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THE LAST STAND

THE FOREVER GATE
BOOK IX

Isaac Hooke



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Ari narrowly raised her sword to deflect the surprise blow Jeremy launched. She wished she had taken the time to equip the shield she'd secured to the back plate of her armor, as she couldn't exactly do that at the moment, not with his blade darting in and out in a fury.

Snarling, Jeremy launched a particularly powerful stab, unleashing flames from the tip as he did so. Ari was forced to dodge to the side as she knocked the weapon away. The fire licked her armor but otherwise caused no damage.

She countered with a sideways slash and followed up with a leaping, downward plunge. Jeremy parried both, though he was forced to retreat.

Ari kept up the offensive, pummeling Jeremy with everything she had, and the man continued to give ground under her onslaught.

She fought in the middle of that no man's land that separated her outnumbered army from Amoch's, in the square where both sides had gathered opposite each other in the city of Kismet. For a moment, she wondered vaguely if the battle could be won with a single duel alone, by two champions elected to fight on the behalf of both armies. If she defeated Jeremy, perhaps Amoch would honor her victory and stand down.

She knew it was wishful thinking on her part. Still, by defeating Jeremy she would deal a demoralizing blow to the enemy, one that would set the mood for the entire battle to come.

As she forced him backward, the damaged obelisk at the center of the square momentarily blotted out the sun. Jeremy swiveled sideways, retreating into that shade, and she followed. He abruptly sidestepped, leading her into the sun once again; his positioning was such that the molten disk was above and behind him, blinding her.

Jeremy used the moment to switch to the offensive and he pressed the attack. Ari squinted, narrowly defending against that blur of a blade. She retreated into the shade.

Powerful tines of electricity erupted from behind Jeremy, sourced from the first ranks of Amoch's army as the lightning wielders unleashed their powers. At first she feared the bolts were aimed at her and Jeremy, but

the powerful energy tore past toward her men instead. From the periphery of her vision, she caught a glimpse of the lead defenders dodging behind their lightning shields.

She heard Renna's voice some distance behind her. "Attack!"

Still fighting, Ari was vaguely aware as her men rushed forward. They launched flames from their swords, but the enemies produced their own shields and deflected the fire. Then they unsheathed flaming swords and advanced to meet the charge. Her army was supposed to be better equipped. So much for that notion.

As defenders raced past, three swordsmen abruptly joined her side, sweeping Jeremy backward in the rush.

Around her, the defenders fought members of Amoch's army. Fire swords clanged from lightning shields. Streams of flame and tines of electricity were exchanged on both sides. Enemies fell, bodies sometimes aflame. Defenders dropped in equal numbers, their hair smoldering, the charred areas of their skin indicating where lightning bolts had struck.

Members of the heavily-armored enemy hunter class swept through the ranks, their oversized daggers and telescoping blades cutting wide swaths through the men.

Ari equipped her shield in time to defend against two enemy swordsmen. She defeated them, but one of the hunters rushed to fill their place. It raised its huge dagger to strike at her. She hefted her shield to block the blow, not at all sure it would hold up.

An explosive arrow struck the hunter in its unarmored face, and the resulting detonation completely obliterated its head. Leaving a trail of red mist, the empty helmet arced several meters into the air before thudding into her shield; the headless, heavily armored body fell to its knees and toppled.

She glanced over her shoulder. A few paces back, Renna stood with bow and arrow in hand. The Keeper nodded.

Ari hurried forward to find the next foe. A man unleashed lightning at her, but Ari blocked it with her shield and then skewered the opponent.

Another man replaced him, launching fire at her. She sidestepped and somersaulted, cutting her weapon horizontally: the attacker's head rolled from his shoulders.

When she landed, she saw Amoch and Wraylor not far ahead, gliding through the battle like royalty.

Defenders rushed Amoch. He had merely to gesture with his staff and

the men were swept aside by an invisible hand, their bodies disintegrating in midair before they could strike the cobblestone.

Wraylor pointed her bone staff at one man who raced toward her, and his body dissolved into a slithering mass of cockroaches. Those insects swarmed over the body of another defender, leaving behind a skeleton picked clean of flesh.

Angered by the sight, Ari retreated to the collapsed portion of the obelisk that was strewn across the square. She sheathed her sword, stowed her shield, and clambered onto the ruins. The vantage point proved favorable: she had a clean line of sight to Amoch.

She slid the bow down from her shoulder and loaded one of the explosive arrows from the quiver at her waist. She aimed at Amoch's center of mass and released.

The arrow flew true and detonated violently upon impact. Though he was invulnerable, the explosion knocked him far back; he struck several of his own men along the way, clearing a momentary path through the enemy. He was soon swallowed from view by the churning mass.

Ari launched a second arrow at Wraylor and the hooded woman was similarly hurled backward, vanishing in the throng.

Those two momentarily taken care of, she aimed her bow at a member of the hunter class, who was tearing a path deep into the defenders. Her arrow struck its unarmored face and the resulting explosion liquefied the gol's head.

Her exhilaration at those small victories was quickly doused when, from her vantage up there on the ruins, she realized how hopelessly outnumbered her army was. Already, she thought her ranks had been reduced by half, while the enemy hordes meanwhile seemed endless.

Briar should have arrived by then with the promised reinforcements from the Black Den, but apparently he had decided not to come. Without his men, it seemed apparent to Ari that the battle was forfeit.

She heard a loud thudding from her right. Brute. Apparently the creature had spotted her, because it was headed straight toward her, tearing through the fray, alternately elbowing men aside with its powerful arms or slicing them down with one of the four scimitars it held. The Dragon Lady moved in a graceful dance of death at its side, beheading any who dared oppose her own advance.

Ari had time to release one more arrow. She aimed at the cobblestone immediately between the creature and the Dragon Lady.

The latter noticed Ari's intention in time and nimbly leaped away. Brute was not so quick. The arrow struck and the resultant explosion knocked the large creature backward. The beast smashed into the ground, and the cobblestone dislodged around it.

The Dragon Lady leaped onto the fallen obelisk and attacked.

Ari dropped the bow, withdrawing her sword just in time to defend against the katana. She retreated under the flurry of strikes, nearly losing her balance on an uneven section of the ruined obelisk.

The Dragon Lady attacked mercilessly, the expression on her silver dragon mask never changing: the wide eyes, the thick nostrils, that unnerving gaping grin.

Ari tripped and fell over the edge of the ruins. She landed hard, with her back to the cobblestone. Her armor absorbed most of the blow, but the wind was still knocked out of her. She had dropped her sword, and it lay about a pace to her right.

The Dragon Lady leaped at Ari. In midair, the woman raised her blade with both hands and plunged it downward in time with her descent.

Ari rolled toward her dropped sword, but she doubted she'd retrieve it in time to defend against the katana.

The Dragon Lady landed beside her.

Ari scooped up her sword, knowing that death was imminent...

And then she heard a loud clang beside her.

Another blade had intercepted the death blow meant for her.

She spun to see who it was.

Renna.

Ari clambered to her feet while the Keeper forced the Dragon Lady backward. Ari grabbed the shield from where she had stowed it on her back and strapped it to her arm. Then she rushed the Dragon Lady and renewed the attack.

Together, she and Renna pinned the woman against the ruin of the fallen obelisk. The Dragon Lady struggled to keep up with the twofold attacks.

Renna was abruptly drawn away by an aggressor from the side; Ari positioned herself to screen the Keeper's back from the Dragon Lady.

Ari kept up the relentless assault. She used the lightning shield to her advantage, protecting the left side of her body so that her sword arm could continue the attack unabated. She struck that curlicued armor repeatedly, but

as in the previous engagement, Ari could not inflict even a dent. As she gazed into those grotesque features while she fought, she had an idea. The mask... the mask was the key. If she could rip it off and then strike at the face, her opponent would fall.

An opening presented itself and Ari slapped the mask with her hilt. The hand guard caught against the embossed edge, and Ari flipped the weapon upward.

The mask flew off.

Ari was stunned by who she saw underneath.

“Gemma!” Ari said.

Zak’s sister picked up the attack, taking advantage of Ari’s momentary distraction. “Who told you that name, gol?”

“Your brother!” Ari defended the blows. “He is with us now in the real world your Amoch speaks of!”

Gemma’s face crumpled in outrage and her attacks increased, becoming frantic: “Lies! You killed my brother before my very eyes. You and the gol Ten burned him to a crisp!”

Gemma’s attacks became a fervent blur, coming in from all sides, and even with the shield Ari had trouble defending. Gemma’s assault only abated when the ground began to shake and men screamed around them. A shadow fell over the pair. Motion drew their gaze skyward.

Meteors of different sizes fell from the heavens, pummeling the defenders. One particularly large one was headed toward her and Gemma, blotting out the sun.

Gemma leaped backward, while Ari dodged to the side. The meteor struck: the ground exploded and she was flung across the battlefield.

Ari landed on her back. Broken cobblestone followed her down, and she raised her shield to protect herself. When the incoming debris ceased, she crawled to her feet, dazed.

She had lost sight of Gemma. She did, however, spot Amoch in the distance: he was extending his staff in the general direction of the defenders. He had caused the meteors, no doubt.

Wraylor stood beside him. She, too, had returned with a vengeance. She transformed the ground into acid underneath several defenders. The men sank, screaming. Some attempted to crawl from the greenish liquid but it was too late, and the tissue sloughed from their faces and arms, leaving bone.

Brute meanwhile rampaged through the fray, causing death and

destruction wherever it went. Though she could not see them in the seething masses, she had no doubt that Jeremy and Gemma continued to fight somewhere out there as well.

Enemy soldiers raced forward to fill any vacancies. Ari found herself standing before a hunter gol. Renna rushed to her side, and while the Keeper distracted the thing, Ari unleashed flames into its face, disabling the unit.

Three more defenders joined them and they fought back to back. Other pockets of men formed nearby, surrounded by enemies, struggling to stave off the attacks. It was then that Ari realized her army was completely overwhelmed, reduced to a few score survivors. It was doubtful the hold-outs would last much longer.

The battle was lost. They could attempt a retreat, but it would be slow and arduous with the enemy on all sides like that. By the time they made it to the edge of the square, most of the remaining defenders would be cut down.

She had wanted to save Kismet. But she couldn't even save her own army.

A horn echoed loudly in the square. Ari ignored it, fighting on. Some of the attackers paused in confusion, perhaps searching for the source of the horn, and she used that moment of hesitation to strike them down.

Motion drew her gaze to the rooftops, where archers knelt in plain sight. They lined the roofs of the square on all sides, likely placed by Amoch to ambush her. She was angry that the scouts hadn't reported them, and even angrier that neither she nor her generals had thought to position a similar group of archers.

We didn't have enough men for such a maneuver, the voice of reason reminded her.

Yes, the battle was indeed lost.

And then a voice echoed above the sounds of war.

"Let the whoremongers come out to play!"

She would have recognized that voice anywhere.

Briar. The archers were his.

He had come through for her in the end.

The archers unleashed their arrows into the fray. Explosions ripped through the square, chewing wide holes through the enemy ranks.

Fresh swordsmen from the Black Den rushed forward, unleashing flames and lightning, and their ferocious onslaught swept the opponents from Ari.

So there was still a chance she might win after all. A very slim one, but a chance nonetheless.

Briar joined her. “Why hello, dear niece! Fancy meeting you here.” He wore lightning rings on every finger, and carried a fire sword and shield.

“Thank you, Briar,” she said.

“No,” Briar told her. “Thank *you*, Ari. For showing me that I’m still a good man somewhere inside. And that I still have courage buried within me, however deep.” He glanced toward the dueling ranks ahead of them. “Now let’s teach this Amoch and his whoresons some manners, shall we?”

two

Hoodwink resided within a shuttle far above Ganymede. “Steady as she goes.”

His pilot, Zak, sat in the cockpit beside him. They were both dressed in spacesuits with exoskeletons attached to the outside. Their helmets were on. In front of them, above the controls, a viewscreen relayed video from the external cameras, giving the illusion that the cockpit had windows. Behind them, in the freight area, a nuclear warhead awaited placement. Custom magnetic shielding designed by Hoodwink and implemented by the engineers would prevent the Satori from realizing what their deadly cargo was. In theory.

The trailing shuttle, piloted by Klay, carried a similar nuke. Those were the last two weapons of their kind that the human colony ship had aboard. Some might have thought the proximity of the trailing shuttle to Hoodwink’s was dangerous, should that craft be destroyed. However, the nuke wouldn’t detonate in an attack: it required a specific combination of temperature and pressure to activate the proper chain reaction, a combination only the warhead itself could achieve.

Of course, while Hoodwink wasn’t worried so much about the nuke detonating, he was very nervous about losing it, as they needed both for the plan to succeed. That was why he had assigned the second-best pilot after Zak to the trailing craft.

Two decoy shuttles flew on the left and right sides of Zak’s, piloted by Clark and Raynor. Zak followed the third decoy shuttle, which was flown by Myerson. At the very front was Hoodwink’s own alien flyer.

Through the viewscreen, a thick black mass gathered before the Satori mothership, their destination. Much of the ship was occluded by that darkness, and Hoodwink saw only portions of the hull, which hinted at its massiveness.

“Are you sure this is going to work?” Zak asked him, his voice coming over the speakers of Hoodwink’s helmet.

“It’ll work,” Hoodwink said. “They haven’t fired at us so far, have they?”

“But they will, if this works,” Zak said. “They’re going to be pretty pissed.”

“And that, my boy, is precisely why I brought along someone with your flying skills.” Hoodwink glanced at the overlay on his aReal. Was Clark drifting to the left?

Hoodwink activated the squadron channel. “Clark, looks like you’re straying to port.”

The display updated with the shuttle’s corrected trajectory.

“Sorry about that, Hood,” Clark transmitted.

“Stick to formation, people,” Hoodwink sent over the encrypted line. “And maintain speed at half throttle. I don’t want anyone showing any sign of hesitation. Let’s not give them any clues as to how frightened we really are.”

Hoodwink cut the line and watched as the squadron closed with the black cloud over several minutes. Soon, that darkness completely obscured the mothership from view.

He glanced at Zak. “It’s time for me to get back to my flyer. The autopilot can only take it so far.”

“Good luck,” Zak said.

Hoodwink smiled. “On a good day, I make my own luck, lad.”

“Is today a good day?” Zak asked.

Hoodwink’s smile wavered. “Don’t be jinxing it now.”

He sat back in his chair, closed his eyes and thought of the code word of squeals and pops that would allow him to detach from his surrogate and return to his Satori body.



GRAOL AWOKE TO a transmission in the Satori tongue.

Unknown ship, identify yourself.

He floated in a greenish liquid within what served as the cockpit of the flyer, looking out on the universe through the twenty-four eyes that granted him three hundred and sixty degrees of visual acuity. A portal offered him a view of the black fog that blotted out the stars ahead.

