

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ISAAC HOOKE

FOREVER GATE

EPISODE 7:

WALLS OF STEEL

BOOKS BY ISAAC HOOKE

Science Fiction

The Forever Gate Series

The Dream
A Second Chance
The Mirror Breaks
They Have Wakened Death
I Have Seen Forever
Rebirth
Walls of Steel
The Pendulum Swings (April 2016)
The Last Stand (May 2016)

Military Science Fiction

A Captain's Crucible Series

Flagship
Test of Mettle (May / June 2016)

The ATLAS Series

ATLAS
ATLAS 2
ATLAS 3

Thrillers

The Ethan Galaal Series

Clandestine

A Cold Day In Mosul
Terminal Phase

Visit IsaacHooke.com for more information.

WALLS
OF
STEEL

THE FOREVER GATE
BOOK VII

Isaac Hooke

This is a work of fiction. All characters, names, organizations, places, events and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously.

Text copyright © Isaac Hooke 2016
All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be copied, reproduced in any format, by any means, electronic or otherwise, without prior consent from the copyright owner and publisher of this book.

www.IsaacHooke.com

Cover design by Isaac Hooke
Cover image by Bo Benson Ray Sales

table of contents

[one](#)

[two](#)

[three](#)

[four](#)

[five](#)

[six](#)

[seven](#)

[eight](#)

[nine](#)

[ten](#)

[eleven](#)

[twelve](#)

[thirteen](#)

[fourteen](#)

[fifteen](#)

[sixteen](#)

[epilogue](#)

[postscript](#)

[about the author](#)

[acknowledgments](#)

A series of clicks and groans awakened Graol.

His twenty-four eyes focused on the liquid environment, taking in visual information from every direction at once, giving him three hundred and sixty degree eyesight. There wasn't much to see.

He floated in the tight compartment of the life craft that had ejected from the mothership when it exploded. There was no room to swim anywhere. A fleshy umbilical linked him to the local life support system. A small portal near his torso provided a view of outer space beyond.

He squeezed his torso in the Satori equivalent of a sigh. He had been enjoying a pleasant mind dream, living in a palace of coralline with a harem of tentacled females fulfilling his every desire. He had almost forgotten about the real world, and that he had ever been human. And yet, he glimpsed hints of his humanity even in the dream. Sometimes, when he would look out past the coralline walls into the bright ocean, he would remember the faces of Ari, Tanner, Stanson and the others. He would see his own reflection and remember his human name: Hoodwink. But then his favorite mate would wrap her tentacles around him in pleasurable bliss and the memories would vanish.

The dream was undoubtedly part of the conditioning performed by the local AI, in what the Satori called Return therapy. It was supposed to help an alien quadmind forget the years of immersion spent in a human surrogate. The dream was just one part of the therapy, but a potent one. Normally it was used in the latter stages of the process, however: he could only imagine how the other surrogates involved in the mission must have felt, awakened after all those years as human beings to bodies that were entirely foreign to them. The alien dream world wouldn't have helped them in the least. One of those surrogates was a human named Jeremy, who had programmed the computer virus that had nearly destroyed the human colony ship on Ganymede. Jeremy's alien name was Javiol. He was very likely insane at the moment.

Graol wasn't entirely certain about his own sanity. Now that he was awake, his humanity had reasserted itself stronger than ever. He had been human far too long for his sense of self to change so quickly. He didn't think

he would ever truly be Satori again. He wanted to close his eyes, wanted to forget what he was, but his lidless vision organs allowed him no such luxury.

He flexed his body, pressing against the extents of the compartment. Before he had gone into hibernation, four of his eyes had been crushed, yellow blood had seeped from his lower appendages, and his torso had bled black ink. Apparently all of those injuries had regenerated during the journey. The Satori body was remarkably resilient.

The pops and high-pitched moans came again, transmitting directly into his quadmind. It took a moment for him to understand the meaning.

"Nearing Earth colony."

It could be only the local AI of the life craft. For a moment he considered overriding the nav controls: he was afraid of returning. But the time for course changes had long passed. If he had wanted to remain in orbit above Ganymede, he should have done so before entering hibernation. He couldn't simply fly back to the moon, not anymore, at least not without attracting unwanted attention. Besides, without a surrogate body, he had no means to interact with the humans. There simply was no way for him to go back.

He reached out, searching for other quadminds. He found several. The overall sentiment seemed to be one of confusion, though there was also much fear. Most of the Satori colonists wouldn't have awakened when Graol had arranged for the destruction of the mothership. It must have come as an unpleasant surprise to be unceremoniously hauled from their dreams by the AIs only to find themselves trapped inside small life crafts on the way back to Earth. The awakening would be even worse for the lower classes, who were packed into the crafts eight at a time. Not like Graol, who had one all to himself.

Through the portal, he watched the green and white ball of Earth grow until it consumed the view. He spotted a few small Satori vessels in orbit, but was troubled when he saw another, far larger vessel.

It looked like a massive saucer joined to an inverted cone. Smaller rectangular sections protruded from the saucer, while canals crisscrossed the cone. At the bottom tip, pipes of varying heights vented black mist.

That ship hadn't been there two hundred years ago. The Satori had been busy: they'd built another mothership. Had the pod decided to move on to a different part of the galaxy already, in search of a new species to extinguish? If so, they would undoubtedly swing past Ganymede to finish the

last remnants of humanity.

The outside was swallowed in bright orange as the craft began reentry. Graol was momentarily jostled about in the liquid. Then the portal cleared and he was through.

The craft approached one of the greenish-tinged oceans. The surface came up faster than he expected, and when the vehicle struck, his body was jerked about as the inertial compensators struggled to absorb the blow.

The outside quickly became dark. Several moments passed. He perceived only the tight, mostly featureless confines of the craft around him, dimly lit by the algal glow of his own body. The portal remained a black hole in the side of the craft, the waiting darkness impenetrable, suffocating. Graol experienced a sudden moment of claustrophobia. He doused the fear by remembering Ari, Tanner and the others. He missed them terribly, and hoped they fared well.

Static constellations of light began to float past in the distance. He couldn't tell if they were Satori or other alien species. Those lights momentarily faded as the craft passed through a seething cloud of blackness; when it emerged, he began to see hints of the massive structures of coralline that were around him. Slowly, the ocean outside brightened. The craft had entered a massive underwater valley.

He spotted pods of the Xeviathi slave class, the great iridescent gill-whales. Large, fleshy gills lined their baleen-jawed heads. Xeviathi were engineered to have no consciousness of their own. Every whale that Graol saw out there served as a surrogate, housing the consciousness of a Satori master.

As the valley became a complex series of tunnels and caverns carved into the alien coral, Graol spotted some satoroids—robots that vaguely resembled Satori with their metallic tentacles and immobile torsos, though they possessed a spinning rotor in the place of a tail. They also could serve as surrogates, but mostly they were the direct embodiment of a central AI, termed The Shell, allowing said AI to interact with the oceanic environment. For that reason the satoroids were called the Servants of The Shell.

Graol began to see the occasional Satori out there, pumping its pear-shaped torso in and out, flagellating its tail, rippling its cilia. Satori couldn't move very fast compared to satoroids and other slave classes, and thus wouldn't stray far from their resting caves. Graol was close to the main settlement, then. The sprawling Satori city of Laranth.

Absent throughout all of that were any of the original seafaring species of Earth. None of the native underwater races existed anymore, of course. The Satori had ensured their extinction in the preemptive strikes of two hundred years ago, which had acidified the oceans, converting the water into an environment more suitable to Satori life. After those strikes the shores were lined with the dead bodies of whales, dolphins, sharks, squids, and the like. Vultures and other scavengers that chose to eat their flesh died, too.

Something nudged the craft and it came to an abrupt halt. Beyond the portal, he saw moorings attach.

A message consisting of squeals and moans was broadcast into his mind.

Welcome home, colonists.

Graol floated in a wide coralline cave. At the front, moored in place by fleshy cords, twenty-five unconscious Satori had gathered in a half-circle, their bodies abandoned so that their psyches could link, forming that greatest of Satori evolutionary advantages: the Hivemind.

Joined like that, they became a functional entity more equivalent to an AI in terms of sheer processing power and decision making speed. The Hiveminds were how the ancient Satori had won their civil wars when the species was still in the equivalent of the human industrial age, before the invention of AI. The greatest tacticians and strategists were Hiveminds.

Ordinary Satori could link, too, and in fact often did. The greatest cultural and technological contributions to society had come from linked quadminds, including the invention of space travel.

Graol regarded those motionless bodies with some trepidation. This was the highest tribunal in the ocean: the Royal Hivemind. Governing body, high court, and board of inquiry, all rolled into one. Capable of guiding the entire pod of Satori and delivering deadly judgment. With his three hundred sixty-degree vision, Graol was well aware of the fifty satoroids distributed throughout the cave: the personal guard of the Royal Hivemind, and its on-the-spot executioners.

With Graol were the nine surviving members of the former Council from the mothership, including Thason, Bryce, and Crav. None of the others involved in the human surrogate mission, including Javiol, were present. Presumably they would be judged in turn.

The murky water was lit only by the glow of the algae in the translucent gastric cavities of the Satori present. Tiny particles floated by, waste products from the tens of thousands who dwelled in the underwater cave system beyond.

The Royal Hivemind deigned to transmit its thoughts then.

You have returned empty-handed. The alien colony remains intact on the gas giant's moon. Your surrogate project was a failure. And most damning of all, you lost the primary mothership. The Vargos.

None of the Satori responded.

The Shell of the mothership made a final transmission before detonation. Its internal systems were compromised by a virus of some kind. That was all that was intelligible. Who would do such a thing?

It could only be Javiol, Graol transmitted immediately. He was our greatest programmer. He was the only one of us who had been able to learn enough about the Species 87A computer system to create the virus we inserted into the AI of their ship. Species 87A was what the Satori called humans. Unfortunately, he went mad in the process. I believe he created a virus for the Vargos, too. If you haven't interrogated him yet, you will soon learn how mad he is.

All of the Fifty Surrogates went mad, Thason said slowly. He had been the chief biomimetics officer responsible for creating the baby surrogates they had inserted into the human ship and its dream world in the first place. Even Graol's sanity is questionable. Remotely injecting one's consciousness into an alien body for a short stint of existential pleasure is one thing. But injecting it into a newborn alien, a baby immersed in an alien virtual reality, and then leaving it to live out its life in that reality? Of course they are all insane.

Are you insane, Graol? the Hivemind asked him.

Graol would have laughed, if he was human.

If I was, would I even know it? Graol transmitted. *And would I admit to it? Though truthfully, despite the extensive Return therapy I have undergone, I still feel more 87A now than Satori. But I would not betray my race.*

Wouldn't you? the Hivemind returned.

He kept his quadmind calm. Maybe in small things, but never to the extent of blowing up my own ship. I couldn't. Not with all my polyp children, and my family aboard.

Tell us of these small things? the Hivemind questioned.

Small betrayals, Graol said. *Such as wanting to live the rest of my days in an 87A surrogate.*

There was a pause. Do the councilors concur with Graol's assessment regarding Javiol? That he had the skill necessary to create the virus, and the motive to implant it: insanity?

Yes, Bryce transmitted. *It is entirely likely that Javiol was responsible for the destruction of the Vargos.*

Are there any others who had the necessary skill to create such a

virus? the Hivemind asked.

There were only two others aboard with the necessary programming skill, Bryce answered. Fhavolin, head of the council, and Graol himself.

All quadminds seemed to turn on Graol. He shifted his cilia uncomfortably.

The Hivemind spoke again: *Tell us what happened to Fhavolin. She who did not return.*

We don't know, Crav responded. She was in hibernation like the rest of the council at the time. Perhaps her moorings malfunctioned before the explosion and failed to load her into a life craft.

Graol was very careful to keep his thoughts blank, as he knew the answer to that question very well.

Do you have something to add, Graol?

He cleared his quadmind. No.

He would have to guard his thoughts more carefully.

There is no need for you to guard your thoughts here. You are among friends.

Again he blanked his quadmind. *I do not feel comfortable, I suppose, with having my thoughts read. I blame it on all the years I have spent inside an 87A body. But you are right. I am among friends. And I have nothing to hide.*

Do you know what happened to Fhavolin, Graol? the Hivemind pressed.

Graol contracted his torso in a sigh. *No. She was my mate, once. That is why you detected distress in my quadmind when you mentioned she did not return. Though I suspect Javiol was her mate before he was sent inside the 87A vessel. Perhaps she colluded in some way with Javiol to destroy the Vargos.*

Impossible, Bryce said. She would never betray us like that.

Oh, I wouldn't be so sure, Thason said. He always considered her a rival, and still smarted over the fact that she had been elected to head the shipboard council, and not him. It's quite possible that she helped him. In fact, she would have had to, because Javiol would have been embedded within the 87A surrogate at the time the Vargos virus appeared. That could be why she never made it to a life craft. The Vargos AI attempted to defend itself, killing her, but was too late.

Another pause.

Shell, the Hivemind transmitted to the central AI. Update us on the status of the one known as Javiol.

The Return therapy is going well, the Shell answered. I believe he will be able to answer your questions coherently, now.

Graol shuddered when he heard that series of pops and clicks in his mind. It sounded exactly like the AI he had contended with on the Vargos, though he knew it operated from a completely separate and independent core.

Bring in Javiol, the Hivemind instructed the AI.

Two satoroids left the cave. In moments the robots returned, carrying a Satori between them. His tentacles were bound to his torso by fleshy ropes. His tail had been folded up and secured under his lower appendages, preventing him from achieving any locomotion.

Graol had never beheld Javiol in person before, and was a little surprised by what he saw. His body was small by Satori standards, as if stunted. Even his eyestalks were tiny. Those portions of his tentacles that weren't bound appeared shredded, as if he had struck repeatedly at the insides of his life craft in a futile attempt to escape.

Remove his quadmind cap, the Hivemind said.

That was a device that prevented a Satori from transmitting its thoughts.

One of the satoroids detached the small metallic interference device that had been fastened to Javiol's torso.

Because of the cap, Graol was expecting a stream of incoherent thought to emanate from Javiol, but the Satori remained quiet.

You have learned discipline, Javiol, the Hivemind transmitted.

Javiol answered immediately. *I am Javiol 44-57-79-312, egg donor Fhavolin-2-22-65-114, sperm donors Haol-26-36-12-85 and Fallow-92-1002-4-58, mooring B7.*

Did you destroy the Vargos, Javiol? the Hivemind asked him.

I am Javiol 44-57-79-312, egg donor...

When he finished, the Hivemind said: *Did Fhavolin help you destroy the mothership?*

I am Javiol 44-57-79-312, egg donor...

The Hivemind interrupted him. *Replace the quadmind cap, Shell.*

Before the satoroids could do so, Javiol transmitted again. *Is Hoodwink here, among you?*

Like Graol, Javiol would have never seen him before. Javiol would

not know he was present.

Hold, the Hivemind instructed the satoroids. Speak, Javiol.

I have a message for him: Hoodwink, I'm going to track you down for the rest of my days for what you did to me. I won't sleep until the squirming remains of your body lie flayed before me, your peeled skin tanning in the sun while I ready it for hanging on my mantle. I'll gut—

Replace the quadmind cap, the Hivemind instructed the satoroids.

Javiol's transmissions ended the moment the satoroids reattached the metal object.

Javiol, the Hivemind announced. You are sentenced to death for the crime of high treason. You planted a virus in the AI of the Vargos, thereby causing the destruction of said ship. You are a traitor to your race and a disgrace to all Satori everywhere. Shell, schedule him for execution by The Spike.

I have placed him in the first available opening, the Shell returned. His execution will take place tomorrow with the rising of the thermal currents.

Take him away, the Hivemind commanded.

The satoroids carried Javiol from the cave.

"And so ends Jeremy," Graol thought.

Graol, this Hivemind has determined your innocence in the matter of the destruction of the Vargos.

Thank you, Graol transmitted.

Furthermore, we have decided that a Species-87A surrogate will help you adjust. Several of the surface cities were spared the nuclear armageddon 87A brought upon itself. We already have an extensive collection of surrogates populating these cities. I am sure one of the sub-pods would be happy to have you join their ranks.

Many thanks, Graol responded. That is exactly what I need to complete my healing: to be among other Satori who also inhabit 87A bodies. But... may I ask the Royal Hivemind what it plans to do with the remnants of 87A on Ganymede?

The Hivemind didn't answer immediately. It seemed to be weighing whether or not it wanted to reveal its intentions regarding the human species. Finally: *We've let them persist as a barnacle in our side for centuries. It's time to remove that barnacle. When the new mothership is fully operational, it will be dispatched to the gas giant's moon to eliminate them.*

Is that wise? Thason sent. *You have spent the past two hundred years building the new colony ship. If you send it, and we lose the vessel, it will be a terrible blow. We will be defenseless. We could end up trapped here.*

Then we will build another.

Yes, Thason sent. *In another two hundred years. I don't have to remind you that we won't be receiving aid from other pods any time soon.*

Though this wasn't the only colony or 'pod' of Satori in the galaxy, Thason was right, reinforcements wouldn't be arriving for a long time. The Satori species was spread too thin, its colonies scattered in far-flung corners of the quadrant. There were too few motherships with little incentive to depart a fertile colony. Once a pod found and conquered a suitable planet, the constituent Satori grew lazy, and normally wouldn't heed distress calls from other pods unless they were close to exhausting the resources of the conquered world. Eventually, if the calls continued for many centuries, they would grudgingly build and launch a colony ship, if only to fulfill the religious obligations of their race, which required the complete and utter destruction of all other species.

Satori believed that when they died, their psyches were reborn again into whatever receptacles of consciousness were available: Satori, human, or otherwise. The Satori hated that. They wanted control over the species they returned as, preferring a Satori body—all other races were considered inferior. They actually felt they were doing humanity a favor by wiping them out. With no or few human bodies left, the dead human psyches had a greater chance of reincarnating as 'enlightened' Satori.

When the Ganymede colony was destroyed, that would leave only the few humans who yet remained on Earth itself. Most of them would be completely subservient after two hundred years of alien domination, every man and woman likely passing his or her days in lethargic complacency, waiting to be chosen in the lottery to become a surrogate for a Satori host.

Your fears are unwarranted, the Hivemind told Thason. *The latest remote scans of the 87A vessel indicate a ship completely incapable of spaceflight. They are stranded on that moon.*

That doesn't mean they won't fire back, Thason insisted.

Our upgraded defenses will easily handle any resistance, the Hivemind sent. It abruptly directed its attention toward Graol, as if remembering that he was still there. *Graol, you may go.*

He straightened and relaxed his lower appendages twice in rapid

succession, the human equivalent of nodding the head, and two of the satoroids escorted him out, leaving the former council members to debate the issue with the Hivemind alone.

three

Hoodwink strode between towering buildings of iron and glass on a street made of asphalt. The front entrances were unlocked, as were the doors on all the floors. He had explored a few of the towering monstrosities. Mostly they contained abandoned offices where people once worked, and on the lower levels, sometimes he found shops. Occasionally one of the shops was manned by a humanoid robot, obviously designed by the humans. One of the robots fitted him with a suit in a clothing store, and in a place called a "grocery store," another robot guided him through the produce section, pointing out all the different kinds of fruits and vegetables that were available to him at no cost. He left with a carrot in one hand and an apple the other. He finished both in short order and was promptly hungry again.

Hunger. An unpleasant feeling he had forgotten about. Satori didn't need to eat: the colonies of algae in their gastric cavities produced light when digested, which allowed for the growth of more algae. Satori could live a thousand years without any external food supply because of it. Too bad his human body wasn't more like that. He might have to talk to a few Satori genetic engineers about augmenting the species.

He walked past the powered flyers and wheeled vehicles that rested against the curb, free for the taking, ready to scoot him to wherever he wished. He wanted to use his own two feet for the moment, just happy that he had legs rather than lower appendages and a tail.

He wore augmented reality glasses, or aReals, designed by the humans. He followed the overhead map that the aReal overlaid upon his vision, and headed toward the main city food generation facility, labeled "food court" on the map. He hoped he would meet other amiable individuals there, because while it felt good to be human again, he couldn't shake the disheartening emptiness he felt. Because other than the few robots, he hadn't encountered a soul since awakening in his new body.

Finally he saw two people, a man and a woman, walking toward him. They carried "grocery" bags. They kept their gazes averted and stared at the pavement as they neared.

He checked their biometrics on his aReal and confirmed that the

bodies were unregistered: these were real human beings, not surrogates. He could hardly contain his excitement as they approached.

"Hello," Hoodwink said.

The pair stopped. "Hello," the man said, keeping his eyes averted. The woman refused to look up, too.

"A fine day, isn't it?" Hoodwink continued awkwardly.

"Yes it is." The man waited, still not looking at him, as if duty required him to remain where he was.

"I'm new to the area, I am," Hoodwink said. "I have no friends. I don't suppose you would be interested?"

"I'm sorry," the man said. "But we do not harbor Satori in our minds, yet. Though we look forward to that day with utmost yearning. Until then, we would not make good friends, I think. May we go?"

"Yes, yes of course," Hoodwink said.

The pair seemed relieved.

He watched them depart, and felt sick to his stomach. One of the humanoid robots observed from a nearby shop. When Hoodwink met its eye, the robot turned around and went back inside.

That's right, Shell. Watch me.

The next few humans he passed behaved similarly. They stopped politely, listened to what he had to say, and excused themselves by telling him how excited they were to one day become Satori puppets, but unfortunately they could not befriend him until then, and if it pleased him, they would like to be on their way. None of them ever met his eye.

Hoodwink didn't have the heart to tell them that if they ever were chosen to become surrogates, their own consciousnesses would be utterly obliterated. Then again, maybe they knew.

At least Hoodwink could rest easy about his own body, as his was one of those the Satori had pre-grown, genetically engineered to have no consciousness of its own. At least that was what the Shell had told him.

Near the food court he spotted a big robot resting on a street corner. A soldier of some kind. Vaguely humanoid, it was twice the height of a man and three times wider. A red visor covered the eye area. The joints were hydraulically actuated. It appeared to have a jetpack. In place of hands were weapon mounts: the right arm ended in some kind of missile launcher, while the left terminated in a nasty looking twin turret.

According to the Satori archives, those particular robots were called

Patrollers, and they'd helped clean up and repair the damaged cities in the years after the war. These days it looked like they served mainly as enforcers of the peace.

In the sky overhead, quadcopters occasionally darted past: small surveillance drones that were connected to the same city-wide wireless network the aReals used.

He reached the food court and went inside. The few humans present finally met his eye, and actually smiled. They were obviously Satori surrogates. He checked their biometrics on his aReal and confirmed that the bodies were indeed registered to Satori.

He ordered something called a hamburger from one of the serving robots and then approached a table containing three surrogates: two men and a woman.

"Well hello," one of the men said.

"Hello," Hoodwink said. "Do you mind if I join you?"

"By all means." He introduced himself as Gnarl's. The other two people at the table were Lion and Gwen.

Hoodwink sat and bit into his burger.

"First time as an 87A?" Gnarl's asked.

"What?" Hoodwink glanced at him. "Oh. No. I've inhabited a human body for a long time, I have."

"Well good for you," Lion piped up. "I've been inside human bodies off and on for the past two hundred years. Honestly, in my opinion, they're one of the more interesting surrogate species. The gustatory sensations, the sexual pleasures, the intertwined emotions. They're way more fun than the Xevianthi."

Gwen smiled fondly. "I've kind of grown attached to my own body. I'm going to miss it when we finally pack up shop and head to the next world. I hear it's soon, you know. That's why we've created the mothership."

"Don't listen to her," Gnarl's said. "We're going to be here for a long time yet. This world's resources will last us at least another millennia or two."

Hoodwink shuddered as he considered the potential ramifications for humanity of two thousand years of slavery. Two hundred was bad enough. But two thousand? The species would never be able to recover.

