've ever met.

Jindayi holds out her hand to shake. Valettia stares at the hand, then looks up at Jindayi.

JINDAYI

I mean like, not the most-most famous. Calisto follows me on TheNow, and she won two grammies. But I mean, the most famous person I've sat next to. But you're probably used to everyone wanting to know you now that you're trending globally so um...

Jindayi waggles her hand. Valettia shakes it.

JINDAYI

Are you excited for the tour?

VALETTIA

I was ordered to see the sights and take the welcome tour.

Valettia almost smiles.

SARA

Welcome aboard everyone! I'm Sara, and I'll be showing you Pacifica today.

The cart accelerates. Sara swivels her chair around to face the other passengers.

SARA

Our first destination is going to be the --

ASAHI

-- Watch where you're going!

SARA

Don't worry, like all the vehicles on Pacifica, this cart is automated. All I have to do is give it a destination, and the cart's AI does the rest.

NYX

So don't freak out.

ASAHI

Sorry.

Valettia looks out at the city.

JINDAYI

I bet you know way more about this place and the tech than any of us.

Valettia glances back to see Jindayi staring earnestly in expectation of a response.

VALETTIA

I just got here.

SARA

To your left, you'll see Akeno Fountain.

Sara points to AKENO FOUNTAIN. Water spouts from four fluted columns that are modern art interpretations of leaping dolphins. Above them is a bronze statue of a man looking skyward.

SARA (CONT'D)

It's a memorial for the victims of Pacifica 729, the airliner that was shot down during a terrorist attack.

ASAHI

Put me in a mech and I'll make sure that never happens again.

NYX

Like you could save everyone.

ASAHI

I'll try my best.

Valettia keeps her gaze on the fountain, ignoring her fellow passengers when a windy feedback fills Valettia's ears and a MYSTERIOUS VOICE whispers:

MYSTERIOUS VOICE (OS)

This way.

Valettia turns, trying to find the voice, only to see Jindayi looking directly at her, smiling as sound returns to normal.

JINDAYI

...isn't it beautiful?

VALETTIA

What did you say?

Jindayi repeats herself in a single rushed breath:

JINDAYI

The deep blue of the ocean beyond
the statue and the light blue of
the fountain, isn't it beautiful?

Valettia glances back to the fountain but a glossy glass-metal building comes into view, blocking sight of the fountain. The windy feedback returns:

MYSTERIOUS VOICE (OS)

This way.

Valettia glances again, trying to find the source of the fading sound.

VALETTIA

Did anyone hear that?

SARA

Hear what?

VALETTIA

A voice.

ASAHI

Nobody said anything.

NYX

She's obvs crazy.

Valettia glances quickly around the cart. Everyone's staring at her.

VALETTIA

I probably am crazy. In the real world, if I killed someone, I'd go to prison. Instead, I'm here.

Valettia crosses her arms. Everyone looks dumbfounded at her revelation.

MYSTERIOUS VOICE (OS)

This way.

VALETTIA

Might as well listen to that voice
in my head.

Valettia taps her head just above the ear. She jumps from the moving cart, hitting the street and falling into an uncoordinated tumble. As soon as she has her feet under her, she races down a side street.

SARA

Wait!

Sara stabs at several buttons on the arm of her chair.

SARA (CONT'D)

Stop! What button do I push!

But Valettia's already rounded a corner and lost sight of the tour trolley.

MYSTERIOUS VOICE (OS)

This way.

Valettia rounds a corner. Then another. Then another. Sprinting through the city. It's a maze of streets. Finally she slows to a stop.

EXT. MECH HANGAR - DAY

Valettia swallows and looks at the open doorway. A faint blue shimmers from within before the doorway becomes dark once again. Valettia steps inside.

INT. MECH HANGAR - CONTINUOUS

The Mech-I from the school stands at rest inside the hangar. At the feet of the mech, Tarku, in cadet's uniform, slips a HALO into his backpack.

VALETTIA

Who are you?

TARKU

I'm Tarku.

He pulls the backpack onto his shoulders.

TARKU (CONT'D)

And you?

VALETTIA

Val. What's in there?

She flicks her head in the direction of the backpack. Tarku fidgets from foot to foot.

TARKU

Nothing.

VALETTIA

You were calling me.

TARKU

No.