The local AI aboard the flyer would have transmitted a canned response to the challenge, but apparently the mothership was not impressed, because the communique repeated.

Unknown ship, identify yourself or you will be destroyed.

The moans and hisses were transmitted directly into Graol's quadmind, courtesy of the local AI, which had received the telepathic signal and boosted it.

This is flyer Hrotissqerie 122, piloted by Graol-52-70-32-144, egg donor Laol-12-142-160-924, sperm donors Maol-16-30-42-43 and Fallow-92-1002-4-58.

Graol waited several moments before the response came.

According to the records, you are assigned to Earth. As is your flyer.

Graol knew he was speaking to the Shell, the primary AI in control of the mothership, and the main representative of the ship's local Hivemind, not to be confused with the Hivemind Graol had destroyed on Earth.

The records are inaccurate, Graol sent. You are aware that Earth colony has ceased transmissions?

We are aware, the response came. A minor communications glitch with the colony, no doubt. We expect contact to be fully restored shortly. Explain what this has to do with the inaccuracy in the records.

I have been operating undercover on Ganymede, Graol returned. Collecting samples of Species 87A technology. Species 87A was the Satori designation for humans. Because of the sensitive nature of my mission, the records were purposely obfuscated to conceal my location. Ordinarily I would instruct you to contact my superiors on Earth to confirm my identity, but since communication is down, I can do no such thing.

I must clear your approach with the Hivemind, the Shell responded.

The Satori AI had one major weakness: it's appetite for new technology. So Graol said: *I bring you five shuttles laden with 87A weapons and equipment. They carry hitherto undiscovered technologies. I have also uncovered the 87A Hidden Archives, which contain the entire technical history of Species 87A.*

Obviously tempted, the Shell did not reply for several moments.

Finally: Turn back. The Hivemind refuses to grant authorization for your approach at the present moment.

But these technologies—

Turn back or suffer the consequences, the Shell interrupted.

It was worth a try.

Turning back, Graol lied.

He waited until the flyer was within two kilometers of the black fog

that shielded the mothership.

You have not turned back, the Shell sent.

Doing so presently, Graol responded.

The flyer closed to fifteen hundred meters.

Graol transmitted the code that ordinarily would allow a Satori flyer to penetrate the countless nanobots that composed the black cloud. Not unexpectedly, the microscopic robots did not respond to it.

A thousand meters.

Graol broadcast several more overlapping frequencies; if his values were correct, the affected nanobots would vibrate in turn, retransmitting and amplifying the same frequencies to their neighbors.

Five hundred meters.

You have not turned back, the Shell sent.

He doubled the signal strength. Tripled it.

Two hundred meters.

He knew he was successful when the black fog visibly changed form, condensing into discrete clumps as the nanobots vibrated at their resonant frequency and ceased functioning. The dark clusters spread like a disease through the cloud, as the nanobots comprising the shield deactivated en masse.

The craft hit the outskirts of the transformed cloud. If Graol had failed, the black mass would have hardened upon impact, and his vessel would have incinerated.

Instead, those small clumps readily yielded; it was as if simple space dust struck the forward armor of the flyer. Small pocks marred the glass as the craft penetrated, and then the shuttle was through. The self-healing glass repaired against the backdrop of the all-consuming mothership.

The Shell would have trained the nearest turrets on his craft by then, and would begin firing shortly, Graol knew. He activated the coded sequence for evasive maneuvers, programmed in the final target for the autopilot, and then moored himself to the consciousness transference unit.



HOODWINK OPENED HIS eyes in the cockpit of the human shuttle.

Zak was just returning to his seat.

“Why weren’t you at the controls?” Hoodwink asked angrily.

“For a second there we thought you were going to betray us,” Zak said. “The cloud wasn’t changing, and the other pilots convinced me to train the laser rifle on you. If that black shield didn’t go down, we were going to turn around, and I was going to shoot you the moment you woke up.”

Hoodwink shook his head. “If that shield hadn’t gone down, I wouldn’t have woken up! I’d be dead now.”

The incoming fire from the mothership began. Hoodwink’s flyer began to dodge.

Zak switched to the squadron line: “Initiate evasive maneuvers. Follow Hoodwink’s flyer in.”

The shuttles maintained their formation; the pilots did an excellent job of mirroring the movements of Hoodwink’s flyer, keeping it directly in front of them.

No alien flyers intercepted them, of course: the Satori battle protocol relied entirely upon point defenses.

Those plasma blasts didn’t let up; one of them sheared right through the shuttle that escorted them on the port side. The twin halves of the craft disintegrated into so much space debris.

Good-bye, Clark.

“Steady, people,” Hoodwink said. “Stay tight.”

With the nanobot shield behind them, the mothership before them looked like a colossal saucer joined to an inverted cone. Smaller rectangular sections protruded from the top of the saucer, while canals crisscrossed the cone. At the bottom tip were the pipes of varying heights that had vented the nanobots. Nothing emerged from those latter structures at the moment.

The shuttles were so close that the mothership consumed nearly the entire field of view in front of them. The lead shuttle, and Hoodwink’s flyer beyond that, were nearly lost to the immensity of it all.

Hoodwink’s flyer flew toward the saucer section. Up ahead, the two closest turrets continued to unleash streams of plasma at the squadron, making it impossible to land on the alien hull.

“What the hell is Stanson doing?” Hoodwink exclaimed.

Once the shields were down, the human ship was supposed to fire at the alien mothership from the surface of Ganymede and disable those two key turrets. However, it seemed the attacks from the human ship had ceased entirely.

Hoodwink sent a broadcast to the Hercules vessel on the surface.

“Stanson, take out the turrets goddammit!”

The communications lag should have only been a couple of seconds at that distance, but Stanson didn’t respond.

“Stanson?” Hoodwink tried again.

Finally the Control Room operator responded: “We’re trying.”

“Well try harder! We’re getting eaten alive up here!” Hoodwink angrily cut the comm.

Zak deftly maneuvered after the lead shuttle. A plasma bolt tore past overhead, narrowly missing. Some debris broke away from Hoodwink’s flyer.

“I think that one scraped the roof of your flyer,” Zak said.

“Let’s try the X2s,” Hoodwink told the pilot. He switched to the squadron channel. “Shuttles, prepare to fire lasers.”

Zak prepped the shuttle’s onboard lasers. The autopilot aboard Hoodwink’s flyer was programmed to make as many passes as necessary over that region of the alien hull. Only when the turrets ceased firing would it attempt a descent.

On the next pass, Hoodwink watched the first turret approach.

“Hold,” he transmitted. “Fire on my command. We all target the same area. Zak, share your targeting data.”

Five hundred meters to the turret.

“Hold.”

Two hundred meters.

“Hold.”

Fifty.

“Fire.”

Zak and the other pilots unleashed their lasers at the turret in unison.

“Direct hit,” Zak said. “No obvious damage.”

A flash came from their left and Raynor’s shuttle disintegrated.

Hoodwink hailed the Control Room on the surface below. “Stanson? Goddammit!”

Stanson’s answer came a few seconds later: “Looks like Kade disabled half our defensive weapons with his most recent patch. Either accidentally, or intentionally, we’re not sure which. The ones facing the turrets in question are currently inoperable, and I’m not able to override the change.”

“What?” Hoodwink couldn’t believe it. “Thanks for informing me of

this *now!*”

Stanson replied: “We didn’t notice the problem earlier because the countermeasures were able to pick up the slack... apparently the automated systems launched mortars to act as chaff, a last resort action that protected our ship against most of the incoming fire. Additionally, the weapon alarms weren’t functioning, so basically it was the perfect storm down here in terms of fog of war. I’m sorry, Hood.”

“Don’t *I’m sorry* me, you bastard!” Hoodwink returned. “Those excuses make no sense! Get those weapons online! Kade did this, you said? I thought Tanner was supposed to have captured Kade by now.”

“Tanner is almost at his location, yes,” Stanson transmitted.

“Tell him to hurry! Because if you don’t take out those turrets soon, there won’t be any shuttles left up here!”

three

Tanner retrieved two security personnel, Lana and Craig, from the berthing area and he made his way down to deck four. Lana had a crossbow-shaped blaster—apparently she’d built one using schematics from the archives, a few 3D-printed parts, and the help of the trainer AIs. Unfortunately Lana had neglected to tell anyone about the weapon, so she was the only other person aboard with a blaster, after Tanner. As it was an illegal weapon, Tanner almost confiscated the thing from her, but decided he could use another armed individual in his party.

As he proceeded through the corridors, he realized Hoodwink had been right about the robot patrols: they had definitely decreased. The maintenance robots were likely being called away to repair the ongoing damage to the hull.

Tanner noticed that the rumbles signifying the alien attacks had ceased shortly after Hoodwink departed with the shuttles. He hoped that was a good sign of their impending success.

Blaster in hand, he reached compartment 4-77-3-Q, one of the fiber hubs on deck four. All terminals from the immediate subsection connected through that hub. Kade resided either inside 4-77-3-Q itself, or within one of the nearby compartments.

Tanner quietly opened up 4-77-3-Q and had a look inside. There was no one hiding among the server farms, routers, and optical cables.

The radio built into his aReal activated. It was Stanson. “Tanner, what’s your status?”

“I’m at 4-77-3-Q,” Tanner said softly. “Should have Kade in custody shortly. I’ll keep you apprised.”

“All right, but hurry,” Stanson returned. “We’ve already lost three Keepers. The battle can’t be going well on the Inside.”

Tanner made his way to the hatch on the far side of the room and entered the access code.

When he opened it, he spotted a young man with his back to him. It had to be Pots—no one else had that thick, vibrant red hair. He was operating a terminal via an aReal headset.

Pots either sensed his presence, or more likely he had rigged the aReal to issue an alert if the hatch opened, because Pots abruptly spun around. When he saw Tanner pointing the blaster at him, the freckle-faced youth raised his hands.

“Take off the aReal and step away from the terminal,” Tanner instructed him.

Pots removed the headset and stood up.

Tanner fully entered the compartment, followed by Lana and Craig.

Beside the terminal Tanner spotted Kade, Brown, and an older man and woman he didn’t recognize. All four were unconscious, tethered via umbilicals to the terminal.

Lana and Craig subdued Pots, tying his wrists behind his back and then patting him down. They made him sit on the deck nearby.

Tanner went to the terminal, exchanged his headset for the one Pots had been using, and used the Child’s access controls to waken the four dreamers one at a time. Lana and Craig disconnected the umbilicals from the surprised individuals in turn and bound them, setting them on the floor beside Pots.

When they were all awake, Tanner addressed Kade. “Who are these two?” He nodded at the man and the woman. The aReal labeled them as crew members “17598” and “25431.”

“Does it matter?” Kade answered.

“Not really. But I suspect they’re two dreamers you pulled out without permission. Especially considering that my aReal tells me they’re currently sleeping in pods on decks three and seven at this very moment. Yet another hack on your part, no doubt.”

Kade shrugged.

Tanner sent Stanson a message. “I’ve secured Kade, Brown and Pots. There are also a pair of ride-alongs Kade apparently awakened illegally.”

“Got something urgent for you to work on,” Stanson returned. “Hoodwink is having some trouble. Apparently Kade disabled half our defensive weapons, so we can’t eliminate the necessary turrets on the mothership.”

Tanner’s eyes bulged in outrage. “What? The fool.”

“It’s imperative that you get him to rollback whatever changes he put into the system to cause that,” Stanson continued.

“I’m on it.”

Via the aReal, Tanner pulled up the recent code changes made to the system. Nothing was obscured or obfuscated—Pots’ access privileges ensured that. Since he had all the privileges he needed again, Tanner instructed the AI to rollback all changes made in the past week and then to issue a hot-reload. He was relieved when the AI told him the rollback had successfully deployed.

“Did that work?” he transmitted to Stanson.

“No,” Stanson returned. “Although, it seems the robots are abandoning their guard positions around the inhabited portions of the ship. The relearning center, the berthing area... it looks like we’re no longer prisoners on our own ship. So you fixed that. But we still need those weapons online.”

Tanner nodded. That meant Pots wasn’t the one who had made the change. He needed to try a user account with different access privileges: Kade’s.

He placed Pots’ aReal back down on the terminal and donned his own.

“Kade,” Tanner said. “Give me your access code.”

Kade didn’t answer.

“You or one of your loyal followers disabled half the defensive weapons in your last patch,” Tanner told him. “If I don’t rollback those changes, all of us are going to die.”

Kade kept his mouth shut.

“Did you disable half our point-defense weapons on purpose or something?” Tanner asked him. “Is that what you want, for all of us to die? We can’t fight back against the Satori without them.”

Brown glanced nervously at Kade. “You never said you disabled the external weapon systems.”

Pots seemed just as worried. “Kade. Is Tanner telling the truth?”

Kade still didn’t answer.

Tanner trained the blaster toward the group. “Let’s find out how valuable your co-conspirators are to you. Should I kill Brown? Or how about Pots? What about this man.” Tanner aimed his weapon at each prisoner in turn. He kept an eye on Kade, watching for any reaction, but the man appeared completely impassive and unperturbed. “The woman?”

When Tanner pointed the weapon at her, he thought he saw a momentary flash of fear in those eyes.

“The woman, then.” Tanner took a step toward her. “You don’t help me, I’m going to start by blasting away her feet. One toe at a time. Then I’ll move on to her hands. Then her arms. Her legs. And finally, if you still won’t help me, and she hasn’t bled to death, I’ll concentrate on her torso. Basically I’ll keep blasting until she dies. What do you think of that?”

Kade bared his teeth in a smile. “Go ahead. I know you won’t do it, Tanner. You don’t have it in you.”

Tanner cocked his head, and then he stepped forward angrily. “Hold her.”

Lana and Craig pinned the bound woman, and Tanner held the weapon to the tip of her boot.

“We’ll start with her big toe.” Tanner slid his finger over the trigger.

“Okay okay!” Kade said.

Tanner immediately withdrew his finger and glanced at Kade. “That was quick.”

“I’ll help you,” Kade said. “But only because I want to save the ship. I never intended to shut down those external weapons. It was an accident.”

Tanner wasn’t sure he believed him. Whatever the case, the truth would come out at the trial. Assuming Ari gave him the luxury of one.

Kade revealed his access code and Tanner immediately revoked all changes the man had made in the last week. Tanner recompiled the codebase and issued a hot-reload.

“Stanson, try now,” Tanner sent.

A moment later: “That did it. Well done.”

Tanner slumped in relief.

He had Brown give up his own access information and reverted that Child’s changes, too. The older man and woman didn’t have any access privileges in the system, confirming that they were indeed illegally freed.

Tanner attempted to scan the Inside, specifically Obelisk Square in Kismet, where Ari currently fought the remnants of Kade’s army, but that area still seemed shielded.