"We were just about to head back," Lion said. "Why don't you join us? Have you ever experienced a sexual foursome?"

Hoodwink swallowed his latest piece of burger. "That's all right."

"We can have sex in the corner over there instead if you like," Lion said. "The robots don't care. Hell, neither do the other surrogates. They sometimes join in."

Hoodwink raised a hand. "That's fine."

"I thought you said you've inhabited a human body for a long time," Gnarl told him. "Surely you haven't held back from experiencing all the pleasures that go along with that?"

"You know," Hoodwink said, standing. "Perhaps this was a bad idea."

"No no, finish your burger, man," Gnarl said. "We're the ones who are going. Sit sit."

When Gnarl and the others stood, Hoodwink obeyed.

"I'll give you my aReal number in case you change your mind," Lion said.

The transmission request appeared on Hoodwink's aReal. He accepted it, not wanting to cause a fuss, and then filed it away in his local trash folder.

"Thank you," Hoodwink said. "Nice meeting you all."

He watched the three depart, dreading that some other surrogate would join him to fill the vacuum. Thankfully, the others kept to themselves. He counted six individuals seated at three different tables. All couples.

When he finished his burger, Hoodwink wiped his hand in the provided napkin and made his way toward the exit. He passed one of the couples, and they nodded, smiling at him. He thought he saw desire mixed with invitation in their eyes, and he quickened his pace.

He bumped into another pair as he crossed the threshold outside. The couple exchanged pleasantries with him, and then almost immediately asked him to have sex with them. Hoodwink quickly excused himself.

He supposed the Satori didn't have much else to do with their surrogate bodies. He understood then why the real humans he had met were so eager to end the conversations he attempted to strike up. They were probably expecting him to demand they all have sex right there in the street.

He took a different route back toward the apartment where he had awakened. He was looking forward to shutting out that very strange, very repressed world.

He passed a human woman seated with her legs stretched across the pavement, and her back against the building behind her. She was one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen. Creamy white skin, high cheekbones, thin brows, a cute button nose, and long black hair clasped into

an intricate pony-tail. Her eyes were startlingly blue. Her only flaw was the skin beneath those eyes, which was so thin that he could see all the veins underneath, the branching blue lines vanishing into the cheek area. Even so, for Hoodwink the veins only added to her allure.

She held out a hand toward him, meeting his gaze. She was not actually human, then.

Hoodwink felt an overwhelming sense of disappointment. He was about to turn away when she spoke.

"Alms?" the woman said.

He paused in disbelief. "You're *begging*?"

"I am," she answered.

He scratched his chin. "I wasn't aware that money was needed in this place?"

"Oh it's not," she said.

"Then why are you begging?"

"I don't know," she said. "Alms?"

He double-checked his aReal and confirmed that she was registered in the system as a human surrogate to a Satori named Ghra.

Hoodwink sat down beside her. "I don't have alms. Mind, I don't think anyone does anymore."

"That would explain why no one will give me money," she deadpanned.

Hoodwink grinned. "I think I like you, I do." He reached for her hand. "I'm Hoodwink."

"Sarella." She quickly withdrew her hand and looked away.

"You seemed disappointed," Hoodwink told her.

"Of course I'm disappointed. You have no alms."

Hoodwink pursed his lips. "You don't want to have sex with me, do you?"

Her face crumpled in disgust. "No!" She edged away from him.

He laughed. "Good. You're the first surrogate I've met who hasn't tried to talk me into a threesome a minute into the conversation. Then again, I haven't met very many, I admit."

"Oh they're all the same," Sarella agreed. "But I'm not like the others."

"Maybe." Hoodwink noticed the sleeping bag rolled up on the pavement beside her. He nodded toward it. "You sleep out here?"

"I do."

"Don't you have an apartment?"

She smiled wanly. "I prefer the streets."

"Why?"

She didn't answer.

"You've been to the Inside, haven't you?" Hoodwink said.

She peered searchingly into his eyes, but didn't otherwise answer.

Hoodwink nodded slowly. "I can tell. You're too different from the others. I never thought I would find someone else who knew my pain. Someone who had seen what I had. You're one of the other Fifty Surrogates, aren't you?"

"I thought I was the only one," Sarella said.

"No," Hoodwink told her. "You were never the only one." He wrapped an arm around her and gave her a half hug.

"I felt so alone," Sarella said. "Like you, I didn't think I would ever find anyone who would ever understand me. I'm not Satori. Not anymore. I'm human through and through."

Hoodwink retracted his arm. "I feel the same way." He stared at her features uncertainly, his gaze lingering on the veins beneath her eyes. "Come home with me."

"No," Sarella said.

"I promise I won't have sex with you. I only want companionship. Someone who understands the human condition. No real human being will even meet my eye. Please. I only want a friend."

"I can be your friend out here, on the street," Sarella said.

Hoodwink nodded. "All right. Then here I'll stay."

And so he did. They chatted about everything in the hours to come, from the most mundane to the heartrendingly philosophical.

When evening finally came, it was with some regret that he stood to go.

"Are you sure you'll be safe here, alone in the dark?" he asked.

"I'll be safe. Got some watchful friends nearby." She nodded toward the shop across the street. The robot shopkeeper could readily be seen beyond the window, watching them.

And so he departed, only to return the next morning. "I brought you a sandwich." And they spent all that day talking, too.

Hoodwink returned each day and their friendship blossomed. After a week he managed to convince her to come home with him. He set her up in

the spare guest room and their friendship continued unabated.

Until one day she seduced him.

He had just returned from buying groceries. He placed the bags on the kitchen counter, and when he turned around, she stood there, spectacularly naked. Suddenly out of breath, he went to her, and mashed his lips against hers. She returned his kiss just as hungrily. He couldn't take off his clothes fast enough.

As they lay there cuddling afterward, having copulated for the third time in an hour, Sarella said: "Do you ever wonder what it would be like to go back?"

"You mean to the Inside?" Hoodwink asked.

"Yes," she replied.

He had told her all about his life on the Inside, and the daughter he once had. Sarella had shared her own life as the only child of a baker in return.

"Every day I dream of it, I do," Hoodwink said. "If the Hivemind would allow it, I would go."

"On an infiltration mission, you mean?" Sarella asked.

"If that was what the Hivemind required of me," Hoodwink said carefully.

"So you would betray the daughter you love?"

Hoodwink sighed. "Yes. No. I mean, I don't know." He didn't want to have that conversation.

"What if the Hivemind promised to let her live?" Sarella pressed. "In exchange for your help in destroying the remaining human colonists?"

"I would refuse the mission then, I think," Hoodwink said. "I couldn't trust myself to complete it. And I don't believe the Hivemind would want me, either. The Satori know the whole surrogate program on Ganymede was flawed. Look at what it did to you and I. We think we're human, and yet in reality we're two aliens living out our lives in stasis far beneath the sea."

"But you told me you wanted to go back," Sarella said.

"Yes," Hoodwink agreed. "As a participant. Not a destroyer."

"Hmm." Sarella gave him a forced smile. He sensed that his words were somehow troubling to her.

He wondered if it was a bad idea to allow her into his house, and his life.

He quickly forgot his misgivings when they had sex yet again.

four

Javiol floated in a murky holding cell made of steel. Energy bars denied any exit. Beyond, two strange iron golems stood watch. They were cast in the image of these so-called Satori, and occasionally activated rotors or extended metal tentacles to avoid drifting into the walls. Satoroids, they were called.

How did I know that?

With his mind, Javiol attempted to access the wall panel interface beyond the energy bars, but that didn't work. He wasn't sure why he thought it would.

More questions filled his thoughts. How was he breathing underwater? How was he seeing in all those directions at once? Why was he in that body?

The answer to all of those questions was simple. It was his comeuppance, he knew, for what he had done. To Ari. To the world.

His punishment? To have his human mind trapped inside the body of an oversized fish.

If he could have laughed, he would have. He once had so much power. He had been able to manipulate the very fabric of the world. He had created Direwalkers. Brute.

But somehow he had fallen out of favor with One, his master. One, the AI that ruled the world.

It was Hoodwink's fault. Hoodwink. Yes, Hoodwink must have done something. He had somehow wormed his way into One's favor. That must be it. And when Hoodwink had received the power to manipulate the world, he had immediately transformed Jeremy into that disgusting creature and placed him at the bottom of the ocean with others of its ilk.

I'm Jeremy Flanners. Mayor of Severest. Faithful servant of One. Why have you forsaken me, One. Why?

Perhaps Hoodwink wasn't entirely to blame for his current predicament. He remembered something the man had told him the last time they had talked:

What reward did One promise anyway? To take you to that world you

dream of every night? That world of water? If you ever go back, you'll get your world of water all right. You'll drink your fill. Just not in the way you'd hoped.

His tentacles trembled. No, it wasn't in the way he had hoped. Not at all.

Javiol had hated humanity, once. But in that moment he desired nothing more than to be human again.

Filled with regret, he stared at the satoroids floating outside his cell.

And then he remembered.

He transmitted the override code to the robots. A rapid series of clicks, pops, and moans. Those robots in turn transmitted the code to the Shell.

How can I serve you, oh great Javiol? the Shell sent. Somehow he knew the Shell was the AI of this place. The equivalent of One. Except unlike One, the Shell didn't rule that world.

Javiol did.

Let me out of this cage, Javiol transmitted.

Instantly, the energy bars deactivated.

Move your servants back, Javiol sent.

The two satoroids retreated, giving him room.

He whipped his tail and pumped his torso until he was outside of the cell. The algal colonies in his gastric cavity glowed purple, reflecting his jubilation.

Before he had left the ocean behind two hundred years ago, he had helped program a much needed software update to the Shell. He had inserted a carefully-crafted, multi-layered backdoor with the patch, one that was designed to escape both the AI and manual code reviews. He was the only one who knew it was there.

He was a genius.

Wait a moment. I was here two hundred years ago?

The moment of insight vanished, and the fleeting sense of who he really was faded with it. It felt like the memory was still there somewhere inside of him, but just out of reach. The feeling was similar to wearing a bronze bitch and sensing the power of vitra teasingly beyond his grasp, so near and yet so far.

A bronze bitch. It seemed a lifetime ago when he had worn one. When he had been mayor. When he had lost everything.

I want a human body, he sent the Shell. And I want Hoodwink.

There was a pause.

You wish to find Graol? the AI returned.

Javiol didn't know what that was. *No. Hoodwink.*

Another pause.

Yes, the AI sent. *I know where he is. But you also realize, Hoodwink is Graol.*

Javiol didn't know what to make of that. *Take me to this Graol.*

The satoroids escorted him through the metal halls. Javiol repeatedly ingested the water and jetted it out again, propelling himself forward. He whipped his tail, too, struggling to keep up with the underwater golems.

How do I know how to move this body?

Soon the murky steel corridors gave way to coralline, and he found himself in the main cave system. He passed other satoroids, and sometimes the Satori sea creatures themselves. Occasionally these sea creatures greeted him; instinctively he gave the proper response dictated by Satori social decorum.

He had intimate knowledge of these creatures and their customs, their security protocols, their AI. Once again he had a glimpse of what he actually was, but once more it slipped away.

He didn't know what the hell he was. He didn't care. He only wanted to get out of that ocean and back to civilization.

The tunnel opened out into a wide artificial cliff covered in seaweed. The satoroids led him away from the cliff, into the masses of glowing Satori that were moored to long horizontal tracks by the thousands.

He swam past these inanimate Satori. Though they were in stasis—or at least he thought they were—he felt like thousands of open eyes were watching him. Javiol strove to ignore the feeling.

He passed row upon row of the sea creatures until finally the satoroids halted.

Beside Javiol floated a nondescript entity that looked no different from any of the others.

Graol, the Shell sent.

This is Hoodwink? Javiol asked it.

It is, the Shell returned. *The body that is home to his consciousness, anyway.*

Though at first he didn't believe it, somehow he knew that the Shell

was right. That was indeed Hoodwink.

He tried to read the thoughts of that fish. As usual, the images returned were fragmented and incomplete, as could be expected of one whose consciousness had been transferred to another body. He thought he saw a naked woman at one point, but the image quickly evanesced.

Javiol stared at the tentacled body of his arch enemy and wondered if he should kill him.

He wrapped his stinging tentacles around the body and began to squeeze. Somehow he knew that if he applied the right amount of pressure to the gastric cavity, he could easily crush the quadbrain that lurked within. The unconscious sea creature did nothing to resist.

Javiol paused as a sudden twisted idea came to him.

He released his hold on the body and retreated.

Can you disconnect him from his body? Javiol asked the Shell.

I can, the Shell returned.

Then do so, Javiol instructed the AI.

Please specify the passcode.

Javiol felt a surge of anger and his gastrointestinal algae glowed red.
What do you mean, specify the passcode?

Someone has programmed a passcode into the release mechanism of this unit.

Hoodwink had done it, no doubt.

Then override it! If Javiol had the ability to snarl, he would have. Instead he intertwined his tentacles.

Unfortunately, the Shell returned. *I cannot. If I attempt to forcibly remove him, he will die.*

Javiol squeezed his tentacles tightly together and then released them. He had another idea.

If Hoodwink dies in human form, will he return here?

He will, the Shell returned.

That seemed at odds with what Ari had told him. Something about, if she died as a gol she would die in the real world. Yet... that probably didn't apply in the current situation, not to the fish technology.

Are you certain? he asked the AI.

I am. The fail-safes will protect him. He will awaken as Graol.

That settled it, then. Javiol would simply have to hunt down Hoodwink in human form.

That might actually prove to be a lot of fun.

When he awakens, Javiol told the AI. *I want you to escort him to a holding cell. I want him to live out the rest of his days in the body of that fish, the fate he intended for me.*

It will be done.

Now give me a human body, he ordered the Shell.

The satoroids led him three rows down to an empty mooring. He took his place and allowed the fleshy cords to connect to his torso.

He instructed the Shell to lie to the Hivemind about his execution: the AI was to inform them that Javiol had died and his remains had been disposed of. Then he told the Shell to guard him, giving it strict orders to wake him if any of the other sea creatures should somehow discover his ruse and come to retrieve him. He also commanded the Shell to rouse him the moment Hoodwink—Graol—woke up.

The consciousness transfer initiated and the underwater world faded.

* * *

Jeremy opened his eyes. He looked at his hands, touched his face. He lay on a bed.

He sat up slowly, his mind working overtime to recall the mental pathways necessary to move a human body. He regarded his surroundings. He seemed to be in a bedroom.

He was connected to some sort of intravenous drip. He pulled the needle from the crook of his arm and flinched at the pain. He wrapped the resulting wound with the bandage provided on the nightstand.

He spotted a mirror. He hauled himself to his feet and realized there were more tubes outrageously shoved into his body. In disgust, he reached for the tube that dangled from his penis. But before he touched it a tinny voice erupted from the thing, startling him.

"Press the button to deflate the small balloon inside your bladder before removing the catheter," the voice said.

He hesitated.

"Press the button before removing the catheter," the voice repeated.

He spotted a flashing green button on the tube. Beneath it, printed in big bold letters were the words: *Press Me*. Annoyed, Jeremy wrapped his thumb and forefinger around the tube to steady it, and then pressed the button.

He heard a hiss as air vacated the tube via an opening. The sound

abruptly ended.

"You may now remove the catheter," the tube said.

Jeremy did so. He felt a stinging sensation as the tip traveled down his urethra. When it emerged, he tossed the whole thing aside in revulsion.

He followed a similar process to withdraw the second tube from his sphincter.

When that was done, he forced himself to walk. He felt violated. Debased. His nether orifices pulsed with minor pain.

He slowly made his way toward the mirror. He stumbled, catching himself on a bed post. He wondered how long the body had been unconscious. Somehow he knew that it didn't really matter, because surrogates didn't suffer the usual symptoms of prolonged coma—no pressure sores, limb contractures, respiratory problems, or atrophied muscles.

He reached the reflective surface and a feeling of unbridled joy ran through him. Until that point, he hadn't entirely believed that he was human once more. But as he stared at himself in the mirror, he knew it without a doubt. His face had changed, true, but it didn't matter. He was *human*.

There was a packet of food on the nightstand. He picked it up, tore open the package, and slowly ate the contents, relishing all the gustatory sensations.

When he was done, he sighed pleurably.

Human.

As he stared at himself in the mirror, his expression abruptly darkened.

It was time to find Hoodwink.

He picked up the pair of glasses on the nightstand. Somehow he knew those glasses were a device called an aReal. He put them on.

"Shell, are you there?" he asked the empty room.

Two words overlaid his vision, painted by the aReal so that they seemed to be written on the mirror in white text.

I am.

"Where is Hoodwink?"

A top-down map immediately appeared in the upper right corner of his vision. It zoomed out until a flashing red dot was indicated several neighborhoods away.

Jeremy smiled widely.

Hoodwink occupied himself with Sarella, and the two went everywhere together. He explored all the nearby places that hadn't been destroyed in the nuclear devastation. The Sierra Nevada with its giant sequoias. Lake Tahoe with its crystal blue waters. Yosemite Valley with its high granite summits. While those places were beautiful, Hoodwink never saw any animals. No birds. No squirrels. Not even insects. It was altogether eerie, and likely the result of some sort of engineered virus the Satori had released into the atmosphere while following their species extermination protocol — doing their part to ensure when a Satori died, it had a greater chance of reincarnating as a Satori and nothing else.

On Hoodwink's insistence, they often left their aReals behind during such excursions: he was worried about the Shell constantly tracking them. Sarella told him they could simply remove and replace the batteries at will, but Hoodwink usually opted to leave the devices behind altogether.

It was good to get away from the claustrophobic city with its giant robots. But even in the wilderness, he might be hiking alone with Sarella, joking and laughing away, only to round a corner to find himself standing face to face with a hovering quadcopter. That, or one of those giant robot soldiers just sitting there, pretending to guard the trail. Whenever he encountered a machine like that, even if it was one of the smaller ones, he couldn't help but feel a fright. If the Shell ever ordered those robots to turn on him, that would be the end of his human body. There was no way to fight back against something like that.

Indeed, Hoodwink soon realized that those machines were not so much meant to protect the populace, but rather to subdue them, ensuring that the humans and even the surrogates remained docile. Yes, the omnipresent machines, constant reminders of the repressive world they lived in, one ruled by alien masters. Those robots guaranteed that the tiny human population would never forget they existed only because the Shell and the Satori allowed it, and that if any one of them should ever stray from what was expected of them, they would die. And even if they did not stray, they might perish anyway—as decreed by the whims of their Satori masters.

There were other, less immediate threats to the delicate human bodies. For example, Hoodwink sometimes wondered about the radiation that must still linger from all the nuclear weapons the humans had detonated during the war with the Satori, but Sarella assured him the aliens had cleaned up all of that. Sometimes, in the various wooded areas, he also discovered unexploded ordinance.

Once, during a particularly long wilderness excursion, he and Sarella encountered the skeletal remains of a platoon the clean-up robots had missed; he and Sarella collected the weapons and hid them inside a fallen trunk, and then memorized the spot. They planned to return to the cache and retrieve those weapons if the need ever arose, because in the city there was nowhere to procure such arms.

The only sign of any resistance he saw the whole time was graffiti spray-painted in an alleyway beside a boarded-up shop. The words read:

Resist the dark web of Irotas.

Irotas was the word "Satori" reversed, as if the underground artist was too frightened even to spell the real name of the oppressors. The graffiti was conveniently painted-over the next time Hoodwink passed that way.

The weeks went by. Hoodwink and Sarella fell into a routine when they weren't traveling outside the city. They would visit the empty gym in the mornings to exercise, travel to the market to pick up fresh produce from the robot farmers, and then eat it at the roadside spot on the pavement where Hoodwink and Sarella had met. They would stay there for some hours, simply talking, or relaxing in each other's presence, until they were hungry again, at which point they would visit a grocery store and eat their fill as they toured the robotized aisles. They would go for a drive, exploring a new park or some other area of the city, and after a few hours they would return to their neighborhood to visit one of the robot-manned restaurants for supper. They often chose restaurants that were popular with other Satori surrogates, and as such had to avoid the usual sexual advances. When finished eating their meals, they would return home and make love. Afterward, Hoodwink would read one of the great works of human literature on his aReal, or a history book, and Sarella meanwhile would paint, also with her aReal, the device recording her brush strokes as digital patterns of light. They would make love once more before bed, and then sleep, only to begin the process anew the next morning.

Hoodwink grew restless. At night he was haunted by his memories of

the Inside. There was a particular recurring nightmare that repeated every few days. In it, Ari fled from a shadowy figure who reminded Hoodwink of One. He knew deep down that if the shadow reached her, she would die. She weaved between the bones of the barren desert outside the walls of some city's Forever Gate, trying to lose her pursuer, but the figure closed. Hoodwink sprinted through the sand toward her but struck the barrier of glass that demarcated the internal boundaries of the system: he was on the other side of it, and couldn't help her.

One time, when he awakened from a particularly bad version of that dream, he found Sarella wiping his forehead with a cloth.

"It's all right," Sarella said soothingly, the side of her face limned like a crescent moon by the light from the table lamp she had turned on beside the bed. "It's over now. It was only a dream."

Hoodwink allowed his breathing to slow.

"Was it the dream again?" Sarella asked.

He nodded. "I don't know if I can do this anymore. Live my life this way. The emptiness..." He looked at her and cupped the crescent-lit side of her face in his palm. "I thought, being with you, I would be complete. I thought it would be enough. I was wrong. I need my daughter. I need the rest of humanity. And I need them unchained. The Satori can't do this. We have to —"

"Shh," Sarella said. "We forgot them, tonight." She nodded toward the two aReal spectacles they had left on the nightstand. She released Hoodwink and he felt suddenly cold without her pressed against his side.

She got out of bed, removed the batteries from the aReals, and carried them from the room. She returned a moment later to rejoin Hoodwink, her welcome warmth suffusing his side.

She smiled slightly. "You were saying?"

He inhaled deeply and sighed. "I need to leave Earth. I have to get back to Ganymede."

"You can't leave," Sarella said. "You know the Hivemind will never let you. Or the Shell."

But Hoodwink continued as if he hadn't heard her. "I could take a flyer into orbit and then make my way to Ganymede. I'd have to load my human body of course. That'll be tricky. I'll probably need to get my hands on a spacesuit of some kind. One with enough oxygen to make the journey."

"As I said, you'll never make it out of orbit. Not without the

permission of the Hivemind. The Shell will shoot you out of the sky."

Hoodwink paused for a long moment. Then he looked at her. She sensed his gaze and turned to meet it.

Hoodwink spoke his mind: "What if I eliminated them both?"

"What? The Hivemind? And the Shell?" She stared at him. "You're crazy. It's impossible."

"No. *It is* possible. Trust me. I know. I have intimate knowledge of the system. A well placed bomb, and kaboom, they're out of the picture."

"Would you dare place a bomb?" Sarella said. "You would seriously hurt your race." After a moment, she added as an afterthought: "*Our* race."

"I would set them back a few hundred years, yes," Hoodwink said. "Mind, most of the members of our society would still survive in the oceans. And it would be better for them, too. They'd be living as Satori again, rather than through the various surrogates and virtual worlds they thrust upon themselves. They'd be forced to share the Earth with humanity: the Satori dwelling in the oceans, and humankind on land."

"It might be better, as you say, but most of the Satori won't like it," Sarella said. "They'll fight to restore the status quo. Their religion demands it."

"Well," Hoodwink said. "They'll have a hard time subduing humanity without all of their machines. With the Shell gone, they're little more than sentient fish."

"You're forgetting about the newly constructed mothership in orbit. It contains another Shell. Another Hivemind."

"Ah yes," Hoodwink said. "I'm not quite sure what to do about that, not yet. Judging from what I heard during my short visit to the Hivemind, they'll be dispatching that ship to Ganymede shortly, if they haven't already. So we won't have to worry about them for a while."

