
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
ISAAC HOOKE
FOREVER GATE
EPISODE 6:
REBIRTH

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REBIRTH

THE FOREVER GATE
BOOK VI

Isaac Hooke

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one

Sword in hand, Ari cautiously made her way forward through the ruins of the market square. The signs of the recent attack were obvious—shredded tents, apples spilled from carts, small blast craters in the cobblestone, the bodies of four guards. Unfortunately there were no witnesses, as everyone had fled. The shutters on the surrounding buildings were sealed tight.

She could sense the remnants of *vitra* use floating in the air. The individual they tracked had expended much of his charge, maybe all of it, when the four guards attempted to detain him.

Two streets led from the square. She glanced at the seven gols who accompanied her and Tanner. They were armored in gray plate, the sword-and-shield symbols stamped into their breasts proclaiming their guardsman professions. Though they looked human, in actuality they were randomly spawned AIs—artificial intelligences.

"You three, take the north street," Ari told the guards. "And you three, the east."

"Yes, Nine." The guards obeyed, splitting up to follow their assigned routes. Only one of the gols remained behind with Ari and Tanner.

"He won't have gone far," Tanner said. In the real world of the Outside, Tanner was half a head taller than Ari, but on the Inside he was the same height. He sported a goatee matched to a flourishing mustache that day, and wore a skin-tight blue outfit that accentuated the muscles of his chest, arms and legs. The cuffs and collar seemed to meld into his flesh, almost as if the fabric were a tattoo. The look was completed by black boots, a metallic utility belt, and a silver cape. Embossed into the chest area of the tight fabric were the digits 1010—binary for the number "ten."

Ari's outfit was nearly an exact duplicate, excepting her belt and cape, which were golden, and the digits on her chest, which read 1001, or "nine." She also carried a small satchel over one shoulder.

Since the two of them were connected to the Inside via an access port, not a pod, the system treated them as gols. If either one died on the Inside, they would die in the real world.

"He's still here," Ari said. "Hiding somewhere. He has to be."

She kept the sword extended in one hand as she swept her gaze from

building to building. The blade left a subtle trail of flames as it moved. On the steel was etched a fire-spitting raven, its wings streaming cinders.

Though it was midday in the city of Severest, the square was somewhat dark thanks to the overcast sky and its black clouds that threatened a storm. She hoped to find the target before the sky opened up. Rain only made the lightning worse.

Ari strode past the ruins of a fountain. A gaping hole had been blasted into the rim, allowing the water to spill forth. She remembered a time, less than a year ago, when that water would have been frozen, the land gripped in the permanent vise of winter. They had made much progress since then. Roughly half the cities of the Inside were completely free of the software-enforced ice age. The other half were thawing out. It wasn't a utopia yet but it was getting there.

Ordinarily she allowed the gol guards to hunt down and collar youths whose powers had newly awakened, but this particular individual had eluded capture for months. Ari admired his ingenuity and wanted him on her team. She planned to bitch him herself and bring him under the tutelage of the Users, a group of uncollared individuals on the Inside. That, or she would send him to the real world of the Outside to join the equivalent group, known as the Children. Together, both groups formed the Council, which she led. If the renegade had no interest in joining her, then the bronze bitch she placed around his neck would neuter his powers and spare the Inside from his menace anyway.

She moved between the different stone buildings that enclosed the square, pausing beside the wooden doors to look for signs of forced entry.

She sensed a sudden surge of vitra from the second floor of one of the houses across the street, and spun, reaching for the spark inside the blade. Just in time she fanned that spark into a conflagration; she used all of her focus to turn the weapon into a lightning rod so that the steel absorbed the deadly electricity aimed at her.

The attack subsided and Ari lowered the sword, whose metal glowed a molten red.

"Go!" Ari shouted, running toward the building where the attack had arisen.

Tanner and the gol guard followed close behind.

"He's definitely expended his charge by now," Tanner said. "He's ours."

Ari hurled her body against the wooden door at the base of the building and the hinges yielded. The first floor held a glasswork shop of some kind. Heat emanated from a kiln in a side room. Intricate glassware lined the shelves near the front of the shop.

The cowering owner pointed a shaking hand upstairs.

Ari took the steps two at a time and reached the hallway on the second floor. Two doorways lined the right side of the hall, while one door opened on the left.

The gol guard and Tanner came up behind her. She made her way slowly toward the first doorway. She paused at the opening, pressing herself against the wall. She nodded at Tanner, who proceeded to dash inside the room, going high. She followed, going low, her extended sword ready to lash out with flame.

A compact bed rested near the wall, beneath the closed window. A tiny chest and a writing desk completed the furnishings. Tanner searched under the bed. Nothing. There was no other place for anyone to hide in there.

They cleared the second room in the same manner.

As Ari emerged to join the gol in the hallway, a fork of lightning erupted from the third room.

She rolled to the floor. The powerful forks ripped the gol apart above her.

She unleashed flames from the sword toward the door. The lightning barrage ended and she scrambled to her feet.

Tanner was already at the door.

"Surrender and we will spare your life!" Tanner shouted from his position beside the entrance.

In answer a bolt of lightning ripped from the doorway; the deadly tines scarred the wall across the way and left behind blackened and splintered wood.

Ari joined him. "He has to have rings. There's no way he could still have any charge after all of that."

"Unless he's an aberration," Tanner said.

"I somehow doubt it," Ari told him.

"Well, either way, I don't think we'll be collaring this one," Tanner said.

"No," Ari agreed. "Ready?"

"Ready." Tanner crouched.

She sought the spark of vitra inside the blade and amplified it. The weapon glowed molten red and smoke poured from the metal. She directed the sword past the door, keeping her body shielded behind the frame, and unleashed a veritable wall of flame.

Tanner followed the fire inside. She heard an eruption as he launched his own stream of flame.

She joined him in time to see a charred body fall to the floor beside a burning bed.

"Got him," Tanner said.

Ari approached. "It's too bad it had to end this way. He would have been a good addition to the Users."

She sensed motion behind the burning bed. "There are two of them!" She darted toward the fiery mattress.

A figure emerged from hiding and raced toward the door. A young woman.

"Catch her!" Ari said.

Tanner managed to wrap his arms around the woman and he pinned her limbs to her torso. He lifted her and she struggled in his grasp, her legs squirming in the empty air.

Ari approached but the woman nearly kicked her.

"Hold her to the floor!" Ari said.

Tanner dumped the woman rather hard to the floor and mounted her. Ari retrieved the bronze bitch from the satchel she had brought and clasped it around the neck of the young woman.

"It's done," Ari said.

The woman still struggled.

"Calm down," Ari told her. "It's okay. It's over. We're going to let you go."

The young woman stopped squirming after a few moments.

Tanner released her.

She reached up and hesitantly touched the collar at her neck.

"What was your relation to the deceased?" Ari asked the young woman.

The girl glanced at the burned corpse of her companion.

"He was... he was." She seemed about to burst into tears.

The woman abruptly scrambled to her feet.

Tanner made to grab her but Ari extended a halting hand.

The woman promptly fled.

"Let her go," Ari told Tanner. "There's no harm she can cause anyone, not anymore."

Ari approached the charred body and knelt. "See? Rings." She lifted the clawed remnants of the youth's hand.

"Someone was helping him," Tanner said.

"It would appear so." She removed the four silver rings one by one from the fingers and deposited them in her satchel.

"There are only two places he could have gotten those from," Tanner said.

Ari nodded. "Let's go have a chat with our charred friend here in the real world."

"Assuming he survives his rebirth. For all we know, he could be an old man in the Outside."

Ari pursed her lips. "It's possible. But I have a feeling this one has lived only two or three lives on the Inside."

"What makes you say that?"

"He avoided the gols for months. It takes an active mind, full of ingenuity and the cleverness of youth, to outwit AIs like that."

"But we already agreed that someone was helping him," Tanner said.

"Good point." Ari stood. "I guess we'll find out his real age soon enough."

Tanner regarded the corpse uncertainly. "You know, sometimes I wonder at what we've become."

"What do you mean?"

He smiled fleetingly. "I once believed we would have a world uncollared. A world where every man could freely use the spark inside him without aging, and without punishment for doing so."

"We all wanted that," Ari said. And it was true. After the war they had conducted trials in certain small, isolated cities, uncollaring all the residents. Chaos reigned for the first few weeks until a pecking order emerged: those strongest in vitra assumed control of the community and ruled by fear. When one of the communities began plotting to attack another city via portal hop, the Council ruled the trials a failure and voted to shut down the experimental communes and maintain the ban on vitra throughout the Inside. The Council allowed only a small subset of people to remain uncollared: the members of the Users, their partners on the Inside.