“How are you shielding Obelisk Square?” he asked Kade. “You’ve placed some object in the simulation world?”

The man smirked at him defiantly.

Tanner shrugged. “I’ll find it eventually. What about what you did to Ari? Where can I find the code for the inventory item that’s trapping her to the Inside?”

Again, merely that defiant smirk.

Tanner considered rolling back all the changes that Kade had ever made, going back six months, but that would reverse some of the helpful changes he had made to the system. He and the other Children would simply have to go through the codebase, ideally with one of the prisoners watching. It was going to be an arduous process—Kade had touched thousands of files while working for them.

Tanner supposed he could threaten Kade again in an attempt to accelerate that process, but he worried the Child would call his bluff: though Tanner acted like he was completely ready to go through with it, he would've never been able to fire his blaster into the woman's boots.

He decided that unraveling the code would simply have to wait. He wanted to get back Inside to help Ari in the battle. Time passed faster within. Who could say what dire straits she might have found herself in since his last appearance?

"I'm turning this place into a makeshift brig," Tanner told Lana and Craig. "And I'm going back Inside." He handed his blaster to Craig so that both security personnel were armed. "Watch them."

A call from Stanson appeared on his aReal.

"What now, Stanson?" Tanner asked after accepting the call.

"One of the Keepers reported in via courier," Stanson returned. "Looks like there's someone else aboard you need to track down."

Tanner crumpled his brow. "What? Who? I need to get back Inside to help Ari."

"You can't go in just yet. And you *will* be helping her."

"I don't get it," Tanner said. "Who am I looking for? Who's so important I have to stop everything I'm doing to track them down?"

"Tanner, Jeremy has returned."

Tanner glanced at Craig. "I'm going to need my blaster back."

four

Ari took a few moments to catch her breath. Briar's men held the front line just ahead, while his rooftop archers continued to soften up the middle ranks with their explosive arrows.

A colossal flaming hammer appeared above the square. It swiveled toward one of the rooftops and smashed down. Archers screamed as the rooftop collapsed, and the square shook from the impact. The hammer reset, and moved toward the next house. The archers there fled as the massive steel head crashed down.

Ari spotted Amoch and Wraylor standing amid their troops near the ruined obelisk. They were both looking up at the hammer.

"That's his doing," Ari said. She glanced at Briar. "It's time to drive a wedge through to the head of the enemy."

"Can we kill him?" Renna asked from her side.

"I don't know," Ari said. "But we have to try. Or at the very least, distract him."

Ari wished she still had her bow in that moment. She still had a few explosive arrows left in her quiver, but without the longbow... then she realized she had something just as good.

She extended her arm and hurled her shield into the fray. The thrown object knocked over men like dominos, shooting out electricity from all sides, cutting a trench deep into the enemy ranks.

Ari sprinted forward, following that shield, releasing flames from her sword to enlarge the human trench. Renna was on her left. Briar her right. The men of the Black Den just behind. From them erupted waves of lightning, fire, and steel.

She caught her shield as it returned and the object landed snugly on her forearm, strapping itself into place. She defended a lightning attack with it and then hewed down a man who vaulted at her. She released flames from her blade, flames from her shield, and lightning from her rings, killing the attackers like one born to the work.

She closed to within five paces of Amoch. He was protected by four members of the hunter class. The hunters pivoted their humongous daggers

toward her.

She threw her shield. The lead hunter dropped its dagger to catch the object. She unleashed flames at the gol's face, aiming for the eyes above the mandibles of that helmet. But the hunter turned its head so that the fire caught the side of its helm.

Another hunter struck out at her, extending its telescoping razor weapon. She somersaulted sideways, growing frustrated. She had to get to Amoch and attack before the man killed her and her companions.

In the middle of her somersault, she grabbed one of the arrows from her quiver and hurled it between the two hunters, toward Amoch. The deadly arrow flew at the leader of the army like a dagger.

Incredibly, Amoch caught it. And then his body floated forward. Literally floated—his feet didn't touch the ground. He forced his way past the hunters, and the parts of their bodies that he touched disintegrated. He halted directly in front of Ari.

He did all of that before she returned to the ground from her somersault.

The air had grown black around Ari. When she landed on her two feet, she and Amoch were isolated from the rest of the army, floating in an island of darkness.

He wrapped an arm around her back, placing his palm at the base of her skull, drawing her in. His other hand held the explosive arrow almost to her lips. Ari tried to move away, but his grip was like a steel vise.

"Did you know," Amoch said. "Once launched, the tip will detonate immediately upon contact? It doesn't matter the speed at which the arrow travels." He moved the steel tip closer.

Ari squirmed, but she couldn't escape his grip.

"Come Ari, embrace the sweet kiss of death." Amoch brought the arrow nearer still. "I always wondered if I would have the courage to kill you when the time finally came."

Ari stared at it, fighting him with all her gol strength, but it was to no avail.

Just when it seemed the tip must touch her lips, he abruptly lowered the arrow. "But I can't do it."

Ari slumped in relief.

"You saved me," Amoch said. "In those dark days when I first emerged. I couldn't cope. The shock from living so long on the Inside, out of

time from everyone else. The separation from my wife. I was lost, and felt that my entire life had been a sham. A waste. Nothing I had done was real. Living further seemed pointless. I was ready to end it all. I had managed to deceive everyone. My relearning specialist. The Children. All except you. You could see the pain inside me. You told me that I had to set my feet firmly on the deck and concentrate on my work. You promised I would eventually forget what happened to me on the Inside, and that I would find purpose. Well you were right. I found purpose. Just not, perhaps, the purpose you envisioned.”

He let go of her and stepped back. “But while I cannot personally kill you, others can. And so—” He abruptly looked up. “What—”

The darkness vanished and she stood in the square once more, in the middle of the battle. The bodies of the slain hunters lay around her. There was no sign of Amoch or Wraylor.

“Ari!” Renna said. “There you are! We thought we’d lost you!”

“What happened?” Ari said.

“When Amoch reached you, a globe of darkness enveloped the two of you and then you were gone.”

“What about Wraylor?” Ari asked.

Briar was the one who answered. “The she-bitch was fighting here only a moment ago.” He deflected a lightning blow with his shield and launched flames from his sword. “But then she vanished. Good riddance! She was decimating my men!”

Ari scooped her shield from the dead body of the hunter who had stolen it and then scanned the battlefield one last time for signs of Amoch and Wraylor. The pair were completely absent. Either they had teleported somewhere, which was doubtful, or, judging from Amoch’s reaction, someone had pulled them out.

Tanner found Kade, Ari thought. That was the only way to explain their disappearance. *We’ve almost won, then.*

She noticed that the ground rumbled violently every three seconds and realized that Amoch’s giant hammer still floated in the air above one of the houses. Without its master to steer it, that hammer smashed down into the same rooftop every three seconds, locked in an infinite loop, sending shockwaves across the square.

She was about to rejoin the main fighting when defenders and enemy fighters alike were batted aside before her. Brute burst through the front line

and made its way straight toward her.

She remembered Amoch's words: *while I cannot kill you, others can.*

Ari hurried to the giant hammer. It continued to smash the collapsed house every three seconds. When the hammer raised, she hurried across the rubble. She stumbled on a pile of broken bricks, but managed to regain her footing in time to clear the ruins. The hammer smashed down behind her as she entered a side street free of fighting. The shockwave nearly sent her reeling.

She rested against the wall of a nearby building and watched Brute approach the demolished house from the other side.

The creature paused at the far edge of the ruins, well away from the falling hammer.

"Come on," Ari said. "Come get me!"

Brute sneered, but did not move. The hammer smashed down, momentarily hiding the creature from view. When the hammer raised, Brute was no longer standing there.

Movement drew her eye to the adjacent building. Brute was clambering the intact wall.

"Shit." Ari retreated several paces.

Brute reached the rooftop, crossed to the rear side, and then leaped down, cratering the cobblestone beneath him. The creature approached her, smirking widely.

Brute had conveniently positioned itself between Ari and the moving hammer. If she timed her attack just right...

"Wipe that smirk off your face," Ari said.

She threw her shield with all her strength and struck Brute squarely in the chest. The creature hurled backward, directly into the path of the giant hammer. It smashed down right when Brute passed underneath.

The hammer lifted and Ari's shield did not return. Half buried in the debris, Brute struggled to get up, but was too slow, and the hammer struck again.

Ari retreated. She knew the hammer would not kill the beast, but it would at least keep Brute occupied for a while.

Before she could return to the square and the battle fought there, Gemma dropped from a nearby rooftop. The woman wore her dragon mask once more.

"You have to be kidding me," Ari said. "Look, Gemma—"

The woman closed ranks and attacked.

Ari parried the blade, purposely keeping to the defensive for the moment.

“Gemma, don’t do this,” Ari said. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“But *I* want to hurt you!” Gemma’s voice sounded muted from behind that mask.

“Your brother is alive.” Ari dodged a stab from that katana. “I swear to you! He told me all about your life on the streets. How you ran away from home. How he raised you.”

Gemma paused in her attack. “He told you this?”

“Yes,” Ari said.

“Did he tell you why we ran away from home?”

“No,” Ari admitted. “Though I can imagine the reasons.”

Gemma pressed the attack.

“This man you follow,” Ari said between blows. “Amoch. Have you listened to any of his sermons? He preaches that none of this is real. That there is another world atop this one. Do you believe him?”

In answer, Gemma sliced at her throat.

Ari deflected the attack. “You must, or you would not follow him. Have you not seen the people he lines up at each of his sermons? People who fall upon their blades so that they may leave this reality and move up to the next?”

Gemma attacked harder.

“You don’t believe it, do you?” Ari said, the realization dawning upon her. “You follow him only out of vengeance.”

Gemma struck so hard that Ari nearly lost her grip on the fire sword.

Ari focused on countering, and she managed to divert those powerful blows. Ari switched to the offensive as Gemma grew tired, and her blade darted through her opponent’s guard a few times, merely to deflect from that curlicued armor.

“I am going to tell you the cold, hard truth,” Ari said. “And you can do with it what you will.”

Gemma weakly parried Ari’s latest attack. She had obviously exhausted herself.

“Amoch speaks rightly,” Ari stated. “There is indeed a world that sits atop this one. And I am its leader.”

Ari waited a moment for her words to sink in. Gemma responded with

a half-hearted stab.

Ari easily parried the blow and continued. “Do you hear me? The leader. And I chose Zak. *Chose* him. I wanted to awaken him from this world myself. I saw potential in him. A man who could make a difference. And he is doing that at this very moment. Fighting for us. Leading an attack against an Enemy even more powerful than Amoch. One among you is from that very Enemy. Jeremy.”

Gemma finally stepped back and ceased the attack. She kept her sword raised and at the ready, however. “You can bring me to my brother?”

Ari felt her expression soften. She lowered her blade slightly. “I could. But it is against the rules we have laid down. Even I, as the leader, cannot violate these rules. It would set a bad precedent. Without these rules, there would be chaos in both worlds. Besides, to do so, I would have to end your life here.”

“So if I end your life,” Gemma said. “You will simply return to this upper world of yours?”

“Not precisely,” Ari said. “If I die here, I die for real. It has to do with the way I’m connected to this world.”

Gemma lifted her mask, revealing her face. She seemed torn by indecision. She pursed her lips. “Who is Amoch in the real world?”

“He used to be one of my top programmers. A man named Kade. But something happened to him. I don’t know what, but he changed. Or maybe he remained the same the whole time and simply shielded his true intentions from the rest of us. Whatever the case, he betrayed us all.”

Gemma’s eyes momentarily flicked to her own blade, as if she were trying to decide whether to use the weapon or sheathe it. “Jeremy is part of this Enemy who attacks us? This Enemy my brother is helping to destroy?”

Ari nodded. “He is.”

“The man in the suit and tie?” Gemma asked.

“That’s him.”

Gemma turned toward the square. “If he is my brother’s enemy, then he is mine. Come then, gol Nine, let us finish this.”

“You can call me Ari,” she told her.

Wary of a trick, at first Ari allowed Gemma to lead the way. But as the woman attacked the enemy fighters and it became obvious that she had switched allegiances, Ari fought directly at her side and trusted her to guard her flank.

“Thank you for believing me,” Ari told her.

Gemma nodded curtly.

Ari and Gemma cut their way through the defenders until they reached Briar and Renna.

“Who’s the fine lass?” Briar said, eyeing Gemma up and down.

“She’s with me,” Ari said.

Renna raised her shield to deflect an incoming blow of fire, then nodded at Gemma. “Welcome to the party.”

Ari continued the fight. She had hoped the enemy soldiers would flee the square at some point after Amoch and Wraylor vanished, but apparently she had been wrong. Perhaps the members of the opposing army hadn’t yet realized their leaders were gone?

“Your masters are dead!” Ari shouted into the attacking ranks. “The fight has ended!”

In answer, a lightning wielder launched a stream of electricity at her. Briar moved forward and deflected the blow with his shield.

“Clear from my path!” someone shouted. “Clear away!”

A corridor formed among the enemy ranks. Jeremy stood at the end of it in his suit and tie.

“Ari dearest,” Jeremy said. “The fight is far from ended.”

The head of the giant hammer, which continued to pound into the battered house beside the square, abruptly broke away from the handle and crashed to one side. Above it, the damaged handle continued to feebly move up and down.

Brute stood to its feet amid the debris, extended its four arms out to the side, and roared. It withdrew its scimitars—one of them was broken, so the beast discarded it—and then stepped into the square. Soldiers on both sides gave it a wide berth.

Jeremy grinned as the creature approached. “Two’s company. Shall we, Brute?”

“She’s mine,” a muted voice hissed.

And then, before Ari could react, a blade penetrated her from behind, stabbing clean through her armor to emerge from underneath her diaphragm.

A mortal wound. Every breath she took burned.

Ari stared at the square-tipped blade in shock for a moment and then fell to her knees.

“Ari!” Briar said.

She jerked in pain as the blade withdrew, and then glanced over her shoulder.

Gemma stood there, katana covered in fresh blood. The mask covered her face once more, obscuring her features. Ari could almost imagine her snarling victoriously beneath that gaping grin.

Hoodwink gripped the armrests tightly with his gloves. Zak was bringing the shuttle on its fourth pass through the plasma flak when the nearest enemy turret flashed brighter than it ever had before. The incoming fire abruptly ceased, and all that remained of that particular point defense was floating debris.

With the aReal built into his helmet, Hoodwink zoomed in on the farther turret in range: it too was destroyed and inoperative. That could only mean the non-visible spectrum lasers from the human ship had finally fired.

Stanson's voice came over the radio. "Defensive weapons back online."

Well done, Tanner.

"Take us in," Hoodwink instructed Zak.