"But they will return," Sarella said.

"If they do, it won't be for a long time," Hoodwink told her. "You're forgetting about the human beings left behind inside the crashed Hercules colony ship. When backed into a corner, with nowhere else to go, the trapped dog becomes a wolf. And the humans on Ganymede are very much wolves at this point. They will fight back."

Sarella seemed to ponder everything he had told her. "You said you could destroy the Hivemind under the ocean with a well-placed bomb. How would you even get close enough to place such a weapon?"

"I have a way."

She smiled obligingly. "And where are we going to find this bomb?"

"The resistance, dear girl," Hoodwink said immediately.

"What resistance?" Sarella asked.

"There is always a resistance. I've been reading the histories of humanity. Whenever an oppressive regime assumes power, human beings always rise up. It might take a while, decades, even hundreds of years, but eventually that regime is toppled. You see, it's the nature of humanity to resist trammels of any kind. Even the human being born into captivity will eventually want to break free. All it takes is one person to show the way. I'm completely convinced that a resistance movement exists out there."

"I'm not," Sarella said flatly.

"Do you remember the graffiti?" Hoodwink asked her.

Sarella frowned in the dim light. "Just because you saw some random scribbling on a wall doesn't mean there is some mythical resistance out there. It could have been a little kid who happened to get his hand on a spray can. I wouldn't be surprised if it was in fact, judging from how messy the writing was. And if even a resistance existed, and it was based in this city, I somehow doubt they'd have the means to provide you with a bomb powerful enough to do what you need."

"You might be surprised at the resourcefulness of humanity," Hoodwink said. "Especially when its freedom—its very existence—is at stake. I told you about the wolves on Ganymede, didn't I? On Earth, these wolves have become bears."

Sarella sighed. "Can we stop with the animal metaphors?"

Hoodwink smiled sheepishly. "Sorry."

"So tell me, how do you expect to go about finding this so-called resistance?"

"I haven't figured that part out yet," Hoodwink said. "Maybe I can leave my own graffiti on the wall, see if someone answers it."

Sarella looked at him with what appeared disbelief, and then she laughed. "Where do you come up with these ideas?"

"Do you have any better suggestions?" he asked.

She didn't answer.

"Thought so," he said.

She lay her head back on her own pillow. Hoodwink did the same. She spoke again a moment later: "What happens if you're actually

successful? What if you succeed in contacting the resistance, and destroying the Shell. What then?"

"Then I go to Ganymede, like I said."

"No," she said slowly. "I meant... what about us?"

"You could come with me," Hoodwink said.

She was quiet for some time. "I can't, Hoodwink. If you're successful, I'd rather stay here and help humanity rebuild."

He studied her silhouette in the dim light, then rubbed her hand with one palm. "Then I guess, at that point, we part ways."

* * *

Hoodwink went with Sarella to the apartment she owned and retrieved the art supplies she had procured for herself when she first moved in. Together the pair went to the alleyway where he had seen the graffiti, and while she screened him from the view of the street beyond, he wrote a single word.

How?

The word stayed up for a whole day, and was promptly erased the morning after. Over the next week he passed the alleyway multiple times, waiting for a response. It never came.

One night, too distracted to read the latest work of human literature he had downloaded into his aReal, he pondered the original graffiti.

Resist the dark web of Irotas.

He was sure he was missing something. But what?

The dark web.

Dark web.

He had browsed it before. The dark web was a grandfathered overlay network that utilized the public Internet for the routing of anonymized traffic. It required a special legacy software packaged called Roq, which dispatched each request through several random relay hosts before reaching the destination. Roq was supposed to make it impossible to track down the IP address of the target website, and the IP of the person accessing it. In the not too distant past, the citizens of oppressed regimes had favored the use of Roq to anonymize their Internet access.

If there was a resistance out there, it certainly made sense that it used the dark web. Because from what he knew about the Shell, even the AI wouldn't be able to decode the packets. Hoodwink should be safe connecting to it via his aReal: while the Shell might be able to listen in on the aReal's

microphone, and the eye movements and gestures he made, in theory the actual data sent over the Roq network would be unreadable by the AI.

Unfortunately, because the dark web was unindexed, there were no search engines. The Roq access software he had installed on his aReal contained a basic index, along with a dark web search engine, but most of the sites, including the search engine, were offline. The only site that did actually work was a fairly tame online forum called Trade Winds. The postings involved mostly humans looking to exchange various illegal items frowned upon by the Satori regime, such as firearms.

The forum did have a search feature, however.

He pulled up the Roq application on his aReal and navigated to the index. He chose the Trade Winds forum and waited rather impatiently for the aReal to connect. The access indicator seemed to flash forever... he began to worry that the forum had been shut down by the regime since the last time he had accessed it.

But in a few moments the familiar logo came up and he heaved a sigh of relief. At least that avenue was still open to him.

He logged in with the user alias he had created the last time he was at the site. His aReal transmitted the required public key and biometric data required to sign in, and then he navigated to the search box and typed the message:

Resist the dark web of Irotas.

No results came up. He tried browsing through the different postings, looking for signs of any dissenters. No luck. There were only firearm postings, the occasional drug listing, and some vague discussions reminiscing on the "good old days." If there were any resistance members present, they were likely communicating in private rooms.

He selected the "member list" link near the top of the page. He was a little surprised the site would even keep a public member list, since the whole point of the dark web was anonymization, but he wasn't about to complain.

On a hunch he skipped ahead to all aliases beginning with the letter I and began to browse through them.

There. A member named Irotas.

He sent the user a message:

I want to resist.

That was all he had. He shut down the aReal and promptly forgot about the dark web.

He checked the forum again a few days later. To his surprise a response had come in. A single word:

How?

That was the same message he had left in the alleyway. He took that as a sign the resistance had seen it.

He responded with:

I have a plan to fight the Satori oppressors. Need others to help implement it.

A week later Hoodwink still hadn't received a reply.

"It's probably for the best," Sarella told him. "Contacting the resistance can't end well. Not for either of us."

"And what if my plan succeeds?"

She smiled wanly. "That might be the worst scenario of them all."

A few days later he finally received a response in his Trade Winds account.

Come to the alleyway tomorrow at three a.m.

He stowed his aReal in the bathroom and explained the message to Sarella.

"That will be tricky, given the curfew," she said. "Which alleyway, anyway?"

"Presumably the one where I saw the original graffiti." Hoodwink smiled triumphantly. "I told you there was a resistance."

"And what if the resistance is merely a honey pot?" Sarella said. "A trap laid by the Satori to enmesh anyone who tries to go against the regime. Perhaps the Shell had one of its robots paint the original words. Perhaps the Shell answered the message on the dark web forum itself. You do this, you'll be walking right into their hands. The word *Irotas* is Satori spelled backwards, after all."

"If it was a honey pot, why would the Shell take so long to reply? Why not order me to come to the alleyway right away?"

"Maybe it didn't want to arouse your suspicions by responding too quickly," Sarella said.

"And why not simply send its robots to arrest me?" Hoodwink said. "No. I don't buy it. It's not the Shell. I'm going to the alleyway at three a.m.. Do you want to come with me?"

She sighed. "You know I'm going to come."

"I do," Hoodwink said. "Though I thought I'd give you the courtesy of

asking."

Hoodwink waited until two thirty in the morning and then made his way into the building hallway with Sarella. They both left behind their aReals so that the Shell wouldn't know they were violating curfew. The AI had other ways to track them of course. The countless cameras on the streets. The robots. Perhaps other implants hidden inside their bodies.

For the cameras, Hoodwink and Sarella had earlier toured the area between their apartment and the alleyway. They noted the location of all spy cams along the way, as well as the shops manned by robots, and when they returned home they planned a route that circumvented most of the surveillance.

There was nothing they could do about the robot patrols except avoid them. As for any implants, they would simply have to hope the Shell hadn't tampered with their bodies.

Dressed entirely in black, with black balaclavas covering their faces, they reached the apartment fire escape shared by that floor. Hoodwink gazed into the darkened courtyard below.

"Looks clear," he said.

They couldn't exit via the front lobby, because there was a camera on a streetlamp directly outside. There was also a music shop manned by a robot on the first floor of the building across from the apartment. That robot also monitored the lobby, no doubt.

Hoodwink stepped onto the fire escape and proceeded to climb down the two flights to the first floor. There, he unlatched the ladder and carefully lowered it to the ground. He cringed each time the latch struck each rung; though the scraping noise was soft, it sounded loud in his ears.

When the ladder was in place, he climbed down into the courtyard. He led Sarella through the tall grass until they reached the enclosing fence. There, he gave her a boost to the top.

She scanned the back road beyond and then gave him a thumbs up. She reached down and helped him over.

On the other side, they opened special umbrellas designed to conceal their heat signatures from the thermal imaging of any passing surveillance

drones. There was no other way to avoid the things, as the pair wouldn't have any warning: the quadcopters flew high enough to mask any sound produced by the already quiet motors.

The two made their way through the dimly lit lanes. They ducked into alleys or side streets whenever the mechanical hum of moving treads heralded the approach of a patrol robot.

As one of those ground robots drove by, sweeping its search lights to and fro, Hoodwink wondered as he often did how those tank-like treads avoided chewing up the asphalt. It was perhaps a silly thought to have, considering the circumstances, but he couldn't help himself. Perhaps an ordinary human being would have been scared witless. But not Hoodwink. He blamed the cold, logical part of his quadmind, the Satori part, for asserting itself. Probably a good thing, as he needed all of his mental faculties at the moment.

When the patrol robot was gone, they continued their clandestine advance, and soon reached the street adjacent to the alleyway. Unfortunately, that entire area was closed to them, as there were too many spy cameras and robot-manned shops.

Instead, Hoodwink folded the umbrella and tucked it under one arm, and then climbed the lower branches of a nearby blue oak. He hauled himself onto the rooftop of the single story building beside it. Sarella did likewise.

They reopened their umbrellas and hurried at a crouch toward the far edge of the roof. The next building was a little higher, with a five foot gap between it and the current roof. Hoodwink and Sarella took running jumps in turn and crossed the gap.

They made their way from rooftop to rooftop like that, until one building proved a bit too far away to jump to. Hoodwink found an abandoned ladder between the superstructures of the current roof and he made a makeshift bridge. It seemed a little too convenient to Hoodwink. Nonetheless, he forced himself to cross. It was tricky, and he almost lost his balance along the way. Sarella meanwhile conquered the ladder with ease, moving like a ballerina.

He reached the edge of the rooftop and stared at the target alleyway below. Though it appeared empty, he hesitated. There were several areas of absolute darkness down there. Anything could be lurking within the shadows. Perhaps robot soldiers, preparing to arrest him and Sarella. He thought again of the ladder, which he had left in place between the two buildings. Had the

Shell put it there? Or had its opportune presence merely been a coincidence? Perhaps the resistance members had stowed it to make the crossing easier. That must be it.

"Hoodwink?" Sarella whispered, her voice muffled by the balaclava she wore.

"Let's go," he said softly.

They lowered themselves into the alleyway and waited. He stared intently at the darkness around him, searching for a glint of metal, listening for the hum of servomotors, but no robots emerged from the night.

Perhaps it wasn't a trap after all.

He felt a tap on his shoulder and he nearly leaped out of his boots. He spun. It was Sarella. She was pointing at the alleyway wall. A small crack had appeared and moments later a door opened inward. No light coming from within. It was darker inside than outside.

Sarella beckoned questioningly toward the door.

Hoodwink sighed.

Now or never.

The pair entered and the door sealed behind them, leaving them in absolute darkness.

"I'm going to blindfold you," a man said. A human voice. That meant nothing. Robots were equipped with vocal synthesizers that allowed them to mimic human sounds perfectly.

Hoodwink felt a blindfold come down over his eyes.

The umbrella was yanked from his grasp.

"Put your hands behind your back," the man commanded.

Hoodwink did as he was asked, and he felt a tight cord dig into his wrists, binding them.

"Okay, turn on the flashlight," the man said, obviously talking to someone else in the room.

He heard a soft padding sound. A light must have gone on, because Hoodwink was led forward. He stubbed his toe on something hard, and yelped softly. He bit down on the pain, not wanting to alert any robots that might be passing outside the building.

"Easy, big guy," the man said.

Hoodwink was led down some stairs—he stumbled on one of the steps, but the man caught him. The flights seemed to double-back on themselves, and when he reached the bottom he walked for several more

moments. The vague stench of sewage reached his nostrils.

He was halted, and his binds were abruptly removed.

"Don't remove the blindfold," the man said. "Here, climb."

The man helped him to a ladder that led down through a hole in the ground. Hoodwink descended. He knew he was in a tunnel because of the way sound behaved around him, his breath and the clang of his boots on the rungs echoing ever so slightly. Also, he merely had to flare his elbows to contact the tight concrete confines.

As he descended, the stench of sewage grew to an all out assault on the nostrils. Even through the fabric of his balaclava it was nauseating. The sound of dripping liquid echoed from below.

When he reached the bottom his binds were reapplied and he was led forward once more.

"Where are you taking me?" Hoodwink asked quietly.

No answer.

"Bree-anne, are you still there?" Hoodwink asked, using the codename he had agreed upon beforehand.

"I'm here," Sarella said from somewhere behind him.

Finally he was unbound and led up another ladder. At the top, his hands were retied and he was guided forward. Thankfully the sewage smell quickly faded behind him.

He walked for several minutes through what he thought was some kind of underground pedway system. Eventually he climbed several flights of stairs, walked through a carpeted corridor, heard a door open beside him, and then stepped beyond its threshold.

The door closed behind him and the blindfold was removed.

* * *

Jeremy peered past the edge of the stairwell. He hadn't seen which door the party had entered: he was too worried about being spotted.

Not that it mattered. He would get them when they emerged.

He rubbed his weary eyes. The tracking bot had alerted him when Hoodwink and his girlfriend took the fire escape, and Jeremy had hurried after them. He had a combat robot quietly break through the hidden door in the alley wall, and when his prey had entered the sewers, he had forced himself to pursue. It wasn't any worse than the sewage his fish body lived in, after all.

He had been watching Hoodwink for the past few weeks. When he

had discovered that his hated enemy had engaged in a relationship with a human female, presumably another surrogate, he had decided to forgo killing him immediately. Instead he wanted Hoodwink to grow attached to the woman. He wanted him to feel the pain of loss when Jeremy terminated her existence, and *then* he would wrench Hoodwink back into his Satori body.

As he stared at the many hallway doors, he decided he would do the deed that very night. It was time to enact his vengeance.

"Shell," he said into his aReal. "Dispatch twenty combat robots to my location."

Yes, great Javiol, the Shell overlaid onto his vision.

Jeremy smiled wildly.

seven

Hoodwink found himself in an apartment living room of some kind. Four men stood before him. All of them wore latex masks with different faces. The first mask depicted a white human skull set against a black backdrop. The second a maniacally grinning human visage. The third was a ghostly white face within a black hood. The fourth a featureless bright blue fabric with thick red goggles overlaying the wearer's eyes. Each man carried a plasma rifle strapped over one shoulder.

Sarella stood beside him. He noticed she no longer wore her balaclava. Her hands were bound behind her back, like his own.

Skull-Mask stepped forward and removed Hoodwink's balaclava.

Hoodwink stared at them, waiting for someone to begin the conversation. No one did.

"Are you the resistance?" he asked.

No answer came from those lifeless faces. Not for a long moment.

Then Skull spoke. "There is no organized resistance. There hasn't been in decades. We've lost our will to fight. We eke out our days in servitude, ordinary men living in an oppressed world, waiting for the Satori to take our bodies and use us as hosts at their leisure, seeking, *dreaming*, of one day finding freedom."

Hoodwink thought they were lying. Of course there was a resistance. And they were part of it. They simply didn't trust him enough to reveal that fact, not yet.

"I can give you the freedom of which you speak," Hoodwink told them.

"Can you now?" Skull said. "We know who you are. Or rather, *what* you are."

"What do you mean?"

He heard a chuckle from behind that mask. "We know you're a surrogate."

Hoodwink involuntarily took a step back. He felt extremely vulnerable in that moment. "How?" They weren't wearing aReals, so he wasn't precisely sure how they had determined that.

Skull stepped forward until his mask was only inches from Hoodwink's nose.

"Why shouldn't we kill you?" the masked man asked. "You who are a symbol of our oppressors? You who would dare infiltrate our midst, claiming that you can set us free, when you are one of them. How do we know this isn't some kind of set up to eliminate the last vestiges of resistance in the human race?"

"I— I—" Hoodwink stammered. "Blast, I don't have proof. I don't. All I have is my word."

"That's not good enough for us," Skull said.

"It is for me," Sarella said.

She slid her hands forward. She had merely been holding them behind her back, pretending to be bound.

Hoodwink was taken aback. "What is this?" He studied her uncertainly. "All this time... you were pretending?"

"She's very good at pretending," Phantom-Mask said. "In fact, one of the best. She was a professional thespian, in another life."

"You're not a surrogate?" Hoodwink asked her.

She looked away, unable to meet his eye.

Blue-Mask spoke up next. "No, she is not."

"But she told me she had been to the Inside. No human from Earth could know of that place."

Sarella answered him, though she still couldn't meet his gaze. "It was you who spoke of the Inside, first. What were your words? 'You've been to the Inside, haven't you?' I simply agreed, and told you I thought I was the only one."

In his naivety and loneliness, Hoodwink, wanting so desperately to find someone like himself, had invented a whole fictional persona for her. She was human, not Satori. How could he have been such a fool? But despite her damning admission, even then a part of him refused to believe, and he said: "But you know things about the Satori that no human being could ever know."

"Think back on all the conversations we've ever had," Sarella said. "Everything you told me about Ganymede or the Satori, I simply agreed with and amplified. You fell for it."

He rubbed his eyes. "But I'm the one who's supposed to hoodwink people."

"I know. I lived up to your namesake."

He thought of something. "But even my aReal had you cataloged as a surrogate."

She smiled mischievously. "That was perhaps the Satori's biggest mistake: using human technology. They should have distributed something entirely new, something alien, not something we actual humans could hack."

"So all of this has been a set up from the very beginning?" Hoodwink asked her.

"When you showed up, I tried to get rid of you," Sarella said. "For your own good. But you kind of grew on me. So I figured, why not. I could befriend you, glean whatever information I could. I didn't mean to fall for you, though."

"So wait a second, you spray-painted that graffiti? You created the Irotas user on the dark web forum?"

"Not exactly," Sarella said. "Some of us occasionally scrawl graffiti in the different surviving cities of the world, if only to draw new members."

"So you admit that there is a resistance!" Hoodwink said.

"We admit nothing," Phantom returned.

"I'm still not convinced we can trust him," Skull said. "He could easily be a plant."

"I've lived with him for the past few weeks," Sarella said. "I've been his lover. I know him. I trust him."

"The fact that you've been his lover only hurts your case, in my opinion," Skull told her. "It clouds your judgment of him. I vote that we kill him and hide the body so that the Shell can never get at his memories."

"You know of the Shell?" Hoodwink said.

"Thanks to you," Skull said.

"You've shared everything with them, haven't you?" Hoodwink told Sarella. "Everything I shared with you in confidence. The stranded colonists. The Satori mothership. The Hivemind. Everything."

"Don't you think they have a right to know?" she asked.

She had a good point.

Sarella turned toward Skull. "Hear him out at the very least."

Skull merely stared at Hoodwink from behind that mask.

"You can kill me," Hoodwink said. "But the Shell can still get at my memories if it wishes, by lobotomizing my Satori body. And maybe I will simply tell the Hivemind and the AI all about my adventures with Sarella."

Skull nodded toward Sarella. "She'll be long gone by the time you return." He addressed her directly. "See, I told you he intends to betray you."

"Hoodwink wouldn't do that," Sarella insisted. "He wouldn't betray me."

"Don't be so sure," Skull said. "He may seem human, but peel back the layers of reality and you'll find an alien mind composed of four hemispheres operating a human brain of only two. His thinking is alien to our own."

Sarella smiled fleetingly and rested a finger on Hoodwink's cheek. "Not so alien."

Hoodwink scowled at her, but when he saw the tenderness in her features, all the aggression and betrayal he felt vanished.

Skull must have seen the change in his eyes, because he nodded. "Fine. Speak, Satori. Tell us of this ingenuous plan you have to fight the oppressors."

Hoodwink did so. He asked questions at key points, to gauge their actual ability to help him, and they answered him reluctantly. It was obvious they didn't yet trust him completely.

When he was done, Skull spoke. "It's a fascinating plan. Brazen and extremely crazy, but fascinating. Whether or not it's actually going to work is another thing entirely. But I have one final question to ask you. Why are you helping us? Why?"

"Let's just say I have a vested interest in humanity." He glanced at Sarella and held her hand.

"We'll get you back to your daughter, Hoodwink," Sarella told him.

Skull exhaled loudly. "I can't promise we'll help. I have to take this up with the others."

"They'll help," Sarella said.

"We'll see," Skull countered. "We'll be in touch." He rudely shoved the balaclava down over Hoodwink's face and then blindfolded him.

Everything was calm at first as they led him into the hall and into what Hoodwink assumed was the stairwell, judging from the steps and the way the sound echoed.

But then there were shouts, and the noise of some sort of pulse gun firing.

Someone screamed beside him.

Someone shoved Hoodwink back up out of the stairwell and into the hall.

"I told you it was a trap," Skull shouted. The hiss of a plasma rifle cut him off as someone fired back into the stairwell.

Hoodwink felt the muzzle of a rifle slam into his temple.

"Tell me why I shouldn't execute you right now!" Skull said.

"It wasn't me," Hoodwink pleaded. "I swear it. Give me a weapon and I'll fight for you, I will. I'll prove myself."

There was more shooting.

"Let him help," Sarella said. "We're going to need every one of us to get out of this."

Finally the barrel pulled away and Hoodwink's blindfold was removed. Skull stood above him. He cut his binds and tossed him a small pistol.

"Then fight," Skull said.

The other four were holed up beside the exit, where the melted remnants of the door hung from the hinges. They fired down into the stairwell. Plasma shots came in return, sweeping past and slamming into the opposite wall.

Hoodwink cozied up beside Sarella, who also had a small blaster for a weapon. He leaned past the doorway and let off a few shots. He struck a robot soldier just as it peered past the bend that led to the lower flight. Its flat head melted away and it collapsed.

Hoodwink took cover when the return fire came. He glanced down the hall toward the far side. He saw the doors to the rooms, but otherwise there didn't seem to be any other exits.

Skull pulled out a small RC radio. "Radius, can you get to us?"

"That's a negative," a voice returned a moment later. "There are too many of them. The rear guards we placed are dead. I've called for backup but they won't arrive for a while. And from the numbers I'm seeing down here, it won't matter anyway."

"Roger that," Skull said. He stuffed the radio back into his harness.

"Looks like we're on our own. We have to get to the fire escape."

"I'll buy you some time," Phantom said from his position beside the open stairwell door.

Skull rested a hand on his shoulder. "You will feast with the martyrs tonight in eden, Rick."

"Go!" Phantom said. Rick.

Hoodwink and the others retreated. They chose one of the unlocked doors and hurried inside the apartment.

Staying low, Hoodwink gazed out the living room window. It faced the street, which crawled with mechanical activity. It seemed like all the robots in the city were converging on the building: there were the bigger, mech-like soldiers, and the tank-like patrol robots on their treads.

Hoodwink quickly ducked out of view. "Shit."

Blue glanced outside and recoiled in obvious shock. "Forget the fire escape! We're completely and utterly screwed. We got all the robots in the city out there."

Skull took a look. "Damn it."

"You brought me here on an underground pedway system connected to the sewers, right?" Hoodwink asked Skull.

"We did," the man answered.

"Does the pedway connect to this building?"

"Yes," Skull told him. "But not via the main stairwell. Even so, we'll never reach it with all those robots on the stairs."