VALETTIA

But I heard you. Did you use that?

Again she nods at the backpack.

VALETTIA (CONT'D)

Whatever it was? Some kind of megaphone?

TARKU

I don't know what you're talking about.

VALETTIA

You weren't telling me...this way?

TARKU

Uh.

He shrugs.

JINDAYI (OS)

She's over here!

TARKU

I think your friends are looking for you.

Valettia glances over her shoulder to see Jindayi, Asahi, and Nyx have caught up with her. When she looks back to the mech, Tarku is gone.

MYSTERIOUS VOICE (OS)

This way.

Valettia stares at the blue mech as bursts of red pulse across its surface.

END ACT II

ACT III

EXT. MECH HANGAR - DAY

Tarku hurries from the hangar, one hand clutching the strap of his backpack, his head down. He turns a corner and runs into Sara. The two collide and Tarku's backpack hits the ground.

SARA
Sorry, I didn't mean to run into
you.

Tarku reaches for the backpack, but Sara is closer and kneels and grabs the strap. She holds the backpack up.

SARA
Did a cadet run through here?

Tarku quickly snatches the backpack from Sara. Her face contorts with alarm. Tarku pays no heed, and slips the backpack strap cross-wise over his head and shoulder as he points to the open hangar.

TARKU
She went that way.

SARA
Thanks!

As she runs past Tarku, he lets out a sigh of relief.

SARA (OS)
Hey!

Tarku stiffens and turns to face her.

SARA
I'm Sara by the way. I know I'm
out of uniform, but I'm sure I'll
be seeing you in classes next
week. If you want a tour of the
city, the next one starts after
lunch!

Tarku manages an awkward wave and turns to walk away at a hastened pace. After rounding a couple corners, he slows.

TARKU
(to self)
That girl in the hangar.

He taps his wrist manager.

TARKU (CONT'D)
Display incoming class.

Faces and names hover over his wrist.

TARKU (CONT'D)
Private view.

From Tarku's POV, the faces and names fly from his wrist manager to fill his view. From outside Tarku's POV, he slouches against a wall while his eyes light up with visuals. Back to his POV, the students scroll past until VALETTIA REYES comes into view. Her record expands, showing footage of the dancing mech.

TARKU
(to self)
Why was it talking to her when I
was the one with the HALO...?

He taps his wrist manager again.

TARKU (CONT'D)
Call Mother.

The display of students falls out of his view. A digital phone tone bleats. From outside his POV, he leans against the building.

TARKU (CONT'D)
(to self)
Come on, answer.

The tone continues to bleat.

TARKU (CONT'D)
Connect already!

He flinches at the outburst and glances up and down the street, but he there's nobody around. He sighs when a connecting tone plays.

MAI (OS)
What a pleasant surprise to hear
from you --

TARKU
You gave me a defective.

Mai is visible inside a window from Tarku's POV. Advanced facetime. INTERCUT from outside his POV.

MAI
Your meaning?

TARKU
The HALO!

For the second time he nervously glances up and down the street before continuing, more hushed and under control.

TARKU
I tried to practice like you asked, but it wouldn't connect.

MAI
There may be a problem with the device. I will send you the address of the person who can solve the problem.

TARKU
Fine.

A termination tone plays. His wrist manager pings. He taps it. A map appears over his POV. Tarku hikes down the street.

END INTERCUT

EXT. PACIFICA: ONOSAI'S - DAY

Like all the buildings of Pacifica, this one is glossy, shiny, and made with irregular edges. Tarku presses the greeting pad outside the building.

ONOSAI (OS)
Yes?

TARKU
Is this Onosai?

ONOSAI (OS)
Who's asking?

Tarku looks up and down the street. An OLD WOMAN walks down the other side of the street.

TARKU
Tarku.

Silence. Tarku shifts from one foot to another and adjusts the strap of his backpack. He leans closer to the greeting pad and lowers his voice.

TARKU

I said --

The door buzzes.

ONOSAI (OS)

-- Come up.

Tarku opens the door and enters.

INT. ONOSAI'S LOBBY - CONTINUOUS

Everything is shiny black obsidian. Tarku turns a few curious circles. A ding and a door opens to reveal an elevator. Tarku enters.