With the weapons back online, the humans would be firing continually at the unshielded mothership, Hoodwink knew, even if he could not see the laser attacks with the naked eye. The automated defenses of the Hercules ship were supposed to avoid hitting their own shuttles, or Hoodwink's alien flyer. He could only hope that the Children hadn't made any mistakes while programming the targeting systems.

Other turrets on the mothership continued to fire, though they were aimed at the human ship on the surface below—the landing zone on the hull was clear.

As the crafts neared the alien surface, Hoodwink said over the squadron line: "That's close enough Klay and Myerson. Hold your positions. Armageddon One going in."

The respective pilots "rogered" him. He glanced at the position of his flyer on the three-dimensional map that overlaid his vision: the autopilot hovered the craft nearby. Good.

"Launching grappling hooks," Zak announced. A moment later: "The hooks aren't taking. I'm going to have to land without their help."

"Do it," Hoodwink ordered.

"Turning on AI assist," Zak said.

Hoodwink watched the smooth metallic surface close on the cockpit

viewscreen. It extended as far as the eye could see, from horizon to horizon, marred by the occasional rectangular superstructure or depression.

Then the craft shook and the descent ended.

“We’re down,” Zak said. “Activating mounting magnets.” He paused. Hoodwink’s chair rumbled slightly. “Magnets have taken.”

“Let’s do what we came here to do,” Hoodwink said.

He unbuckled, floating from his seat. He shoved himself toward the cargo area and began unstrapping the nuke. Zak joined him and in moments they had the nuke floating free.

He flexed his arms, hauling the bomb toward the airlock. He felt the vibrations in his suit as the servomotors in the exoskeleton momentarily strained to change the motion vector of the mass. The engineers had placed small engines on the nuke that would sense attempts at directional changes and launch propellant to aid in steering. Some of that propellant fired.

Hoodwink opened the inner airlock and then the outer hatch. There was no explosive decompression, as the interior atmosphere was already evacuated. The hydraulically-actuated ramp descended to the hull—not that Hoodwink needed it in the weightless environment.

“Now we’re going to see how well your spacewalk training went, we are,” Hoodwink told Zak over their local line.

He and Zak shoved the bomb forward. The overhead of the shuttle fell away, revealing the empty void above. Jupiter hung there, the size of a fist, its swirling clouds reminding him of where he was.

Hoodwink vented propellant from his suit to keep close to the alien hull. Zak did likewise from his position on the opposite side of the nuke.

When they were well clear of the shuttle, Hoodwink said: “Vent dorsal propellant. Let’s plant this thing.”

The pair descended toward the hull and the flat-bottomed nuke struck soundlessly. They activated the mounting magnets.

As a test, Hoodwink attempted to pry the bomb free of the surface. His arms shook as the servomotors shuddered in protest.

“We’re good,” he sent Zak. “Arming the weapon.”

He set the countdown to ten minutes and then armed the nuclear core. The HLED display updated.

9:59.

9:58.

9:57.

He synced the countdown on his aReal to the timer, then switched to the squadron line and transmitted: "Armageddon One, deployed. We've got ten minutes, lads. Then shit's going to get radioactive."

Hoodwink and Zak vented propellant to return to the shuttle. When they were in, Hoodwink shut the airlock hatches and buckled himself in to his seat.

Zak released the magnetic mounts and jetted the craft from the surface to rejoin the waiting shuttles. The three moved forward, staying close to the hull, putting distance between themselves and ground zero. The autopilot of Hoodwink's flyer was programmed to follow Zak's lead by that point, and it kept within five hundred meters behind them.

Hoodwink ordered a halt when the group was just out of range of the nearest Satori point defenses, and well outside the blast radius of the planted bomb. They were still within radiation range of the latter, but in theory the armored hulls of the shuttles combined with the shielding in their suits would protect them from any serious radiation poisoning. And Hoodwink's Satori body could handle whatever dosage passed through his alien flyer.

"Now we wait," Hoodwink said. He glanced at the countdown indicated on his helmet aReal. Three minutes to go.

"I wonder what my sister is doing right now," Zak said into the silence that followed.

"She's probably enjoying her life on the Inside," Hoodwink said. "Eating ice cream."

Zak laughed nervously. "She's not the ice-cream eating type. But I hear you. Compared to what we're doing..."

Hoodwink fidgeted. He stared at that countdown, willing it to go faster, wishing he hadn't set so much time.

"She's a good girl," Zak continued. "Wouldn't harm a fly. My death probably tore her up, though. She's got no one now."

"She'll manage," Hoodwink said. "She'll have to." He thought of all the people close to him who had ever died. Cora. Fhavolin. Sarella. It hurt him greatly, the knowledge that most of them had died by his own hand, or because of something he had done.

Ah Sarella, forgive me.

He'd disposed of her body on Ganymede shortly after arriving; he lay her to rest beside the corpse of his previous surrogate. That their mummified remains should lie there together for most of eternity seemed somehow

fitting.

“You know,” Zak said. “It’s funny. Growing up on the streets like I did, in a world where space travel was something people only did in books, where finding the next meal was the greatest and only goal in life, I never thought, not in my wildest dreams, that I’d ever find myself on a space craft in orbit above Ganymede, waiting for a nuclear bomb to go off so I could blow a hole in an alien ship and then board it afterward.”

“You and me both, lad,” Hoodwink said. “It’s a long way from the streets of Severest to the moons of Jupiter.”

Hoodwink watched in trepidation as the remaining seconds ticked down.

“What if it doesn’t work?” Zak said.

“It’ll work,” Hoodwink said. “The engineers refurbished both warheads with the help of the training AIs. They replaced the metal parts and joints, and 3D-printed completely new carrier vehicles. They assured me that every part passed the recommended spec.”

“Oh, I’m sure the bomb will go off,” Zak said. “But I mean, what if it doesn’t create the crater we need?”

“The Satori aren’t invincible,” Hoodwink said. “Trust me. Their technology can only take them so far. Without the nano robot shield they are no more than sardines in a very large tin can. And we’re about to peel that can open.”

The timer on his aReal reached zero.

Hoodwink waited for the expected crater to appear.

The moments past. Still nothing.

“What happened?” Zak said. “Shouldn’t we have seen something by now? A flash? Debris?”

“It would seem our nuke didn’t detonate,” Hoodwink said.

So much for the engineers’ assurances.

Blaster in hand, Tanner made his way through the pod-lined passages with two more security men he had retrieved from the berthing area. The few robots he passed ignored his party, thanks to the rollback in their programming he'd performed. Still, he didn't feel all that safe passing those emotionless bastions of steel, and he was glad for the weapon.

He'd dispatched another security team along with some relearning specialists down to cargo bay seven, where the robots had gathered most of the newly awakened. When that team had reported in, they informed him that the bay housed three hundred people in total. At least two hundred and fifty of those people would have to be returned to the pod world if the food sources were to last.

Tanner was still waiting to receive Jeremy's location. It had been several minutes since Stanson had informed him that their old enemy was somewhere aboard, and Tanner hadn't yet heard anything else. He had been checking random compartments since then, but hadn't discovered anyone. He was growing frustrated, because he wanted to get back Inside and rejoin Ari. Time passed faster on the Inside, so the battle was probably over by then. Even so, his place was with her. He intended to capture Jeremy and return to her as soon as possible.

"Stanson," Tanner said into the comm via his aReal. "Have you completed your scan of all organic life aboard?"

"Just did," Stanson returned. "I was about to contact you."

"So what did you find? Where's Jeremy?"

"That's the crux," Stanson sent. "We can't find him. He's masking his signature somehow."

Tanner wasn't so sure that was the case. "Is it possible he isn't aboard?"

"What do you mean?" came Stanson's response.

"Maybe he found a wireless access port somewhere and then left the ship before we changed all the entry codes on the hatches," Tanner transmitted.

"Sure, but the signal from those wireless ports wouldn't penetrate the

hull from outside the ship,” Stanson replied. “So he wouldn’t be able to connect if he was somewhere on the moon.”

“But we routinely communicate with shuttles out there,” Tanner pressed.

“We do,” Stanson returned. “But those transmissions rely upon large booster nodes in the shuttles themselves.”

Tanner considered that. “So you’re saying a wireless access port could penetrate if it was used from a shuttle?”

“Possibly,” Stanson said. “Though the bandwidth requirements are fairly high. The lag would render such a connection useless.”

“What about an alien signal?” Tanner asked. “As in: a signal from a Satori mind to its human surrogate? How easily would that penetrate the hull?”

“Probably very easily,” Stanson transmitted. “We have no idea how most of their technology works, but we can assume that it’s somewhat more advanced than our own.”

“I want you to redirect those active scanners of yours,” Tanner sent. “See if you can identify the position of any alien flyers resting on the surface nearby. If we can’t find Jeremy aboard the ship, then we’ll just have to track down his Satori body.”

“On it,” Stanson replied. “I’ll get back to you shortly. In the meantime, it’s probably a good idea for you to get suited up. Assuming you actually want to pursue this angle.”

“I do.”



KADE STUDIED THE two guards, Lana and Craig. Lana carried the blaster. She was the one to watch out for.

Kade sat on the floor. Pots resided to his left. Brown his right. Just beyond Brown perched Sammuel, and Kade’s wife from the Inside, Teanne. They all sat so close together that their shoulders were touching. None of them were bound, not any more, though they kept up the pretense, holding their wrists behind their backs for the sake of the guards.

After Pots was originally tied up, he managed to secretly grab a pocketknife he’d left on a nearby shelf while Tanner awakened Brown, Kade and the others. After Tanner left, Pots cut through his flexicuffs and

surreptitiously passed the knife down the line. Each of them had sawed at their bindings until they were all free.

Good old Pots. Kade would have to see that he was rewarded once the ship was theirs again.

“Ready?” Kade said, underbreath.

“Ready,” Brown returned.

Craig stood up angrily. “I said *no talking!*”

“Sorry,” Kade said. “I really have to use the head.”

“Hold it,” Lana ordered him.

“What harm can I do?” Kade said. “We’re all bound and gagged.” He shook his leg, as if struggling against the urge to relieve himself. “I’ll piss on the floor if you don’t let me go.”

Lana exchanged a glance with Craig. “Should we let him piss on the floor?”

Craig wrinkled his nose. “I don’t want to smell it for the next three hours.”

When the guards still hesitated, Kade added: “There’s a protocol for the ethical treatment of prisoners, you know. Ari won’t be pleased when she finds out you wouldn’t let us use the head. We’re not animals.”

Lana sighed, then told Kade. “Move forward. Away from the others.”

Kade wormed his body toward the guards.

Unfortunately Craig, the unarmed one, advanced to meet him. Too bad.

“Stand up,” Craig said.

“I can’t stand on my own,” Kade told him.

Craig knelt to grab his upper arm. He must have seen that Kade was no longer bound, because he said: “What the—”

Kade leaped to his feet, smashing Craig in the nose with the hilt of the knife. He slid the blade under his chin and spun toward Lana, who was pointing the blaster directly at him.

“Drop the blaster and kick it to us,” Kade instructed her.

“Don’t listen to him!” Craig struggled in his arms.

Kade pressed the tip of the blade to his flesh and Craig stopped struggling.

Lana raised her hands in surrender and lowered the blaster to the deck. She kicked it toward the group.

Teanne immediately scooped it up.

“Give me the blaster,” Kade instructed Teanne.

His wife scowled at him, as if considering shooting him down right there. “No. It is mine.” She pointed the weapon at Lana.

Kade wasn’t entirely sure how much he trusted his wife to carry the weapon, though she had certainly proven herself in the recent battle. Her Wraylor avatar had been a killing machine out there. Still, he hadn’t really forgiven her for warning Ari of his attack on Crane. He supposed he couldn’t blame Teanne: the place *was* her birth city, even if it wasn’t real.

Kade shoved Craig toward Lana.

“Bind them,” he told Pots.

While Teanne kept the blaster pointed at the pair, Pots proceeded to retrieve the flexicuffs from the belts of the guards and bound their wrists behind their backs in turn. He forced them to sit in a corner of the room. Craig and Lana scowled at them the whole time.

“We have to move,” Brown said. “This location is compromised.”

“Obviously,” Pots told him.

Kade heard a beeping then.

“What is that?” Pots said.

The beeping increased in frequency. Kade realized it was coming from the blaster Teanne held.

He stepped toward his wife urgently.

“Drop—” Kade began.

The blaster detonated. Kade was launched backward by the shockwave. He smashed into the bulkhead and slid to the floor.

He blinked his eyes several times. His hearing was gone, at least for the moment. He crawled to what remained of his wife. Pots was already there, holding her. He was saying something, but Kade couldn’t hear.

A large hole had been torn into her side. Her face was covered in blood. She wasn’t breathing. She had no pulse.

Pots handed her to him, and Kade held Teanne in his arms.

“My wife,” he said, though he couldn’t hear the words. “My wife.”

Why did Teanne have to be the one to scoop up the blaster? She should have listened to him when he asked her to hand it over.

She despised him for letting her out of her pod and into the real world. For revealing the truth. He had broken the rules, risked everything to set her free, but none of that mattered. She resented him for it, mostly because he had failed to revive their sons. Both had proven to be extremely old and frail

in the real world; the first died the instant he slid from his pod, the second shortly thereafter. He remembered Teanne's accusing words as clearly as if she had spoken them yesterday: *You should have left them alone. You should have left me alone.* Yes, she despised him.

But how she felt about him didn't matter, because in the end he loved her. They had seen so much together. Experienced so many different worlds.

And now she is dead.

Kade lowered her body and in a fit of rage took the knife to the guards. He could hardly see for all the tears. When their pitiful lives finally ended, he turned his attention to the terminals.

Ari was responsible for the loss of his wife, however indirectly. He prayed that his minions hadn't eliminated her, not yet.

She needed to properly suffer.

What is the worst possible death I can give her?

He thought immediately of Brute and he grinned for the first time through the tears.

seven

On her knees, Ari watched hypnotically as Gemma raised her katana out to the side to perform the finishing blow. The woman obviously meant to take her head.

Ari could only watch, too stunned, and in too much pain, to do anything else.

The sword sliced through the air.

“No!” someone shouted. A woman’s voice.

Another blade intercepted the katana.

Renna. The Keeper drove the Dragon Lady backward under the strength of her blows.

“Men, attack!” Briar shouted.

Defenders rushed into the corridor that the enemy ranks had formed for Jeremy and Brute. The sally would buy Ari some time, but Briar had doomed most of those men to their deaths for it, she knew.

Briar knelt beside her. “Can you walk?”

“I think so,” Ari said. Somehow she was able to find the mental fortitude to staunch the wound to her gol body, and banish the pain. She would have to continually focus on that wound beneath her diaphragm if she wanted to live.

Briar hauled her to her feet. “We’re going to bring you somewhere safe. Somewhere we can apply a healing shard. We’re going to make you good as new, my niece.”