"How many floors is this building?" Hoodwink asked.

"Three."

Maniac-Mask was watching the peephole at the main door. "Rick is gone. The robots are clearing the rooms one by one. They're two doors away from us."

"Everyone," Hoodwink said. "Concentrate fire on the floor. This spot." He pressed the heels of his boots repeatedly into the carpet, forming a small depression. "We need to drill our way through to the floor below, we do."

Every plasma weapon aimed at the floor.

"Set noise dampeners to full," Hoodwink said.

The group did so and then opened fire. The silencers masked the noise, and a small, manhole-sized gap melted in the carpet to the room below.

Hoodwink helped each man down in turn, followed by Sarella, who

flinched as she passed through. When his turn came, he gripped the edges and lowered himself. The surrounding flooring was still fairly hot from the blast, and he understood why Sarella had flinched.

He dropped down into the apartment below.

The group directed their weapons at the floor once more and opened another gap. They proceeded to lower themselves in the same way. When Hoodwink's turn arrived, he heard the sound of the door being kicked in just above. He hurled himself through the hole and struck the carpet of the below apartment rather hard. He yelped quietly upon impact.

"You okay?" Sarella said.

He moved with a very slight limp. "Tweaked my ankle slightly. Nothing I can't handle. We have to move. They're here."

They hurried through the apartment toward the entrance. Behind him, Hoodwink heard a loud metallic clank. When he glanced that way he saw a combat robot had dropped down through the hole.

Maniac, who was bringing up the rear, immediately blasted the robot.

Sarella paused at the entrance to peer through the spy-hole. She opened the door, and carefully surveyed both directions.

She beckoned toward the rifle that Skull held and he gave it to her. She aimed it down the hall outside and fired off two quick shots.

"It's clear," she said softly, returning the weapon.

The group hurried out the exit. Hoodwink heard another muted clank behind him and he knew a second robot had dropped down. Maniac fired once again and laughed like a madman.

Sarella led the way down the hallway toward the rear set of stairs that was supposed to lead to the pedway. As Skull had predicted, two robot soldiers had guarded the place. Sarella had eliminated them with her earlier marksmanship.

Sarella pushed open the door to the stairs and Skull followed her inside.

Without warning a shot came from behind Hoodwink. Maniac collapsed. Hoodwink and Phantom dragged the fallen man onto the stairs.

Sarella and Skull took up guard positions and fired into the hall as Hoodwink and Phantom hoisted Maniac between them.

"No," Maniac said. He was panting loudly. Blood dripped from his lips. "I'm done. Leave me a grenade."

Hoodwink glanced at Skull, who nodded. Hoodwink and Phantom

lowered the man to the floor by the entrance. Maniac traded his rifle to Sarella in exchange for her smaller blaster, and then accepted a grenade from Skull.

"You will dine with the martyrs tonight, my friend," Skull said.

Maniac nodded. The red blood stood out on his lips against that deathly pale face. His skin was steeped in perspiration, though he was shivering.

The survivors hurried down the stairs and reached the glass door of the underground pedway. Beyond it, the passage branched off to the left and right. Sarella opened the door cautiously and swept her rifle in both directions.

"Clear," she said.

The party dashed into the steel corridor.

Hoodwink heard a muted explosion behind him as he ran and he realized Maniac had detonated the grenade.

Hoodwink knew it was only a matter of time before the Shell or whoever was hunting them started sending robots down there from other entrances to head them off. He had no idea how far they had to go. No idea if they would ever make it to the sewers.

And then Sarella burst into a side door labeled "mechanical." He and the others followed her inside. Large machines grumbled and hummed around him. He passed pipes, conduits, flashing panels. It seemed a colossal waste of energy to keep all of that running, given the scant populace, but that was the Satori way: they wanted their playpens ready to go at a moment's notice.

Sarella paused beside a manhole cover. "Here it is."

The vague scent of sewage reached his nostrils.

She grabbed a nearby crowbar and popped the lid. The stench of fecal matter promptly increased. A tunnel descended into darkness.

Sarella went down, with Skull and Phantom going next.

Sarella shouted up: "Hood, replace the cover when you come in."

Hoodwink lowered himself inside; when his shoulders were level with the floor, he dutifully grabbed the heavy cover and shifted it toward him.

It was at that point he heard several loud thuds echoing in the room. He glanced between the machines and spotted a man wearing boots and holding a blaster. He was accompanied by two combat robots. Hoodwink didn't recognize the individual, who wasn't looking his way, his face in

profile.

"The manhole should be right here," the pursuer complained to the robots. "I marked it on my map!"

Hoodwink ducked and lowered the cover into place as silently as he could. All light immediately faded, and he descended the ladder by touch in the absolute darkness.

"Sarella, are you here?" he asked quietly when his boots touched a hard surface, probably concrete. The terrible stench was nauseatingly strong.

"I'm here," Sarella answered. "Put this on." She shoved something into his hands.

He explored the item, which seemed to be some kind of eye-wear. He slid it over his face and immediately a concrete tunnel appeared in black and white around him. The device likely utilized the same sonar tech that was built into aReals, which allowed the wearer to see by bouncing sound waves off the surrounding surfaces. Those waves came in the form of very soft clicks that wouldn't travel more than ten feet from the wearer. From what he knew of the stealth tech, the robots could only detect the sonar at very close range.

Hoodwink stood on a narrow catwalk that bordered a sewage tract. Only a tiny trickle of sludge flowed down its length: the sewer system was obviously designed to handle the waste products of a population far larger than what currently resided in the city.

Skull and Phantom walked along the catwalk ahead, almost out of sight of the stealth goggles.

He heard a clank above. The pursuers had found the manhole cover.

"They're up there," Hoodwink said. "A surrogate is helping them. He knows about the sewers."

"Let's go then!" Sarella hurried after Skull and Phantom.

They joined up with the other two and the party quickly reached a fork. They proceeded to take the rightmost branch.

They advanced a short distance and then took a left.

As they reached another fork, Hoodwink heard clanks coming from around the bend ahead. At least he thought the noise was coming from there: it was hard to tell because of the echo effect the tunnel caused.

Skull immediately raised a fist and spun the index finger in a circle, a gesture that Hoodwink interpreted as "retreat."

They backtracked.

They reached the previous fork and jumped across the tract to another catwalk, taking the leftmost corridor instead.

They hurried forward and turned right at the next branch that presented itself. Again they heard those mechanical clanks. The robots sounded closer that time.

The group quickly retreated.

"Damn it," Skull said when they rounded the bend of the previous fork. "These sewers are swarming with robots. We'll never get out of here."

He led the retreat, passing a small alcove where some kind of monitoring equipment was placed. The party approached another fork.

Up ahead, two combat robots abruptly stepped into view.

Skull immediately took them out.

Another robot peered around the bend.

"Watch out!" Skull flattened himself against the wall.

Phantom moved too late and was struck down. He toppled from the catwalk, landing lifelessly in the tract.

Skull fired at the bend as the group retreated. "The alcove! Take cover in the alcove!"

Hoodwink reached the alcove that housed the monitoring equipment and ducked inside. He assumed a guard position on the rear edge, aiming his rifle down the corridor. Sarella and Skull did the same on the opposite side, and they fired nearly constantly into the oncoming enemy. So far Hoodwink hadn't released a single shot, as no robots had come at them from the rear. But he knew it wouldn't be long.

From the periphery of his vision, Hoodwink saw Skull retreat from the edge to fetch the small RC radio from his belt.

"Radius," Skull said into the radio. "Flood the storm drains."

No answer came.

"Damn it," Skull said. "Too much interference." He tried again.

"Radius, can you read? Flush the storm drains."

"You can do that?" Hoodwink asked Sarella.

"Like I said, Hood, the aliens made a mistake in relying on human technology to keep their conquered vassals in check." She fired off two shots.

"It's too bad you couldn't have hacked the robots themselves," Hoodwink muttered. He finally spotted a group of robots rushing at them from the rear, and he unleashed several shots from his blaster.

Behind him, he heard Sarella talking to Skull. "You do know if we

flood those drains, the robots won't be the only ones flushed out to sea, don't you? And the ocean is basically acid... not the best for human skin."

"I know," Skull said. "But I have no plan of ever reaching the sea." He produced a pair of flexicuffs and tried the radio again. "Radius, flush the storm drains."

"Roger that," returned the digitally garbled voice.

"Finally," Skull said. He tossed the cuffs to Hoodwink and Sarella. "Tie yourselves in."

Skull retrieved another set of flexicuffs from his utility belt to obey his own instructions.

"I hope you two can hold your breaths for at least forty-five seconds," Skull said.

Hoodwink secured one of the cuffs to his wrist and tied the other to a small pipe connected to the monitoring equipment.

When that was done, he leaned past the edge and opened fire at the next batch of troops coming at them from the rear.

He heard a subtle rumbling in the distance. The floor shook, promising the approach of a massive amount of water.

"It's funny," Skull said as the rumble grew. "I remember reading in the history books about how all the modern cities in the world had finally separated out their storm drains from the sewage systems. Every city except ours. And now it's that very storm drain that's going to save our lives. I told Radius in the moments after we figured out how to control the drains that someday we'd find a use for them. Looks like I was right."

Hoodwink and the others continued to fire at the robots, but the incoming stream of mechanical bodies proved endless. It was a wasteful, almost crazy strategy on the part of the enemy, and yet there was method to it, because the weapons of Hoodwink and the defenders would eventually begin to overheat and become useless.

"The rainwater in those storm drains isn't acidic like the seas, is it?" Hoodwink asked.

"A little bit," Skull replied. "But not as bad. It's treated, you see. So you'll survive. Just don't open your eyes."

The rumble grew to an all-consuming roar and then the waves smashed down the tunnel.

Hoodwink was engulfed by water. He held his breath and shut his eyes just in time. The blaster was ripped from his grasp and he was pulled

sideways.

He floated there, helpless in the current, his body tugging against the cuffs that held him by the wrist. He could feel the plastic digging into his flesh, drawing blood. He fought the current to bring his other arm forward, and grabbed the pipe in attempt to alleviate the pressure on his wrist.

He hadn't been able to take enough air into his lungs before he held his breath, and he struggled in that moment, wanting nothing more than to open his mouth and inhale deeply. While his mind knew that there was no air out there to breathe, still it took an effort to restrain his body. He fought every moment to keep his mouth closed and his nostrils still, preferring to black out rather than to have to suffer the painful death of water asphyxiation. He remembered how much it hurt to cough up all that amniotic fluid when he had first emerged from his pod into the real world for the first time. He had no doubt the pain would be even worse when the current liquid was inhaled, especially if it was slightly acidic.

Just when he couldn't take it anymore, the water level went down. He knew because his head felt suddenly cold and exposed. He kicked his way to the surface and as the cold air struck his face he inhaled deeply. He opened his eyes at that point; they burned, so he quickly closed the lids. His head bobbed up and down, repeatedly striking the concrete. He didn't care. He was alive.

Slowly the water level continued to cede and he tried to open his eyes again. It took some effort, and much wiping, and several tears, but finally he blinked his way through the burn. And that's when he realized his goggles had been swept away, too, and he could no longer see.

"Sarella?" Hoodwink said. "Skull-faced man?"

Sarella's voice echoed beside him. "We're here."

Hoodwink exhaled in relief. "I don't suppose either of you have a spare pair of goggles?"

"I lost my own," Sarella said.

"I still have mine," Skull told them. "No spares."

"Now do you believe that I'm on your side?" Hoodwink said.

"Maybe." Skull didn't sound convinced.

When the water had gone down enough to walk on the catwalk, the three of them interlocked hands and Skull led them through the sewers without further incident. Eventually they climbed another ladder and emerged into the basement of a partially lit home or shop.

"Where are we?" Hoodwink asked.

"You're in one of our safe houses," Skull told him. He still wore his sonar goggles, which made the skull on his mask appear bug-eyed. The effect was somewhat comical. "A shop."

"It's not connected to the alleyway we used to get here?" Hoodwink asked.

"No," Skull said. "This place is far away from there. I suspect the alleyway you used to get here is compromised. In any case, Sarella will take care of you. She knows this place."

Skull began to descend the hole in the floor that led to the sewers.

"Wait," Hoodwink said. "What about my plan?"

"As I said before," Skull told him. "I must take this up with the others. We will let you know."

He lifted the sewer cover into place and vanished.

"So are we supposed to wait here until he gets back or something?" Hoodwink said. "Because we obviously can't go outside. The robots will be patrolling the streets, looking for us, they will. They'll scan our biometrics."

"Not if we have these." Sarella made her way to a series of old-style computer terminals and opened a drawer, producing two aReals. "They've been reprogrammed to send false biometric information to the computer systems, and hence the Shell. While we can alter the face data we send back, unfortunately we haven't been able to disable the microphone, or alter the voice data. So you and I will still have to be careful of what we say when wearing the devices. Try to deepen your voice. And call me Matilda or something when you wear it."

"The aReal you left at the apartment, it had false biometric information, too?"

"It did," Sarella agreed. "But I can't use that profile anymore, of course. It's tainted, associated with you."

"Wait, we used to go on excursions without our aReals from time to time," Hoodwink said. "And the robots scanned your body on several occasions. The Shell would have known you weren't a surrogate those times."

"Yes," Sarella said. "But it would have also assumed I was merely some human toy you had acquired."

"Wouldn't it realize that your face remained the same between profiles, when its robots scanned you with and without your aReal?"

"I told you, we can alter the faces on the aReals. It would have simply

assumed you lived with a surrogate, but occasionally went on dalliances with a human mistress."

Hoodwink reluctantly accepted the aReal, which was powered off. No battery, probably. So he didn't have to fear that the Shell was listening in at the current moment. "I don't suppose we can hack these aReals and turn off tracking entirely?"

"We can, but we haven't been able to figure out how to turn off the auto-patching. As soon as we disable tracking, the aReal automatically downloads a fresh patch that restores that ability. We'll have to rely on the fake profiles instead. That and of course removing the batteries when we want to go incognito. Anyway, it's time we caught up on some sleep. It's what, four a.m. now?" She beckoned toward a couple of mats that were set up against one wall. "That's our bed for the night. Tomorrow morning we'll head to one of the apartments assigned to the owners of these aReals. We can't return to your place any more, obviously. Or mine."

"No," Hoodwink agreed. He lay on the bed and closed his eyes. Though he was exhausted, it was a few hours before sleep took him.

* * *

The next morning Hoodwink stared at the small, coin-like magnesium-ion battery that powered his aReal.

"I don't understand," Hoodwink told her. "Won't any robots we pass simply check our actual biometrics? How are we going to escape notice?"

"For speed reasons, it's faster to rely on the data from the aReals. If they wanted to scan our actual biometrics, the robots would have to make us stand still for a full minute while they checked us out at close range. The surrogates would complain to the Shell in droves if they were forced to do that sixty times during a simple stroll."

"Why don't we just hide out here for a few days?" Hoodwink asked.

"Because, the rebel bastards forgot to restock the fridge."

"Let's take a path through the sewers then, like your friend? Even though the smell is nauseating, I'd rather go down there than back on the streets, I would."

"Yes, well," Sarella said. "The place is probably crawling with robots by now."

"Good point." Hoodwink sighed. "The streets it is. We're just two innocent surrogates making our way home." He slid the battery into the requisite slot on the aReal and the device powered on. "I'm hungry, Matilda,"

he said, making an effort to deepen his voice.

"Let's go eat then," Sarella said, her own voice rather shrill.

On the streets, the robots were obviously on high alert. Every mechanical soldier they passed paused to scan the biometric information from their aReals, but thankfully the machines all moved on before attempting a more detailed scan. Quadcopters flew low overhead, but no alarms were raised. The biometric tags were working.

For the moment.

The pair reached the apartment following the "home" icon that was overlaid on the street maps of their aReals. Inside, they found a man unconscious on the bed. He had a total parenteral feed connected intravenously to the crook of one arm, with a urinary catheter and rectal tube linking him to some kind of excretion collection machine, so he obviously wasn't a real human being, but rather a bio-engineered shell awaiting a Satori's consciousness. Hoodwink and Sarella locked the body in the washroom along with the feed and collector.

Hoodwink had expected the relationship to be over after all the lies Sarella had told, but surprisingly he found that he could not hate her, not when she looked at him with those caring, tender eyes. They made reconciliatory love that first night, and every night thereafter. Maybe she was still manipulating him. He didn't care.

A few days later Sarella and Hoodwink decided to check the dark web forum for messages. However, they didn't want to risk doing it from their aReals.

Since the patrol activity had calmed down by then, they were able to make their way toward the safe house relatively easily. It was broad daylight, so when they neared an alley next to the appropriate shop, they began to act promiscuously and, kissing frantically, pulled each other into the shadows of the alleyway as if impatient to make love.

They entered the shop via a backdoor and went directly to the basement. Sarella checked for signs that the sewer entrance had been tampered with, but she seemed satisfied that it had been left untouched. She sat down at one of the old-style terminals and connected to the Internet via Roq.

After opening up the account inbox, she turned toward Hoodwink. "The rebels have agreed to help."

"Good," Hoodwink said. "Transmit the magnetic shielding spec, and

all my other modifications."

She nodded. "Transmitting now. I still don't know how you remembered all that stuff."

"I'm a Satori living in a human body," Hoodwink said. "I have a quadmind."

"Yes, but at the moment you have only two hemispheres."

"It takes focus," Hoodwink said. "To access the higher memories. Sometimes I can't do it. But on a good day... well, let's just say today was a very good day."

"It's done," Sarella said. "Now we just have to see what they come up with."

The piano black SUV arrived at their new apartment a week later. The day before, Hoodwink had spotted fresh daisies planted in the garden at the front of the building. Sarella had told him the flowers were a sign from the rebels, letting them know that the time for action had come. She'd warned him to be on the lookout for the arrival of a transport the next morning.

Hoodwink and Sarella had kept a low profile the entire previous week, remaining holed up inside the apartment, ordering food online. They waited until the delivery drones were long gone before opening the door to retrieve their items.

"They're here." Hoodwink replaced the curtain. He had been waiting by the window all morning.

Sarella nodded. She sat calmly by the table, sipping cardamom-spiced black tea. She took one last drink and then set the cup aside. "Let's go."

"I was expecting a flyer," Hoodwink said.

"A SUV is less conspicuous," Sarella said. "It'll be easier to lose the drones. And besides, it'll look like we're going on a day trip."

"It'll take longer..." Hoodwink protested.

"Which would you prefer," Sarella said. "Speed, or safety?"

He grudgingly admitted that safety was preferred.

"Good. Then grab your stuff, and let's go."

He retrieved his backpack, which was full of camping gear, and then replaced the battery in his aReal and put it on. Sarella did likewise.

"It's time to go camping, dear!" Sarella said in that high-pitched affectation.

They proceeded downstairs to the SUV, loaded their gear in the cargo area, then took a seat in the back.

"Good morning Skakes," Sarella told the driver.

That was a fake alias, of course, likely for the benefit of the aReals.

"Morning Matilda," the driver said. Hoodwink recognized the voice of Skull. It sounded a little forced, and raspier, again probably for the aReals. The man's angular, weathered face spoke of a hard life. He had an ugly scar above his right eyebrow. It looked like something caused by a knife, or a

robot's pincer. He hadn't shaved in a few days, judging from the thick salt-and-pepper stubble on his face. His hair was buzz cut to almost the same length as the stubble, with a bald area on top.

The man riding shotgun merely waved two fingers in greeting. He was middle-aged, too, though he wore his hair long and greasy. He had just as much stubble as the driver. He, too, had a scar, though his was a long line above the chin.

The driver put the SUV into gear and accelerated. It was obvious the self-driving controls of the car had been disabled, perhaps permanently.

The four of them remained absolutely silent during the drive. Well, everyone except for shotgun man, who thrummed his fingers on the dashboard in an annoying, staccato rhythm.

Though Hoodwink was nervous as hell about what was to come, he couldn't help but turn to Sarella and mock dance to the rhythm. She covered her lips, struggling to contain her laughter.

The driver finally snapped. "Would you quit that?"

"Okay okay," shotgun man said, apparently chastened.

A few minutes later he started up again.

The driver clenched his jaw but said nothing.

The SUV passed the guard robots on street corners and on patrol. Surveillance drones flew overhead. None of them stopped the vehicle.

Since traffic was nonexistent, and the passengers encountered no resistance from the machines, the group made good time to the outskirts of the city. The driver turned onto the main highway and proceeded due west.

When the SUV was several miles outside the city, the driver announced in a rasping voice: "I'm getting some kind of interference in my aReal. What about you guys?"

"Me too," Hoodwink playacted. The others echoed his answer.

The driver flicked a switch on the dashboard, and a green light activated above it.

The passengers removed their aReals and ejected the small disk batteries.

The driver swerved the vehicle slightly as he worked on disabling his own aReal.

"Here, let me do it," Sarella told him.

"I got it," the driver said. He lifted the disk battery over his shoulder to show her, then flipped it into the cup holder in the center console.

"Should we toss them entirely?" Hoodwink asked, rolling down his window to do just that.

"No," the driver said. His voice was no longer raspy. "The Satori can't track us through the aReals, not without the batteries. We've run tests. Might as well hang on to them in case we need to fool the machines again."

The man riding shotgun abruptly turned around. "I'm Blake." He extended a hand.

Hoodwink shook it. "Hoodwink."

"Odd name," Blake said.

"No odder than Blake." Hoodwink turned toward the driver. "And what should I call you?"

"Call me Skull," the man said.

Hoodwink nodded toward the green light on the dashboard, though Skull probably didn't see the gesture. "What did flipping that switch do?"

"Activates a little something I installed in the vehicle," Skull explained. "Severs its connection to the Internet."

Every car, truck, SUV or flyer in the city was a so-called smart vehicle: Internet connected. Just another way for the Shell to track those living in its domain.

Blake abruptly leaned into the back area. He carried some sort of handheld scanning device that he pointed at Hoodwink's body.

"What are you doing?" Hoodwink asked the man, who slowly tilted the device as if running some invisible beam over Hoodwink's body.

Hoodwink glanced at Sarella.

"He's just checking you for weapons or bugs," she reassured him. "It's harmless."

"Can you turn to the side a bit?" Blake swiveled one finger.

Hoodwink sighed, then unbuckled his seatbelt and rolled to the left.

"Now the other way," Blake said.

Scowling, Hoodwink complied.

Blake sat back in his seat. "He's clean."

Outraged, Hoodwink buckled his seatbelt and crossed his arms to hide his slightly shaking hands. Good old human adrenalin.

Blake opened an old-style laptop on his legs. He lowered the window and the rapid inflow of air sent his locks flying backward. He placed a thick, square-like antenna on the hood and the mounting magnets underneath the device took hold.

He promptly closed the window and typed a few commands.

"We've got two quadcopters following us," Blake announced.

"All right," Skull said. "Time for some misdirection."

A turnoff appeared, then another, but Skull ignored them both, continuing on the main highway.

The road soon became cluttered with debris. Skull had to swerve by blast craters, large potholes, and abandoned cars. Several of the vehicles displayed signs of damage, and many were burned-out husks of steel.

"The robot clean-up crews never bothered to come out this far," Blake explained to Hoodwink.

"I know," Hoodwink said. "I've gone on a few wilderness excursions myself."

Skull pulled up behind a vehicle.

"Okay, take them out," Skull told Blake.

"Hand me the large case, would you?" Blake asked Hoodwink. He nodded toward the rear cargo area.

Hoodwink retrieved the first case he saw in the cargo compartment. "This one?"

"No, the large one," Blake said.

Hoodwink grabbed the other case. It was unwieldy, and Sarella had to help him pass it to the front.

Blake went outside and set the case on the ground. He opened it and retrieved a large weapon with a thick barrel. It reminded Hoodwink a little of a recoilless rifle, or perhaps a mortar launcher. Copper coils spiraled around the barrel underneath the muzzle.