"Let's get back," Ari said.

* * *

Gemma raced down the street, scarcely seeing where she was going through all the tears, and the storm: the clouds had opened up, dousing the streets in rain. Terror and hatred alternately racked her body in waves.

When she finally realized the gols weren't pursuing, she paused in a shadowy alleyway, gasping for breath. Lightning flashed in the skies, and she jumped.

Lightning. She would never know it again.

She wrapped her fingers around the bronze bitch at her throat and pulled with all her might. The cold metal felt far too tight, almost as if it were choking her. She reached for vitra, the freedom maker, the essence of life. She could almost touch it but not quite: it teased her, lying just beyond her grasp, near and yet so very far.

They've taken even that from me. The one comfort I had left.

She released the collar and fell to her knees in anguish. She covered her face in her hands. The rain suited her mood entirely.

She had told her brother to give her some of the rings, but he had refused, wanting to protect her. And now he was dead.

She thought of the two evil gols with the strange digits on their chests who had murdered him.

Lightning flashed again.

She swore in that moment to track down those two gols at all costs.

And kill them.

two

Ari opened her eyes in the world of the Outside. She lay on a mat, tethered to a terminal by a cord that ran from her belly like an umbilical. She lifted her torso, wrapped her hands around the clamp at her belly button and rotated the metal cylinder, disconnecting herself from the umbilical. She knew that organic wires threaded the surface of her intestinal tract to her spinal cord, where they met with more embedded devices and cords. The machines that operated the ship had implanted these bodily intrusions inside her during the fetal stage, and the wires had grown with her body. She didn't exactly know how the technology worked, but that wasn't important. All that mattered was that when she jacked in, she joined the simulated dream experienced by the other tens of thousands of crew members.

Tanner arose from a mat nearby and similarly disconnected.

To her left, the desolate, icy surface of Ganymede resided beyond the broad window beside her. The banded clouds of Jupiter took up much of the sky. Stars dotted the remaining darkness.

To her right, the main area of the compartment known as the Control Room was crowded with small desks covered in dials, buttons, blinking lights, and touchscreen displays. Five watches of the so-called Children alternated shifts in the Control Room so that it was manned every hour of the day. She remembered a time when they all wore white robes on duty. These days everyone dressed in service utilities, a more formal attire that better suited their station. She had ordered the change when they had discovered the 3D printers.

Half of the Children were tethered to their terminals, lying unconscious on mats on the floor, entirely immersed on the Inside. In addition to programming, testing and maintaining the environment, they acted as Keepers, people the Inside citizens could go to for help in times of need or trouble.

The other half sat in the chairs and physically manned the different terminals. Most of the awake operators used augmented reality glasses, or aReals, to access the various systems. Those glasses overlaid computer graphics with one's existing vision, "augmenting" the reality one saw. A similar user interface was available when connecting through the umbilicals, though the aReals were preferred because they allowed for untethered access

—having a clamp pulling at your insides could become uncomfortable after more than a few hours, especially if you sat in a chair. The touchscreen displays on the terminals offered a backup user interface.

The operators were called Children because when her father Hoodwink originally recruited them, he had concentrated on the youngest members of the crew, choosing them for their ability to learn quickly and their better chances of surviving the awakening process. Though these days the operators were comprised of individuals of all ages, the name had stuck. Since these men and women were part of the Council that determined the overall welfare of all the people aboard, both Inside and Outside, Ari had selected them based on their maturity as much as their technical proficiency. Some of the eight-year-olds present had the minds of sixty-year-olds, while some of the sixty-year-olds had the minds of twenty-year-olds.

Why?

Time passed differently in the two worlds. Forty-eight hours on the Outside was roughly equivalent to three weeks on the Inside. Because of this, bodies aged and died in the simulated world far faster than the host's actual body, therefore the main AI that ran the system routinely rebooted people's consciousnesses. When someone died on the Inside of "natural causes" on a date predetermined by the computer system, their memories and personalities were reset and they were assigned to new parents on the Inside.

Because of a glitch in the system, violent, unexpected deaths caused one to wake up from that reality, and when that happened a person retained the knowledge and memories of only the latest life lived. That was why the mind didn't match the body's age. If the awakened person survived but remained within their pod, they would be wiped and returned to the Inside. If they managed to pierce the pod that contained them, previously they would have been sent to the meat grinders for protein reclamation, given the damage to the ship's nutrient production systems. But after Hoodwink had destroyed the attacking ship in orbit and Ari assumed command, she had made the food system repairs the first priority. Cannibalism was utterly repulsive to her, even if the dreamers had no idea where their food had come from. The repair drones had been able to restore most of the food system, so that humans who died or awoke prematurely were spared from being processed into nutrients for the rest of the dreaming crew.

Those who escaped their pods and did not qualify for membership with the Children helped out in other ways: some became engineers, others

doctors and growers. Most of them were constantly learning, via the archives. The goal was eventually to help the machines as they went about their daily tasks, or even supplant some of them.

Ari went to one of the operators and rested a hand on his shoulder. "Stanson, I want you to track down the pod containing that teen."

The androgynous-looking youth nodded, waggling the locks of his pageboy-style hair. "We detected a wake-up on deck twelve. He forced his way out of the pod almost immediately." Despite his feminine features, his voice was the deepest of anyone present.

"I'm not surprised," Ari said.

"I already sent a retrieval crew," Stanson continued. "If he lives, he should be here in a few minutes."

"Good," Ari said. With the alien computer virus out of the system, the machines no longer swept the corridors clear of humans. The retrieval crew would have a safe passage.

Ari joined Tanner at the window. He was staring at the starboard wing of the ship, which was partially visible from their current position. Most of said wing was buried underneath the icy surface of the moon. The impact had apparently not been very gentle.

"Do you ever think we'll leave this place?" Tanner asked her.

"I don't know," Ari said. That was a lie, of course. They were never leaving this place. The only other person who knew was the chief engineer, who she had sworn to secrecy. Certainly, the robots were doing a fine job of repairing the ship, both internal and external, but according to the engineer, the main reactor core had been ejected before impact. A reactor wasn't something the robots could simply reconstruct—the fuel source alone was impossible to replicate. Without the main reactor, the ship didn't have the energy necessary to ignite the propellant that would have allowed them to leave orbit. The secondary reactor provided only just enough power for the internal operations. The solar panels installed on the dorsal portion of the hull helped. Even so, when the plutonium in the secondary reactor ran out after fifty years, the crew would perish. Yes, better that no one knew.

"I suppose there's nothing left for us on Earth, anyway," Tanner said. "This is our home, now. I guess I'm going to finally have to come to terms with that."

Ari bit her lip. "We'll always have the Inside. We can live anywhere we want, in there."

Tanner looked at her and smiled. "I suppose we can." He returned his attention to the window and the space beyond, and his features darkened. "I worry that they'll come back someday."

"Who?" Ari said. "The attackers?"

"Yes."

"I hope not," Ari told him. "But if they do, we won't have Hoodwink to protect us."

"No." Tanner rested a hand on her lower back. "But I'll protect you."

"No one can protect us," Ari said.

Tanner smiled. "I can." He gave her a quick kiss on the lips.

Much as she enjoyed the kiss, she extricated herself from him, feeling slightly embarrassed. She was never a big fan of public displays of affection, especially not in front of the Children. Fortunately no one paid them any heed, or at least pretended not to, absorbed as they were in the private worlds of their augmented reality displays.

A few moments later a chime erupted from the door speaker.

Stanson glanced at her. "The retrieval team is here. They have him. He survived."

"Let him in," Ari said.

The doors opened and the two members of retrieval led in a wide-eyed individual wrapped in a towel.

As Ari had guessed, he was young, no more than nineteen or twenty. His features were gaunt, with a thin, straggly beard that reached to his Adam's apple. The unkempt hair on his head touched his shoulders, and his fingernails were only an inch long. His hair and nails should have been longer for his age, of course, but the umbilicals in the pods released a chemical amalgamate that stunted the growth of both.

Underneath the towel she could see the outline of a full body exoskeleton—it allowed him to walk on his weakened legs and lift his atrophied hands. Ari had worn a similar exoskeleton when she first emerged, though hers had only been lower body. The Children had found that the reborn gained muscle tone faster when a full-body suit was employed, with the strength-enhancements subtly dialed back each hour of movement.

The reborn youth started when he saw Ari and Tanner, and he took a step back.

The retrieval team members grabbed his arms on either side and held him in place.