Briar led her away. More defenders rushed into the fray to cover their retreat. Bodies were sent flying left and right by Brute. She thought she heard Jeremy calling her name through the clamor of battle, but she ignored his taunts.

Briar picked out certain people as he went, calling them to his side to act as their honor guard. They left the square to shelter in a house on a side street. Men went upstairs to secure the second floor, while others guarded the front and back doors.

Briar helped Ari remove her breastplate, and then he retrieved two healing shards and applied the creatures to the entry and exit wounds on her

torso. He released lightning into the shards from the rings he wore, and the creatures became so cold that they burned.

Ari watched the one on her belly shrink into the flesh, leaving behind the pinkish skin of a newborn in place of the wound.

She felt utterly exhausted, but forced herself to rise nonetheless. “We have to get back to the square.”

Briar shook his head. “Ari. Dear niece. The battle is lost. Surely you realized that even as we forsook the field. We must retreat to the transit center and leave this city to its fate.”

“What about your men? And mine?”

Briar sighed. “They gave their lives for us.”

The guard at the front door spoke. “One of ours is running through the streets. He calls for Ari.”

“Get him,” Ari said.

The man, a member of the Black Den, glanced at Briar for confirmation, who nodded.

The guard hurried outside and returned a moment later with the courier.

“Ari!” the man said when he saw her. “Amoch has returned! And he is very angry. He has killed them all.”

“Amoch?” Ari said in alarm. That meant Tanner had failed after all.

“Yes,” the courier said. “He attacked our men, and his own men. He didn’t care: whatever moved, he killed it. Indiscriminately. It’s a massacre out there. We must flee!”

The courier abruptly floated into the air. His arms and legs squirmed. “Help me!”

He slowly turned upside-down, and then slammed into the wall so hard that cracks formed around him. He slid to the floor dead. Red blood stained the wall where he had struck.

Several others in the room also floated into the air, similarly turned upside-down, and lost their lives when their bodies smashed into the walls.

The front door exploded open.

Amoch stepped inside.

Ari tried to move but her body was frozen. Kade had apparently reverted the code change that allowed him to freeze avatars.

“Why hello, Ari,” the hooded man said. “I’ve missed you.”

Hoodwink instructed Zak to return the shuttle to the bomb. He ordered the others to remain behind, and they did so; however his alien flyer also followed along, keeping within five hundred meters as per the instructions he had originally programmed into the autopilot.

Debris occasionally spurted upward from that massive hull where the invisible lasers from the human vessel struck. Most of the plasma bombardments from the alien mothership had ceased for the moment—the turrets would have been the first structures the humans targeted when the shields went down.

Zak landed near the bomb without the aid of grappling hooks and activated the shuttle's mounting magnets.

"Stay here," Hoodwink told Zak. He unbuckled his seatbelt and floated to the airlock, opening the inner and outer hatches. He pulled himself out, venting propellant to steer himself toward the bomb.

When he reached the device he grabbed the handles and drew his body toward the control panel. The timer on the HLED was locked at 3:00.

"Looks like the countdown is stuck at the three minute mark," Hoodwink transmitted. "I'm going to try resetting it."

He entered ten minutes and pressed the arm button. The display began to count down once more. From three minutes, not ten.

2:59.

2:58.

"Shit." Hoodwink tried to change the value but the panel refused to respond. He hurriedly jetted toward the shuttle.

"Zak, get ready to launch the moment I'm inside," he transmitted. "We have three minutes!"

"You like to cut things close, don't you Hoodwink?" Zak replied.

Hoodwink pulled himself through the first airlock and shut the hatch.

"Go go!" he sent.

Hoodwink was thrown to the deck of the shuttle as the craft ascended, then slammed into the rear bulkhead of the airlock when Zak accelerated. He wished the damn craft had better inertial compensators.

Using the enhanced strength of his exoskeleton, he managed to crawl along the deck and leave the airlock. He shut the inner hatch and then continued crawling toward his seat.

Before he reached it the shuttle pitched forward precariously, spinning out of control.

“Talk to me, Zak!” Hoodwink said. His stomach was doing flip-flops.

“The nuke just detonated,” Zak said.

Zak managed to regain control of the craft a few seconds later. Hoodwink hauled himself into his chair and buckled the seatbelt.

“Show me what we’ve got,” Hoodwink said.

Zak switched the viewscreen to the aft external camera.

Above the alien hull behind them, glittering debris filled the void from horizon to horizon, a million bits of crumpled metal and ice ranging in size from specks to large boulders. Large swaths of mist gradually dissipated in the gaps between those fragments, the remnants of the flash-cooled water that had escaped before the compartment seals kicked in.

Beneath that debris, a kilometer-wide blast crater marred the hull.

“Well lads,” Hoodwink said over the squadron line. “Looks like we’ve got ourselves the arsehole we’ve been looking for.”



TANNER MADE HIS way across the surface of the Jovian moon. He carried a bulky briefcase in one hand that would serve as a signal booster, allowing him to stay in contact with the Control Room. The light from his helmet lamp lit the way. That illumination had an oddly sharp quality, given that there was no atmosphere for the photons to diffuse in.

It wasn't the first time he'd found himself bounding across that icy landscape. The last time he had been out there, Ari had just died, and three robots had been hunting him, intent on his destruction.

The gravity outside was almost a seventh that of the artificial field aboard the ship. Even with the bulky spacesuit, he weighed only forty pounds. As such, with each step he bounded more than two paces. He had to lean in the direction he wanted to go, keeping his center of mass forward.

On average, the icy crust of Ganymede was one hundred kilometers deep, but the current area resided atop a mountain range; if he looked carefully he could see the outline of yellow peaks encased in the ice below.

They were tricky to discern, given the layer of sand, grit and silicate that sheathed the surface in most places—debris from the aerial bombardments that had dug through to the rock below.

He came across the alien flyer. It was a triangular-shaped thing, about twice as wide as it was tall. Tanner circled the metallic object, but there were no obvious openings.

He approached the hull, which was covered in strange symbols. He pointed his blaster at an angle to guard against ricochets and released a shot.

The plasma blast struck the metal but was absorbed. No damage. He tried again. Not a dent.

Well that's not going to work.

Via his helmet aReal he transmitted a message to the Control Room. He wasn't sure the signal would penetrate the hull of the human ship, even with the signal booster he carried.

"Stanson, can you still read me?" he sent.

"I can," came the digitally warped reply.

"Can you pipe me into Hoodwink?" Tanner asked.

A moment later Hoodwink's voice came over the line. His voice sounded even more distorted than Stanson's had. "You better tell me Ari's with you."

Tanner felt a moment of shame. "No, Hoodwink. I—"

"What the hell are you doing!" Hoodwink lambasted over the line. "You're supposed to be with Ari. You promised me you would protect her."

"I know," Tanner said quickly. "I'm sorry. And I will. I—"

"Do you remember what you told me?" Hoodwink interrupted.

Tanner shifted uncomfortably. "Uh, yes?"

"You said: *I'll never let her die again, Hood. Never. I swear it.* And do you remember what I told you?"

Tanner felt himself growing smaller inside by the moment. "That if I lost her, I better not wake up."

"And I still mean that," Hoodwink said over the comm. "Anything happens to her, you better damn well be dead, too."

Tanner swallowed. "Okay. Can you help me now?"

There was a pause before Hoodwink answered. "I'm kind of in the middle of something, Tanner."

But you could take time away from what you were doing to yell at me?

“I’ve found Jeremy’s Satori flyer,” Tanner transmitted. “I need to get inside. Any ideas?”

“Jeremy?” Hoodwink returned. He sounded stunned. “The bastard followed me all the way from Earth?”

“Apparently so,” Tanner transmitted. “Couriers dispatched by the Keepers reported that he was part of the battle in Kismet, and had attacked Ari. Obviously we can’t let that go unpunished. I want to break into his flyer and stop him.”

“Attacking Ari!” Hoodwink said. “How dare he. When you get inside that flyer, you kill him, you hear?”

“That’s my intention, Hood.”

“Good,” came the response.

“So how do I get in?” Tanner asked. When no answer came, he added: “Hoodwink, still there?”

“Just a moment.”

A minute passed. Two.

A data request icon abruptly appeared on his aReal.

Tanner accepted. “What’s this?”

“An encoded EM wave. I had to go back to my Satori body to get you this. I hope you brought one of those portable signal boosters with you.”

“I did,” Tanner returned.

“Good. You can use it to transmit the wave.”

“The wave...?” Tanner asked as the data progress bar updated.

“An emulation of the Satori mind transmissions,” Hoodwink said. “An override code that will open the outer airlock of any Satori flyer you encounter.”

“Very nice,” Tanner sent. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it,” Hoodwink replied. “By the way, how is Ari doing?”

“I don’t really know,” Tanner admitted. “Other than the fact she’s still alive. I plan to return to the Inside the moment I’ve dealt with Jeremy. By the way, we’ve captured Kade and his fellow rebels, in case you haven’t figured it out yet. So at least that problem is dealt with.”

“That’s something, anyway,” Hoodwink returned. “This is probably the last time I’m going to be able to get in touch with you for a while, so unless there’s something else of utmost urgency you need, I’ll have to bid you farewell. Kill Jeremy, then take care of Ari like you promised.”

“All right,” Tanner said, though he doubted Ari would need much taking care of. “But if this doesn’t work, I’m calling you back.”

Hoodwink didn’t answer.

With his aReal, Tanner piped the alien signal into the booster and waited. He couldn’t hear or see the actual waves, of course. So he waited.

Ten seconds passed.

Thirty.

He tried the transmission again.

Another thirty seconds passed.

He thought the signal hadn’t worked, and was about to call Hoodwink back when the hull shuddered beside him.

A small hatch spiraled open in the side.

Tanner withdrew the blaster from his belt and lowered himself into the opening.

A man-sized pod resided on the metallic deck within. It reminded him of the pods on the Hercules ship that held the human sleepers. The central membrane had burst outward, as if it had already given birth to whatever it contained. Jeremy’s surrogate, undoubtedly.

The hatch abruptly sealed behind him, and the airlock began to fill with greenish-tinged water. It took a full minute until the compartment was submerged.

What could have only been the inner hatch spiraled open, and Tanner swam inside the central portion of the flyer.

Some sort of sea creature took up most of the space within. It was an ugly thing with a bulbous, tentacled torso that resembled a jellyfish, and lower appendages that could best be described as starfish-like in shape.

Jeremy must have alerted the system to wake his alien body if an intruder entered, because those tentacles abruptly flung out and wrapped around Tanner’s spacesuit. One of them ripped the pulse gun away, while another confiscated the briefcase.

Some of the tentacles squeezed, pulling in different directions, trying to rip his body apart. Other tentacles had barbs that pierced the fabric of his suit, and the toxic water began to seep inside.

Ari struggled against the invisible binds that held her, but she could neither move nor speak. Brute carried her upon its back. Briar and the others were gone: their bodies smashed into the wall of the house. Dead. There was a chance they lived on in the real world, since they resided in pods on the Outside. She, however, would die for real when her turn came.

She didn't fear death. How could she, after what she had seen? The golden gate, towering into the sky. The sense of peace, and love. Still, for all of that she would miss Tanner. And Hoodwink.

I can't die. Not yet. It's too soon.

Brute followed Amoch through the winding streets until they reached a hilltop that overlooked the southern edge of Kismet. Amoch, Brute, Jeremy and Gemma climbed that hilltop until the entire city stretched before them.

"Set her down," Amoch commanded.

Brute complied.

Ari was lifted into the air by an invisible force, her arms and legs forced outward so that she was spread-eagled.

"I'm going to destroy Kismet, Ari," Amoch said. "And you are going to watch. In the meantime, as punishment for killing my dear wife, Brute here is going to end your existence. Very, very slowly."

I didn't kill you wife! Ari wanted to say, but she couldn't open her mouth.

Brute withdrew a skinning knife from the back of its belt.

"Brute's going to flay you alive, you see," Amoch continued. "And as your gol body slowly dies, deprived of its skin, you will watch the city die. I am going to grant no one quarter, because of what you did. You will watch the citizens dying, knowing it's your fault that they awaken in the pod world, gasping for breath, their ribs breaking as they struggle to inhale for the first time. Brute, if you will?"

Brute tore off her clothes so that she wore only the skin-tight blue outfit that was an intrinsic part of her gol body. The beast then stabbed the knife into the cuff above her wrist, and peeled both the skin and fabric back, revealing the gory muscle tissue underneath. Blood dripped from the exposed

fibers. The pain was intense. Worse than anything she had ever experienced as a gol.

Amoch started down the hill, but paused to add: “You’ll notice that I’ve disabled your ability to ignore pain. You’re going to suffer, Ari. You’re going to feel every stab, every ripping of skin from muscle and bone. And I’ve also raised a teleportation shield around the area, in case you’re still holding out for a rescue. No one can move you, despite that you carry a tracker hidden in your computerized inventory. This is your end.”

Brute applied the knife to the base of her torn skin, and sawed while pulling back, releasing the dermis layer from the muscle tissue underneath. The agony was unbearable, so much so that Ari actually blacked out.

She awakened a moment later, gasping for breath, her lower arm throbbing with every heartbeat. The entire area had been flayed.

“You cheat me,” Brute was saying. “No falling unconscious!”

Ari almost laughed. *Like I have any control over that.*

Amoch had descended to the bottom of the hill. He unleashed carnage by alternately launching walls of flame, lightning and acid. He crushed buildings with a wave of his staff. People fled screaming from their homes, and he exploded their bodies into plumes of red mist.

Brute began sawing at the skin of her upper arm next.

Jeremy coughed.

In her distress, Ari had almost forgotten that she had an audience. She would have looked directly at Jeremy and Gemma in that moment, but she couldn’t turn her head, and saw them only at the periphery of her vision. It was probably for the best: Jeremy would simply sneer, most likely.

“Well this is just dandy,” Jeremy suddenly said to Gemma. “But why should Brute have the honor of killing her?”

Gemma didn’t answer, her expression hidden behind the dragon mask she wore.

“This isn’t right,” Jeremy continued. “I want to end her existence in my own fashion, in my own time. Preferably with Hoodwink present.”

Jeremy abruptly withdrew his fire sword. “Release her, Brute.”

Brute paused. “You have no power over me, krub.”

Jeremy strode forward angrily. “I said—”

Brute swatted at Jeremy with one arm, and the man went flying backward several paces. “Fool.”

Brute continued to work on her arm.

Jeremy clambered angrily up the hill.

Gemma stepped between Jeremy and Brute. She drew her curved katana.

“Stay back,” Gemma warned Jeremy.

He ignored her and continued his approach. From his sword he unleashed a powerful stream of flame at Gemma, which hurtled her into Brute. Off balance, the creature slammed into Ari, who didn’t move, frozen in place as she was by Amoch.

Brute recovered and batted Gemma away. She collided with Jeremy and the two rolled together down the hill. They separated after a few paces and engaged in swordplay.