INT. ONOSAI'S ELEVATOR - CONTINUOUS

Inside the elevator, where buttons normally would be, is a blank panel with the outline of an open hand. Tarku reaches for the panel, but pauses and flexes his fingers with uncertainty. Finally he shrugs and pushes his hand to the panel. The door closes and the woosh of vertical movement follows. With another ding, the elevator door opens to:

INT. ONOSAI'S SHOP - CONTINUOUS

Racks of computer hardware, monitors, wrist mounted personal assistants, coiled cables, and other electronic odds and ends fill the space alongside one frowning woman, ONOSAI (20s, female, French Black). Dancing light rainbows through her hair in the slow seductive rhythm of a fiber optic weave.

ONOSAI

It better be important.

TARKU

Onosai?

Onosai nods and beckons with her fingers. Tarku clumsily slips the backpack over his head, unzips it, and retrieves the HALO from within.

ONOSAI

Important indeed.

She takes the HALO from him, inspects it.

ONOSAI (CONT'D)

The problem?

TARKU

It's not connecting. It's faulty.

ONOSAI

Let's take a look, shall we?

She sits at a desk and attaches a series of wires to the HALO. Her fingers glyph rapidly in front of herself. Flashes of light play across her eyes at an alarmingly fast rate. When she finishes, she pushes back from the desk and looks up at Tarku with a patronizing smile.

TARKU

What?

ONOSAI

All checks out, boss.

TARKU

No, it has to be broken.

ONOSAI

You have the gift, or you wouldn't be in that uniform.

TARKU

Yes, of course.

Onosai rises from her desk and walks between two metal racks of hardware to a glass cabinet. She opens the door to retrieve a LIBERATOR VIAL. She holds it up for Tarku to see.

ONOSAI

Sometimes, we need something to help us learn to link.

INT. MECH ACADEMY: AUDITORIUM BACKSTAGE - DAY

Kaito tugs at the sleeve of his immaculate DRESS UNIFORM. A FLIGHT PIN -- a silver Chinese dragon circling the moon -- is pinned to his jacket's left breast, below are four tour ribbons: red, blue, gold, black and white striped. Major Yip approaches, his face stoic.

MAJOR YIP

How are the nerves?

KAITO

Good, Sir.

Major Yip's face softens, but doesn't smile.

KAITO (CONT'D)
Mostly good.

MAJOR YIP
Mostly?

KAITO
It's not like piloting a mech.
Where my objectives are all laid
out and what I need to do is
clear.

MAJOR YIP
Of course.

Major Yip's face hints at a comforting smile.

MAJOR YIP (CONT'D)
Don't think of it as a speech.
Speeches are for politicians.
Think of this like a mission
brief. Tell them what they need to
know, then let them do it.

KAITO
There's so much to cover. What if
I say all the wrong things?

His fingers deftly adjust his perfectly aligned cufflinks
out of order and back again.

MAJOR YIP
What did Lieutenant Crees say at
your induction?

Kaito is dismissively quick with his response.

KAITO
Duty. Honor. Sacrifice.

MAJOR YIP
Traditional words carry value.

KAITO
It's just that Crees didn't
exactly live up to --

Kaito stops himself and stares straight ahead. Major Yip
nods and his eyes turn commiserating and kind.

MAJOR YIP

When we reach for high words, even
falling short makes us better.

Major Yip salutes Kaito, who abruptly snaps into attention to return the salute. Major Yip exits. Kaito leans back against the wall.

KAITO

(to self)

Something to aspire to.

INSTRUCTOR SANCHEZ (OS)

It is with great respect that I
introduce Master Cadet Kaito
Kishimoto.

Kaito walks through the gap in the curtains.

INT. MECH ACADEMY: AUDITORIUM MAINSTAGE - CONTINUOUS

Kaito walks on stage and exchanges a salute with INSTRUCTOR SANCHEZ (40s, female, Mexican). At the podium, he turns to face SIXTY CADETS who sit in the tiered auditorium seats. He glances around.

Nyx stares at Kaito with apparent disinterest. Asahi, next to her, looks small in his seat. Across the auditorium, Jindayi leans in as if hanging on every word.

KAITO

Welcome, Cadets.

Kaito continues to scan the crowd, and finds Valettia. Their eye contact makes Valettia recoil, white knuckling the armrests of her seat, but she doesn't look away.