"The gols!" the youth said, struggling against his captors. They had obviously set the strength of his suit relatively low, because he couldn't break free.

"So you remember us," Ari said. "Good. Though we look like gols, we're fully human, trust me. You'll notice we don't have numbers on our chests anymore. And we're a bit skinnier than before."

The youth's eyes darted to her chest but quickly returned to her face.

"What do you want? What have you done to me?"

Ari smiled. "We want to give you your life back. And we've set you free."

His expression crumpled in confusion.

"What's your name?" Ari said.

He didn't answer.

"I'm Ari," she said. "And this is Tanner."

Tanner inclined his head.

Still the youth didn't respond.

"If you won't give us a name, I'll invent one for you. What should we call him, Tanner? Pretzel, maybe?"

He regarded them uncertainly, and then said, quietly: "I'm Zachariah."

"What's that?" Ari said.

"I'm Zachariah." Louder. "Or Zak, for short."

"Zak," Ari said. "It's a good name. You'll learn the answers to all your questions in the coming days. Someone will be assigned to help you through the relearning process. For the moment, all you need to understand is that the world you were living in was a simulation. It wasn't real."

"But this..." Zak looked around. "This can't be the real world? What is this place?"

"As I said, everything will be revealed to you in good time."

His captors had released him, and Zak used the opportunity to break away from them and dash to the window. "What is *that?*"

The retrieval personnel caught up with him but Ari waved them back. She joined him by the window, taking care not to get too close.

"Are we in a spaceship of some kind?" Zak asked. "Like in the stories?"

"We are," Ari said. "We crashed, many years ago. We're stranded on a moon called Ganymede. That's Jupiter, up there. A planet far away from Earth."

He gazed at the Jovian ball. "It's beautiful." He abruptly looked at her. "What happened to my sister?"

"The woman with you?" Ari said.

He nodded quickly.

"We didn't know she was your sister," Ari said slowly, feeling a pang of regret. "We left her in the simulation. She's unharmed."

"I want to see her," Zak said.

Ari frowned. "It's best if you never again contact those you once knew on the Inside. Especially during the relearning period. It makes letting go easier."

"But—"

Ari lifted a hand. "Listen to me. I have to ask you something. And it's important. Where did you get the Lightning Rings?"

As she spoke, she kept an eye on the Children who were present to see if anyone reacted, but they all seemed oblivious, consumed by whatever it was they were doing in their aReals. That didn't necessarily mean it wasn't one of them, especially considering that half of them were unconscious and operating on the Inside.

"A hooded man gave them to me," Zak said.

"Did you see his face?" Ari pressed. "Did he give a name?"

"No face. No name. He told me only that he was fighting for a free Inside. He gave me the patterns of the town watch, which helped me avoid the guard patrols these past couple of months."

Ari glanced at Tanner. "Have Stanson get in touch with Briar. Find out if any of the rings are missing from the stores in the Black Den." Briar was the current leader of the Black Den, which sheltered the Users. He was also Ari's Uncle, at least in the world of the Inside.

She returned her attention to Zak. Ordinarily she would have let the rebirth officer take over at that point, but she decided she wanted to introduce the youth to his relearning specialist herself. She had the perfect choice in mind. "Zak, come with me. There's someone I would like you to meet."

three

The man who called himself Amoch scaled the rock outcropping. The staff he held neither abetted nor hindered the ascent. In moments he reached the top and stood before the murmuring crowd that had gathered on the outskirts of Dhenn, the underground cave city. He wore a black robe, with the hood lowered so that his face was concealed in shadow. Electrical energy pulsed occasionally along his bare hands, close to the skin.

He ran his gaze across the gathering. Torches lined the stone walls, illuminating farmers, merchants, tradesmen. The middle class, with a healthy serving of the poor. There were even a few rich men near the back, watching from their painted carriages. Amoch smirked when he saw them. They only *thought* they were rich.

He lifted the gnarled bone staff, striking the bronze ferrule at the bottom against the stone three times.

The crowd grew silent.

Amoch reached for the vitra that lay inside the amulet he wore at his throat.

"People of Dhenn!" Amoch said, his words magnified by the jewelry so that his voice boomed. "I am Amoch. And I have come here to set you free. I was once like you, a man who scraped a meager living by trading goods between cities. I had a wife and two sons. Though I didn't have much, I was happy. My family could eat.

"It unraveled, all of it, when I was accused of a crime I did not commit, and sentenced to hard labor in the rock pits of the city of Crag. Every day I worked in those foul pits, my body covered in white dust from the rock, blood oozing from my mouth and nose from the irritation the abrasive powder caused my inner cavities. I worked sixteen hour shifts. My body shriveled from the malnutrition. My lungs deteriorated from the dust. I coughed blood often.

"One day my body couldn't take it anymore and I collapsed. As I lay there, dying, something happened to the world around me. Time seemed to alter. The workers with me began moving in slow motion. The taskmaster's voice warped, becoming deep, prolonged. He flicked his whip at me but I caught it easily. I went to him, drew the sword from his scabbard, and I plunged it through his heart. I cut the shackles from my feet and freed the

other workers.

"But time continued to slow around me, so that when I returned home to my wife, the entire world had stopped. I sat down at the table and waited for time to return. It did not. I spent six months living like that in isolation, waiting for the rest of the world to catch up. But no one ever moved. It was unbearable, watching my wife and kids frozen like that, and being unable to say a word to them, or interact with them in any way or with anyone else in the world. You can't imagine what it was like.

"I decided to starve myself to death. I drank no water, ate no food. My body grew weaker and weaker, but I didn't die. Finally, two months later, as madness sank in, I attempted to scale the Forever Gate that sealed our city. I made it only a short distance before I plunged to my death.

"Or at least, I thought it was my death. But in fact it turned out to be my salvation. I did die, don't get me wrong. But when I next opened my eyes, I resided in a different world."

"You have seen the afterlife?" someone shouted.

Amoch nodded. "I have. And it is... well, nothing like I expected. Nothing any of you will expect. You see, I realized the truth. A hard truth. None of this is real. Your oppressors are illusory, as is all of this. And I will prove it to you."

Amoch extended his arms and from his hands forks of lightning streamed forth, slamming into the ceiling of the cavern.

The crowd screamed in horror.

Amoch smiled in exhilaration.

Yes. Feel my power, ants!

"He's a User!" someone said. "Uncollared!"

Several people near the front started a rampage as they struggled to retreat.

"Halt!" Amoch commanded.

All of those who fled froze in mid-step, some in ludicrous poses. Though they may have wanted to move, they could not.

Amoch ceased the lightning display. "I am not a User. Can a User freeze an entire crowd of people? I think not."

Small rocks pelted the immobile throng from the ceiling. A large boulder broke away and fell toward the group. No one screamed: they couldn't. However some of those near the back of the crowd who hadn't been frozen gasped.

Amoch reached for the vitra inside his staff and swiped his arm sideways. The heavy boulder swerved to the side, following the motion of the bone staff, and smashed into the wall beside the throng, where it crumbled harmlessly to the ground.

"Can a User move a boulder weighing several tons with the wave of a hand? I am no User." Amoch took a step forward. "None of you need to live this way. Do not allow yourselves to die naturally. Take death into your own hands. Come to the other side. I promise when you return, you will have the powers of a gol! Join these others who have chosen to die today."

He released his hold on the crowd. Some people still fled, though the retreat was more measured. Most stayed, held by curiosity.

Amoch gestured to the right. Seven white-robed men and women scaled the outcropping to stand at his side. They knelt, opened the upper halves of their robes, and planted swords hilt-first into the rock. They pressed the blades into their diaphragms.

"There is no one else who wishes to join them in death?"

Amoch waited, but no one stepped forward.

"I will," an old man shouted gruffly. "Got nothing to live for, anyway."

He struggled to make his way up the rock.

Amoch beckoned towards his assistants, two muscular men who wore only loincloths. The pair helped the man ascend.

When the man was at his side, Amoch asked him: "What is your name, old man?"

"I am Sammuel."

"Sammuel," Amoch said. "When you return, you will be a king at my side." Amoch beckoned toward the rock beside him. "Kneel."

Sammuel obeyed.

One of the assistants handed the old man a sword. He positioned it hilt first in the ground like the others.

There was a disturbance among the crowd. Several town guards were making their way to the front. Amoch had thought he'd disabled them all. He must have missed a few, then.

"Stop this!" one of the gol guards said as it reached the front. "By the order of the mayor of Dhenn, you are hereby under arrest for disturbing the peace."