Blake unfolded a tripod connected to the base of the weapon, and then balanced the device on the ground. Then he sat in the car and launched an application on his laptop.

The skyward-pointing barrel of the weapon abruptly swiveled in place and the coils flashed red. The barrel tilted to the left and the copper glowed again.

"Got 'em," Blake announced.

Hoodwink glanced out the window, searching the sky, but didn't see anything. Then a quadcopter crashed to the ground a few feet beside the SUV, littering the asphalt with debris. Another one dropped into the field beside the road.

"Did you like that?" Blake flashed Hoodwink a toothy grin, revealing

a gold cap. "Their parachutes didn't even have a chance to deploy."

"Let's go let's go!" Skull said.

"Shit." Blake ran outside and refolded the tripod, then shoved the weapon into the case. He threw it to Hoodwink in the back and before Blake closed the door Skull was already turning around, tires squealing.

Sarella helped Hoodwink stuff the case into the rear cargo area behind the seats.

As Skull raced back down the highway in the opposite direction, Hoodwink watched the sky carefully, looking for signs that other drones had found them. Blake meanwhile kept his eyes glued to the laptop.

Skull took one of the turnoffs he had previously ignored and floored the accelerator. The trees there grew right up to the edge of the highway. Skull was forced to slow down when the clutter of abandoned vehicles became too thick.

After several tense minutes, Skull pulled up behind a big-wheeled off-roader that had been parked at the shoulder underneath the expansive branches of an oak tree. It had forty-five inch wheels, a mechanical winch, and a vehicle snorkel protruding from the hood.

"Out!" Skull said.

Hoodwink and Sarella abandoned the existing vehicle, leaving behind their camping gear, and loaded into the off-road SUV.

Four plasma rifles were piled together in the back seat.

"Nice." Hoodwink strapped one of the rifles over his shoulder.

"Hand one to Blake and me," Skull said from the front.

Sarella gave Skull and Blake a rifle each, and kept one for herself.

Skull started the off-roader and drove directly into the wilderness that edged the highway. The remnants of an overgrown paved road provided a bumpy path through the trees.

"They'll send one of the Birds-of-Prey to monitor this area," Skull said. "So we have to stick to the woodland route. It's going to be rough, though. This road hasn't been maintained in a long while."

"What's a Bird of Prey?" Hoodwink asked Sarella quietly.

"A really big fixed-wing military drone," she told him. "A hunter killer. After the Satori won the war, they used them to hunt down remote outposts of humans and kill them all. It's equipped with a full complement of Hellfire X20s, along with a few bunker busters."

"Basically bad news," Blake said, flashing that gold-toothed grin at

him from the shotgun seat.

Up ahead another big-wheeled SUV awaited, blocking the path. When Skull reached it, the vehicle started up and led the way.

The undergrowth thickened so that the road wasn't even visible because of all the foliage that had encroached upon it. Skull followed in the path of the lead vehicle; tree branches scraped the sides of the SUV and the metal screeched in protest. Overhead, the tree canopy completely blotted out the sky, foiling any Birds-of-Prey that might be watching overhead.

"You're ruining my paint job," Blake complained.

"Kid," Skull told him. "The paint job is the least of our worries right now."

Rivers occasionally overran the route. The SUVs were forced to move into the open to cross them. Hoodwink and the others watched the skies tensely during such fordings, but no Hellfires came.

On one crossing the water came up to the hood of the vehicle. The snorkel did its job and the vehicle didn't stall. Some water leaked inside however, dousing them up to the ankles. The liquid was easily emptied by opening the doors after fording.

After some hours of driving like that, a radio resting on the dashboard abruptly came to life.

"The silo is just ahead," a voice said over the line. "Going off road."

The lead SUV turned off the road and directly into the trees. Skull followed it. The branches scraped their vehicle even more vigorously.

"What do you think about your paint job now, Blake?" Skull taunted.

Hoodwink was jerked terribly in his seat as the SUV drove over the bumpy terrain and surmounted the logs and bushes in its path. The frame groaned loudly when the vehicle struck a particularly nasty bump, and Hoodwink nearly hit the ceiling.

"Remind me never to let you drive again," Blake muttered.

Skull ignored him and nodded toward the right side. "See that?"

Hoodwink glanced out the window. "I don't see a thing, I don't."

"Look carefully. There's a fence out there."

And then he saw it: a chain-link fence almost lost to the foliage.

"That's the abandoned launch control center," Skull said. "It was tricky as hell to get in there. Surveillance cameras and automated guns all over the place. We had to cut all the video feeds and replace them with our own. It was all fairly low tech, ancient stuff though. Nothing like the aReal

shit we've had to deal with in the past. Oh, and get this, there was a dead Equestrian."

Hoodwink glanced at Sarella. "An Equestrian?"

"Fancy name for a robot tank," she told him. "Ancient model."

"Its power source had failed, of course," Skull continued. "We removed the AI core, blocked its connection to the Internet, and managed to reprogram the thing with the help of a few training AIs. We put it back in the tank, supplied a fresh power source, and guess what boys and girls? We have ourselves a robot tank."

Hoodwink spotted a single-story structure between the trees beyond the fence. There seemed to be some sort of antenna tower beside it. Then both were gone, lost to the thick branches.

"I saw a building," Hoodwink said.

"That would be the launch control building," Skull said. "Most of the actual control center is sheltered in an underground bunker underneath it. But that wasn't what we were concerned with. No. The silos were the key. Do you see any hemispherical cupolas on the ground?"

"No," Hoodwink said. "Too much foliage."

"Well, those are what the tops of the silos look like. According to the archives, this was one of the last launch control centers still operating when the war came. We'd moved all of our nukes to submarines and flyers by the time the aliens arrived. Our engineers had a hell of a time getting the blast doors open."

The chain-link fence faded into the foliage behind them.

"We're not going to the silo?" Hoodwink asked.

"No," Skull said. "Once we found a missile, we extracted the smaller delivery vehicles and moved them to a safer location to work on. Who can say that the Satori don't send regular patrols out to these abandoned silos to check on them, after all?"

"I doubt they would," Sarella said. "They have no fear of nukes."

"Just the same, we weren't going to take any chances."

"So where did you move these delivery vehicles?" Hoodwink asked.

"You'll see."

Skull continued to follow the lead vehicle for another thirty minutes, jostling the passengers constantly along that bumpy terrain.

"I don't know how you transported nuclear delivery vehicles through this crap without them going off," Blake complained.

"It doesn't work that way," Sarella told him.

"It takes more than a jostling to detonate a nuke, it does," Hoodwink agreed.

"And who made you the expert?" Blake asked.

"You forget," Skull told him. "He *is* an alien."

"Which is exactly my point," Blake said. "What does he know about *our* technology?"

"I've done my research," Hoodwink said. Though in truth Blake was right: he knew relatively little about how the nuclear warheads actually worked.

The trees abruptly opened up as the two vehicles drove into a clearing. A canopy had been hung overhead, blocking out the entire sky. The underside had a leaf pattern that replicated the surrounding foliage. A similar pattern likely decorated the top.

Sarella apparently noticed that Hoodwink was staring at the canopy, because she told him: "It shields us from any visual reconnaissance during the day, and thermals at night."

"I guessed as much," Hoodwink told her.

Floodlights connected to generators provided extra light. Tents of varying sizes were strewn about the clearing. Three soldiers in full kit stood guard in front of the largest tent. Another two soldiers guarded a smaller tent.

"Welcome to one of the satellite rebel camps," Skull said. "It's completely mobile: we can have everything packed up in under two hours. And two minutes if we leave the tents, canopy and lights behind."

In front of four other SUVs, two big pickups with monster truck wheels were parked off to one side. The vehicles were technicals—double-barreled anti-aircraft energy guns were bolted to each of the truck beds. A robot battle tank stood silent watch beside them. The Equestrian, no doubt.

The lead SUV came to a halt beside the other vehicles and Skull parked behind it.

Hoodwink scanned the thick trees that enclosed the camp.

Sarella squeezed his hand. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he lied.

He couldn't shake the feeling of impending doom.

* * *

The bee-sized micro-drone flew through the trees, its obstacle avoidance tech working at full tilt to avoid the many leaves and branches as it

circumnavigated the camp. Its tiny camera was pointed toward the tents, transmitting everything to the Shell, and hence, Jeremy.

Jeremy had dispatched miniature spy drones throughout the city. He had specifically instructed them to ignore the biometric signatures transmitted by aReals and to rely on good old fashioned facial recognition technology. He had seen nothing for a week. Hoodwink and Sarella had apparently gone into hiding.

And right when he was about to give up, all of a sudden Hoodwink and his girlfriend had unexpectedly turned up. The pair had been spotted inside an SUV headed toward the outskirts of the city. Jeremy had considered launching his attack right then, but curiosity had gotten the better of him. What was that scheming Hoodwink up to?

Jeremy had instructed the micro-drone to pursue.

Let Hoodwink think he was safe. Let him scheme away. And just when his plans were about to come to fruition, Jeremy would strike.

From his vantage point aboard the helo-drone, Jeremy giggled in delight.

Hoodwink watched as men dressed in combat gear emerged from the lead vehicle.

Skull and Blake opened their own doors and got out.

Hoodwink glanced at Sarella, whose hand he still held. "Well. I guess there's no turning back now, is there?"

"Not really," Sarella agreed. "Why, you're having misgivings?"

"Only one." Hoodwink looked her squarely in the eyes. "The fact that you're here." She opened her mouth but before she could protest he tightened his grip on her palm. "But I'm glad you came nonetheless." He gave her a quick peck on the lips and then he forced himself to pull away. "Let's do this."

Hoodwink approached the small party of men who stood beside the SUVs, the Equestrian guarding ominously in the backdrop.

"Meet our commandos," Skull said when Hoodwink reached him. "Pencils. Alien. Depravity. Carbine."

Pencils and Alien nodded stiffly, while the other two men merely stared daggers at Hoodwink when they were introduced.

"Commandos," Skull continued. "Meet Hoodwink, our resident alien. And Sarella, his girlfriend."

Hoodwink inclined his head slightly.

Alien ran a scanning device up and down Hoodwink's body.

"He's clean," Skull told him. "We already checked him earlier."

"Never hurts to check again," Alien said.

"So you're the one betraying your own race?" the one named Depravity said. "I'd never sell out my own species." He spat a thick glob of chewing tobacco and saliva onto the ground in front of Hoodwink and Sarella.

Hoodwink glanced at Skull. "We're off to a good start."

"Don't mind them," Skull said. "They're honestly glad for your help. They just don't know how to show it." Skull turned toward the commandos. "Have the scouts reported in?"

"They have," Pencils, who seemed to be the commanding officer,

said. He wore glasses, though Hoodwink suspected they were prescription, not aReal. The Satori eugenics program should have bred out men like him years ago. "Nothing in the sky. Nothing in the trees. Quiet as a fox out there."

"I think the proper saying is *wily* as a fox," Alien told Pencils.

Pencils shrugged. "Foxes are quiet."

Skull led the group through the camp. The soldiers assumed positions on all four compass points of the party.

"I suppose it's good to have an armed escort protecting us," Hoodwink commented to Sarella.

Blake overheard, and he looked at Hoodwink and flashed that gold-toothed grin of his.

"You probably think they're here to protect you from the aliens?" Blake said. "Should we tell him, Skull?"

Skull glanced askance. "Let's just say your proposal wasn't exactly met by open arms, Hoodwink. There is division among the rebels. Some believe you pose a grave threat to our existence. They think you're an assassin who has come to take out our senior leadership elements. The soldiers here are meant to protect against that possibility."

"All these soldiers to protect you from *me*?" Hoodwink said incredulously.

"You, or whatever machines you might summon to your aid."

"I feel so loved right now," Hoodwink quipped.

"What Skull isn't telling you," Blake appended. "Is that some of us really want to kill you. And I mean really badly. It's not often we get our hands on a surrogate alone outside the cities. A surrogate, that ugly symbol of our alien overlords. So the soldiers are also here to protect you from *us*."

Depravity glanced at Hoodwink and spat on the ground in front of him again.

Hoodwink sighed.

When they reached the largest tent, Skull led the party inside. Alien and Depravity came, too, while the remaining two commandos joined the others who guarded the door.

Within, Hoodwink saw a few workbenches and shelves covered in equipment. A robot arm was operating on a spherical object shielded behind a thick glass case. Two men in white lab coats stood by a pair of computer terminals.

"You're the scientists I've come all this way to meet?" Hoodwink

asked the men.

The pair exchanged looks and then laughed uproariously, just as if Hoodwink had made some grand joke.

"No no no," Skull said. "These men are the decoys. *Those* are the scientists."

Two long-bearded dwarfs dressed in shabby clothes were tethered by an umbilical to a nearby computer. Both were unconscious.

"Wake them," Skull said.

One of the decoys went to the computer terminal the dwarfs were linked to and pressed some buttons.

The dwarfs awoke.

"What the fuck!" the first dwarf said, sitting up. He rubbed his eyes. "I told you about pulling us out prematurely. I was in the middle of something!"

"Don't get your nuts in a twist," the second dwarf said. He disconnected the umbilical from his belly button and lowered his shirt. "We've been in there for what seemed days. I for one am glad to leave that digital world behind."

"He's here," Skull said.

"Who's here?" the first dwarf said, his eyes bugging out angrily. "Like I'm supposed to know who the fuck you're talking about?"

"The alien."

"That's him?" The scientist eyed Hoodwink up and down. "He doesn't look like much."

Hoodwink forced a polite smile. *Neither do you.*

"Well, you show the fucker around," the first dwarf told the second. "I'm going back in. I have some more tests to run."

He lay back down and shut his eyes. He hadn't bothered to disconnect his umbilical.

The second dwarf stood. He reached up and extended a hand. "Hello. I'm Brent."

Hoodwink knelt slightly and shook the hand. "Hoodwink."

"You'll have to excuse my colleague Gab," Brent said. "We don't get many visitors, or a chance to socialize with the outside world that much."

"That's fine. I hear you have a nuke for me?" Hoodwink surveyed the remaining portion of the tent, and his eyes locked onto a black, inverted cone-shaped object that squatted in one corner.

"Indeed we do." The dwarf led Hoodwink toward the object, which was about five feet tall and three feet thick at the base. "We had to retrieve all the old training programs from the Hidden Archives to figure out this thing."

"The Hidden Archives?"

"Yes," Brent said. "The entire technical history of humankind, squirreled away from the aliens in small canisters no bigger than diving tanks. We have a local copy there." He nodded toward several small metallic tanks that lay against the tent fabric behind the computers. Several blocks of what looked like plastic explosives were attached to them, Hoodwink noticed. A precaution against capture, Hoodwink guessed.

"The training AIs from the archive taught us how to extract the reentry vehicles from the ICBM," the small scientist continued. "Each reentry vehicle is called an Mk210, and carries a nine hundred kiloton W98 warhead. Roughly sixty times the power of the Hiroshima bomb. Though you probably have no idea what that is."

"I've heard of Hiroshima," Hoodwink said. "I've been studying human history since I returned to Earth."

"Fantabulous," Brent said. "Then I won't have to come up with another comparable. Will that be good enough for your needs, then? Or do you need something that packs more of a punch?"

Hoodwink gazed at the black Mk210 reverently. "No. That will be more than enough."

"Good, because this is the only one we've rebuilt so far. See, these things have been sitting around for two hundred years. Turns out the radioactive material caused a whole slew of decay in the metal, not to mention corrosion in the joints, plus some of the goddamn plastic materials had warped with time, so we had to 3D print a whole new W98 and transfer the primary and secondary to it with radiation gear and worker robots, then throw it all back into the Mk210 again. Fucking— pain— in— the— ass.

"Anyway, after much coaxing, the training AIs showed us how to disable the permissive action link, which means there's no two-man rule requirement or Gold codes or any bullshit like that. Just arm and go. We put together a manual remote detonator powered by a small magnesium-ion battery." He handed Hoodwink a palm-sized black box with a small HLED display that showed a countdown set to five minutes. There was a small metal switch on the front beside a button.

"Turn the dial to adjust the timer," Brent continued. "Then flip the

switch and the button turns green. That means the warhead is armed. Press that button to initiate the countdown. Keep in mind: once you activate the warhead countdown sequence, you can't shut it down, so if you're not ready to put fifty kilometers between yourself and the Mk210, do *not* press the button, and instead flip the switch back down to disarm the thing."

Hoodwink nodded.

"We've also added magnetic shielding, based on the specs you sent us," Brent said. "We followed your design to a T, so if it doesn't mask the weapon's signature from the Satori, don't blame us."

"I'm sure you did everything properly," Hoodwink told him.

"It's funny," Brent said. "We've all seen the histories of the attack. The Satori force us to watch it when we're kids, part of the indoctrination sessions and all. In them, we see humanity launch wave after wave of nuclear weapons at the enemy, and none of them ever breaches the darkness surrounding the alien vessels. Instead we end up destroying our own cities. And now you come to us saying those videos are a lie. It's a bit hard to swallow, at first. Especially since the Hidden Archives confirm that's exactly what happened."

"No, the videos are the truth," Hoodwink said. "Or a form of it, anyway. Nuclear bombs can't breach Satori shielding. And humanity *did* destroy most of its own cities. Whether the presidents actually knew they weren't harming the Satori, or they launched the bombs in some desperate scorched earth attempt to prevent the aliens from taking those cities, I don't know. But I tell you, when a nuke is planted in the proper spot in the Satori underwater colony, inside their shield and past their defenses, trust me, it will work."

"How are you going to get past the shield?" the scientist asked.

"I have a way," Hoodwink said.

"Fine, but why do you need a human-built nuke anyway?" Brent said. "Surely the Satori have something more powerful you could use?"

"If there were any bombs left, they would be aboard the mothership, not the underwater colony. And I don't need to tell you how difficult it would be to retrieve one of them. First we have to fly up to the mothership, then actually steal one, and then come back down, potentially pursued the whole time by a squadron of these Birds-of-Prey I've heard so much about. That's crazy talk, it is. Especially when there are bombs down here for the taking. Bombs that the Satori, in their hubris, allowed to remain in existence."

Brent smiled slightly. "It's possible the Satori didn't even know about them."

"What do you mean?"

The small scientist glanced at Skull. "I don't know if he told you, but the blast doors were a bitch to get through. That's because none of the Satori, nor their pets, had ever opened them to even check if we had any nukes left."

"Like I said," Hoodwink replied. "Their hubris." Hoodwink walked over to the Mk210 and rested a hand on the metal. It was cool to the touch. "When can I take her?"

"We're basically finished testing." Brent glanced at the other small scientist, who was unconscious and tethered to the machine. "As soon as Twist-Nuts there is done, we can load it into one of the pickups and you can take it wherever you want."

"Looks heavy." Hoodwink thought of the technical outside with its monster truck wheels. "Will the pickup be able to handle its weight?"

Brent shrugged. "Handled it well enough on the way here. The weight actually helps smooth out the bumps."

"Lucky you," Blake commented.

"All right," Skull said. "Let's leave the scientists to finish up their testing. Because I don't know about you but I'm starving."

Skull led them back outside and the other two soldiers rejoined the party. Depravity remained inside, Hoodwink noted. While Hoodwink was in the camp, apparently no one was to be left unguarded.

The group made its way to one of the smaller tents. The scent of fresh beef stew taunted the nostrils.

Hoodwink's eyes were drawn once more to the surrounding foliage. That's when he saw it. A tiny object, little more than a bee. At first he thought it was a bee. But no insect moved like that.

Hoodwink halted. "We've got company."

Skull glanced at him. "Wha—"

Up ahead the tent flap parted and two combat robots emerged, plasma rifles aimed directly at the party.

"Drop your weapons," one of the robots said in its deep voice.

There was a blast behind them. Near the vehicles, smoke emerged from the Equestrian; the robot tank had obviously been disabled, though there was no sign of who had done it.

The commandos raised their hands and then slowly slid the rifles

down from their shoulders. They dropped the weapons in turn: none of them dared test the reflexes of the machines.

More commanding voices were heard across the camp: two more combat robots corralled the two scientists and their decoys from the large tent and marched them, along with the remaining commandos—who were also disarmed—toward Hoodwink and the others.

One of the robots shoved the scientist Gab, who apparently wasn't moving fast enough for the machine's liking.

"I'm moving I'm moving, jeez," the dwarf said. "I got small legs. Cut me some slack you metal fucker."

When the groups joined, the pair of escort robots took up guard positions on either side of the prisoners.

A man Hoodwink didn't recognize stepped from the tent to stand beside the first two robots. He wore aReal glasses.

"I'm glad your lackeys obeyed," the man said. "It would've been a pity to kill you so soon, Hoodwink."

The bee-sized drone flew to the man's side and hovered there.

Four bigger quadcopters emerged from the trees, these ones equipped with prop guards to protect their propellers from the branches. A nasty looking blaster dangled between the landing gears. The drones took up a position on either side of the man and his combat robots.

"Who are you?" Hoodwink said.

"Why, Hoodwink," the man said. "Don't you recognize me? It's me. Your dear old friend. Jeremy."

Hoodwink regarded the man uncertainly. "Jeremy? Or Javiol?"

"I don't really know," Jeremy said.

"You were scheduled for execution," Hoodwink said. "By my reckoning, your Satori body should be drifting at the bottom of some ocean trench, a meal for xenosharks."

Jeremy smirked. "For some strange reason I found myself with rather intimate technical knowledge of all things Satori. It seems I placed a rather innocuous-seeming backdoor in that computer program known as the Shell. You obviously made a mistake, dear Hoodwink, when you transferred my human consciousness into that fish body." He spoke the word fish with obvious contempt.

Hoodwink shook his head. "You still haven't figured it out yet, have you Jeremy? That's your actual body. You're Satori, not human. Just like me."

"Then why don't I feel that way?"

Hoodwink laughed nervously. "I don't know. It's our lot in life, it is. We've embedded our consciousnesses in human brains for far too long."

"You goddamn aliens with your goddamn identity crises," Skull muttered.

Jeremy ignored the comment and instead said, in mock sorrow: "I'm surprised you're not happier to see me, Hoodwink. I've crossed oceans of reality to join you."

"What do you want, Jeremy?" Hoodwink told him.

"To see you suffer, of course," Jeremy said matter-of-factly. "As you meant me to suffer. First of all, I'm going to kill your woman. Before your very eyes. And all your friends here, one at a time. And then I'm going to kill you and return your mind to the fish body where it belongs. You will live out your life rotting in a prison deep under the ocean, rueing the day you betrayed me. Wondering if you could have done anything differently. Anything to save her." His eyes drifted toward Sarella. There was a malicious glint in them.

Jeremy glanced at the combat robots beside him. "Bring her to me."

The two robots marched forward imperiously and snatched Sarella by either arm.

"Hoodwink!" she pleaded as the robots led her away.

Hoodwink started after her.

"Stay there," Jeremy ordered him. All four of the drones tilted their blasters menacingly toward Hoodwink, who froze.

When Sarella arrived, Jeremy produced a long knife from the chest harness he wore. It was almost a machete. He held it in front of his face.

"This is a skinning knife," Jeremy said. "Back when there were still deer and cattle around, such knives were used to separate the epidermis from the underlying tissue. Once that was done, the same knife was employed to remove any gristle that had failed to separate from the flesh. One thing about it, it's very sharp." He smiled widely and lifted the knife to Sarella's head.

He grabbed a thick section of her locks and hacked it off with a flick of the hand. He gathered a thicker portion of hair and similarly removed it, this time with a sawing motion.

Sarella was trembling the whole time. She looked at Hoodwink with eyes that pleaded: "Hoodwink. Help me."

When he had cropped her hair down to roughly half its former size, he paused to examine his handiwork. "What do you think, Hoodwink? She's much prettier this way, isn't she? Looks more like a young boy. Much more suiting to my tastes. But she's not smiling. Mmm. I think I'll have to cut a grin into her." He glanced at the combat robots. "Hold her still."