Jeremy appeared to have the upper hand, at least at first: Gemma retreated under the surge of blows, barely able to keep up. Occasionally he launched flames, sending her sprawling. She always rose again, her armor protecting her from the worst of it.

As they fought, Ari felt a surge of hope. Though Jeremy wanted her dead in the end, if he could defeat Gemma and then turn on Brute, at the very least Ari would be granted a respite from the skinning knife. And if Jeremy somehow managed to defeat Brute, then she would have even longer to plot her escape while Jeremy figured out how to kill her “in his own fashion.”

It was an odd feeling, rooting for a man she hated.

Come on, Jeremy, she thought as Brute’s knife dug once more into her flesh. *Take off her mask. Then you can defeat her. Come on!*

Though she had once pitied Gemma, most of the compassion she’d felt had vanished when the woman had stabbed her in the back.

Kill her!

And then, abruptly, Jeremy vanished entirely from the simulation.

All the welling hope within Ari faded, leaving only the excruciating pain.

Gemma returned to watch Brute finish its task.

Hoodwink studied the bottom of the blast crater as Zak brought the shuttle into the expansive wound the nuke had torn. He initiated a full integrity scan.

“There.” He highlighted a smooth section with his aReal and transmitted the location to Zak. “Set her down here.”

Zak flew toward the targeted area.

The wide valley of the crater soon blocked the stars on all four sides. The basin was jagged in some places, with pipes and other structures protruding, while completely smooth in others. Hoodwink zoomed in on the walls of that steel valley and clearly discerned separate decks; it was like looking at the cutaway view of some gargantuan metal dollhouse.

The shuttle landed on the area Hoodwink had picked out, a location that once formed a bulkhead within the vast inner ocean of the mothership.

“Activating mounting magnets,” Zak announced.

Hoodwink’s chair vibrated.

“We’re solid,” Zak said.

Hoodwink unbuckled. “Let’s go.”

“You sure you’re up for this?” Zak asked, his voice echoing from the speakers within Hoodwink’s helmet.

Hoodwink paused. “What do you mean?”

“This is your race we’re attacking here,” Zak said.

“I’ve come this far,” Hoodwink said. “I can’t turn back now. And to clarify: they’re not my race anymore. How could they be? I’ve lived too long as a human. That said, I don’t want to see all Satori die. They’re not evil. Misguided, yes, but evil, no.”

“How many Satori are aboard this mothership?” Zak asked.

“Well, a colony ship like this is capable of holding up to two hundred thousand Satori. However, I’m not sure they loaded the full complement. I believe their mission was to journey to Ganymede to destroy the humans here, and then they were to return to Earth. So I’m guessing it’s manned by a skeleton crew of about two hundred Satori.”

“What if you’re wrong?” Zak said. “Do you really want to be responsible for the death of two hundred thousand of your kind?”

Hoodwink cringed. He had already been responsible for close to that number when he unleashed a different bomb under the oceans of Earth.

“Hopefully the Shell—the AI of this ship—will recognize what we’re doing,” Hoodwink said. “And it will begin evacuation measures to save most of the crew. And if not, well, their deaths are on the hands of the AI, not me. That’s how I look at it, anyway.”

Zak shrugged inside his suit. “Okay then.” His voice seemed thick with judgment, as if he thought: *I wouldn’t betray my own race.*

Hoodwink had met similar men before. Slightly insulted, he said: “All you need to know is that I deal with my conscience in my own way. Now if you’re done testing my loyalties, can we do this?”

Hoodwink floated from his seat and moved to the cargo area, where he grabbed the lone laser rifle from the armory. He also took the satchel containing the explosives and scooped up the bulky laser cutter.

Hoodwink shoved himself to the airlock, opened it, and propelled himself outside.

The other two shuttles had landed nearby. Hoodwink’s alien flyer remained overhead, hovering five hundred meters above the blast crater.

He vented propellant and steered toward the shuttle that contained their final nuke. The external ramp was down, and Klay was already coming outside, guiding the floating warhead. Klay carried his own satchel of explosives, along with the only other laser rifle the party possessed.

Hoodwink strapped the cutter to the top of the nuke, where Klay had already secured his own. Then he grabbed one side of the warhead and helped guide it.

Zak took point. Myerson brought up the rear. All of them floated, venting propellant to advance.

“Where are we taking it?” Klay transmitted over the comm.

Hoodwink indicated the cutaway view of the decks ahead. “Once we’re inside, we take every turn we can coreward.”

“How do we know which direction is coreward?” Klay asked.

“Use the directional indicators in your aReal,” Hoodwink said.

They reached the lowermost border of the steel valley and entered the open passage at its bottom. There was no gravity inside, so they floated onward. There was no light, either: they activated their headlamps, the cones of illumination reflecting from the icy steel walls.

Hoodwink took a downward branch in the passage, heading coreward.

He halted before a breach seal that had closed to protect the compartment beyond.

The plan was to use the explosives to open such blockages. When those became exhausted, the landing party would switch to the cutters.

Hoodwink planted the charges. While he did that, the rest of the group retreated a safe distance and positioned themselves flat on the deck.

Hoodwink rejoined the others. He checked that a) the laser cutters were tied down, and b) the mounting magnets glued the nuke to the deck. Satisfied, he lowered himself to a clear area and activated similar magnets in his boots and gloves. He felt his body press into the surface.

“Everybody ready?” he asked.

A chorus of affirmative replies came over his helmet speakers.

He triggered the remote detonator with his aReal.

The deck shook. He saw the shockwave of the released gases from the charges, but it quickly vanished, replaced by the greenish water that gushed from the breach. The liquid boiled and desublimated almost instantly, forming a cloud of fine, frozen ice pellets similar to mist that swept rapidly over the party. If his fellow astronauts hadn’t been glued to the surface, that mist likely would have carried them away.

Hoodwink could hardly see through the thick fog. He did, however, hear the impacts of the tiny pellets that continually assailed his suit. It reminded him of the sound of snow hitting the windows during a blizzard on a cold winter night in Severest. That life had seemed so long ago.

He thought of Ari on the Inside, and prayed she was all right. Tanner had sworn to protect her, but he had already betrayed that promise. The last time he spoke with Tanner, the Child had been on the surface of Ganymede, trying to get into a flyer that apparently contained Jeremy.

Javiol. Hoodwink couldn’t believe the Satori had followed him all the way back to Ganymede. Hoodwink had hoped Javiol died in the nuclear explosion on Earth. No such luck, apparently.

Hoodwink supposed Tanner hadn’t completely gone back on his word, because eliminating Jeremy would protect Ari in the end. If Tanner showed the alien mercy for whatever reason, then Hoodwink would simply have to do the murderous deed himself. A creature like that, one hell-bent on vengeance, one who wouldn’t think twice about destroying a world to achieve it, couldn’t be allowed to live. Yes, Hoodwink would set things right when he got back.

Assuming he actually returned, of course.

An object abruptly appeared in the thick mist and drew his attention back to the present moment. He thought it was made of metal, though he couldn't be certain. As the explosive decompression sucked it past, he caught a glimpse of a steel tail smashing into the deck just in front of him: it tore a wide gash as the owner struggled to find purchase, and then it was gone.

That was a Satoroid, of course. A robot built in the image of the satori.

Another Satoroid appeared in the flowing mist.

"Watch out!" Hoodwink said.

The robot flew past before he could even finish the words. There wasn't much he or the others could have actually done to avoid the thing anyway, not when they were all glued to the deck.

The boarding party waited several more moments like that, and finally the mist abated. Some of it lingered in the passage, eerie testament to the water that once existed in the area beyond.

The party released the magnets that held them in place, hoisted the nuke from the surface, and floated onward.

Beyond the breach, the passage widened. Pockets of green mist remained inside. He spotted another Satoroid. It slowly revolved in place, its tail occasionally twitching, its rotors useless in the vacuum environment.

"Give it a wide berth," Hoodwink instructed his companions.

They crossed that passage and reached another coreward seal. They breached it in a similar manner, endured the resultant decompression, and continued onward. Eventually they ran out of explosives and switched to the laser cutters. The actual breaching proved slightly more difficult, as Hoodwink had to mount himself to the bulkhead right beside the seal before applying the cutter. Mist would stream out until he had carved a big enough hole for the internal pressure to tear the rest of the seal away. When that happened, he had to hunker down and wait until all of the water boiled and desublimated, hoping the whole time that any robots didn't strike him with their tails as they were dragged out.

As the boarding party proceeded deeper, the steel yielded to mummified coralline, which had accumulated on the bulkheads. The Satori purposely grew it to give their artificial oceans a more homey feeling.

While Hoodwink breached one particular seal, the mist outflow abruptly ceased. He finished cutting out a rectangular portion of the door, and

peeled it back to reveal a fatty portion of flesh blocking the passage.

It could be only the giant body of a Xeviathi that plugged the hole, one of the slave classes. That meant he was close to his goal.

Hoodwink took his laser rifle and fired twice at the organic blockage. The insides of the beast gushed outward in succession, turning into a sickly green-red mist that soon subsided. With the third rifle shot, that misty gore continued unabated, and soon the Xeviathi was pulled entirely through the hole as its innards turned inside out, sucked into space through the wound Hoodwink had created. Bones smashed into the surrounding bulkheads, nearly striking the party members a few times.

“This is disgusting, Hood,” Zak said.

“I won’t disagree,” Hoodwink told him.

With the Xeviathi gone, the water within was free to mist through. Several minutes passed, with the party glued to the deck nearby, waiting for the outflow to end. Twice more the hole became plugged by a Xeviathi. Twice more Hoodwink removed the blockage with some rifle blasts.

When all the water finally boiled away, the group entered what proved to be the vastest cavern yet. They purposely kept close to the lower deck as they advanced.

They hadn’t gone far when Zak spotted something.

“What the hell are those?” Zak said.

Hoodwink zoomed in and saw the head-sized robots crawling along the deck. They had the elongated, tentacled bodies of squids, with crab-like claws on the underside that allowed them to latch onto surfaces.

“Defense robots,” Hoodwink said. “Another variant of Satoroid. Small, deadly things.” He slid the laser rifle down from his shoulder. “Don’t let them latch onto you. One of those breaches your suit, you’re dead.”

Hoodwink and Klay fired at the squid robots and disabled them one by one. At first the pair had ample time to target the next squids, but as the enemy numbers increased, they found themselves struggling to keep up.

Whenever a squid got close, it pushed off from the surface and vented water to propel itself toward the party members. Hoodwink had three close calls so far, and he began to wish he still had some explosive charges left.

“Look up!” Zak shouted.

Hoodwink spotted other metal squids descending from above, where they had crawled, previously unseen, upon the distant overhead.

“Retreat!” Hoodwink said. “We have to turn back or we’ll be

surrounded!”

And so they grabbed the nuke and vented propellant, retreating toward the passage that led into the cavern. Hoodwink and Klay occasionally paused to shoot at the squids.

When they reached the broken seal, the party members piled through.

“So what now?” Myerson said.

“We continue forward,” Hoodwink replied. “And find another path.”

“But they’ll chase us the whole way!” Myerson exclaimed. He was staring into the breach, obviously terrified. “They’ll block our retreat.”

“No one ever said this was a mission we would survive,” Hoodwink said softly.

“Uh,” Zak said. “Look.” He pointed down the passage.

Up ahead, more of the squids had appeared. Hundreds of them.

The deadly things completely blocked off all forward advancement.

eleven

Choking, Tanner felt like some rag doll that two kids were fighting over in the schoolyard. Jeremy's Satori body had wrapped itself around Tanner; those appendages squeezed so tightly he could barely inhale. The tentacles around his torso pulled in the opposite direction to those encasing his waist and lower body, threatening to tear him apart. Barbs on those tentacles pierced his suit in three places, and the toxic water flowed inside. So far none of the stingers had actually touched his skin underneath: he had a feeling he wouldn't survive very long if that happened.

He wished he had a strength-enhancing exoskeleton to fight back with, but Hoodwink and the pilots had taken all of the ones that were compatible with spacesuits. He only had what little strength he had left, and his wits. Both were proving futile at the moment.

The phosphenes of hypoxia spotted his vision, and he felt himself close to losing consciousness.

Black out and you die.

And just when he couldn't take it anymore, just when he was sure either his suit, his body, or both must tear in half, or that he must lose consciousness, the alien loosened its hold, apparently growing tired.

Tanner took a deep breath. The phosphenes cleared. He spotted the tentacle that held his blaster. Before the alien could squeeze him again, he vented propellant from his suit and hurtled himself through the water toward it.

The appendages that enwrapped his body followed loosely for a moment. One of the barbs pulled free.

The weary Satori suddenly realized what he was doing and tightened its hold, but the alien was too late.

Tanner tore the blaster from the Satori's grasp and spun it toward the beast. Before he could fire another tentacle shot out and pinned the weapon to his chest.

Dammit. So close.

Tanner struggled to free the weapon, but it may as well have been glued to his body. The alien squeezed him tighter than ever.

He forced the weapon upward, millimeter by millimeter, and fired at a nearby tentacle, severing it.

The alien drew him closer to its main body. The motion shifted his weapon slightly, so that the aim was clear of his suit. He fired.

The plasma bolt tore into one of the Satori's limbs, amputating it as well.

The alien responded by squeezing harder and curling all its free tentacles from view.

Tanner fired again, and that time the blast struck the bulkhead. He was hoping for a penetrating shot, or at the very least a ricochet, but as before the alien metal merely absorbed the blow.

He couldn't breathe. His vision was once more nearly consumed by phosphenes. His feet were soaked to the ankle in the burning liquid that had flowed through the gaps in his suit.

Then he saw it through the phosphenes: a portal of some kind. He could see the stars beyond.

Why hadn't I noticed that on the outside?

If he could just aim the weapon a few centimeters higher...

Feeling the veins pop out on his forehead, he strained against the Satori's hold. No use.

Perhaps...

Via the aReal in his helmet, he vented propellant from the back area of his suit. The tentacles blocked most of the egress ports, but apparently some were free, because his body tilted a few degrees.

He fired.

The energy blast struck the portal dead on.

It didn't penetrate. The portal simply absorbed the blow like the bulkhead.

In desperation he tried again. Again. One last time.

The fourth shot did it.

The portal melted away.

As the water violently evacuated the chamber, Tanner and the alien were dragged toward the blast hole. The Satori wasn't small enough to fit, nor was it big enough to seal the hole entirely. The alien thrust out its tentacles, releasing Tanner to grab onto whatever it could.

In moments all the water had vented and the expulsive force ceased. Tanner and the alien descended to the bottom of the flyer.

Above him, the Satori flopped its body about violently. Those motions became less animated with each passing moment, until they ceased entirely. Its body had turned gray and white.

And so ends Jeremy.

Tanner slid himself out from underneath the stiff tentacles. One of them broke off.