"I think not." Amoch tilted his staff. The guards immediately froze in

place. Amoch turned toward the kneeling individuals. "When you hear the ringing of the ferrule thrice upon the rock, fall on your swords." Amoch addressed the crowd: "Watch now, and learn the true meaning of courage."

Amoch lifted his staff and thrust it down into the rock. He repeated the action. On the third strike, the eight men and women impaled themselves on their swords. The old man went last, but he, too, reluctantly followed through.

"Finish them," Amoch told one of his assistants.

The muscular man moved between the bodies that still writhed and chopped off the heads.

"The guards, too, please," Amoch told his men.

The assistants moved between the immobilized gols and chopped off their heads.

"You are all cowards," Amoch addressed the crowd. "All of you. These men and women are adventurers in the true sense of the word. And they will reap the benefits of their courage." He paused, staring at the frightened faces nearest him in the throng. "Nonetheless, I have a gift for all of you as well. For those who want it, anyway. Think of it as a reward for staying, and hearing me out.

"For you see, I am gathering men and women to my side. Men and women who want to fight with me. I am uncollaring worthy individuals across the world. We will live free in this land, and make our own rules, form our own kingdom. There will be no gols to order us around." He raised his arms and shouted. "It is time to break free of your trammels! The gols bitched you when you were fifteen years old. Fifteen years old! Why? Because they knew that the power of lightning flowing through your veins could easily overthrow them! I say to you, from this moment forth, you will be no one's bitch." *Except mine.*

He pointed out an individual near the front. "You! Come to the stage."

The frightened man looked from side to side, and then pointed at himself.

"Yes you!"

The man made his way up the outcropping. He stumbled halfway and the assistants helped him.

When he was at the top, Amoch told him. "And what is your name?"

The man was dressed in dirty coveralls. He had grime underneath his fingernails. "I'm Hadrian. I'm a potato farmer."

"Hadrian, the potato farmer, today you are a lightning wielder." Amoch produced a heavy gold key. "Turn around."

Hadrian reluctantly complied.

Amoch fit the key neatly into the hole at the back of Hadrian's collar and twisted it. The bronze bitch clicked open and Amoch let it fall to the rock with a heavy clank.

Hadrian reached up and felt the skin of his bare neck. His eyes widened. He glanced at his fingers and held them to his face.

"That's right," Amoch said. "Go ahead and try it."

Hadrian looked out at the crowd, then he raised one hand and unleashed a bolt of lightning over their heads. Hadrian grinned widely, and seemed about ready to jump up and down for joy.

"You are free," Amoch told him. "Let us fight together to set this world free."

"I will follow you!" Hadrian said.

"Good," Amoch said. He beckoned toward the wall behind him, where other followers waited to welcome Hadrian.

His assistants moved through the crowd below. They handed out similar keys from the wicker baskets they carried.

"Men are moving through your ranks now. I want you to accept these keys, use them to unlock your collars, and open the bitches of your friends and family members. All I ask in return is that you consider joining the ranks of the army I am building. We are going to free this world and start our own utopia."

Individuals accepted the keys and began opening their collars. Most of them experimented with lightning immediately, sometimes injuring themselves and those nearby. A few handed the keys to other people in the crowd and joined Amoch on the rock. Others departed, ostensibly to free their friends and families.

And so it has begun, Amoch thought. *The birth of an army. And a nation.*

* * *

Leon watched the scene unfold from the outskirts of the crowd: men and women received keys and then unlocked their collars. Several of the uncollared raced away, gleefully casting lightning about, destroying indiscriminately.

That wasn't good. Not good at all.

He was one of the eyes and ears of the Black Faction, a loose conglomeration of thieves and criminals who operated underground throughout the cities of the world. Sure, uncollaring everyone sounded like a good idea, at first. Freedom from the oppression of the gols and all that. But when one paused to think about the ramifications, the worldwide chaos and looting that would result...

Leon shook his head. That whole uncollaring affair was going to be bad for business. Very bad. It wouldn't do for ordinary people to have these abilities. How were the citizens supposed to be scared and intimidated by the Black Faction if everyone had lightning?

Yes, it wasn't good at all.

He would have to return to the Black Den in Severest and report the news at once.

After he got himself uncollared, of course.

four

Ari and Tanner arrived in the Control Room early the next morning. They had taken a sonic shower together in her quarters, and were holding hands up until the moment they arrived at the entry hatch.

Ari took her place. "So what's the latest news on the Inside today," she asked Stanson, who was part of the first watch.

"This might be a statistical anomaly," Stanson said. "But we're getting a rise in the number of people dying violently on the Inside and waking up prematurely."

"How many over the past day?" she asked him.

"Seventy-two."

Ari shook her head. "There's no way we can accommodate them all. Send them back under."

"Twenty-two of them already broke out of their pods," Stanson said. "Retrieval crews have been collecting them all night."

"Damn it," Ari said. "Find work for them if you can, and have the machines prepare new pods for those who don't fit in." Inevitably, there were a few people who were too old, or too mentally unfit, to help out with the various ship tasks. And while it cost more resources to create new pods to hold these misfits, she refused to send them to protein reclamation, or to allow them to idle away their days in the nursery, wasting calories—far less food was required to maintain an individual in the sleeping state versus the waking. "Meanwhile, I want you to reprogram the servers to immediately sedate anyone who awakens prematurely. I don't want anyone else getting out. We're already close to our caloric maximums. The food system can't keep up. If we allow anyone else out of the pods, we're going to have to start cutting back everyone's portions, crew members and dreamers alike."

"I'll have Kade see what he can do," Stanson said. Kade was one of their top system programmers. When he'd emerged six months ago he'd demonstrated an aptitude for coding almost immediately. In his first three months he'd been responsible for creating several new macros to ease the work of the Keepers who helped maintain the Inside. In his last three months, Ari had him turn his attention to the internal ship systems: in two weeks he had demonstrated enough proficiency to move out of the sandbox environment, and he'd been instrumental in rewriting some of the core

processes. If anyone could reprogram the servers to keep the dreamers sedated, it was Kade.

She glanced at his station. He hadn't reported in yet. Someone from the fifth watch was still manning his terminal. That was one thing about Kade, he certainly liked to sleep in. Ari cut him slack only because he was so valuable. Still, she decided she was going to have to talk to him about coming in earlier.

"Has Ben run Zak through the qualifications, yet?" Ari asked Stanson.

Ben was the specialist Ari had assigned to assist Zak in his relearning.

"He has," Stanson told her. "His hand-eye coordination scores were quite high for someone who has lived his whole life asleep. Ben thinks we can train him to operate the shuttles."

"A pilot, then."

"Yes," Stanson said.

They had been sending out the shuttles on exploratory runs to survey the moon for mineral deposits, and to retrieve chunks of ice from the surface of Ganymede to melt into fresh water. The autopilot systems functioned well enough, but Ari preferred to have an actual human operator behind the controls. She'd seen all too well how robots and AIs could turn against them.

"It's too bad Zak is still rejecting this reality," Stanson added.

"Is he?" Ari said.

"Ben says his reality disassociation is the worst he's ever seen."

"Well, keep me updated on his progress." Ari felt responsible for him, seeing as she and Tanner had personally tracked him down.

"Will do," Stanson said.

The first watch liaison officer spoke up: "Briar just reported in."

Ari looked at him. "What's the news?"

"He says none of the Lightning Rings are missing," the liaison officer responded.

Ari tapped her lips. "That leaves one of the Children." She surveyed the members present, only half of whom were awake. "Start a scan of the system logs. Find out if any Keepers injected Lightning Rings into the world in the past few weeks."

"I'll get someone on it," Stanson said.

"What are you going to do when we find the culprit?" Tanner asked from his seat beside her.

"Zak almost killed you and me because of those rings. That's not

something we can treat lightly. I'm going to permanently ban whoever did this from the Inside. I might arrange some brig time, too."

One of the tethered operators looked up. His glazed eyes focused on Ari. "There's been an Incident on the Inside."

* * *

In the city of Severest, Ari and Tanner moved through the wreckage of the buildings adjacent to the long rock wall known as the Forever Gate. The destruction was incredible. A blast crater twenty feet in diameter had formed in the cobblestone beside the wall. The closest structures were completely demolished, their bricks fanning outward from the wall along the ground. Several of those bricks had melted, with large sections of slag spread over the cobblestone. The buildings that yet stood were burned out husks. Roughly twenty of the nearby houses had been razed. Luckily no one had been at home during the attack.