KAITO

I'm supposed to talk about honor
and sacrifice. But really, those
are code words for something
you're more familiar with.

His gaze continues to drill into Valettia.

KAITO (CONT'D)

Family. And hurt.

Kaito steps away from the podium, and so his next words are quiet without amplification.

KAITO (CONT'D)

(muted)
You've gotten a --

He returns to the podium and pulls the microphone free with an ear screeching cacophony of dissonance. Several cadets in the audience wince. When the sound fades, Kaito walks back to front stage.

KAITO
You've gotten a tough deal here.

He looks to Valettia, then pans the crowd: Nyx is still bored, Asahi looks like he's checked out, and Jindayi is starting to fidget nervously.

KAITO
This isn't a volunteer army.
You're all here, because like me,
you have the gift of the link, and
that means you have to serve.

He looks back to Valettia. Her face twists in anger and disgust.

KAITO
It's easy to see the link as a
burden.

Valettia's eyebrows quiver in pain. Kaito holds eye contact with her.

KAITO
Because it is. Walking away isn't
an option when we are the Earth's
-- no, humanity's -- best hope to
survive when the hunters of the
Anshar come to collect this city.

Valettia's rage turns defiant.

KAITO
You will survive.
(beat)
We will survive.

He thumps his fist against his chest.

KAITO (CONT'D)
Do not look at those beside you as
cadets. Do not look at them as
strangers. They are family. Like
it or not, we are family.

Valettia stirs, leaning forward, her defiance turning to need.

KAITO

Forget everyone from before. We don't have the luxury of living in the world our parents grew up in. There is an evil that drove the Anshar to Earth. Pacifica has given us the power to fight that evil. But only if we come together as a family. You must care for the person next to you like they are your blood, because from today onward, they are.

Valettia releases her clutched hands from the armrests and looks away from Kaito. He returns the microphone to the podium and exits the stage.

INT. MECH ACADEMY: AUDITORIUM BACKSTAGE - CONTINUOUS

Major Yip nods to Kaito.

MAJOR YIP

Family's a little off-book, isn't it?

END ACT III

ACT IV

EXT. MECH ACADEMY: SOUTH GATE - NIGHT

Sara, still in uniform, grips the top of the composite fence and pulls herself up, stretching one leg up to straddle the fence before transferring her weight and swinging her other leg over before sliding down the outside, reaching the plaza.

EXT. PACIFICA: STREETS - NIGHT

Sara walks the streets.

SARA
(to self)
Family. Easy for that know it all
Master Cadet to say...

She glances up to see a MAN walking towards her...smiling. Sara blushes, lowers her head, and walks past him.

EXT. PACIFICA: HARBOR - NIGHT

Sara stops at the harbor with a view of the spiral beach. As she turns back towards downtown, she notices an ELDERLY WOMAN smiling and nodding at her. Sara rushes past her.

EXT. DIAZ APARTMENT - NIGHT

A COUPLE enters the building. Sara runs towards them.

SARA
Hold the door!

The woman holds the door while the man waits inside. They both smile at Sara as she enters.

INT. DIAZ APARTMENT: ELEVATOR - MOMENTS LATER

Sara stands apart from the couple in the elevator. They smile kindly at her.

SARA
Thanks for holding the elevator.

WOMAN

My pleasure.

The elevator dings. The twentieth floor.

SARA

This is my stop.

She exits the elevator.

INT. DIAZ APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

The apartment is modern styled. Casey greets Sara.

CASEY

You said you were stuck on campus
for two weeks.

SARA

I have my ways.

They exchange a friendly hug.

TIAMAT DIAZ "THE EMISSARY" (30s, female, Alien-hybrid) is Casey's mother. While Casey is entirely human, Tiamat has minor cosmetic differences: she's very pale compared to Casey's Latino color, and in dim spaces casts a faint blue bio-luminescence. Her hair is platinum blonde yet blue at the roots.

Tiamat salutes hello with one hand and offers a plate of cookies with the other.

SARA

Hi, Ms. Diaz.

Tiamat smiles graciously and silently holds the tray of cookies until Sara takes one. Tiamat's smile widens. She waves goodbye by raising her hand and bringing her fingers down. As Tiamat exits down a darkened hallway, the faint blue bioluminescence illuminates the walls.

Casey chomps on a cookie.