Because of the depressurization, his epidermis had been sucked into the tiny perforations the barbs had made in the suit, and the skin formed temporary, painful seals. He would have a few bruises, later. Not to mention vacuum burns.

Via the sweat collection ducts in the heels of his boots, he vented the toxic fluid that by then had reached to his lower calves. The stuff formed green crystals as it evacuated beside him. While that was ongoing, he retrieved the suit repair kit from the cargo pocket of his leg assembly and sealed all three perforations. His skin throbbed painfully in those areas where it had been severely pinched and exposed.

He waited for the last of the fluid to vent, then he wiggled his toes, just to assure himself that they hadn't been burned away. While his feet burned almost as badly as the pinched areas of his skin, everything seemed intact.

Tanner retrieved the signal boosting briefcase and contacted Stanson. "Jeremy has been dealt with."

He expected a congratulations, or some other praise, but instead Stanson returned: "Craig and Lana stopped responding a while back. I sent men to relieve them. What they found wasn't pretty."

Tanner felt dread forming in the pit of his being. "What did they find?"

"The brutally stabbed bodies of Craig and Lana. There was someone else, too. The woman you found with Kade. Apparently she'd taken some kind of blaster wound."

"Kade and the others?" Tanner asked.

"Gone."

"He's back on the Inside," Tanner said.

"That's the likeliest possibility, especially considering that violent deaths on the Inside have spiked again, centered on Kismet. We've already lost two other Children who acted as Keepers there."

Tanner plugged the wireless access port that was part of the signal

booster into the provided slot on the abdomen area of his spacesuit. The corresponding connection within the suit telescoped into his belly button.

“I need Ari’s position,” Tanner sent.

“She’s still in Kismet,” Stanson returned. “But we can’t teleport you directly to her tracker. There’s some sort of shield in place.”

Tanner tried to access the Inside via the wireless access port. It didn’t work. A message flashed on his aReal.

Bandwidth requirements not met.

He had to get back to the Hercules ship.

Tanner disconnected the access port, leaped onto the dead body of the Satori, and hauled himself through the portal. He bounded across the hull of the flyer and onto the slippery surface of the moon beyond.

Each step hurt his tender feet, but he didn’t care. Ari’s safety overrode any discomfort he felt.

I’m coming, Ari.

twelve

Ari held her arm very still, panting. Any movement pained her. After Brute had finished skinning her arm, Amoch had returned to check on the creature's progress. He had released his freeze on her avatar, and they had tied her to a stunted tree nearby instead.

Amoch had instructed Brute to resume the flaying, and then returned to the bottom of the hill to continue his assault on the city. Occasionally a Keeper approached with reinforcements, but Amoch defeated them within moments.

Brute had not resumed the torture immediately, apparently wanting to drag out her suffering for as long as possible. Instead the beast merely stared at her. It had been doing so for the past ten minutes, at least.

"Just finish it," Ari begged. She wished Amoch hadn't disabled her ability to block pain, because the agony was unbearable.

"Don't listen to her," Gemma told the creature. "Let the gol suffer. Nine must pay for the wrongs she has done against us all."

"I've never wronged you," Ari gasped.

Gemma lifted the dragon mask to look at her with her own eyes. "But you have, gol. How does it feel to be on the receiving end of everlasting pain?"

Ari looked away. "Your brother is alive..." But she knew it was useless. The woman was unreachable. Why bother to even try? Gemma had seen her brother die. To her, the current reality was all there was, her brother's death completely real.

Brute approached Ari again at last. The beast took the skinning knife to her lower leg that time, cutting a circle around her ankle just below the cords that bound her so that the creature could carve away the skin of her foot.

Ari gritted her teeth at the pain as Brute worked. She struggled against her binds but the movements only caused further pain.

She forced herself to look at Gemma. There was no pity in those eyes. She saw hatred, defiance, and barely concealed disgust, the latter no doubt for the grisly mess that Brute was making of her body.

She's the only one who can save me now, Ari thought. I have to try to get through to her. I have to.

"We're on a starship right now," Ari told her through the agony. Talking helped the pain somewhat, by distracting the mind. "A Hercules class. A generation ship. Meant for colonization. We escaped Earth during an alien invasion. The alien mothership hunted us down and we crashed on Ganymede. We managed to destroy that mothership with the help of a sympathetic member of their kind. But another mothership has come. It's attacking us right now, from orbit. Your brother is helping us. He's piloting a shuttle that's carrying a very powerful bomb. He's bringing it to the mothership. He's going to save us all."

"Perhaps I should cut out your tongue," Gemma said. "It won't kill you, but at least it would stop the lies. Then again, if you choked on your own blood, I'd never forgive myself for shortening your suffering."

"Nor would I," Brute told Gemma.

"You pretend to be strong, but it's an act," Ari told her. "I can see right through it. You've lifted the mask over your face, but not from your soul. Deep down you're still a little girl hiding from the world. Someone who's lost without her brother."

Gemma's face darkened. She wrapped her fingers around the hilt of the katana that protruded above her right shoulder, where it was sheathed on her back. Her knuckles whitened, but then she abruptly released her hold.

"I know what you're doing," Gemma told her.

"What am I doing?" Ari flinched, because Brute had finished with her foot and had moved on to sawing away the skin along her calf.

"You're trying to make me kill you," Gemma said. "You want me to grant you release from your suffering. But I refuse."

Ari sighed. She was never going to get through to the girl. It was hopeless. Nor would she escape Brute. There came a time when one simply had to give up and accept one's fate.

And then she remembered something.

"Woolly," Ari said.

Gemma stared at her. "Excuse me?"

"Woolly," Ari repeated. "That's what your brother nicknamed you. A long time ago."

Gemma stared at her. Was that a hint of recognition Ari saw in her eyes, or was she imagining it?

“Perhaps you’ve forgotten that name,” Ari continued. “But your brother hasn’t. You see, he told me about the time the two of you were picking the pockets of nobles along Grassylane.” Ari watched Gemma’s face closely as she spoke, looking for signs that she was getting through. “He said a town guard caught him, and promptly led Zak toward the nearest jail. But you broke into a cattlemonger’s pen and freed the woolly mammoths to distract the guard. You and Zak got away in the confusion that followed. He nicknamed you Woolly that day.”

Gemma tried hard to hide her emotions: she simply stared at Ari, her face an impassive mask. But her eyes, they had definitely changed. The disgust was still there, as was the defiance, but the hatred seemed gone, replaced by confusion.

Come on, Gemma. Realize the truth. For all our sakes.



GEMMA COULDN’T BELIEVE the story she had just heard. There was no way Nine could know those things about her brother. And yet, when it came to it, Nine *was* still a gol. Perhaps it had somehow drained her brother’s memory before killing him.

And that was the crux of the matter. Nine had killed him, along with the other gol, Ten. Nothing could change that.

And yet, what if the gol was speaking the truth? What if Zak was alive and well in the so-called “real world” that Nine spoke of? The same world Amoch claimed existed atop their own? If Nine was speaking the truth, then Gemma was losing the only opportunity she had to reunite with Zak. Then again, Nine had told her earlier that it was against the rules to bring Gemma to her brother, so even if she saved the gol, there was no guarantee that Nine would help her in return.

Glancing at the gol’s face, Gemma felt a moment of compassion when those features twisted in obvious agony from the work that Brute was doing. No creature should have to suffer as Nine did.

But the gol killed my brother.

And what if Nine did not?

The suffering swayed Gemma, and she decided that if there was even a small chance that she could be reunited with Zak, she must take it.

She resolved to strike a bargain with Nine: the gol’s life in exchange

for the opportunity to rejoin Zak. Nine would have to go against the so-called rules that prevented Gemma from seeing her brother, and if the gol did not, or was otherwise lying, it would die.



BRUTE FINISHED SKINNING her entire right leg and stepped back to observe its handiwork. It grunted in delight.

“You fainted again,” the beast said.

Ari hardly heard. Spreadeagled there on the tree, she had given up on Gemma, and had allowed her head to bow. She didn’t have the strength to hold her chin up, not anymore.

And then she heard a sickening sound that reminded her of a blade violently parting flesh. She gathered her reserves and forced herself to look up.

The square edge of a katana protruded from Brute’s midsection.

The creature glanced down in puzzlement. “How?”

The blade retreated into that torso, and the four-armed creature spun around, discarding the skinning knife to draw the four scimitars from its belt. Yes, four: the creature had replaced the weapon it had broken earlier, apparently.

Brute bore down on Gemma, who had lowered her dragon mask.

Ari smiled very slightly.

So I finally got through to her.

She was vaguely aware as the two fought. It was obvious that Gemma was losing, though so far her impenetrable armor had prevented Brute from skewering her. Brute plunged all four blades into her torso at the same time, onto nearly the same spot, likely trying to perforate the breastplate, but the creature succeeded only in flinging her body backward across the ground.

And then Tanner rushed in from the side and joined the fight.

Tanner.

Wanting to join the fray, Ari involuntarily pulled at her binds. The resultant pain made her black out.

She came to in time to watch Tanner and Gemma defeat Brute. It was on its knees before them. Gemma’s katana protruded from its chest. Together he and Gemma had broken its four blades. Several gashes lined its torso. Both of its right arms were blackened and smoking, as was half its chest.

Tanner brought his fiery blade out to the side and swept it down, separating Brute's head from its shoulders. The creature toppled.

Tanner rushed to Ari's side.

"You're a... sight... for sore thighs," Ari quipped.

"You've still got your sense of humor," Tanner said. "That's a good sign. Here, drink this." He offered her a flask. She took a sip and felt slightly reenergized.

"How did you do it?" Ari asked him.

"I had the Children edit Brute's invulnerability flags earlier. Looks like Kade forgot to reset them when he came back in. Also, the Children finally found the code that traps you here. We've fixed your avatar. You can return, once we get out from under the shield Kade raised here."

He applied five healing shards, distributing them between her damaged arm and leg, and unleashed lightning into the starfish-like creatures from his rings. When the cold subsided, her skin was healed.

Tanner reached up to cut through her binds. Ari noticed that Gemma stood behind him. She no longer wore her mask.

Tanner removed the cord that bound her right wrist, but before he could free her other arm, a blade slid in front of his larynx.

A katana.

"Before you set her free, Ten," Gemma said. "Take me to the Outside. I want to meet my brother."

"Gemma," Tanner said. "We can't take you anywhere until we deal with Amoch. We—"

She pressed the blade closer. "Take me to my brother!"

Ari's gaze was drawn by movement behind Gemma. "Watch out!"

Gemma glanced over her shoulder but it was too late.

A broken blade sliced into the side of her head. The coif Gemma wore deflected some of the impact, but her unarmored face bore the brunt of the blow. Gemma toppled under the impact like a rag doll.

Tanner spun to defend Ari from the headless body of Brute, which had arisen to fight on. Tanner easily defeated the range of those broken scimitars, and in moments had reduced the creature to a pile of burning, dismembered limbs.

Tanner cut the three remaining cords that bound Ari, allowing her to go to Gemma. The right side of the young woman's face was a gory mess.

"Do you have any more shards?" she asked Tanner.

He shook his head. "I could try to run outside the teleportation shield, disbelieve, and then come back..."

"She'll be dead by then." Ari gripped Gemma's hand. "It looks like you get your wish after all, young one. You're going back to the real world." Gemma blinked vacantly, and then her breathing ceased.

Ari retrieved Gemma's katana, since she herself had been disarmed, and stood. She gazed down the hill to the city below. She couldn't see Amoch, though she had a general idea where he was from the screams. A building collapsed at the end of a long line of burnt-out houses.

"Like Brute, Amoch is no longer invulnerable," Tanner said.

"He froze me back there," Ari told him.

"The Children fixed that, too, before I came in," Tanner said. "He won't be freezing us anymore."

"What about his minions?"

"He only has three left that I know of," Tanner told her. "Brown and Pots, and an older man."

"They're on the Inside with him?"

Tanner nodded. "Probably. Though I'm sure he's left at least one of them on the Outside, watching them. Let's go to Severest, interrogate the Dwarf, and get the sub-AI to track down Kade's new location."

"And allow Kismet to be destroyed in the meantime?"

"The Children are making deck by deck sweeps," Tanner said. "And are enlisting some of the robots to help. They might very well find him before we reach the Dwarf. Kismet can endure until then."

"Well at least the robots haven't turned on us again. Yet." Ari watched another building crumble; three burning individuals raced into the street only to drop a moment later. "Kismet can endure, you say? Finding Kade on the Outside could take anywhere between ten minutes to two hours. Time passes so much faster here. By the time we get him, Kismet will be lost. No, I say we take him now."

"Are you sure you're up for it?" Tanner asked. "After what you've gone through?"

"I am. But give me some more of that energizing drink first."

Tanner offered her the flask and she drank deeply.

She wiped her lips. "All right then."

Tanner nodded toward the opposite side of the hill. "Let's make an ammo stop, first."

He led her down the far side of the hill, pausing behind a boulder where he had stowed two bows and quivers, along with a fresh fire sword for Ari.

Ari and Tanner secured the quivers to their belts and hefted the bows over their shoulders. She exchanged the katana for the fire sword and sheathed it.

They left the hill behind and proceeded into the city. They followed the sounds of terror and paused when a building imploded almost right in front of them. They retreated to a rooftop position on an adjacent street.

From their hiding place, Ari and Tanner spotted Amoch in his robes. Two men were at his side, dressed as Keepers: likely the avatars of Brown and Pots, or the third man Tanner mentioned.

Oblivious to their watchers, the trio walked forward casually, destroying everything in sight. The three were located far enough away from each other that Ari and Tanner's exploding arrows would affect only the targeted men.

"I'll take Amoch." Ari loaded an arrow and aimed her bow.

"I'll take the man on his left." Tanner likewise prepared an arrow.

"Ready?" she asked.

In response Tanner fired.

Shit.

She released her arrow.

The first man beside Amoch exploded.

The second man rushed toward Amoch and leaped in front of him. The arrow struck his body and he disintegrated in a spray of body parts, sending Amoch flying backward.

Ari quickly loaded another arrow and aimed into the street, but Amoch was gone.

"I never said to fire!" Ari scolded him.

"Sorry," Tanner replied sheepishly.

"I was going to count to three—"

She paused. Her body felt different, somehow. She tried to move, but found that she was glued in place. She could breathe, and move her lips and tongue, but that was it.

"Uh, Tanner?" she said. "I can't move."

"Neither can I."

"I thought you said the Children fixed that," Ari complained.

“They had,” Tanner replied. “The man Kade left on the Outside reverted that change, I’m guessing.”

“Wonderful.”

Several tense moments passed. Her gaze was locked toward the street, in the direction she was looking before her body froze.

Finally Ari heard what sounded like someone clambering onto the rooftop behind her, followed by the repeated clank of a staff’s ferrule against the tiles. The noise grew in volume, occurring in regular intervals like the ticking of some clock of death.