There was a Keeper with them, a woman wearing a skin-tight blue outfit with a red cape and belt. The digits 100000 were carved into her chest. Her name was Renna. A User also joined them. He was dressed like a farmer, and wore a fake bronze bitch around his neck. His name was Jan.

Ari and Tanner had opted for less conspicuous attire that day, and they looked similar to Jan with the dun shirts and trousers they wore over their gol outfits. They also wore fake collars. They had scabbards strapped to their waists, but that was not an uncommon sight, at least in that city. What was uncommon was the swords those scabbards contained, though no one could see them of course, not while they were sheathed anyway.

Ari lowered herself into the shallow crater and walked right up to the wall. The blast had carved out a concave section of the Forever Gate. She placed a hand on the damaged surface. The rock there had melted and re-solidified, becoming glasslike. "They almost got through."

"Who did this?" Tanner said. "The citizens?"

Occasionally citizens on the Inside attempted to blow a hole in the Forever Gates of the cities in a bid to get to the paradisiacal world they believed existed beyond. The Users had attempted that very thing years ago, with her help. They had failed. Ironically, the bombing attempts only increased after Ari and her team fixed the weather. Perhaps the citizens had become emboldened by the improved weather, and believed that the world outside the walls was not so barren, and that it was something they could actually survive and explore. In reality, a desert world existed beyond the

Gates in every city. One could travel about two miles into that world before they reached the extents, which were bounded by infinite windows of glass. The lack of a true wilderness between cities helped keep the computational requirements of the simulation low.

Ari shook her head. "I don't think any citizen did this. There's no existing bomb on the Inside that could cause damage like this. None that we know of, anyway."

"So you think it was one of the Keepers?" Renna asked her.

"That would seem the likely scenario." Ari looked up. That wall extended as far as the eye could see, to the clouds. It cast that part of the city in shadow.

"The same individual who gave Zak the rings?" Tanner asked.

"Probably." She could see no other damage to the wall farther up. That was good.

"At least they didn't get through," Jan, the User, commented.

Ari turned toward Renna and Jan. "I want the two of you to find witnesses. Look for anyone who was in the area this morning. Have them report anything out of the ordinary: someone they didn't recognize; a strange object lying against the Forever Gate. Anything."

"What about the system logs of the area?" Renna asked.

"Tanner and I will check them personally when we return," Ari told her. "We'll see if we can find specific people who were in the area that you can talk to."

The Keeper nodded, and then she and Jan left to search for witnesses.

"You think we'll actually find anything in the logs?" Tanner asked Ari.

"No," Ari said. "Our culprit probably wiped the relevant entries. All of the Keepers have that ability."

"Maybe it's time we changed their system permissions?"

"I'll talk to Kade about that," Ari said. "Even so, I'm still hoping we'll find potential witnesses in those logs."

Tanner surveyed the damaged wall. "Well, like Jan said, at least they didn't get through."

"No," Ari said. "But I'm fairly certain they were merely testing the weapon." She regarded Tanner gravely. "And I fear that next time, they will get through."

five

Ari sat in the Control Room of the real world, tapping one foot impatiently on the deck. Moments after she had returned, Stanson had informed her that the Children had received a demand from an anonymous source: a Keeper found a written note stipulating that five hundred people were to be released into the real world of the Outside, or another, more powerful bomb would go off in a random city on the Inside.

They wouldn't be able to meet those demands, of course. For one thing, the necessary caloric requirements went well beyond the capabilities of the food system. And for another, Ari and her team didn't have the manpower to handle the reintegration of so many people at once.

One of the Children was likely responsible. It could be anyone present. Or someone whose shift occurred during another watch. A misguided, sick individual.

She went to Kade, who was programming the system with his aReal spectacles. She rested a hand on the back of his chair and he looked up at her. Those glasses made him look like a young professor of sorts. His body was twenty-one years old, but when they had pulled him out, his mind was in the late forties.

"Have you changed the write permissions on the logs?" Ari asked him.

Kade nodded. "I have. Currently, the only people with the permission to change the logs are yourself and Tanner."

"So our suspect won't be able to hide his or her tracks anymore."

"That's the hope," Kade said.

"Why only a hope?"

"Well," Kade said. "There are ways to connect outside of the normal logging procedure. Connecting in zero mode, for example."

"Can't we disable these modes?"

"We can," Kade said. "But it has to be done on a terminal-by-terminal basis. The suspect could just connect from a rogue terminal somewhere on the ship, and we wouldn't be able to stop him."

Ari sighed. "What a mess."

"You should see the code," Kade said.

Ari laughed. "That's quite all right. Tell me, have you been able to

reprogram the pod system to sedate anyone who awakens prematurely?"

Kade nodded. "Sort of. I've tested my changes on a few recent candidates. The umbilical supplies the necessary incapacitating agents, and the subjects go under. However, their brain waves tell me they're not dreaming. They're not on the Inside, but merely unconscious."

"Well, that's preferable to having them awake and wasting valuable resources. See what you can do to get their minds re-engaged."

"'I'm on it."

"I have another message from Briar," the liaison officer announced.

Ari went over to him.

"One of his eyes and ears in the Black Faction has reported something strange," the liaison officer explained.

"Strange?" Ari said. Tanner came to her side, wanting to hear.

"Yes," the officer said. "Apparently this guy Leon returned to the Black Den without a collar. He says someone in the cave city of Dhenn staged a cult suicide and then handed out keys to the bystanders so that they could remove their bronze bitches."

"Keys?" Tanner said.

The officer nodded. "He says half the city is running around uncollared. It's chaos."

"Damn it." Ari glanced at Stanson. "Have every Keeper congregate on Dhenn immediately. I want the threat contained. Have them coordinate with the gol guards and Users to collar as many of the people as possible. And spawn a couple hundred of the hunter class."

"A couple hundred?" Stanson said. "I don't think so. You'll slow the system to a crawl in that area. Those AIs are too resource intense. I can send in ten, maximum."

"Then do it," Ari said. The hunter class was basically a specialized version of the guards with several equipment upgrades. "I want the city's transit centers locked down, too. No one goes in or out of Dhenn until further notice. Save Users and Keepers, of course."

"I'll dispatch the orders," Stanson said.

"We can flood the associated pods with incapacitating agents?" Tanner suggested.

Ari glanced at Kade. "How feasible is that?"

"I can certainly put together a list of all the pods linked to the people of Dhenn," Kade answered. "But I can't discriminate between who's wearing

a collar and who isn't. I might be able to have a patch for that ready sometime later today, though."

"What if we incapacitated them all?" Ari said.

"We could," Kade said. "But as I mentioned, I'm having trouble getting those I've sedated back into the shared dream. It would probably be wise to hold off on that, unless you want to turn Dhenn into a ghost town."

"No," Ari said. "We don't know what the long term effects of sedation will do to their minds. Work on that patch."

She returned to her seat. Tanner joined her.

"I've been scouring through the logs since we got back," Tanner said. "While most of the entries have been wiped, I did find some people who were in the area this morning. Some of them could be potential witnesses."

"Get Renna to check them out."

"Already have," he said. "About ten minutes ago."

The liaison officer glanced at Tanner. "Renna just checked in. She says she found a witness."

Already? Ari thought. But then she reminded herself that time passed so much faster on the Inside. In the ten minutes it had taken Tanner to relay the order to Renna and inform Ari about it, two hours would have passed for the Keeper: enough time to track down and interview at least a few potentials.

"Let's go meet this witness," Ari said.

* * *

Dressed as well-to-do merchants, Ari and Tanner returned to Severest and approached a small hut positioned on an out of the way section of Forever Street. The hut stood in an alleyway beside a rusty iron portcullis that sealed off the only rope leading up the Forever Gate in that city.

Ari ducked her head to pass through the doorway. Inside, Keeper Renna sat cross-legged on the floor in her red cape and blue outfit, looking like a superhero as she sipped tea beside a severe-looking man whose forehead appeared permanently crimped. His unkempt gray hair and slobbish way of dressing hinted at an occupation of begging.

"Welcome, Ari, Tanner," Renna said. "Meet Spalding. My witness."

Ari reached out and shook his grimy hand. Tanner did the same.

"I'm going to get gold for this, yes?" Spalding said. "She promised me gold."

Ari smiled indulgently. "You will get gold. Tell us what you saw."

"Well," Spalding said. "This morning, I had taken up my usual

position on Forever Street, in the shadow of the great wall. It's a good begging spot, because the nearby buildings are spaced just the right distance apart to offer the best view of the Forever Gate, and visitors often come there to gawk. There's a curio vendor not far from the spot, and the guilty patrons usually give me some coins after they waste their money on a miniature replica of the Gate."