CASEY

You're not hungry?

SARA

There's a limit on how much
seaweed a person can eat.

CASEY

Try telling that to my mom.

Casey laughs and finishes her cookie. Sara struggles with a single bite.

SARA
Seaweed chocolate chip. Mmm.

CASEY
It's okay, mom's not looking.

Sara promptly deposits her cookie in the food composter and follows Casey to:

EXT. DIAZ APARTMENT: BALCONY - CONTINUOUS

City lights decorate the view from the twentieth floor. Sara leans against the railing.

SARA
Does everyone in town seem nicer than usual?

CASEY
What do you mean?

SARA
Everyone seems to be smiling at me.

CASEY
Oh, that's the uniform.

Casey pokes the patch on Sara's sleeve with the red shield with a silhouette of Mech-I.

CASEY (CONT'D)
You're important now, like me.

Casey laughs and rolls her eyes.

CASEY (CONT'D)
The same thing happened when my mom got turned into a half-anshari -- everyone got extra nice around me.

Sara abandons the railing to stretch out on a balcony couch.

SARA
Yeah, like giving you this super awesome apartment.

Sara winces as soon as she says it.

SARA (CONT'D)

Sorry.

CASEY

It's been hard.

SARA

I can't even begin to imagine. I mean, just going back and forth across town between my parents's places is hard enough. Your mom being special and not even having

--

Sara manages to catch herself from finishing 'a dad to help' and continues:

SARA (CONT'D)

-- and here I am complaining about a uniform.

Sara glances down and picks at the wrinkles on her jacket. She keeps her head down and voice quiet.

SARA (CONT'D)

What if I have to go into battle?

When she does look up, Casey takes a seat on the end of the lounge chair. Casey's smile is soft and friendly.

CASEY

We're all stuck in something bad.

SARA

You were the one that told me to have the test!

Casey looks down, squeezes her knees together, then looks back up.

CASEY

Sorry.

SARA

Just so you know, I'm not sure I'll always be able to work my magic and sneak out of academy grounds.

Sara glances towards the horizon. When Casey answers, her voice is barely a whisper.

CASEY

My mom said you had to test.

SARA

What? Why would she want me to do that?

CASEY

Now that she's half-anshari, she hears things we can't hear. She told me the city asked for you.

INT. MECH ACADEMY: CLASSROOM - DAY

BEGIN MONTAGE

Instructor BANNERJEE (40s, male, Indian) walks among the desks while lecturing.

INSTRUCTOR BANNERJEE

In Kundalini diaphragm breathing it is important to feel the air rise and fall.

Jindayi holds her hand to her stomach as she breathes in and out...

BEAT

INSTRUCTOR BANNERJEE

Five more repetitions of alternate nostril breathing.

Asahi pinches his left nostril closed, inhales, switches to pinch his right nostril closed and exhales...

BEAT

INSTRUCTOR BANNERJEE

Take a slow, deep, breath only to exhale as fast as possible.

Nyx breathes big and slow only to exhale in a burst.

END MONTAGE

Valettia looks out the window where palm trees sway in the wind. She blinks and she's in the dream again.

EXT. DREAM: SKY - DAY

At first she hears the wind, but then she begins flying faster and faster, the clouds whip by and the sound of the wind grows deafening before finally giving way to complete silence. For a moment, she shivers. Then her fingers start to spasm and re-entry heat burns along her skin.

INSTRUCTOR BANNERJEE (OS)
Cadet Reyes?

INT. MECH ACADEMY: CLASSROOM - CONTINUOUS

Valettia blinks and is back in the classroom. Instructor Bannerjee stares right at her. Valettia glances around the class, making eye contact with Tarku who inhales slowly, counts to four with his fingers and exhales slowly.

INSTRUCTOR BANNERJEE
The technique is called what?

VALETTIA
Count to four?

INSTRUCTOR BANNERJEE
Wrong. Please keep your attention on matters of class, and not the passing clouds. Who can help Cadet Reyes?

Tarku's hand shoots up.

INSTRUCTOR BANNERJEE
Cadet Zhao?

TARKU
Box breathing, Instructor.

INSTRUCTOR BANNERJEE
Yes, and please remind Cadet Reyes of it's use.

TARKU
The technique increases CO2 in the bloodstream, rapidly inducing calm to restore a lost link.