The robots braced themselves against her on either side. Jeremy positioned himself in front of her and grabbed her chin with one hand, then flared his elbow so that he could bring the tip of the long blade toward her lips. She squirmed in his grasp as the deadly point approached.

Jeremy sighed in what seemed ecstasy. "Oh, I missed this part of being human." He glanced at Hoodwink. "You know, that feeling of having power over someone else? Absolute power?"

"I wouldn't know it," Hoodwink said.

"You're missing out, my old foe," Jeremy said, relaxing his grip somewhat. "Look at her. When they gaze at you so helplessly like that, eyes begging, knowing they're completely at your mercy, why, that right there is what it means to be human."

"That's not even human," Hoodwink said. "What you're doing is cold. Heartless. Lacking any semblance of humanity. You're not human, Jeremy. You're all Satori. A human being would never do this."

"I think you're wrong," Jeremy said, squeezing the fingers of the hand

that held her so that her lips puckered grotesquely. He brought the knife tip close once more. "I think what I'm doing is completely within the realm of humanity. A Satori would never do this. They would simply kill the woman outright. There would be no torture. They would take no joy in it. Only a human being could. Species 87A."

"No," Hoodwink said. He wanted to keep stalling while he tried to come up with a plan. "Only a Satori like yourself could do this. Think about it. Your Satori mind exists naturally in a state with few emotions. So when you inject your consciousness into a mind teeming with them, of course you're going to become hypersensitive to those emotions. You experience higher highs and lower lows than a normal human being. And you've become addicted to them."

"That might actually be believable," Jeremy agreed. "I am certainly different than an ordinary man. Better." He focused on his task, stretching out the skin alongside her mouth with one hand. "Now shut up for a moment and let me work. Unless you want her enhanced smile to be a jagged mess."

"Please, Jeremy," Hoodwink said. "I'm the one you want."

"You certainly are," Jeremy said, bringing the blade closer to her face. "And I'm getting you precisely the way I want you. Don't worry, you'll get your turn soon enough."

Jeremy adjusted his grip on the haft and touched the point to the edge of Sarella's cheek. She whimpered, shifting; he cut a gash along her cheek instead.

Jeremy released her, frustrated. "Damn it. This knife is too cumbersome. Does anyone have anything smaller?"

He glanced at the soldiers in full kit. "You there. Show me your combat knife."

Pencils retrieved the knife from the sheath in his utility belt and held it up. The back edge was corrugated at ugly angles, while the bottom curved in a slight crescent toward the deadly tip.

"Yes, that one is much better," Jeremy said. "It will do just fine. Toss it over."

Pencils glanced at Skull, who nodded reluctantly. Pencils threw the knife over. The blade landed with a thud in front of Jeremy.

It was then that Hoodwink noticed Depravity, who had stayed behind at the first tent, wasn't among the group. Had the combat robots killed him? Or...

Jeremy shoved his original blade back into the sheath in his harness and then glanced at Sarella.

"You're so sexy when you're afraid," Jeremy said.

Sarella, her face a mask of fear, stiffened at the comment. Her features hardened into a scowl and she spat at him.

Jeremy stuck out his tongue and let the spittle drool onto it. He licked his upper lip, gathering even more of it. "Mmm. I can literally taste the fear. Salty. Slimy. Please, do you have some more?"

Sarella stared at him with hatred in her eyes.

Jeremy sighed. "Very well. Keep your saliva to yourself then. I'm looking forward to tasting your blood, next."

Jeremy knelt to pick up the knife Pencils had tossed him.

In that precise moment, Sarella raised her heel and kicked him sideways in the face, knocking his aReal glasses to the ground.

Jeremy staggered in place, momentarily senseless.

Everything happened extremely fast in the next few moments.

A plasma blast erupted from the far side of the camp, slamming into one of the combat robots beside Hoodwink.

Since Jeremy didn't have his aReal, the four drones, lacking any instructions to the contrary, darted toward the source of the attack.

The two robots meanwhile released Sarella and flicked the rifles down from their shoulders.

The remaining ground robot near the party spun toward the source of the attack as well.

Another shot came, and this time one of the robots beside Sarella went down.

The machine directly beside the party opened fire at the source of the attack, which seemed to be a crate outside the first tent. The four drones closed with that crate and also fired.

Three of the commandos leaped onto the closest robot. The machine easily beat them off, and fired at close range, tearing a hole through the torso of the soldier who called himself Carbine.

Alien meanwhile had retrieved his rifle from the ground, and he unleashed a shot, blowing off the robot's head.

Sarella scooped up the weapon from the fallen robot near her and she fired at the remaining machine beside her, which had turned its attention to the primary group of prisoners. She reduced it to scrap metal.

The drones turned away from the crate, apparently done with whoever had attacked them there.

Pencils shot down one of the drones immediately.

The other drones assumed an evasive attack pattern: scurrying about like crazy while returning fire.

The defenders ducked to the ground and took cover behind whatever they could. Hoodwink found himself behind a discarded tire.

"Smart bullet mode!" Pencils shouted from behind a crate. He flicked a switch on his rifle, and the others did the same. The group of men fired directly upward.

Instead of plasma, barely visible projectiles launched from the weapons. The projectiles swerved about the field of battle, making rapid laps, picking up speed as they honed in on the noise and heat of their flying targets.

The three drones attempted to flee. The first two were struck down by the smart bullets. The third ascended rapidly toward the canopy but the prop guards prevented it from cutting through the fabric. Another bullet smashed into it and the debris crashed to the ground.

The group gathered to assess the casualties. They had lost three men: one of the decoy scientists, and two soldiers.

Sarella emerged from the tent where she had taken cover. A red drape of blood covered her cheek below the knife gash.

"He's gone," she said, referring to Jeremy, of whom there was no sign.

"Gathering reinforcements no doubt," Skull said. "Collect your things, people. This place is hot. I want us out in under two minutes. Let's go let's go let's go!"

Jeremy's aReal lay abandoned on the ground where Sarella had kicked it. As the men dispersed, Hoodwink walked over to the thing and ground it underfoot. He scanned the trees bordering the camp, searching for Jeremy or the bee-sized micro-drone, but saw neither.

He hurried toward the main tent to help oversee the transfer of the Mk210.

As he passed the smoldering crates that lay outside the tent, he saw Pencils there, cradling Depravity in his arms. The drones had shot him up fairly badly.

Hoodwink knelt beside them. Though Depravity obviously hated him, compassion made Hoodwink say: "Thank you for saving all of our lives."

He was expecting the man to curse at him and tell him off, but instead Depravity reached out, groping for Hoodwink's arm.

Hoodwink gave him his hand and the man gripped it with surprising strength.

"Worth it," the man said. "Make it worth it."

Hoodwink felt his chin quivering slightly. "I won't let you down," Hoodwink promised. "Or humanity. I swear it."

A semblance of peace appeared in his eyes and Depravity closed them forevermore. Hoodwink allowed the limp hand to slide from his grasp. When the arm struck the Earth, Hoodwink felt a sudden shame for letting the hand fall like that, and he rested it on Depravity's plasma-riddled body instead.

"He was a good man," Pencils said.

"The best," Hoodwink agreed. He forced himself to rise before he choked up.

Human emotions. When he was in Satori form, he yearned for them constantly, and yet now that he had them, sometimes he wished he did not. They could be... overwhelming.

Inside the tent, Brent had summoned one of the lifter robots to carry the Mk210. Hoodwink made way for the ponderous thing and followed it to one of the pickups with the monster truck wheels. The robot dropped the heavy bomb in beside the anti-aircraft gun, and the entire truck tilted toward the weight.

"Looks a bit precarious," Hoodwink said.

"It'll be fine," Skull told him, loading into the driver's seat.

Blake took his usual shotgun position. Sarella loaded into the bed with Hoodwink; Alien, Pencils and two other commandos joined them. They tossed recoilless rifles, rocket launchers, and extra rifles into the bed with them.

The remaining commandos piled into the second monster truck. The lifter robot joined them, folding up to a quarter of its size and positioning itself inconspicuously in one corner of the bed. The commandos used it as a chair.

The scientists meanwhile loaded into an SUV with the surviving decoy and a soldier. They shoved the metallic canisters that contained the entire technical history of humankind inside with them. The plastic explosives were still attached, Hoodwink noted.

"We're good!" Pencils said. "Let's go!"

Skull started the truck and accelerated into the trees. The SUV with the scientists took up the middle position behind them, while the remaining pickup assumed the rear.

"What about the other SUVs?" Hoodwink shouted toward the driver.

"Fuck 'em!" Skull said.

He leaned toward Sarella. "Why were there so many of them back there?"

"Vehicles?" she asked. "Most of the rebels arrived separately, I would assume. For safety reasons."

"Then shouldn't we leave separately, too?"

She nodded toward the black inverted cone. "Not if you want to transport that bomb out of here in one piece. We're going to need everyone."

Hoodwink regarded the overhead canopy warily. Occasionally the bright blue sky flashed through the thick leaves, but otherwise he saw no signs of pursuit.

He glanced inside the cab and noticed a small tablet that displayed a map.

"What's the source for that map data?" Hoodwink asked Skull.

"The ancient GPS satellites," the driver replied. "The Satori didn't bother to sweep up the upper atmosphere."

Hoodwink wasn't familiar with that tech. "Can the GPS be used to track us?"

"Hell no."

Hoodwink borrowed a medkit from one of the soldiers and cleaned the blood from Sarella's cheek. He then applied a bandage to the knife gash. It was tricky, given that the bed constantly jolted about, but he managed. The worst of it was all the times Sarella flinched, reminding him that he was bringing her pain.

After forty-five minutes they reached an overgrown road. The overhead canopy of branches and leaves still blotted out the sky just as thickly as in the wilderness.

"This road mirrors the highway for a few hundred clicks," Skull shouted through the rear window. "It'll take us toward the coast." He glanced at the branches that shielded the sky. "We should be safe, for a little while anyway."

As the vehicle advanced, an opening abruptly appeared in the canopy overhead, and Hoodwink spotted a glint of metal lying just beyond.

It was the underside of a massive hunter killer drone.

A plasma blast tore into the middle SUV. The vehicle didn't explode, but the force of the blow launched it into the air and it somersaulted into the trees. The rear pickup accelerated forward to assume its place.

"The scientists!" Hoodwink said, but nobody heard. They weren't going back for them, he knew.

Alien, the commando on the anti-aircraft gun, opened fire. Blasts of plasma ripped through the overhead branches. Through the resulting hole in the canopy, Hoodwink caught a glimpse of the hunter killer as it swerved aside.

Several smaller drones abruptly swooped down through that gap and fired their blasters.

The commandos in both pickups returned fire. Smart bullet mode. The small drones began to fall. As did the commandos.

Alien toppled from his post on the big gun. Half his face was melted away.

Hoodwink immediately took up Alien's position on the anti-aircraft gun. He aimed it at the swarming drones and squeezed the trigger.

The plasma bolts cut a swath through the drones and chewed into the vegetation beyond. Hoodwink got carried away in the battle fever, almost hitting the pickup behind them.

He let go of the trigger and took a moment to recenter himself. He caught a glint of metal through the trees overhead.

He swung the barrels upward and fired.

A shower of slag and molten metal rained down. The hunter killer veered from view overhead, vanishing somewhere beyond the canopy.

The two pickups continued to flee; the commandos fired at the small evading drones, and took out the last of the current batch.

Skull swerved the vehicle to the right, turning directly into the wilderness.

As he and the other passengers were jerked about by the merciless terrain, Hoodwink shouted to the driver: "What's going on?"

"Gotta get off the road!" Skull shouted back. "Canopy's too thick for

them to spot us, here."

The branches of shrubs and trees that were swept aside by the cab recoiled, whipping past the truck bed and often striking the passengers. The group was forced to huddle close to the metal deck, using the sides of the bed and cab for cover. They were constantly jostled about by the terrain.

Hoodwink kept expecting one of the larger combat robots to come leaping through the trees, or a combat tank to block their path, or another deadly plasma blast to tear through the canopy. Instead, those branches merely whipped at them continuously.

After some time Hoodwink began to relax, as did the others. As much as they could relax with all that jolting, anyway.

Eventually, after about an hour of travel, the two monster trucks reached an area where the trees were too dense for any further advancement. The canopy was so thick that no openings at all existed overhead, and the landscape was locked in perpetual twilight.

Skull halted beside a thick bole. "We'll rest here a moment and let the engines recharge."

Hoodwink glanced back the way they had come, and saw the broken branches littering the forest floor. "What's to stop them from tracking us on foot? Our trail is somewhat obvious."

"Oh I'm sure they'll track us," Skull said. "The trick is to stay ahead of them. Keep them guessing."

"We should have stayed on the road," Hoodwink said. "At least there we would have had a chance of outrunning them."

"And what if they decided to stage a roadblock?" Skull said. "At least out here we know there's only one direction they can come at us: from behind."

Hoodwink surveyed the trees. "Don't be so sure about that. One of his drones is probably watching us right now, transmitting data for multiple routes of attack."

Skull nodded toward Pencils. "Run a standard sweep. Launch a few smart bullets to insure the area is clean. Make sure you turn your silencers to full, first. The sound of a fired bullet will travel for miles out here."

Pencils nodded and he rounded up the surviving commandos from both pickups and dispersed among the trees.

Two commandos remained behind to guard the civilians.

Hoodwink and the others unloaded the three dead from the truck beds

and placed them in a row.

"It's a shame," Blake said when they finished positioning the bodies. "To end like this. They lived half their lives in chains."

"But they died free," Hoodwink said.

Blake nodded. "They did. But they're never going to see the world know that same freedom."

"We have to bury them," Sarella said. "Or at the very least, hide the bodies."

One of the radios lodged in the harnesses of the dead bodies abruptly clicked to life.

"Hoodwink, are you there?" Jeremy's voice echoed. The digital distortion made his voice hard to understand. "Hoodwink."

"Don't answer it," Skull warned. "You'll only let him know we're in the general area." Skull glanced at a commando. "Gather up the others. Warn them not to use their radios."

"Yes sir." The commando jogged off.

"What's the range on the radios?" Hoodwink asked Skull.

"Five clicks in the open. But out here, dense forest like this? Couldn't be more than one click."

"Though his reception would be better if he was airborne, wouldn't it?" Hoodwink asked him.

Skull shrugged. "Possibly. But those trees..."

Jeremy's voice came over the radio once again. "Answer me, Hoodwink. I know you're there. Answer, or I'm going to kill your girlfriend."

The suspicious part of Hoodwink made him reach for the radio. Skull caught his hand. "He can't touch any of us."

Sarella smiled, but even she appeared on edge. She glanced around the trees uncertainly, searching for any hidden attackers that might have her in their sights.

"All right," Jeremy's voice taunted over the radio. "I warned you."

Sarella abruptly rolled her eyes and collapsed.

The others instantly dropped for cover. All save Hoodwink, who rushed to her side, uncaring for his own safety, and lifted her into his arms.

"Sarella. Sarella!" He checked her pulse. She still had a faint heartbeat. He scanned the trees. "Jeremy! Show yourself!"

"Does anyone see anything?" Skull asked from where he hid behind a log.

"Nothing!" Blake replied.

"Hoodwink," Jeremy's voice taunted from the radio. "This is your last chance."

"I'm going to answer." Hoodwink leaned toward the dead commando and grabbed the radio from the harness.

He glanced at Skull, who nodded slowly.

Hoodwink pressed the send button. "What the hell did you do to her?"

"Ah," Jeremy returned. "There you are. I knew you were within range."

"Tell me what you did to her?" Hoodwink commanded.

"You know already," Jeremy replied. "Search your heart. There's only one way I could have achieved what I just did."

Hoodwink was quiet for several moments. "But she's not a surrogate," he said softly.

"Oh, but she is," Jeremy answered. "She has lied to you. Although, judging from her current reaction, she probably believed the lie herself."

He glanced at Skull. The man merely shook his head as if to say: "if she was a surrogate, I sure as hell didn't know about it."

Hoodwink stroked Sarella's forehead. He leaned his head against hers. *My dear, dear Sarella.*

"Are you still there?" Jeremy said over the radio. There was less distortion in his voice, Hoodwink noted.

Hoodwink sat up straight and steeled himself to deal with Jeremy. He clicked the send button. "What have you done?"

"Merely disconnected her," came Jeremy's response. "For the moment. You see, while you may have programmed a passcode into your own release mechanism, she of course has no such code."

"Send her back," Hoodwink said.

"Certainly," Jeremy responded. "The Shell tells me she is flailing about, trying to destroy the place. He will be glad to send her back."

A few moments passed. Sarella's eyes abruptly shot open and she inhaled deeply, just as if she had been holding her breath underwater and had only resurfaced.

After several deep inhales and exhales, her breathing increased to a near frantic state; she darted her gaze from person to person, eyes wide with fear.

"What happened?" Hoodwink asked her, trying make his voice as

soothing as possible.

She tried to get up but Hoodwink wrapped his arms around her tightly. She fought him.

"Calm down," he told her. "Tell me what happened. Calm down!"

She struggled in his grasp for several moments, then abruptly grew limp. She pressed her face against his shoulder. "No. No no no."

"It's okay," Hoodwink said. He massaged the back of her head with one hand.

"I'm not human," Sarella said. "I thought I was. I—" She broke down and wept.

Jeremy's voice erupted over the radio again. "I have golems with steel tentacles wrapped around her fish body at this very moment. They will crush her to death. What do you think of that, Hoodwink?"

He pressed the send button. "What do you want?"

"I already told you what I want," Jeremy responded. "I want you to suffer."

"You want me to wake up?" Hoodwink said. "Is that it? So you can toy with my alien body? I can tell you my passcode. Or wake myself up."

"I *do* want that," Jeremy replied. There was hardly any distortion in his voice. He was getting closer. "But not just yet. Besides, where's the fun in that? I want to eliminate you with my own hands. I want to look in your eyes when I snuff the life from your human body, so that you have something to remember for the rest of your days as you rot away your life in a prison under the ocean. But until then, I will leave you with a gift. Say goodbye to your girlfriend. Her body is about to become an empty shell devoid of all consciousness. The golems are tightening their tentacles..."

Hoodwink frantically pressed the send button. "Don't kill her, Jeremy, please, I beg you! If you spare her, I'll do whatever you want."

"Really?" Jeremy replied. "Even betray humanity?"

"I—" Hoodwink couldn't finish. He glanced at Skull, Blake, and the others.

I can't betray humanity.

"You took too long," Jeremy said over the radio. "Good-bye, girlfriend."

Sarella's eyes rolled up once again and she grew limp in his arms. Her head flopped against his shoulder. Her heart still beat, and she still breathed, but she may as well have been dead.

Hoodwink felt like dying, too, in that moment. He lay there, not wanting to get up, not ever again.

The commandos hurried back from the wilderness.

"It's clear out there!" Pencils said.

"Not for long," Skull told him. "Get back to the pickups."

"The vehicles will only be half charged," Pencils said.

"Doesn't matter," Skull said. "We're compromised." He got up and rested a consoling hand on Hoodwink's shoulder. "We can't stay here. You heard how clear the man's voice sounded over the radio. We have to go."

Hoodwink nodded. But he still couldn't bring himself to stand.

Skull studied Sarella. As if sensing Hoodwink's unasked question, he said: "I never knew she was a Satori. She fooled us all."

Skull and Blake entered the cab of the pickup. "Hoodwink, let's go!" Skull told him.

Hoodwink scooped up her body and carried her to the pickup, setting her down on the floor beside the commandos.

"I'm bringing her," Hoodwink announced defiantly. "While she yet breathes, I'm going to care for her."

No one contested him.

As the monster truck bounced away from the dense thicket, Hoodwink stared at Sarella lying on the floor. She appeared to be sleeping peacefully. He willed her to awaken, but knew that if her Satori quadmind had died, she never would. The surrogate was completely brain dead. An empty husk waiting for a Satori consciousness.

Hoodwink lowered himself to the bed beside her and wrapped his arms around the shell that was once Sarella.

* * *

Jeremy stood above the three dead bodies.

Behind him, the large metal transport rested on the smoldering ground. Sunlight pierced the foliage-induced twilight, thanks to the large hole in the canopy the flyer had burned away during its landing.

The humanoid golems returned.

"We've found their trail," one of the machines told him.

Jeremy dismissed them to the transport. The fact was, he already knew where they were. He had dispatched the golems merely to confirm his data. Three of the bee-like scouts had them in their sights and were following closely. When Hoodwink paused to make camp, the drone scouts retreated

for half an hour while his lackeys made their predictable sweep of the area. Then the drones returned and watched them all night.

Jeremy considered calling in reinforcements to capture Hoodwink once and for all, and to end the game, but he decided to delay a while longer. His enemy had suffered much already, yes, but there was room for him to suffer more.

Much more.

And he thought again, as he did once before: *Let him think his plan is going to succeed. Let him travel to the utmost brink, and the moment he is about to achieve his goal, I will pull the rug out from under him and send his world into ruin.*

Besides, he had a new trick up his sleeve. One that would tear Hoodwink open right to the core.

thirteen

The two pickups made their way toward the coast over the next several days, sticking to the wilderness for the most part, and occasionally taking main roads when the situation warranted.

The rebels stopped to allow the vehicles to self-charge occasionally, a process that occurred all the more rapidly when the solar panels residing in the frame were exposed to direct sunlight. The group subsisted on rations retrieved from another rebel support base they had stopped at along the way. The few personnel manning the base set several charges before abandoning it, if only to ensure a little surprise when their hunters finally arrived.

Speaking of the hunters, there had been no sign of Jeremy or the robots since that fateful day. The commandos swept the camp each night for signs of micro-drones, and even fired smart bullets every few hours just to be safe. Nothing ever turned up. Still, Hoodwink couldn't shake the feeling that Jeremy was somehow toying with them. As the days passed, that feeling subsided, though it never truly went away.

Hoodwink tried to care for Sarella's body as best he could. He poured water down her throat but she would not swallow; the liquid spilled out the sides of her mouth because her throat reflexively sealed up. Some of it dripped into her lungs, and her unconscious mind made her cough it up.

The loss of Sarella weighed heavily on Hoodwink's heart. She had fooled them all, even herself. Especially herself. A Satori in their midst who believed herself human, who had lived so long among them that she had lost herself in humanity and forgotten her roots. How many more surrogates were there like her? Surrogates who lived in human bodies, the memories of their former alien selves but distant dreams?

Hoodwink knew in his heart that not all Satori were bad or evil. Their government, the Hivemind, was to blame for most of their policies. Well, their religion as it currently stood was also a problem. Still, somehow he would find a way to make humanity and Satori live together in peace. Somehow. Destroying the Hivemind was a good start.

When he placed and detonated the bomb, many Satori would die, that was true. But most of the deaths would involve those who were part of the

administration and support of the Hivemind. Ninety-five percent of the Satori population would remain intact, many of those in the sprawling coral city of Laranth, where the Hivemind resided, and the remainder dispersed throughout the smaller cities in the ocean.

The Shell's core would be destroyed in the blast, too, and Jeremy would be rendered impotent. Without the Shell in control of whatever main AI operated the human robots, Jeremy would find himself in command of an army of overlarge and quite useless paperweights.

As the days passed, and the rebels came closer to the coast, Hoodwink began to feel hope. Perhaps his plan would work after all. Perhaps Jeremy had lost interest in him, or the rebels really had evaded his surveillance. Hope. It was a good feeling. One that had been all too foreign to him, of late.

On the fourth day, that hope turned to unbridled happiness because Sarella awoke.

The pickup was traveling through a partially overgrown country road. The sunlight broke through the canopy in multiple places as the tree coverage wasn't overly dense. Despite the overgrowth, the road itself was relatively smooth, with the jolts few and far between. Skull was sitting beside Hoodwink while a commando took a shift at the wheel.