"Tell us what you saw, please," Ari pressed.

Spalding cleared his throat. "Yes. Anyways, I was minding my own business, keeping my hat extended for donations, when this troop of four men waltz on by. And these aren't ordinary men, mind you. They walks about like they own the place, they do. Two of them were these servant sorts dressed in loincloths. Lean, mean, muscular, you know? They carried this heavy chest between them. They struggled a little, as if it weighed a thousand pounds or something. Another man walked behind them. He wore this tight fitting, black suit. I think he was a User or something, because he didn't have a bronze bitch around his neck.

"Their leader, meanwhile, was this scary looking fella who dressed in a dark robe, his face hidden in the shadows of his hood. He carried this long white staff, knobby like it was made of bone or some shit, and its ferrule clicked loudly on the cobblestone with each step. Little threads of lightning sparked all creepy-like from his exposed hands, like the kind you see coming from the fingers of Users and other uncollareds when you make 'em mad. Scary as hell."

Ari considered his words. "Did you see where the four went?"

Spalding shrugged. "I didn't watch them for too long. I got the impression they wouldn't take kindly to stares, so I quickly lowered my gaze. The robed man actually deposited a coin in my hat as he passed. Can you believe it? I didn't dare look up, but I said thanks right quick enough. And then he left without molesting me or nothing."

"Can we see the coin?" Ari asked him.

Spalding nodded. He reached into his pocket and produced the object.

Ari reached for it, but hesitated: she was worried there might be some sort of trap embedded therein. She took it and was relieved when it seemed a normal coin.

She parted the entrance curtain with one hand and held up the object to the light.

"It's definitely a Keeper's coin," Ari said. She handed it to Tanner.

"Freshly minted."

Tanner examined it. "A robed man with a bone staff and electricity flowing from his hands gave you this?" He sounded doubtful.

"That's right," Spalding said. "On my word."

Tanner handed the coin back.

"Do you think we can track down whoever owned it?" Ari asked him.

Tanner shook his head. "We don't keep logs like that. If we did, the system would soon run out of storage space. Keeping track every time money changed hands would make for a very big log."

Ari nodded. "All right." She handed Spalding the sack of gold she'd injected on the Inside with her. "Here is your reward."

His face lit up and he greedily accepted the sack, quickly hiding it in his cloak.

"Aren't you going to count it?" Ari said.

"Don't need to," Spalding said. "I can tell when I'm rich."

"What if I gave you a pile of rocks?"

Spalding retrieved the sack and quickly looked inside. He grabbed a gold coin and bit into it. "Definitely rich."

Ari smiled, then got up. "Thank you, Renna. Let us know if you find any other witnesses."

"I will," Renna told her.

Ari and Tanner left the hut.

Spalding was shouting for joy behind them. "I'm a rich sonbitch! A rich sonbitch!"

"Not if you keep broadcasting it like that," Tanner said over his shoulder.

They left the alleyway behind for Forever Street proper.

"You know," Ari said. "One time, Hoodwink and I were walking down a street together in Luckdown District. We passed a busker. I gave the man three gold coins. Hoodwink told me I was better than him, because I'd given that money so generously, when he would have walked on by. But he doesn't understand I only gave the money because he was there. I wanted to show him how generous I was."

"So you're saying you wouldn't have given Spalding anything if I wasn't here?"

She laughed. "Maybe. But money means nothing to me, now. We can spawn an infinite number of gold coins for ourselves on the Inside if we

want."

"You still miss him, don't you?" Tanner said. "Hoodwink."

She nodded.

"We never really talk about him," Tanner added.

She pressed her lips together. "He died for us. And yet I know his alien spirit lives on, past the final Forever Gate that all creatures in the universe, alien or human, must one day cross."

"We talked about this before," Tanner said. "We can't be sure he died. Maybe he got away before the explosion."

"Maybe." Hoodwink had somehow returned to the alien mothership in orbit and destroyed it, sparing the crashed colony vessel on Ganymede from the relentless energy bombardment. Whether or not Hoodwink had been able to save himself, Ari didn't know.

"So what now?" Tanner said.

"We visit Briar and talk to this Leon character the liaison officer told us about."

six

Ari approached the wall of mortared stone that enveloped the Black Den. Roughly three times the height of a man, that wall had been broken down in the gol attack almost a year ago, but the residents of the Den had rebuilt it with the help of the Keepers.

Sellblades and bowmen patrolled the upper walkways, their heads passing in and out of view as they strode between the merlons topping the wall. The severed heads of individuals from competing factions decorated spikes on the wall. The residents of the Den were real friendly sorts.

"Open up!" Ari said as she approached the portcullis that fronted the wall.

One of the bowmen on the walkway glanced down and then turned around and shouted: "Open up! It's Ari and Tanner."

In moments the portcullis raised.

Ari and Tanner ducked beneath the spiked bars. A pikeman stepped forward to introduce himself. He wore battered plate armor, with the long weapon of his namesake resting over one shoulder. His hair was cropped short, and dirt encrusted the wrinkles of his middle-aged face.

"Hello Ari and Tanner, I'm Barkley. I'll be your Den guide today."

"We don't need guides," Ari said.

"Just the same, all gol visitors must have guides, as per the rules."

Ari rolled her eyes. "Lead, then. Take us to Briar."

Barkley led them through the dirty streets. The rebuilt Den wasn't too different from a typical street in Luckdown District with its rather narrow way, and its shoddy, shack-like homes crammed too close together. It was hard to believe that less than a year ago most of the buildings had lain in ruin, the cobblestone streets pocked with blast craters. The Keepers had done a good job recreating the place.

Hard men with scarred faces, scarred arms and scarred knuckles walked those streets. Some had chunks missing from their noses and ears. There were eye-patched men, cleft-lipped men, arm-stumped men. It was no surprise that the Thief's Kitchen, the Murderer's Guild, and every shady operation in the city had at least one base of operations there, operating under the umbrella of the Black Faction. Ari had considered shutting down the Den and its affiliates throughout the world of the Inside, but Tanner convinced her

the Black Faction would simply go underground. There was always a dark side to human nature, he told her, and an outlet was needed for the more nefarious sorts in society. It was better for her and her team that they operated in the open—they could watch and track the members all the easier. She had situated the User base there for that very reason.

Though the men were hard, they all gave way to Ari and Tanner. They knew who the duo were, and the powers they wielded. Even so, more than a few of them scowled at Ari and Tanner as they moved aside.

Barkley led them through the streets and eventually paused in front of a building where a flag with a skull and crossbones waved from the rooftop. Two sentries watched the entrance.

"The Warehouse," Barkley said.

Ari sighed.

"You ready for this?" Tanner said.

She took a deep breath. "Yup." Visiting Briar was always an exercise in exasperation. The man never failed to get under her skin. That he operated a crime syndicate under the auspices of the Children didn't help matters.

Ari and Tanner walked past the two guards and stepped inside. She took the first door to her right and found herself in a room of iron desks and paneled terminals that was almost a mirror image of the Control Room on the Outside, except in place of a window three displays dominated the front of the room.

As for the terminals, there were about twenty-five in total. Seven were manned by uncollared old men in simple gray tops and trousers--the men were Users, part of the day shift operation of the room. There were no aReal interfaces there, and the Users accessed the systems by means of touchscreens alone.

Briar stood at the front of the room, his back to them as he examined the center display, which was covered in a top-down map of the city. Ari had considered banning him from the room, but he would have simply convinced one of the Users to act as his spy. He used the data for his own benefit, of course, but the Users kept him on his toes, passing on any illegal activity directly to the Keepers or the Children.

One of the Users met her eye and inclined his head respectfully. "Ari."

She ignored him and strode toward Briar, who had spun around upon hearing her name. The fat man's face brightened. He had a touch of crow's

feet around his eyes, which deepened with his smile. On his forehead was the start of a widow's peak.

"By the whoremongers, it's Ari!" he said. "My favorite niece. What honor do I owe this visit?" The folds of fat around his neck jiggled with each word: the sagging flesh nearly engulfed the too-tight bronze bitch he wore.

"Why aren't you and your men in Dhenn helping out with the collaring?"

Briar shrugged. "You never asked. Besides, your User and Keeper friends can handle that uncouth business. This isn't a job for the Black Faction."

She turned toward the Users. "Why are all of you still here? I instructed every User to head to the city of Dhenn to assist the Keepers."

Briar answered for them. "I need a minimum number of men to keep the Control Room operational. Otherwise I won't be able to communicate with you. You know that. Tsk tsk."