Tarku smirks as he finishes.

INSTRUCTOR BANNERJEE
Correct. Moving on to post-link breathing.

Valettia slinks lower in her seat. She glances around the classroom. BRINLEY (18, female, British), hangs on every word out of the instructor's mouth. Next to her is Sara, who constantly shifts, seemingly unable to get comfortable in her uniform. The next row over has DAYA (18, female, Nigerian) who passes a note to IOSEFA (18, male, Samoan) who stifles a laugh and passes the note back along with a fist-bump. Next to them, Nyx flicks the back of Asahi's ear length black hair. Every time he reaches up to feel his hair or turn around, Nyx leans back nonchalantly. Behind her is Jindayi, who as soon as she notices Valettia's glance, smiles and waves excitedly.

INSTRUCTOR BANNERJEE
Cadet Reyes?

VALETTIA
Circle brea --

A cough to Valettia's right. She glances to see Tarku on the verge of hysterical laughter. She looks back to Instructor Bannerjee who shakes a HALO.

FLASHBACK: The band slides over Valettia's head. Tendon's strain on her neck and her eyes squeeze shut from extreme pain.

Valettia shakes the image from her mind and glances back to Tarku who still wears a bemused smile.

Valettia keeps eye contact with Tarku.

VALETTIA
It's a HALO, of course.

The laughter falls from Tarku's face as he stiffens in his seat.

INSTRUCTOR BANNERJEE
Good. After lunch, you will all report to the training hangar for link bonding exercises. Remember your breathing techniques and you will do fine.

END ACT IV

ACT V

INT. MECH HANGAR - DAY

A squat, boxy MECHANICAL TYPE: TRAINER "MECH-T" waits with chest compartment open. The dozen students in the class stand shoulder to shoulder at ease. Tarku studies the mech, his head tilting to the side, until he turns slightly to follow the line of the mech's arm and sees Valettia staring right at him. When she smirks, he swallows, nervously.

INSTRUCTOR BANNERJEE
Cadet Braddon!

Tarku watches as Sara walks over to the mech and climbs the short ladder to the pilot's pod in the chest.

Brinley leans close to Tarku to whisper:

BRINLEY
It's bigger than I thought it'd
be.

Tarku rattles off a response without even thinking about it.

TARKU
Base weight of sixteen point six
metric tons with capacity for a
maximum of five point three tons
of armaments. Even with the paltry
top speed of four hundred meters
per second, it can outrun sound.

BRINLEY
Oh.

The mech takes a single step. THUD.

TARKU
(to self)
Divine.

LATER, Sara, now back on the hangar floor, talks excitedly with Jindayi while Tarku nervously glances up and down the line.

INSTRUCTOR BANNERJEE
Cadet Tupuola!

IOSEFA

Sau ia!

Tarku lets out a sigh of relief as he watches Iosefa thrust a hand to the sky and jog over to the mech.

Moments later, the mech takes several strutting steps. When the hatch opens, Iosefa ladders down from the pilot's seat and struts just as animatedly back to the line of cadets.

IOSEFA
Ete fia siva?

He holds both hands out to Valettia.

DAYA
He's asking you to dance.

Daya exchanges a fist-bump with Iosefa.

VALETTIA
I'll pass.

IOSEFA
Sauni e tau le taua!

Iosefa's chanting fades into the background, overpowered by Instructor Bannerjee's shout.

INSTRUCTOR BANNERJEE
Cadet Zhao!

Tarku breaks from the line of cadets. His breathing increases as he looks up at the mech. Iosefa suddenly collides shoulders with Tarku.

IOSEFA
Let's see what you got, brains.

TARKU
I got...

Nothing. He takes a deep breath, steels himself, and continues the march across the hangar.

INSTRUCTOR BANNERJEE
The pilot's seat is yours.

Instructor Bannerjee points upwards. Tarku climbs the ladder to the middle of the mech's chest.

INT. MECH-T COCKPIT - CONTINUOUS

The interior of the mech is a small, dark space, with a PILOT'S SEAT that is molded into the body. It's an awkward fit, halfway between sitting and standing. Instructor Bannerjee hands a HALO up to Tarku. The hatch closes, sealing Tarku in blackness as the seat begins to OOZE over his arms, legs, and chest, locking him into place.