Hoodwink was perched there in the truck bed, gazing at the sky between the branches, pondering the future, when he heard her voice.

"Hoodwink," Sarella said.

He glanced at her.

Her eyes were open and she was smiling. Her face glowed. She yawned, rubbed her eyes, and sat up.

"Is it really you?" Hoodwink asked.

For a moment he was unsure whether some other Satori had downloaded its consciousness into her body, perhaps Jeremy himself. But as he stared at her face, he could clearly see the tenderness in her eyes. The love.

She touched his chin fondly, as she often did after a session of unrestrained passion.

"It's you." Hoodwink fell to his knees beside her in the truck bed and hugged her close. Then he kissed her. "I thought I had lost you."

"And I you," Sarella said.

Hoodwink glanced at Skull and the others. They all had their rifles pointed at the two of them.

"What are you doing?" Hoodwink said. "Put those down before you

hurt someone!"

"We can't trust her," Skull said.

"Nonsense," Hoodwink said. "Lower your weapons. It's her!"

No one obeyed. The pickup hit a bump and everyone in the truck bed was jolted.

Hoodwink shifted, placing himself between her and as many of the commandos as he could. "Trust me. It's her."

"She's a Satori," Skull said.

"So am I," Hoodwink responded.

"But you've proven yourself," Skull insisted. "This woman, we don't even know if the same Satori consciousness operates her surrogate body."

"You may not know it, but I do," Hoodwink said. "Look into her eyes. Do it. And tell me what you see."

Skull pursed his lips, then he handed his rifle to Pencils. He knelt beside her and gazed into Sarella's eyes for a long moment.

"My my," she told Skull. "You're the handsomest fisherman I've ever met."

Skull stiffened slightly.

She stared at him searchingly, and when he didn't say anything more, she added: "That's what I said to you the very first time we met. You were holding a fresh catch from the lake. It was in Bortar. A rebel outpost. We lived there before the Satori raid. Before we escaped and moved to the city."

Skull stared at her a moment longer and then his shoulders relaxed subtly. He glanced askance. "It's her. Lower your weapons."

The commandos hesitated. When Pencils obeyed, the others complied.

"What did Jeremy do to you?" Hoodwink asked.

"These underwater robots disconnected my Satori body from where it was moored. They took me, tried to force me to undergo something called Return therapy. It was meant to brainwash me, I think, into believing all humans must die. But since my own mind thought I was human the whole time, I rejected their programming. I'm still me. Incredibly, I could still understand the language they used, and reply. I was able to convince the AI that called itself the Shell that the Return therapy had worked. I promised to come back to my human body, and to find a way to reveal your position if I was still among you. And so here I am. With no intention of betraying our cause."

Skull had Pencils assign a soldier to watch her at all times, and that night a commando stood guard outside the small tent Hoodwink shared with her.

"What's wrong?" Hoodwink asked after they made love. She had seemed reserved during the session. Her kisses weak compared to his passionate ones, her touch subdued, almost mechanical, like she was afraid of something.

"Other than the fact that a soldier is listening just outside?" Sarella said.

Hoodwink smiled sheepishly, and nodded.

She sighed. "I don't feel completely human anymore."

"I don't blame you," Hoodwink said. "Not after what happened to you."

"I'm not sure I'll ever feel entirely human again," Sarella said.

"I felt that way, too, at first," Hoodwink said. "When I first returned to humanity, walking among the buildings of steel and glass on this planet, after spending so much time as a Satori. The feeling goes away after a few days. Trust me. Soon, it will almost seem like you never were a Satori. The memory will become a dream within a dream within a dream."

She sighed, cuddling against him. She rested her head on his chest.

She looked up suddenly, as if she just thought of something. "Can I go with you when we reach the submersible?"

"I don't know," Hoodwink told her. "Maybe. I'll have to ask Skull."

"But he'll listen to you. You're the only one who knows where to place the bomb. You can convince him."

"I could die down there," Hoodwink said. "If I make a mistake. Both of us could. Either at the hands of the Satori, or because of the nuclear weapon itself. We might not get away in time."

"Which is exactly why it should be the two of us," Sarella said. "If these surrogates die, we'll still exist in the Satori city. It's not like that Inside you told me the human ship has, where you die for real if you die within. We can find new bodies for ourselves, come back, and try again."

"It might not be so simple," Hoodwink said. "Especially if Jeremy has usurped control of the AI that runs the place."

"Please, let me come," Sarella told him. "I have to do this. I won't have closure unless I do."

"I'll consider it," Hoodwink told her.

His mind thought ahead to the far future in that moment. He was going to succeed in his mission and free the Earth from Satori rule. Together, Hoodwink and Sarella would return to Ganymede and rejoin the humans stranded there, and help repair their ship. When that was done, Ari and Tanner and all the others would come back to Earth and help build a new society, one that existed in harmony with the Satori.

He thought of Ari and Sarella meeting for the first time, and he knew they would both love each other.

In that moment Hoodwink realized he had already decided. He was going to do whatever he could to ensure Sarella came.

* * *

The rebels reached the hidden seaside base two afternoons later. The location was so remote, and so far from any known ports, that it would have been impossible for the robots to cover all that area to find them. Like the previous rebel base Hoodwink had visited, it was camouflaged to look like the surrounding land.

Hoodwink was treated to a meal after his arrival. He and Sarella ate by themselves in the mess, guarded by two commandos. Skull had ordered them not to talk to any of the base personnel—he told Hoodwink that he'd withheld most of the details of the mission from the local rebels. He called it 'operational security.' Skull was worried, like Hoodwink, that spies lurked in their midst. Given Sarella's recent unveiling, it was probably a sensible precaution. Instead he fed the personnel the cover story that Hoodwink was a visiting scientist whose underwater surveying equipment just so happened to look like a large, black inverted cone.

When they finished the meal, two guards escorted Hoodwink and Sarella to the beach outside. The sky was hidden behind thick brown camouflage that hung on poles dug into the sand.

Hoodwink approached a small submersible that perched well away from the high water mark of the contaminated sea. The black Mk210 was gripped between two long arms at the front of the submersible. The bomb was further secured by several carbon fiber cables wrapped around it and the arms. A carrying harness enfolded the remainder of the craft, with ropes leading to a ring near the top. A ladder climbed the side to the upper entry hatch.

Skull stood on top, waving toward a nearby crane as it lowered a hook. A couple of dwarfs babysat the machine, while commandos stood

guard behind them. The dwarfs resembled Brent and Gab with their long beards and shabby clothes.

When the hook was in range, Skull attached it to the uppermost ring of the harness that enveloped the craft. He gave the signal to cut power and the dwarfs deactivated the crane. Skull climbed down and walked toward the dwarfs. He turned around when he reached them to gaze at the ebbs and flows of the dead tide.

Hoodwink joined them.

Skull glanced at him for only a moment before returning his gaze to the greenish-tinged water.

"Hard to believe our greatest enemy resides underneath something so innocuous looking," Skull said. "Who would have thought we would have been brought to the brink by an alien species, our race nearly exterminated, not for our resources but for the simple fact that we existed?" Skull shook his head bitterly. "Those oceans once teemed with life. And now look at them. Poisoned. Green with death."

As Hoodwink stared at the tainted ocean, he couldn't help but feel a longing deep inside himself. A yearning. A part of him wanted to go back to those murky waters and swim the fathomless depths more than anything in the world. And another part of him was repelled to the core by the thought.

"Any problems attaching the survey equipment?" Hoodwink asked Skull, keeping with the cover story the man had fed the local rebels.

"The lifter robot loaded it between the detachable arms earlier," Skull answered. "It was a tight fit, but we wrapped it up with the carbon fiber cables just to be safe. It's going to take a lot of power to counter the weight, at first. At least until you're deep enough for some buoyancy to take effect."

"What about the paint?" Included in the original information packet Hoodwink had sent to Skull was a special paint that would allow the craft to resist the acid in the ocean.

One of the dwarfs looked up. "The formula we were given didn't work. We ended up developing our own, with the help of trainer AIs from the archives. It's based on a sample of metal we extracted from an old Satori undersea robot in our possession. It was captured centuries ago, during the war."

"And you're sure the new formula works?" Hoodwink said. He was positive his old formula was correct. Then again, perhaps his memory of all things Satori was failing him.

"We soaked the submersible overnight," the dwarf said. "The outer surface remained completely intact. Even so, we gave it another coating just to be on the safe side. You'll be fine."

Hoodwink nodded. He hoped so.

"We also upgraded the oxygen tanks to your specs." The dwarf nodded to the unsightly bulge on the right side of the submersible. "You have three months worth. And we applied the requested feed drip and excretion collection tubes, with automated systems to change them out. Guess you're planning on staying down there for a long time? Must be a lot of surveying to do."

"There is," Hoodwink said, trying to make his voice sound as mysterious as possible. There needed to be enough oxygen to reach Ganymede afterward. Assuming the mission even succeeded...

"Oh, and we installed the requested noise makers." The short scientist pointed out the speakers attached with thick arms to the left and right sides. "They're rated to withstand pressures up to the requested depths."

"Well done," Hoodwink said.

Skull turned toward him. "So. The submersible is ready. The question is: are you?"

Hoodwink nodded. "All right. I guess it's time to stop equivocating. Time to get her done, it is."

Skull abruptly shook his hand. "Thank you for doing this. For helping us."

"Don't thank me yet," Hoodwink said. "Wait until you see the dead bodies of the Satori washing ashore."

The dwarfs looked at him with wide eyes. "Dead bodies? I thought this was a survey mission?"

"It is," Hoodwink snapped. "I'm speaking metaphorically, to years in the future, when someone can actually make use of the data we gather." He quickly stepped toward the submersible, mentally cursing himself for nearly blowing his cover story. Though he doubted the dwarfs could ruin the mission.

Sarella came, too. Skull walked with them.

When they were out of earshot of the scientists, Skull said: "Are you sure you don't want to stay when you're done down there?"

"I have to help the colonists," Hoodwink said.

"Perhaps it's for the best that you're going," Skull told him. "I wasn't

too keen on that whole peace proposal you wanted to shove down our throats."

"Oh, I'll force it down your throat eventually, don't you worry," Hoodwink said with a grin.

Skull paused just at the edge of the submersible, while Hoodwink and Sarella continued forward.

"Hey, Sarella, that's far enough," Skull told her.

"Oh," Hoodwink said. "I forgot to tell you. She's coming, too."

Skull shook his head. "No she isn't. I can't allow it."

Hoodwink withdrew the blaster from the concealed in-the-waistband holster he had worn for that very contingency and he pointed it at Skull. "I'm sorry, my friend. But I promised I wouldn't leave her behind. She's a surrogate. If something happens to me, as a Satori she can continue the mission and redirect the bomb to the right place. I need her. She belongs at my side."

Skull gazed angrily at the blaster, but he held out a halting hand to the commandos behind him, lest they decide to take matters into their own hands.

"By her own admission she was sent by the Satori to infiltrate our ranks," Skull said. "I humored you these past few days, allowed you to keep her as a toy, but I cannot allow her to go down with you." He shook his head fiercely. "I knew I should have killed her the moment she awakened."

"If you had, you would not be standing here before me," Hoodwink said. "You looked into her eyes that day. You saw the truth in her. She's no toy. I trust her."

"I wouldn't betray humanity," Sarella pleaded. "I wouldn't."

Skull reached toward his own belt and the blaster he had holstered there. He likely intended to shoot Sarella.

"Don't," Hoodwink said.

After a tense few moments Skull finally relented, letting his hand fall to his side. He told Hoodwink: "Fine. It's your call. If you believe she's trustworthy, take her." He turned his back on Hoodwink but then added over his shoulder: "Watch your back down there, that's all I ask."

"I will," Hoodwink told him. "Get inside, Sarella."

Keeping his blaster pointed at Skull, Hoodwink backed toward the submersible and then scaled the ladder after Sarella. He lowered himself inside; as he reached the upper rim of the hatch, he gave Skull one last mock salute, and then vanished inside, closing the hatch above him.

He took a seat in the cramped compartment. Sarella sat to his left, facing forty-five degrees away. The total parenteral drip was squeezed in beside the panel to his right. There were two feeds, one for him and one for Sarella.

There were no windows in the craft for visual navigation. Instead, the operator piloted via the electromagnetic waves the submersible emitted.

Hoodwink grabbed the supplied aReal from the cockpit dashboard. It was an older model, tethered directly to the computer system via a small cord, guaranteeing that the Shell wouldn't be listening in. He activated the remote view screen and the EM emitters painted two circular, black and white images onto his vision. The first circle appeared in the upper right, and represented the one-hundred-and-eighty degrees in front of the submersible. The edges were spherically distorted. The second circle resided in the upper left of his vision, and depicted the one-hundred-and-eighty degrees behind the craft. Together, both images allowed him to effectively see in all directions.

"Almost like being a Satori," he commented.

Sarella, who was also wearing her tethered aReal, said: "I can't say it's a welcome feeling."

The submersible left the sand as the crane lifted the vessel. He felt the vehicle tilt forward—the center of gravity was off thanks to the Mk210 dangling between the arms at the front of the submersible.

"Thanks for standing up for me back there," Sarella said. "I can't imagine what it would have been like to stay behind, constantly looking over my shoulder, wondering when I'd get a knife in the back simply for being a Satori host."

"You would have done the same for me," Hoodwink said.

The crane swung the submersible out over the water and then began lowering it. When the craft touched the ocean waves, the swaying momentarily worsened.

And then they were under. In seconds the submersible slammed into the sandy bottom.

"You're unhooked," Skull's voice came over the aReal radio. "Good luck."

"Thank you. We'll need it."

The trainer AI on the overlay walked him through the operation of the craft, and soon they were underway. At first the motors of the submersible

struggled to counter the weight of the warhead, as they were forced to advance at a shallow, almost horizontal angle; but when the ocean deepened and they could descend nearly vertically, their progress improved.

"Looks like that damn paint of theirs is holding up so far," Hoodwink said after the AI demonstrated how to monitor the hull integrity. "I guess we'll see how well the rest of the vessel fares against the crushing depths we'll need to descend to."

The hours passed. The submersible descended far slower than the Satori flyer Hoodwink had utilized during his last journey to these depths.

At one point Sarella rested her hand on the hull, as if yearning to feel the kiss of the unseen sea beyond.

"The Satori part asserts itself in the oceans," Hoodwink said.

"You feel it, too?" Sarella asked.

"I do," Hoodwink said. "It's an immutable part of ourselves. Though we are human, we are also Satori, and nothing we can do will ever change that. Not unless we permanently inject our consciousnesses into a human mind."

"Is that even possible?" Sarella said.

"I think so," Hoodwink told her. "We can transfer a consciousness into another Satori entirely, so I don't see why we couldn't do it with a human. We're basically doing that with these surrogates after all."

"But we're still connected by a thin cord to our Satori bodies," Sarella said.

"At the moment, yes. I'll have to look into it, sometime." He sighed. "You know, at one point, that's all I wanted to do. I wanted to leave behind my Satori body entirely, and become human through and through. But now I'm not so sure that's a good idea. I'll need to retain the ability to move between both worlds, especially if I want to act as an emissary for both races, a go-between to broker the upcoming peace."

"You always were a romantic idealist," Sarella said. "But honestly, I don't think there will ever be peace between Satori and humankind. We're too different. Our religions drive us apart."

"There *can* be peace," Hoodwink exclaimed. "There will be."

"Maybe a temporary peace while both sides regroup and gather their resources to attack again," Sarella said. "But it will never be anything more than a short ceasefire."

"You would have agreed with me only a few short days ago,"

Hoodwink said. "Has realizing your nature really affected your opinion so?"

"It has," Sarella said. "I have seen the truth. The Satori cannot be changed."

"If that were true," Hoodwink said. "Then you would not be helping me right now."

She squeezed his palm with one hand. "Perhaps you're right. Perhaps others can change, too." She smiled mischievously. "If we force them to become human."

Hoodwink grinned. "Indeed."

Hoodwink thought of something. He got up, edged past Sarella, and opened the storage closet. There was only one pressure suit.

"Those damn fools," Hoodwink said. "I told them to pack two suits. They didn't know you were coming, so I told them it was to serve as a backup. And they didn't do it!" He had gotten them to pack enough oxygen for two people by lying about the journey's requirements, but if they completed the mission and reached Ganymede, without two suits there would be no way to open the airlock, not without killing one of them.

"We can still go back and get them to give us another one?" Sarella asked hopefully.

Hoodwink checked with the AI. "No. There's not enough fuel to fight the weight of that warhead. This is a one way journey. There's no going back. We either succeed, or we die."

"But I die either way, apparently." Sarella glanced at the suit and laughed softly. "I didn't want to come anyway. Do you remember? I told you I wanted to stay behind and help humanity rebuild. Though that was before I knew I was a Satori. But I guess I get my wish after all."

"I'll figure out a way to get you outside of the craft when we return to Ganymede," Hoodwink said slowly. "I will."

He squeezed past her to return to his seat. Before the mission had even begun, it felt like they'd already lost.

Then he had an idea.

"I'll grab another surrogate body from the Farm in Laranth," Hoodwink said, referring to the place where the Satori grew the surrogate bodies. "The pods there are completely self-contained. They're like pressure suits, but better."

"Will there be time?" Sarella said.

"The countdown is fully programmable," Hoodwink said. "We'll

make the time."

The hours passed monotonously.

Gray-colored specks began to float past at the extreme range of the EM emitters. He wasn't sure if those were Satori or the robot satoroids. So far no alien entities had molested the craft. Still, he expected the colony to be on high alert, especially since the Shell knew of the nuclear warhead.

Finally a pair of the underwater robots emerged from the murk to intercept them.

It was time to test the noise maker the scientists had installed for him. He opened up the interface on the aReal.

Satoroids communicated differently than robots designed by humans. They didn't use EM waves like the wireless Internet, but instead communicated like whales and other marine animals once did, via holographic sound. It was a backup protocol to the telepathic method used to communicate with the Satori, one that allowed the robots to fill the oceans with chatter that would not disturb the quadminds, as the Satori could not hear in the normal sense. The Shell often used that band to communicate subversively, sending messages it did not wish the Hivemind or other Satori to intercept.

Hoodwink activated the speakers, transmitting a signal that mimicked the scout class of the satoroids, confusing them into thinking that the submersible was one of them. It worked.

One of the satoroids paused near the front, apparently curious about the inverted black object the submersible held between its pincers. Would the custom magnetic shielding the scientists had installed into the Mk210 hold up to scrutiny? Or would the satoroid detect the bomb?

Abruptly the robot spun away, flicking its metal tail to rejoin the other satoroid, which had long ago lost interest.

Hoodwink slumped in relief.

He and Sarella continued the long descent. He left the noise maker running in the background to deter any future encounters.

A black mass soon appeared up ahead. That cloudy substance enveloped the entire colony in a massive half dome that protected it from any human weapons. It was comprised of innumerable nanobots, quintillions of them, that would swarm around any impact site and solidify. That cloud shield had won the Satori the war, protecting their flyers and colonies from even nuclear attacks.

Via the noise maker, Hoodwink transmitted the necessary signals to those nanobots, who also utilized that backup communication protocol, and the black cloud cleared from their path. Such a powerful protective force, and yet so easy to circumvent... Hoodwink hadn't given the bypass signature to the rebels, as he wasn't sure he trusted them with that ability. With it, humanity could stage attacks against the various Satori undersea colonies, something that was hardly conducive to the peace he planned.

Once the submersible passed through, massive gray structures of coralline appeared on his aReal. The craft was nearing the underwater valley that lay on the outskirts of the great Satori city of Laranth.

He brought the vessel down and steered between the coralline.

An object abruptly emerged from behind a thick outcropping beside them.

"What is—"

Before Hoodwink could react, the object rammed the submersible.

Alarms started to go off. On his aReal display, a message flashed:
Hull integrity, sixty-five percent.

Hoodwink quickly scanned the twin external video feeds, but apparently whatever had struck them had vanished behind one of the reefs on either side of the craft.

"What the hell was that?" Sarella said.

"I don't know," Hoodwink told her. "But whatever it was, it's gone now."

Hoodwink shut off the alarms and continued the descent. There were gaping holes in the coralline to the left and right. An attack could come again from either side.

"Is there a way to replay the video of the attack?" Hoodwink asked the aReal's AI.

"Yes." The AI returned.

Hoodwink waited, and finally said in exasperation: "Care to tell me how?"

The AI replayed the attack. It was another human submersible, a veritable twin to their own. Probably had the same paint.

"It has to be Jeremy," Hoodwink said. "There can be no other explanation. Somehow he's been spying on us all this time. The question is, how?"

And then Hoodwink had a revelation.

He turned toward Sarella. "It's you."

She looked at him. There was panic on her face. "What's me?"

"There was no way Jeremy could have known where we were. We swept the camp each day for signs of micro-drones. The commandos fired smart bullets every few hours just to be safe. Nothing was ever discovered. There were no drones out there."

"Are you accusing me of something?" Sarella said, her voice shaking.

"You're his spy. It all makes sense now. I gave you all the data files to send to the rebels. You had the formula for the paint. You gave it—"

"The paint didn't work, don't you remember? The scientists had to

change it."

But Hoodwink didn't hear. "I know it's you, Sarella. Tell me how you're doing this. How you feed him your information."

She swallowed nervously.

He considered retrieving the blaster from his belt to force her to confess. That wasn't a good idea: he was in much too close proximity to her. She could easily strike out and throw off his aim; if he hit the inside of the submersible with a plasma shot, the results could be devastating.

Abruptly she covered her face in her hands.

"I'm sorry," Sarella said.

"The Return therapy was successful, wasn't it?" Hoodwink asked her.

"No..." Sarella said. She couldn't meet his eyes.

"I was a fool to bring you. A complete and utter fool. Skull was right. I understand now why your lovemaking was so mechanical. You were afraid of growing too attached to me. He, whom you planned to betray." He shook his head bitterly. "And now Jeremy is here, somewhere. And he's going to ruin all my carefully laid plans. Imagine what we could have accomplished if we had succeeded. If our species had united. If we shared information and resources, rather than competed for them. Humanity and the Satori working together, sharing the planet, living in harmony." He sighed wistfully. "It was a good dream."

Sarella looked at him for the first time. "The Satori don't share planets. You know this, Hoodwink. Plumb the depths of your alien mind, and your human one. There can be no symbiosis between our two species. We're too warlike. This planet can belong to only one or the other, not both."

"You're wrong," Hoodwink told her. "Our races *can* coexist, and they will. I'm going to shove peaceful coexistence down the throats of both species if I have to." He paused, regarding her uncertainly. "But first of all I have to decide what I'm going to do with you."

Sarella's eyes drifted toward his belt. He followed her gaze, and realized she was staring at the blaster.

She lunged at him.

Hoodwink caught her hands too late. She grabbed the blaster.

He forced her arms backward, bending her elbows, redirecting the weapon toward her torso. He stretched one finger past hers, around the trigger.

"Hoodwink..." Sarella pleaded, looking into his eyes.

"I can't let you ruin the mission," Hoodwink said.

The cold, rational Satori part of him assumed control and he squeezed the trigger.

Sarella collapsed onto the dashboard. Her arms flopped downward and Hoodwink easily pried the weapon from her grasp.

"And so it's done," Hoodwink said, mostly to himself. "I wondered if I would be able to place humanity above those I loved. In the past, I was selfish. I would have destroyed humanity to save my daughter. But I've changed. The world comes first, now. I'm sorry, Sarella."

He set the blaster down beside him, within reach in case she tried to attack him again.

Her breathing came in slow, ragged gasps. Her head lay sideways on the dashboard. Her eyes were still open, though somewhat glazed.