"You only need one person to man the comm station," Ari said.

"True," Briar said. "But I also need the others to monitor the gol guards in different parts of Dhenn. They have to keep track of the best places to loot and steal from, you see."

Ari shook her head. "I don't know why I ever agreed to allow you in the Control Room."

He smiled. "Because I'm your uncle! And I'm a good businessman. When I took over, the faction was rotten to the core. Rotten! But I used my keen business skills to institute rules and regulations among all the various guilds, and introduced a measure of fairness into all the proceedings. You'll notice that robberies and murders across the cities have dropped since I took over. Especially in Severest. It's all part of my austerity measures."

"The robberies and murders have dropped because you concentrate only on the richest individuals these days," Ari said. "You don't target as many people to make your ill-gotten gains. So it's only an illusion that crime has actually dropped."

Briar pulled at the thick collar that dug into his throat, as if it were too tight. "The crime rate may have edged upward very slightly among the richest, true, but the poor and middle class are experiencing an incredible era of peace and prosperity. Why, there hasn't been a poor person robbed in months!"

"Could that be because the poor have nothing of value *to* rob?" Ari

said.

Briar shrugged his shoulders. He continued to fidget with the collar.

Ari nodded toward the device. "How come you don't want to let me uncollar you?"

"And force me to join the Users again? I think not, missy. I like my bronze bitch quite well, thank you very much. Besides, when I need vitra, I simply use the Lightning Rings you've graciously donated to the Den."

"I didn't actually donate those to the Den," Ari said. "But to the Users who reside in the Den."

"Yes, but since these Users take shelter in my Den, and I control the Den, those rings are essentially mine."

Ari sighed. "Fine. When can I talk to this Leon individual?"

"You want to talk to Leon? He's resting."

"Then wake him up," Ari said.

Briar looked like he was about to say no, but then he relented. He strode to the front of the room and spoke to one of the guards on duty. The man ran off.

Briar came back. "All right, I admit it, he's actually at one of the whore houses. Hey, we all have our needs of the flesh, don't we?"

In a few minutes the guard returned, escorting Leon inside. Leon wore coveralls and had the arms of a blacksmith. He had no collar.

His eyes lit up with recognition the moment he looked at Ari and Tanner. She didn't recognize him, of course, but his behavior wasn't uncommon. She was famous on the Inside, at least in those cities where she had fought off the alien computer virus.

"Wish you would have given out pamphlets or something about what a pain it is to wield vitra," Leon told Ari. "I spent my charge in the first five minutes. And I've been sitting here, trying to get something, even a spark of that life-giving power back, but it won't come. I'm forced to go to carnal houses to distract my mind. I'm worried I've burned myself out."

"Tell me about the man who uncollared you," Ari said without preamble.

"He calls himself Amoch," Leon said. "He called people to the stage in Dhenn and had them fall on their swords. Never seen anything like it. He's some kind of cult leader. He kept talking about how all of this"—he waved a hand around him—"is an illusion."

"Did this man wear a black robe and carry a bone staff?" Ari asked

him.

"Yes, that's him," Leon said. "How did you know? Is he one of your agents?"

Ari ignored the question and asked another of her own. "This man, did he say what he wanted? Why was he giving out keys to the collars?"

"He said he wanted everyone to live an unfettered life. A free life. He wants to start a new city of some kind, one that will be free of gols. And he asked for people to join him. He's building an army."

"An army?" Ari exchanged a worried glance with Tanner.

"Yes," Leon said. "An army of the uncollared."

Ari went to the map display at the front of the room.

"Show me all the cities," she told the nearest User.

The display zoomed out. Icons represented all the different cities in the world.

"Show me the guard activity."

Clusters of red dots appeared over each city. The biggest dots appeared in Dhenn, which wasn't entirely unexpected given the chaos the city was currently experiencing. The guard activity in all the other cities appeared relatively normal.

"Are you looking for the next potential bomb site?" Tanner asked from her side.

Ari pressed her lips together. "No, I'm checking for signs of disturbance. If he's building an army of lightning wielders, he won't need a bomb."

Tanner tapped the thick red dots over Dhenn on the display. "I don't think he's built his army yet."

She nodded. "I think it's time we made a visit to Dhenn." She turned toward the Users. "Gather Lightning Rings and meet us in Dhenn. Elect one of your number to remain behind and monitor the comm station. Go!"

seven

Ari emerged from the portal hop into the transit center. Most of the portals to the different cities remained active beside her, though one had been destroyed, the circular ring that held it reduced to a pile of rocks on the floor.

The terminal was empty save for the score of gols in platemail armor that carried swords near the entrance. All departures were denied by her order, and any arriving travelers were quarantined in the screening rooms. The walls and floor near the entrance bore the dark streaks of lightning attacks where the uncollareds had tried to force their way in. The bodies of several dead gols had been placed in a pile nearby.

The guards nodded to her as she passed.

"Nine," one of the gols said to her respectfully. "Ten." To Tanner.

Ari stepped from the scarred entrance of the transit center onto a height that overlooked the vast, snowless cavern of the Dhenn cave city. The main cavern extended three miles into the distance; giant stalagmites and stalactites thrust from the floor and ceiling at random places, giving the unsettling impression of a giant maw chomping down on the city. Several of the stalagmites were damaged, with some collapsed entirely, and a few of the giant stalactites had crashed down from the ceiling, their remnants strewn across the street. The sight was made all the more unsettling by the fact that most of those structures had been hollowed out to serve as homes for the residents.

Tiny lights dotted the surfaces of the stalagmites that remained standing, indicating that at least some of the houses and shops were still occupied.

Keepers could overlay a top-down version of the city map over their vision, and Ari tried that now. The latest system patch was supposed to indicate Keepers and gols in purple, but it didn't always work. It looked like today wasn't her lucky day.

"Are you able to get any Keepers or gols on your map?" Ari asked him.

"None."

She walked down steps that were carved into the rock, past torches set in brackets at intervals along the cave wall. When she reached the main street that led through the giant stalagmites, only a few globes of light lit the way.

Several more of those globes had existed the last time she was there. Apparently the residents had been busy destroying them in their lightning-induced destruction spree.

The streets were deserted, of course. Most of the citizens would have been ordered to stay at home by that point, for their own safety. The lightning wielders among them had likely exhausted their charge by then. Though that didn't stop those who had received the keys from unbitching others.

Ari and Tanner picked their way over the ruins of a stalagmite that had collapsed into the middle of the street. Strewn among the rock were all manners of personal belongings: clothes, paintings, books, furniture. There were also a few dead bodies. Ari was particularly touched by the sight of a crushed little girl. There was a good chance the little girl wasn't dead in the real world. Not like Ari and Tanner would be if they died in that place.

"It used to be such a beautiful city," Tanner said quietly. "In its own way."

"I remember," Ari said.

"You know," Tanner told her. "I grew up here."

Ari glanced at him. "You never told me that."

"I know," Tanner said. "I blame it on the whole relearning process we go through after awakening. You know, how we're not supposed to dwell upon our former lives on the Inside and all that."

Ari scratched her chin. "I guess I always assumed you were from Severest like me."

Tanner pointed at the road ahead. "My mother used to take me down main street right there to see the parade once a year. I remember one time I sneaked out early to catch it with friends. That was when I had the first hint that all of this was a simulation."

"Why, what happened?" Ari asked.

"I got separated from my friends by the parade goers and ended up in a tunnel section lit entirely by torches, rather than light globes. I proceeded through that tunnel for what seemed miles—the torches were everywhere. When I got back to the tunnel, I started noticing where other torches burned. Every day, I noticed torches. And I began to wonder why, without fail, did they always continue to burn?"

"That scared you?"

"It did," Tanner said. "Because in school they taught us that torches burn oxygen. All of us should have been choking to death because of the lack

of oxygen, and the flames should have petered out long ago. But they burned on. I asked my science teacher about it, and he said some sort of draft system replenished the air, seeping through the walls of the cave to renew the oxygen. But I didn't buy it. I set out to prove him wrong by bringing my own torch throughout the farthest corners of Dhenn. I'd keep an eye on the flame, looking for the slightest flicker that might indicate a draft. And I pressed it to the rock at intervals, again searching for any waver in the flame. I went out every day after school, making my own paper map as I went. I must have covered at least ninety percent of the city. But I never found a spot where the torch flickered."

"You've never told me why you woke up prematurely," Ari said. "Unless you don't want to talk about it..."