TARKU
 (to self)
 Remember my breathing.

He rapidly cycles through diaphragm breathing, box breathing, single nostril blocking.

TARKU (CONT'D)
 (to self)
 Look inward to see. Numbed skin
 can feel.

He shakes his head.

TARKU (CONT'D)
 (to self)
 Even Iosefa...

He closes his eyes and lets his breathing slow.

TARKU (CONT'D)
 (to self)
 Sometimes we need something to
 help us learn to link.

He peels his hand out of the restraining chair, and reaches into his jacket pocket, pulling out the small LIBERATOR VIAL. He opens the vial and takes out a gelcap.

TARKU
 Sitting in the dark is failure.

He dry swallows the gelcap.

Then light. Tarku looks around, sees the hangar from the elevated POV of the mech's sensors. Glancing at Valettia, her body is outlined quickly. A thermal overlay displays, then concentric circles radiate away from her showing sound waves. Looking to Iosefa, the sound waves are much bigger and farther reaching. He looks at Jindayi and focuses and suddenly hears:

JINDAYI
 ...when you took that first step I
 just knew you'd be the most
 amazing...

Next in the line is Nyx.

NYX
Looks like a dud.

TARKU
(to self)
I'm no dud.

Tarku concentrates and the mech steps with a THUD.

INT. MECH HANGAR - CONTINUOUS

Kaito and Major Yip stand to the side of the hangar where they have clear view of all the cadets and the Mech-T. Kaito's wrist manager glows with a display showing the class roster. He taps on Tarku's image, and clicks a slider from empty to 2/4.

MAJOR YIP
It appears we have a solid
recruiting class.

Kaito nods as the hatch to the mech opens. A moment later, Tarku, sweating profusely, ladders down from the mech. When he reaches solid ground, he thrusts both fists into the air and yells a distant:

TARKU
Beat that!

He trudges towards Iosefa who postures aggressively with a hand on his hip. Kaito takes a step to intervene.

MAJOR YIP
Wait.

KAITO
This isn't building team
chemistry.

MAJOR YIP
Competition is healthy in cadets
their age.

KAITO
Was it with Lieutenant Crees?

Major Yip's brow furrows, then softens.

MAJOR YIP

Competition reveals character, or
in Crees's case, a deficiency.

KAITO

Using liberators is more than a
deficiency.

MAJOR YIP

Is it not your duty to forgive
him?

Major Yip raises a questioning eyebrow.

KAITO

Sir, I --

VALETTIA (OS)

No!

Kaito glances to see Valettia taking a halting step
backwards from the Mech-T. Kaito immediately leaves Major
Yip's side and fast-strides to Valettia.

KAITO

Is something wrong?

VALETTIA

It's not safe.

KAITO

We've engaged inhibitors in the
mech. What happened in California
won't happen again.

Valettia continues to stare at the mech. Kaito gets closer,
peers at her eyes. Valettia's pupils appear partially
dilated and stare not at the mech, but at a far-away point.
He waves his hand past her field of view, and her eyes
converge quickly, following the motion.

KAITO

Val, are you okay?

VALETTIA

Yes.

Her lip trembles but can't quite commit to a smile.

VALETTIA (CONT'D)

Maybe. It's like...

She shakes her head again.

KAITO
It's okay to be scared.

Valettia crosses her arms and hugs herself.

KAITO (CONT'D)
Please. You have a gift.

Kaito points to the pilot's compartment.

KAITO (CONT'D)
I've never seen anyone with the
link as strong as you. Please...

VALETTIA
It's safe?

KAITO
Completely safe.

Valettia maintains eye contact with Kaito.

KAITO
You can let what happened in
California make you a victim, or
you can embrace your gift and
become a hero.

Valettia uncrosses her arms.

VALETTIA
Fine.

She approaches the Mech-T with slow, measured steps like those of someone sneaking up on a wild animal. She takes the ladder one rung at a time. When she's seated, Kaito takes the HALO from Instructor Bannerjee and holds it out to Valettia.

KAITO
I promise. You will be okay.

Valettia takes the HALO in trembling fingers. Kaito steps back as the hatch closes and walks back to Major Yip.

MAJOR YIP
You handled that well.