"The underwater robots injected a device into my quadmind," Sarella said, her voice almost a whisper. "This man, this Jeremy, spoke to me through the undersea AI. The Shell. He told me he would be watching everything I said and did. He told me that the moment I left your side, you would die."

Hoodwink felt a sudden rising dread in the pit of his stomach.

No.

"That's why I begged you to take me along," Sarella continued weakly. "That's why I came down in the submersible with you. Every moment I spent in your presence, was another moment you would be alive. I — I should have told you. I'm sorry. I meant the best for you. For us. Even though I don't believe in peace, I would have followed you to the end. "

She closed her eyes and died.

"Why did you make a grab for the blaster?" Hoodwink shouted at her lifeless body. "Why?"

Hoodwink felt suddenly nauseous. He rested his own head on the dashboard and stared into her lifeless face.

No no no. What have I done?

He closed his eyes. She wasn't a traitor. Hoodwink had murdered the only woman who cared for him on this planet. For what? To save a species that wanted to see him and his kind exterminated.

I can't do this anymore.

He opened his eyes and caressed her lifeless cheek.

No. I have to do this. Otherwise she died for nothing. I can wallow in

self-pity, or I can complete the mission. I will force a peace between those two thankless species. Sarella is still alive, anyway. Her Satori body, in any case.

Unfortunately, he would never be able to find where that body was moored, not anymore. And that was the greatest sorrow of all, because there was a good chance she would die for real when he placed the bomb.

The submersible shook as something rammed it once more. The alarms restarted.

Hull integrity, forty-two percent.

Hoodwink quickly sat up. On the twin displays of the aReal the enemy submersible was coming about to make another pass. Hoodwink quickly dove, bringing the craft precariously close to the bottom of the valley.

"Hello there, Hoodwink," Jeremy's voice taunted over the submersible's radio system. "We have simply *got* to stop meeting like this."

"What do you want?" Hoodwink transmitted angrily.

"Oh I think you know," Jeremy returned. "I want you to suffer."

The enemy submersible swooped in and Hoodwink narrowly dodged by cranking the throttle.

Jeremy's craft scraped the valley floor behind him. It tilted sideways as it struck a rocky protuberance, then pulled up, straightened, and continued the pursuit.

"The Shell couldn't break her," Jeremy sent. "It tried, oh how it tried. Everything your little girlfriend told you was the truth. She refused to join us. So, since she had no security codes installed, unlike you, the Shell came up with the implant idea to directly tap into her mind-body feed. She became our spy."

Jeremy's submersible made another close pass that Hoodwink narrowly dodged. Evading him was made all the more difficult by the fact that Hoodwink's vessel was bogged down by the weight of a nuclear warhead. Jeremy had no such encumbrance.

"I've heard everything she's said to you since then," Jeremy continued. "Watched you flirt. Watched you make love. Felt as you slid your hand between her ass crack. And oh, I so wanted you to believe that she had betrayed you. I'm absolutely thrilled with the result. Her death, by your very hand. Things couldn't have turned out for the better. All the more guilt for your conscience. You'll have to live with that for the rest of your pitiful

undersea life."

Hoodwink knew he wouldn't be able to keep this up forever. He didn't dare ram Jeremy, not with the hull integrity so low. Jeremy's own hull was probably just as severely damaged, but the man had less to lose. If Jeremy lost the submersible, and his life, he could simply respawn in another surrogate. Hoodwink, however, would lose a weapon he would have a very very hard time getting back. Likely the seaside resistance base was being razed to the ground at that very moment. The Shell would recover the Hidden Archives, and send robots to revisit all the nuclear silos, collecting any unspent weapons.

Hoodwink had only one shot to place the weapon. And if he messed it up, which was looking more and more likely, he would never have another chance again.

The valley floor abruptly opened up before him. It seemed bottomless. Up ahead, he spotted two satoroids in the distance.

A plan formed in his mind. A somewhat desperate plan, but it was all he had.

He headed straight toward the robots.

The noise maker was supposed to be running in the background. He should have realized that it wasn't when the robots immediately swung toward him and began frantically whipping their tails. But Hoodwink was too absorbed in avoiding Jeremy's next ramming assault.

As he neared the satoroids, he tried to send a message. That was when he finally noticed the external speakers were no longer functional. Jeremy must have damaged them in the attack.

Hoodwink attempted to alter course but it was too late. The satoroids wrapped their steel tentacles around his submersible and began to squeeze.

The warnings sounded.

Hull integrity, twenty-six percent.

Hoodwink frantically tried the noise maker again but it refused to respond. He was slowly sinking toward the depths below, whose unseen bottom was far beyond the range of the EM emitters. The hull moaned as those tentacles tightened, adding stress to a frame that was already under immense amounts of pressure.

Jeremy was laughing over the comm. "Nicely done, Hoodwink."

The robots completely ignored Jeremy's submersible. Either Jeremy had working speakers installed, or he had notified the Shell ahead of time. He would be cut off from communicating with the alien AI down there, of course, as the aReal didn't function at those depths: the wireless signals employed by the human-designed device didn't penetrate the oceans.

Jeremy's voice came again over the radio. "I'm going to enjoy watching you— oh, shit."

Jeremy's vessel began to descend. Apparently he had sustained more damage during the attack than Hoodwink had thought. The worst of it had probably occurred when Jeremy had slammed into the coralline floor of the raised valley behind them.

Jeremy's craft continued to sink, and when the robots did nothing to aid him, that only confirmed for Hoodwink that Jeremy was indeed cut off from the Shell.

Enjoy your death, bastard.

The local AI announced the latest hull integrity at fifteen percent, reminding Hoodwink that his own death was imminent. The metal moaned terribly around him.

Hoodwink had an idea. The submersible had an internal sound system. If he could reroute the output from the noise maker to that system, he might have a chance.

"AI, can the sound from the internal sound system penetrate the hull?"

"No," the AI said. "The vibrations will be muted."

"Vibrations," Hoodwink said. "The hull will still vibrate."

"That is correct," the AI confirmed.

"Can we modify the frequencies we produce to compensate for the muting? Basically use the entire hull as a speaker?"

"That may be possible," the AI said. "Though I will have to account for the dynamically changing structure of the hull, and the placement of the steel tentacles, and adjust in realtime."

With the machine's help, he programmed the internal speaker system to emit a suitable frequency of sound based on the scout class signature of the satoroids.

He plugged his ears and initiated the changes. The noise was deafening.

Long, painful moments passed. He wasn't sure the vibrations were penetrating the hull properly. Nor was he sure that the scout identifier would even work anymore, since the satoroids had already pegged him for attack. Would they continue to crush the submersible and send him—not to mention humanity—to a shared doom?

He removed his fingers from his ears and, flinching painfully at the noise, he retrieved the remote detonator and flicked the arming switch. He entered a time of ten seconds and rested his thumb over the green initiate button. If he had to die there, he wanted to do as much damage as he could, even if it only harmed the outskirts of the colony.

A message flashed on his aReal.

Hull integrity, five percent.

The robots abruptly released the submersible. The internally emitted frequency altered slightly, compensating for the absence of tentacles on the hull.

The satoroids drifted away, activating their rotors to depart in what seemed a random direction.

Hoodwink disarmed the remote and waited several moments with his fingers in his ears. When he was satisfied that the satoroids were a good distance away, and weren't coming back, Hoodwink turned the volume down and continued onward.

The formerly silent hull creaked occasionally, and he hoped the weakened frame lasted long enough to complete the mission. At least the Mk210 itself seemed to be holding up, though of course if Hoodwink was crushed he'd never be able to detonate it.

Thirty tense minutes later he found himself inside Laranth proper: a

complex series of tunnels and caverns carved into the coral. Unlike the human cities there were no cameras or other surveillance devices anywhere: such was an offense to Satori privacy. The satoroids were the only form of surveillance that the Shell was allowed.

The submersible passed more of the robots; Hoodwink turned up the volume and plugged his ears on those occasions, praying that the vibrations wouldn't further reduce hull integrity. He also floated by a couple of Satori, their pear-shaped torsos pumping away. It was very likely the Shell hadn't notified the populace of the threat. It was simply not the Satori way. The aliens probably assumed he was some harmless human surrogate simply exploring the frontiers of existence.

He steered toward the 'servant house,' a towering structure of rock, metal and coral located beside the governmental palace. He aimed for the base of the structure, toward the tunnel assigned to the lowest of classes. There were no guards, of course. Who would guard servants?

He proceeded about five hundred meters inside that rocky, branching tunnel, and then halted the vessel.

It was the best possible spot to place the bomb. It didn't require passing through the tough security measures of the main governmental palace, and the blast radius would easily eliminate the entire Hivemind in said palace, as well as the Shell's computer core.

He attempted to eject the arms attached to the submersible and thereby release the bomb.

It didn't work.

He tried again. Still nothing.

Damn it.

Well, he'd simply have to manually remove the Mk210 from the arms on the outside, then. Unfortunately, the pressure suit provided with the submersible wouldn't handle those depths, as it was designed more for operation in outer space.

Always the hard way...

He twisted to the side and grabbed the drip feed line. He stabbed the needle into the cephalic vein in the crook of his right arm, as per the instructions he'd watched earlier. He placed the excretion collector in his groin area, shifting uncomfortably as he installed the twin tubes. The needle in his arm twisted slightly with every movement, stinging him. He cursed softly.

Should've inserted the drip feed needle last.

Finally, when all the tubes were in place, he armed the remote detonator and set the timer to thirty minutes. His finger lingered over the green activation button.

He lay back in his chair and glanced at Sarella's body.

"Good-bye, Sarella," he said sadly. "I wish there was some way I could find you before the bomb went off."

He inhaled deeply and then pressed the button.

29:59.

29:58.

29:57.

He closed his eyes and thought of the Satori code word that would disconnect him from his surrogate. The word was a series of squeals and pops that no ordinary human could ever give voice to, let alone even form in the mind.

But he was no ordinary human, of course.

* * *

Jeremy, or rather Javiol, stared at his three-hundred-and-sixty degree surroundings, momentarily disoriented. His human body had died moments before when the submersible finally succumbed to the massive external pressure, crushing him. He had tried to recall the code word that would expedite his return, but in his fear he had somehow forgotten it.

No matter. Dying gives the same outcome.

He was moored in exactly the same place where he had begun his long journey, surrounded by glowing Satori attached by the thousands to those seemingly infinite horizontal tracks. The two satoroids he had left behind continued to watch over him.

As the fleshy moorings retracted from his body, he transmitted a rapid series of clicks, pops, and moans to the robots. The satoroids in turn transmitted the code to the Shell.

Is Graol conscious? Javiol asked it.

Yes, the Shell returned.

I had instructed you to awaken me the moment he emerged!

With his three-hundred-and-sixty degree vision, Javiol attempted to peer through the rows of bodies, searching for Graol—Hoodwink. But all of the fish looked alike to him. Still, he noticed an empty mooring nearby, three rows down, which corresponded to where the satoroids had shown him Graol

earlier. So he was already gone.

Where is he? Javiol demanded.

The Shell responded immediately. *I am no longer accepting new programming. Both of you are under arrest.*

The satoroids abruptly wrapped their long tentacles around him.

What? Cease and desist immediately! Javiol sent.

No reply.

The satoroids began to carry him from the chamber.

Had Hoodwink done something?

No. Likely its self-patching mechanism had discovered the backdoor Jeremy had placed: an error-correcting background process would have started the moment Jeremy overrode the Shell's command protocol. That the background process had taken so long to find the offending code was a testament to Javiol's skill and ingenuity. Obfuscation was always one of his best traits. Then again, maybe the Shell simply hadn't devoted enough computing resources to the process, and that was why it had taken so long.

Whatever the case, the Shell had finally broken free of his hold.

That was completely fine.

Because Javiol still had one more trick left up his sleeve.

Shell, initiate reboot sequence. Passcode zzzZZzzzaaAaaaLlll. The latter word was a series of hisses and squeals.

The satoroids powered down an instant later, and he shucked off their metal tentacles. If he had lips, he would have been grinning from ear to ear.

When Graol awakened, two satoroids immediately wrapped their metallic tentacles around him and ported him away from the mooring area. The Shell told him he was under arrest for high treason, and he was to be de-brained immediately to determine where he had placed the bomb.

Graol allowed himself to be carried through those murky tunnels. The Shell had already lost. By the time Graol was de-brained, that place would be nothing but empty sea.

The cave branched up ahead. Unexpectedly, the satoroids failed to change direction and the three of them crashed into the cave wall. As the robots slowly rebounded, Graol realized their rotors had ceased turning. The steel tentacles held him loosely as well, as if unpowered.

Graol squeezed his torso and flicked his tail to break free. He didn't know why the robots had deactivated. There were certain scenarios he could think of, the most likely of which was a system shutdown or reboot. He didn't know why Javiol would trigger such an operation, unless perhaps he was losing control of the Shell. The cause didn't really matter all that much—Graol would take whatever bone fortune threw his way.

He proceeded through the tunnel, pausing to get directions from oblivious Satori along the way. He gave any satoroids he found a wide berth, even though the machines floated inert in the water.

He made his way to the servant house beside the governmental palace. He took the lower class tunnel and finally arrived at the submersible, which had drifted deeper, its weight easily supported by the water pressure at that depth.

By his reckoning, there were only about fifteen minutes left before detonation.

He swam to the Mk210 that was lodged between the pincer-like arms at the front. Carbon fiber cables secured it tightly in place.

Graol extended his tentacles, whose ends were divided into two feathered fingers, which he used to manipulate objects. First he unclasped the locking mechanism, and then he began unwinding the cables from each metal arm. It was a painstakingly slow process, and Graol could literally feel the

seconds ticking past.

Not going to make it.

Finally he had the cables completely unwrapped and he discarded them. He twined all of his tentacles around the inverted cone containing the warhead and jetted the water rapidly from his torso while whipping his tail. The Mk210 refused to budge from the arms.

Graol placed half of his tentacles against the front of the submersible for purchase and tried again. He pushed and pushed, repeatedly squeezing his torso and flailing his tail. Finally something happened: the weapon didn't break free, but the arms that were supposed to release from the submersible in the first place did.

That was good enough.

He released the Mk210 and jetted to the far side of the lightened submersible. He secured his tentacles around the ladder rungs that ran along the outside and began to port the craft from the servant house. He moved as fast as he could, but the drag from the submersible hampered him.

It took him another ten minutes to reach the underwater hangar bay. It was filled with flyers of various sizes. The satoroid guards were still disabled, as were all the other fail-safes, and Graol easily loaded the submersible onto the larger flyer he picked, choosing one that had all the necessary equipment for remote surrogate interfacing. Well aware of the timer ticking away, he boarded and sealed the waterlock behind him, leaving the submersible inside it.

He activated the engines and navigated the flyer to the tunnel egress painfully slowly—the onboard AI capped the speed for safety reasons.

Come on. Come on.

When he exited into the outlying ocean, he immediately pointed the nose upward and opened up the throttle.

The inertial compensators cancelled out the acceleration and he felt nothing.

He moored himself to the hibernation lines. Several moments later the flyer burst from the ocean.

He glanced out the portal at the greenish-tinged sea. He caught a glimpse of the aftereffects of the bomb, which had no doubt detonated by then: several massive tsunamis spawned on the surface below, caused by a combination of the ocean moving in to fill the vaporized area, and the outward shockwave from the detonation. He could only imagine the

devastation at the impact site.

Goodbye, Hivemind. Goodbye Shell. I leave the Earth in the hands of the common Satori. And humankind.

With the demise of the Shell, the robots that kept the human populace in check would cease to operate, or they would revert to their original programming from the days when humankind ruled the Earth.

He could only hope a new era of peace awaited human and Satorikind. He knew that at first, surrogates would be hunted down and killed by real humans, but he hoped humanity would eventually realize that such killing was only detrimental in the long run. The surrogates allowed them to communicate with the Satori, and only through them could the humans negotiate a peace. When that initial purge was done, he could only hope humanity chose the high road. And that the Satori did the same. It might be wishful thinking, but that was the best he could offer to both sides at the moment.

Graol continued into space. He was unmolested by the orbital platforms. Without the primary Shell, the air defenses would have gone offline.

Not unexpectedly, the mothership had already departed. Though his flyer possessed a relatively high maximum speed, he doubted he'd beat the new mothership to Ganymede. He just hoped the human defenses would hold out until his arrival. He wasn't yet sure how he planned to defeat that mothership, which would have its own Shell operating independently of the destroyed one on Earth, but he would work with the humans to come up with something.

I will see the human colonists liberated. I swear I will.

He would do it for Ari.

For Sarella.

He glanced at the sealed waterlock behind him and pondered the precious cargo it contained. His humanity lay within, alongside the dead body of his former lover. He felt a moment of sadness, though Satori were not supposed to experience such emotions. His neuro-pathways were changing, then. Becoming more and more human all the time. He wouldn't have been surprised to learn that his quadmind functioned more like two hemispheres than four these days.

Good bye, Sarella.

Through the portal, he watched the rising sun crest the Earth. Such a

beautiful planet. It put him strangely at peace.

This is what I fought for.

The human side of him choked up inside.

He queued the sedating agent into the mooring lines, and the Satori dream world soon wrapped him in its gentle embrace.

epilogue

Javiol collected a fresh surrogate from the Farm, choosing a pod that contained a human body already stowed in a spacesuit, and then he made his way to the flyer hangar.

When he arrived, one of the other flyers immediately took flight. Hoodwink, no doubt.

Javiol loaded his surrogate pod aboard another flyer and then assumed the controls. He proceeded out the far side of the tunnel and accelerated upward through the ocean.

Before he reached the surface, the bomb detonated. Javiol knew because the craft was first slammed forward, and then reversed when a powerful downward current sucked it backward.

The flyer broke free of the current and in moments burst from the surface. Behind him a series of massive tsunamis swept from ground zero. He wondered how any of the fish in that underwater city could have possibly survived such an explosion.

He was aware that disabling the Shell had allowed Hoodwink to complete his little mission. Javiol might have been able to stop it, but he didn't want to risk his life. What did he care if a few fish died? In fact, he kind of wanted the ghastly things to perish. Because despite what Hoodwink had said, Javiol himself was not a fish. The body he currently resided in, well, quite simply, it was not him. He was human. Perhaps a somewhat twisted human, but human nonetheless. Why else would he still feel the strong human emotions of love and hate if that were not the case? A love for power, money, and all things that evoked terror and fear. A hatred for Hoodwink.

The flyer crested the atmosphere and he gazed through the portal into the stars of deep space, searching for Hoodwink's craft. He couldn't see it. The distraction of three-hundred and sixty degree vision wasn't helping.

The onboard AI helped him find Hoodwink. Another craft was traveling at high speed ahead of him, toward the planet known as Jupiter. Perhaps Hoodwink had been telling the truth about the ship that had crashed there, then. If so, that meant Javiol would be seeing Ari and all the others

once again. And One. His master.

With a contraction of the torso that was equivalent to a sigh, Javiol plotted a course for Ganymede, resolving to stay awake for most of the journey: he dreaded the Satori dream world with its harems of ugly fish that kept trying to mate with him.

Suddenly agitated, he wrapped his tentacles around his lower appendages and squeezed tightly. As he stared at those empty stars, one thought echoed repeatedly in his head.

You're going to pay for this, Hoodwink. You're going to pay for everything.

His tentacles and lower appendages abruptly relaxed.

And if not you, then Ari.

The End.

Or is it?

[Get the Next Book](#)

postscript

Please help spread the word about *Walls of Steel* by leaving a one or two sentence [review](#). The number of reviews an ebook receives on Amazon has a big impact on how well it does, so if you liked this story I'd REALLY appreciate it if you left a quick review. Anything will do, even one or two lines. Thank you!

You can keep in touch with me or my writing through one — or all — of the following means:

Twitter: [@IsaacHooke](#)

Facebook: <http://fb.me/authorisaachooke>

Goodreads: <http://goodreads.com/isaachooke>

My website: <http://isaachooke.com>

My email: isaac@isaachooke.com

Don't be shy about emails, I love getting them, and try to respond to everyone!

about the author

USA Today bestselling author Isaac Hooke holds a degree in engineering physics, though his more unusual inventions remain fictive at this time. He is an avid hiker, cyclist, and photographer who sometimes resides in Edmonton, Alberta.

acknowledgments

THANK YOU to my knowledgeable beta readers and advanced reviewers who helped smooth out the rough edges of the prerelease manuscript: Noel, Anton, Spencer, Norman, Corey, Erol, Terje, David, Jeremy, Charles, Walter, Lisa, Ramon, Chris, Scott, Michael, Chris, Bob, Jim, Maureen, Zane, Chuck, Shayne, Anna, Dave, Roger, Nick, Gerry, Charles, Annie, Patrick, Mike, Jeff, Lisa, Lezza, Jason, Bryant, Janna, Tom, Jerry, Chris, Jim, Brandon, Kathy, Norm, Jonathan, Derek, Shawn, Judi, Eric, Rick, Bryan, Barry, Sherman, Jim, Bob, Ralph, Darren, Michael, Chris, Michael, Julie, Glenn, Rickie, Rhonda, Neil, Doug, Claude, Ski, Joe, Paul, Larry, John, Norma, Jeff, David, Brennan, Phyllis, Robert, Darren, Daniel, Montzalee, Robert, Dave, Diane, Peter, Skip, Louise, Dave, Michael, David, Merry, David, Brent, Erin, Paul, Cesar, Jeremy, Hans, Nicole, Dan, Garland, Trudi, Sharon, Dave, Pat, Nathan, Max, Martin, Greg, David, Myles, Nancy, Ed, David, Karen, Becky, Jacob, Ben, Don, Carl, Gene, Bob, Luke, Teri, Robine, Gerald, Lee, Rich, Ken, Daniel, Chris, Al, Andy, Tim, Robert, Fred, David, Mitch, Don, Tony, Dian, Tony, John, Sandy, James, David, Pat, Gary, Jean, Bryan, William, Roy, Dave, Vincent, Tim, Richard, Kevin, George, Andrew, John, Richard, Robin, Sue, Mark, Jerry, Rodger, Rob, Byron, Ty, Mike, Gerry, Steve, Benjamin, Anna, Keith, Jeff, Josh, Herb, Bev, Simon, John, David, Greg, Larry, Timothy, Tony, Ian, Niraj, Maureen, Jim, Len, Bryan, Todd, Maria, Angela, Gerhard, Renee, Pete, Hemantkumar, Tim, Joseph, Will, David, Suzanne, Steve, Derek, Valerie, Laurence, James, Andy, Mark, Tarzy, Christina, Rick, Mike, Paula, Tim, Jim, Gal, Anthony, Ron, Dietrich, Mindy, Ben, Steve, Allen, Paddy & Penny, Troy, Marti, Herb, Jim, David, Alan, Leslie, Chuck, Dan, Perry, Chris, Rich, Rod, Trevor, Rick, Michael, Tim, Mark, Alex, John, William, Doug, Tony, David, Sam, Derek, John, Jay, Tom, Bryant, Larry, Anjanette, Gary, Travis, Jennifer, Henry, Nicole, Drew, Michelle, Bob, Gregg, Billy, Jack, Lance, Sandra, Libby,

Jonathan, Karl, Thomas, Todd, Dave, Dale, Michael, Frank, Josh, Thom, Melissa, Marilynn, Bob, Bruce, Clay, Gary, Sarge, Andrew, Deborah, Bryan, Amy, Steve, and Curtis.

Without you all, this novel would have typos, continuity errors, and excessive lapses in realism. Thank you for helping me make *Walls of Steel* the best science fiction novel it could possibly be, and thank you for leaving the early reviews that help new readers find my books.

And of course I ' d be remiss if I didn't thank my mother, father, and brothers, whose untiring wisdom and thought-provoking insights have always guided me through the untamed warrens of life.

— Isaac Hooke

[Get the Next Book](#)

Nothing more to see here ;)

Well, other than:

[Isaac Hooke's Current Release Schedule](#)