And then it ceased.

A black robe lurked beside her.

“Ari,” Amoch said. “Though I do not want to, it seems I have to kill you myself. Everyone else who hates you is dead.”

He vanished from view, walking behind her. Ari expected the killing blow to come any second.

It did not.

Instead, Amoch’s robe appeared on the opposite periphery of her vision. He stood beside Tanner.

“Thank you for showing up, Tanner. Your presence gives me a wonderful idea. How ironic it would be if you were the one who killed Ari.”

Amoch stepped into Tanner’s avatar. The black robes passed right through his body, so that in a moment only Tanner stood there.

Tanner lowered his bow, no longer frozen. “Why hello there.” He lifted Ari, repositioning her so that she was facing him. He smirked. “That’s better. Wouldn’t want you to have to observe your own death from the periphery of your vision.”

Tanner withdrew his fire sword.

“Fight him, Tanner!” Ari said.

“Don’t you understand?” he said. “Tanner is gone. Just like when One overwrote Jeremy’s avatar, I have overwritten Tanner’s. He is seeing and hearing everything that I am, but is powerless to respond in any way. A prisoner in his own body.”

At the corner of her eye, Ari spotted a group of refugees trying to flee across the street below.

“Oh no you don’t!” Tanner spun toward them and unleashed flames from the blade. The refugees transformed into burning, charred masses on the cobblestone.

“Please,” Ari said.

An arrow struck Tanner’s chest. It was an ordinary arrow, thankfully, and not an explosive one. Tanner staggered, and then pivoted toward the source of the arrow.

Ari spotted a survivor from the Black Den ducking from view behind a curtain across the street. Tanner must have seen it, too, because he unleashed a terrible stream of flame from his sword, turning the second-story room into a conflagration. A man fell outside, burning.

Tanner broke the arrow from his chest and turned toward her.

“Fight it, Tanner,” Ari said.

Tanner snarled.

His expression suddenly softened and Ari was set free of the invisible binds. Unready, she collapsed.

“It’s me!” Tanner said as she scrambled upright. “The arrow has weakened him. Quickly, kill me!”

“Tanner, I can’t.”

“Do it now!” Tanner said. “I can only hold him at bay a moment longer!”

Tears streaming down her face, Ari withdrew her sword and plunged it into Tanner’s chest.

The love of her life gasped in disbelief and fell to his knees.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

Tanner vanished. In his place knelt Amoch, the broken arrow protruding from his robes alongside the sword hilt. His face was no longer sheathed in darkness.

Kade looked up at her and smiled. “Didn’t... think... you had it in you.”

He crumpled, rolling off the rooftop, landing dead in the street below.

She retrieved the handmirror from her belt and began the process of disbelieving reality, hoping the code change that trapped her on the Inside had been removed as Tanner promised, and that Kade’s teleportation shield didn’t reach the rooftop.

Please don’t be dead, Tanner.

thirteen

Hoodwink gazed at the hordes of robot squids that blocked the forward direction, then glanced at a similar swarm that approached from the breached seal in the side bulkhead.

“Retreat!” he shouted.

They carried the bomb backward through the passage, putting several paces between themselves and the enemy.

Hoodwink called a halt. “This is good enough. At least here we only have to defend in the forward direction, rather than both the front and side.”

“Wait, why are we stopping?” Zak said.

“We have to plant the bomb,” Hoodwink told him. “We can advance no further. The robots will eventually overrun us if we continue the retreat.”

“But if we plant the nuke here,” Zak said. “Will we destroy the ship entirely?”

“No,” Hoodwink admitted. “But it will disable them. Perhaps permanently. We won’t have to worry about the Satori for a very long time to come.”

Hoodwink tossed the rifle to Zak. “Cover Myerson and me while we arm the weapon!”

Hoodwink and Myerson activated the mounting magnets and secured the nuke to the deck.

“I’m setting the timer to thirty minutes,” Hoodwink transmitted. “It’ll be close, but the rest of you should be able to make it out.”

Hoodwink armed the weapon and the countdown began.

30:00.

29:59.

29:58.

“I’ll stay and guard the bomb,” he told Zak. “Give me the rifle.”

“You’re going to stay alone?” Zak said.

“I am.”

Zak shook his head. “Klay and I are having enough trouble keeping these squids at bay between the two of us.”

Hoodwink saw that they weren’t lying. For every robot the pair

incinerated, another took its place almost instantly. If Hoodwink stayed alone, he would very quickly be overwhelmed.

“Go, Hoodwink!” Zak said. “We’ll cover the two of you. Myerson, go with him!”

“Gladly!” Myerson said. “Thank you, Zak. Klay. I won’t forget this. Hoodwink, let’s go!”

“No,” Hoodwink said. “I won’t be one of those who runs. I stay. Zak, give me your weapon.” Zak didn’t respond. “Fine. Klay, give me the rifle.”

“Don’t do it, Klay!” Zak said. “Hoodwink is too valuable to humanity. His knowledge about the aliens is irreplaceable. We can’t allow him to die. Plus he’s humanity’s only ally: the only one who will protect us if they ever return. I’m sorry Hoodwink, you have to go.”

“You don’t understand,” Hoodwink said. “When I die, I will merely return to my alien body. So I won’t be dead, not really.”

“But you won’t be able to communicate with us,” Zak insisted. “Not when you’re in alien form.”

“That is true, it is,” Hoodwink agreed. “But I will simply return to Earth and find another human body.”

Zak seemed about to give in.

But then Klay spoke up: “What about your flyer? It’s too close. When the nuke explodes, the compressed gases will travel through the corridors we’ve unsealed, explosively venting to the outside. Your flyer will be destroyed in the shockwave, along with your Satori body.”

“Come on Hoodwink, go!” Zak said over the comm. “You’re wasting precious time!”

“Give me a moment,” Hoodwink said. “I’ll return to my alien body and move my flyer out of the way, and then I’ll come back to defend the bomb.”

“There isn’t time,” Zak said.

“Make time. Decide between the two of you who will stay.”

Hoodwink thought the code word and that reality vanished.



GRAOL ASSUMED CONTROL of his flyer and piloted the craft well away from the large blast crater, taking care not to place the vessel in the path of any other Satori point defenses.

He moored himself to the consciousness transference unit and initiated the process that would return him to his surrogate body.

It didn't work.

It was one thing to connect to the surrogate using the powerful transmitters found aboard something like the mothership, but to do so from the flyer with its relatively weak EM generators was another entirely. He was simply too far from his human body.

He repositioned the flyer back inside the crater, returning the craft to its previous orbit. There was nothing for it, then. When the nuke exploded his human body would die and the shockwave from the resulting expanding gases would destroy his flyer, too, along with his real body. Graol's end had come.

He quickly programmed the autopilot to perform a hard banking maneuver upon his awakening. It was doubtful the ship would respond in time, as his consciousness would likely arrive the same moment as the blast wave, but he would be remiss for not trying.

He planned to lie to Zak and the others, of course.

Let them think I will live.



HOODWINK OPENED HIS eyes. He was strapped to someone's back. He couldn't move. The overhead floated past above him.

"What—" Hoodwink struggled against the invisible binds that held him. He tried the squad line. "What the hell is going on?"

"You're back, then," Myerson said as he vented propellant, changing directions to ascend a vertical shaft.

"Where's Zak? Klay?"

"I'm sorry, Hoodwink," Myerson said. "We weren't sure we could trust you. So we installed a failsafe in your suit."

Hoodwink couldn't believe what he was hearing. "A what?"

"A failsafe. We locked your exoskeleton. You can't move."

Hoodwink tried the override controls on the helmet aReal but they didn't work.

"I didn't authorize this!" Hoodwink said.

"I know," Myerson returned. "Zak and Klay thought it was for the best."

Hoodwink struggled against the exoskeleton, but the unit held him tight. He tried the squad line again, hoping that Zak and Klay were still in range.

“Zak, don’t do this goddammit! You don’t have to die!”

“They can’t hear you, Hoodwink.”

Hoodwink struggled one final time and then deactivated the comm to let out a long shout of frustration. Out of all of them, he had wanted Zak to live the most. Zak, the youngest of them all, who had emerged from the Inside only recently. It was far too soon for his life to end.

“I have a message for you from Zak,” Myerson said. “Would you like me to play it?”

“Yes,” Hoodwink said, unable to conceal the emotion from his voice.

“I’m sorry, Hood,” Zak’s voice came over the helmet speakers. “There wasn’t any more time. Good luck. I hope you make it out. If you do, say hi to Ari for me. And if you ever see my sister again, tell her I love her.”

The moments passed in a blur of tears, and then before he knew it Myerson hauled him out into the blast crater and loaded him aboard one of the waiting shuttles.

Myerson strapped the immobilized Hoodwink into the cargo area and sat down in the cockpit.

“Will your flyer follow us?” Myerson asked as the shuttle left the surface.

He didn’t answer.

“Hoodwink?”

“Yes,” he finally said in defeat.

He piped the ventral camera feed into his aReal and watched the blast crater diminish below him. Hoodwink’s flyer kept pace with the shuttle.

When the blast crater was the size of a fist, the bomb detonated. Superheated gases vented from the crater.

The mothership split open.

The escaping ocean water misted, boiling away and desublimating. But Hoodwink hardly saw for the conflicting emotions he felt. Victory. Defeat. Joy. Mourning.

Forgive me, my people, for doing this.

And forgive me, Zak, Klay, Raynor and Clark.

fourteen

Ari opened her eyes in the real world. The Children had indeed fixed her avatar, and Kade's shield hadn't reached her location on the rooftop.

She was still in the relearning center. It was crowded. Her body had been moved to one corner, and an intravenous feed connected her to a total parenteral drip.

Flinching, she slid the needle from her arm, and then opened a first aid kit on the floor nearby to wrap the wound in gauze. She reached under the blue patient gown she had been given and, after convincing herself that no one was watching her, she removed the excretion collection tubes from her lower body. When that embarrassing task was done, she struggled to her feet and blinked the sudden phosphene fireworks from her vision.

"Ari!" Caylin had been seated nearby, probably playing some game on her aReal, but she rushed over to give her a hug.

"Not now, Caylin." Feeling weak, Ari forced her way through the crowded compartment until she reached the exit hatch.

"Where are you going?" Caylin asked. Apparently the little girl had followed her.

"I have to find Tanner," Ari said. "Is it safe out there?"

"The robots are gone," Caylin told her.

That was all Ari needed to know. "Stay here."

She entered her code and raced out into the steel halls. It took her five minutes to navigate the passages and trunks to the deck she sought, but finally she barged inside the Control Room.

There were several empty stations. Dead Children lay in body bags on the far side of the room.

She began to check those bags one by one.

"Tanner's not there," Stanson said.

Ari spun toward him. In her distraught state, she hadn't thought to ping Stanson to confirm that Tanner was actually still in the Control Room. "Where is he, then?"

"He boarded the ship via a hatch on deck three. I'm guessing he connected to the Inside immediately, via a wireless access port."

“Send me the hatch location!” she ordered Stanson.

The requested item appeared on her aReal a moment later.

Ari spun about and hurried to the hatch. When it opened, Tanner stood there.

She stared at him uncomprehendingly for a few moments and then she threw herself into his arms.

“Tanner. Tanner.” She kissed him, unable to quench the urgent need inside of her.

Tanner returned her kiss just as passionately.

Finally he pulled away. “When you thrust your sword into my chest, Kade lost his hold over me entirely and I managed to disbelieve. I can do it without a mirror sometimes, as you know. The sword helped, of course. I don’t know if you noticed my expression, but I couldn’t believe I’d been stabbed. My mind just couldn’t comprehend it. And that hastened my return to the real world.”

She hugged him tight, not wanting to let go. “Don’t ever make me do that again.”

“Look,” someone said from the Control Room behind her.

Ari led Tanner inside. The alien ship filled the viewscreen. The colossal vessel had been split into two pieces, with one portion roughly a third the size of the other.

“Guess we don’t have to worry about a threat from that department for a while,” Stanson said.

“What about Hoodwink?” Ari said.

epilogue

Ari, Tanner, and Hoodwink watched the sun set from the top of the Forever Gate that surrounded Kismet. Their legs dangled over the steep precipice. Gemma was with them, dressed in her newly minted gol clothes, the binary number 1011—eleven—stamped onto her chest.

Briar was with them, too, his chest similarly labeled, though his number was 1100—twelve. He seemed to be enjoying his new life as a gol. He had been utterly surprised when he had awakened in the real world as a “skinny wretch,” and he had demanded that they put him back Inside forthwith so that he could be restored to his former girth.

Caylin was also present. She had taken both Gemma and Briar under her wing in the relearning center, and while not officially their relearning specialist, she spent most of her time with them.

“Do you think he’s watching us?” Gemma asked.

Ari glanced at her. “Your brother?”

“Yes.”

Ari considered her words. “He’s passed the final Forever Gate that all life must eventually cross in this existence. But I think, given the multitude of dimensions and realities in this universe, there is a good chance that yes, he is watching even here in this nested world of the mind. And if he is, I’m sure he’s very proud of what you’ve done, Gemma. Proud of what we’ve all done.”

Gemma reached across Hoodwink and momentarily gripped her hand. “Thank you.”

Ari observed the Keepers working far below, Children conscripted into repairing the world in real-time. They moved from place to place, erasing ruined streets, replacing them with houses and shops, and populating them with furniture and accessories.

Hoodwink followed her gaze.

“It’s not utopia, yet,” he said. “But it’s getting there, it is.”

Ari felt another hand touch hers. It was Tanner beside her. His fingers entwined her own.

She looked into his eyes.

“It’s *our* utopia,” Tanner said.

“Then let’s make the best of it.” She pressed her lips against his for a short kiss.

“I can’t watch this mushy stuff!” Caylin leaned forward and launched herself over the edge. Gemma went, too, followed shortly thereafter by Hoodwink.

“I don’t want to do it,” Briar said. He glanced at Ari and Tanner. “But if I don’t, you’ll never let me live it down, will you? The whoremongers be damned.”

Briar dropped into the precipice.

Ari glanced at Tanner. She gave him another small peck, then pulled away. “Shall we?”

She dragged Tanner over the edge. Together they fell from the heights, hand-in-hand.

Ari activated the wingsuit plugin that the Children had recently finished. Fabric wings deployed between her arms and ribcage, and both legs. She and the others had uploaded the necessary flying mechanics to their avatars before injecting, giving them the muscle memory of over five hundred flights. Parachutes were ready to auto-open should anyone make a mistake.

Ari released Tanner and they glided side-by-side, swooping and diving above the distant buildings.

“Wahoo!” Caylin yelled from up ahead.

Wahoo.

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postscript

Please help spread the word about *The Last Stand* 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!

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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.

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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

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