KAITO
Thank you, Sir. About earlier --

The howling scream of mech engines burning to life interrupts Kaito. He spins just in time to see the Mech-T

blast upward, smashing through the ceiling of the hangar and streaking skyward. His mouth still hangs open when the sonic boom knocks him and everyone else to the ground.

BLACKOUT.

Blinks return vision. The ringing of trauma induced tinnitus. Kaito is on hands and knees. He dry heaves. It's a struggle to get a foot under himself, then the other, and he rises on woozy legs. Pieces of ceiling continue to fall to the now vacant hangar floor.

Major Yip yells, but the words are blocked by the tinnitus.

MAJOR YIP
Full inhibitors, now!

Some of Kaito's words manage to carry through the ringing.

KAITO
Too late. It's too late for that.

Kaito turns and runs for the exit, the tinnitus still interfering with people's words.

INSTRUCTOR BANNERJEE
Where are you going!?

Instructor Bannerjee grabs Kaito by the sleeve. Kaito twists out of the grip.

KAITO
To save her!

Kaito sprints again, leaving the training hangar and entering into:

INT. MECH HANGAR: FLIGHT GROUP RHO - CONTINUOUS

Kaito runs past two waiting Mech-Is and climbs the ladder into a third Mech-I.

INT. MECH-I COCKPIT - CONTINUOUS

A HALO hangs suspended to the side of the pilot's seat. Kaito flips a series of switches underneath the HALO, grabs the ring, and places it on his head as the canopy closes in front of him.

EXT. MECH HANGAR - CONTINUOUS

A black Mech-I streaks skyward.

INT. MECH-I COCKPIT - CONTINUOUS

Kaito looks through the displays at a tiny flicker in the sky.

KAITO
Cadet Reyes, can you hear me?

The HUD locks onto the tiny spec, magnifies it 500x to reveal the Mech-T racing skyward.

Kaito grits his teeth as a THROTTLE GAUGE hits 100%. Below that a HUD icon shows FORCES: 9.3G. Kaito's face flattens from the G-forces.

KAITO
Aaaaghhhhhh!

EXT. SKY - CONTINUOUS

The black Mech-I blasts through the clouds. The Mech-T is bigger now, more than just a flicker.

INT. MECH-I COCKPIT - CONTINUOUS

The HUD overlay of the Mech-T shows: SCANNING 50%. The bar fills to 100%. ENGINE OVERHEAT DETECTED flashes in red.

KAITO
Cadet Reyes! Valettia! You're pushing your engines too hard. Ease off the acceleration!

Silence. Kaito grits his teeth.

KAITO
Cadet! Talk to me! You don't want to go any higher.

EXT. UPPER ATMOSPHERE - CONTINUOUS

Flames burn around the Mech-I while above, the Mech-T leaves the atmosphere, losing it's cone of flame. The engines flicker out.

KAITO (COMS)
Cadet! Turn back!

The Mech-I follows into space.

INT. MECH-I COCKPIT - CONTINUOUS

Kaito shivers involuntarily. The extreme discomfort on his face reveals that a mech doesn't entirely protect from space.

KAITO
Cadet Reyes. Valettia...Val.

EXT. LOW EARTH ORBIT - CONTINUOUS

The Mech-T gracefully turns to greet the now slowing Mech-I.

INT. MECH-T COCKPIT - CONTINUOUS

Valettia appears serene, almost as if disconnected from her body.

VALETTIA
It's not safe.

INT. MECH-I COCKPIT - CONTINUOUS

The HUD display outlining the Mech-T shows: LIFE SUPPORT CRITICAL.

KAITO
Sorry. I don't know what happened to the safeguards.

EXT. LOW EARTH ORBIT - CONTINUOUS

The arm of the Mech-T extends, pointing to the stars.

VALETTIA (COMS)
It is not safe.

INT. MECH-I COCKPIT - CONTINUOUS

Kaito's HUD shifts in the direction of the mech's pointing finger.

KAITO
I don't see anything.

VALETTIA (COMS)

It is not safe!

The HUD displays MAGNIFICATION 10,000%. A BLACK SPACE where no stars shine. The HUD overlay changes to red. In the top corner, the text: INFRARED. A ship appears, one with a boxy central core, accented with components of dozens of various ships that have been attached like trophies along the outer hull. This is a BUTEK REAPER.

KAITO

They're here...

FADE OUT.

END ACT V