"I can talk about it," Tanner told her. "As far as I'm concerned, the rules of relearning only apply for the newly awakened. I let go of my former life a long time ago. So my awakening... well, it was a funny thing. I was headed down to watch that famous parade with my wife—"

Ari halted in mid-stride. "I didn't know you were married."

"Yes," Tanner said. "I was married on the Inside, like you."

"Did you ever try to contact your wife?" Ari said. "Even though it's forbidden?" The relearning process forbid contact with former friends and family members from the Inside. It made the transition far easier.

Tanner shook his head. "No."

"But you were tempted?" Ari asked him.

"Of course I was," Tanner told her. "How could I not be? I loved my wife very much. And it pains me, knowing that she's out here right now at this very moment, trapped, wondering what the hell is happening to the beloved city she grew up in. She would be ten years older by now. Probably remarried. It's for the best, really, that I never contacted her. And to be honest, I hope I never see her again. I really do."

"I didn't know," Ari said. She reached out, squeezed his hand.

Tanner nodded, squeezing back. He looked into her eyes. "I have you now, Ari."

She gave him a hug in the middle of that lightning-damaged street.

"I awakened spontaneously," he told her with his lips next to her ear. "I was striding down that street with my wife one moment and the next I was choking in a pile of sludge, accompanied only by darkness. My guess is there had been some malfunction with the umbilical that provided oxygen and

nutrients. My brain realized there was something wrong and woke me up. I broke free of the pod and when I could breathe and see I found myself surrounded by steel walls. Hoodwink was there, standing above me. I still remember the first words I ever heard with my own ears. 'Well shit on a popsicle stick.'"

Ari smiled at that.

"Hoodwink carried me to shelter," Tanner said. "Evading at least three recycling robots along the way. If he wasn't there, the machines would have scheduled me for protein reclamation."

"All of us owe Hoodwink in our own way, don't we?" Ari murmured.

She heard shouts up ahead, followed by the characteristic sound of clanging swords. She saw a bright flash, accompanied by a loud sizzling.

She released Tanner and the two of them hurried down the street toward the commotion. They drew their fire swords.

Five gols had surrounded two uncollared individuals. The gols were hunter class, armored in colorful insect-like armor: bright red carapaces with spikes running along the surface; helmets with pairs of large, flat mandibles; arm guards with sharp spikes curving from the elbows; leggings with similar hooks on the knees; boots with razor spurs.

In their right hands the hunters held impossibly large daggers, having the length and breadth of man-sized cleavers. If the world had obeyed proper physics, there would be no way those gols could even lift weapons like that.

In their left hands the hunters wielded strange segmented weapons composed of hundreds of tiny razors. Those segments telescoped outward when swung, the countless razors hissing loudly as they sliced through the air.

Just as Ari arrived one of the hunters flung its razor weapon outward, running its multiple segments through the chest of the first uncollared man. At almost the same time, another hunter swung its man-sized dagger and beheaded the second individual.

"Stop!" Ari said. "Your orders were to collar, not kill!"

One of the hunters turned toward her and unleashed its razor weapon. Ari barely dodged to the side as the telescoping blades sliced the air beside her.

"What—" Before she could finish, another hunter swung its man-sized dagger down on her. Again Ari narrowly sidestepped.

"Tanner!" she said. It was a warning, and a plea for help. But Tanner

was already fending off two more of the hunters.

A third hunter came at her. This one swung down its heavy dagger while telescoping its razor weapon at the same time.

Ari dodged the ponderous dagger, batting aside the razor weapon as she did so. At the periphery of her vision, she sensed motion as the other two attackers came at her.

She reached for the vitra inside the sword. Electrical energy filled her. The source of life. It was a false source, but it refreshed her nonetheless as the wires inside her real-world body stimulated the pleasure, pain, and lust centers of her brain at the same time.

She unleashed a wall of flame at the first hunter, sending the enemy flying backward. She heard the loud hiss of an incoming razor weapon from the second hunter and rolled to the ground. A hundred razors cut the air above her. She got up, batting the weapon away with her molten red sword; she bent backwards as the hunter swung its heavy dagger horizontally. If she had moved like that in real life, she would have sprained her lower back severely. But there, she could contort to unreal levels.

She straightened as the razor weapon retracted beside her, cutting into her arm. She ignored the pain inflicted to her gol body, and drove her sword home, her hot blade easily penetrating the carapace of the enemy.

Beneath that insect helm, the hunter's eyes widened. Not with pain. But surprise.

She tried to wrench the weapon sideways to defend against the incoming razor blow from her third attacker, but the carapace proved more durable than she had thought, and her weapon didn't move. Perhaps she had allowed her blade to cool too much.

She was forced to abandon the fire sword in order to dodge the incoming segments. The stricken hunter fell backward, gripping the hilt that protruded from its belly.

She ducked as the third attacker's broad dagger came in.

And then another razor weapon came at her from the left side. She dodged it, and saw that it was the first hunter she had knocked down. The gol's armor was blackened from the wall of fire she had sent, but otherwise he was unharmed.

Ari retreated a few paces, her path to the embedded fire sword blocked by the two aggressors.

Beside her, Tanner had kept the remaining two hunters occupied

during that time. As she watched, he pierced the carapace of one gol, only to take a shallow wound to the leg as the other hunter caught him with its razor weapon.

Just then five more hunter class warriors burst from the doors of the nearby buildings. Time seemed to slow... actually, time really *did* slow, because the system was apparently struggling to keep up with the number of complex actors it needed to render. Stanson had been right: hunters were extremely resource intensive.

"Ari!" Tanner said. "We have to get out of here! We'll come back, respawn with some Keepers."

Ari was loathe to abandon her fire sword to the hunters, but retreat seemed prudent. She had learned that recklessness was not the solution to problems, and only put her life at risk, not to mention other people's lives.

"Retreat, then!" Ari said.

She turned about and ran. Tanner joined her immediately. He sprinted with a slight limp thanks to the wound in his leg.

Behind them, the encumbered hunters easily kept pace with the lightly armored pair.

"We're not going to lose them," Tanner said.

They rounded a bend. Up ahead, she spotted two Keepers in crimson capes alongside two Users with Lightning Rings on their fingers.

"Help!" Ari shouted. "The hunters have turned!"

The two Keepers immediately drew their fire swords. Ari joined them and the group formed a defensive line in front of her. She resisted the urge to ask for their weapons. She had lost her own. She would watch.

"Aim for their faces," Ari instructed the group. "They have no armor there."

The eight remaining hunters approached at a run. The system slowed precariously.

The Users unleashed lightning into the faces of two hunters, and the gols fells to their knees.

The Keepers and Tanner unleashed a stream of flame into the faces of three others, downing them as well.

The three remaining hunters closed with the group.

One of the Users was out immediately as a razor weapon tore him in half.

Tanner released a fiery half sphere, knocking two of the hunters back.

He leaped on one of them and stabbed his sword into its neck. One of the Keepers did the same to the other.

The second Keeper plunged her molten sword through the carapace of the last remaining hunter, driving it through the gol's heart. The Hunter fell to its knees and then collapsed.

"Thank you," Ari humbly told the Keepers and the User.

"What the hell was that?" Tanner said. His mouth movements were slightly delayed thanks to the continued rendering complexities of the scene.

"Someone obviously reprogrammed them," Ari told him.

"Our rogue Keeper?"

Ari nodded. "We're going to have to step up our efforts to catch this Amoch."

"You think he's acting alone?"

Ari shook her head. "At this point I don't know what to think."

Another Keeper dashed onto the scene. He panted as he spoke. "Ari, I've been sent to retrieve you!"

"Why, what's happened?" Ari asked him.

"Something terrible."

eight

Ari stood at the heart of the city that was once known as Emerald. It had been one of the most beautiful places in the realm after the artificial ice age was lifted, and was named after the mighty oak that had grown at its center, a titanic tree whose leaves glittered in the sunlight like emeralds. The gigantic branches swept across the entire extents of the city, reaching to the very top of the Forever Gate that enclosed the place. Shops and houses had been built directly into those wide branches, forming extensive neighborhoods, though smaller districts existed on the ground.

But that massive, life-giving tree was no more. It had been chopped down near its base and toppled into the eastern wall of the Forever Gate. The branches themselves had suffered a terrible conflagration—most were black, others gray. Several sections were still smoldering. All of the homes and shops had been destroyed. There was not a single emerald leaf left.

The buildings on the ground had fared little better: all that remained were burned, hollowed out shells. Even the transit centers were destroyed—Ari and Tanner had to inject directly into the city from the Outside.

A hole had been successfully blasted into the Forever Gate underneath the fallen tree. Ari had dispatched Keepers to search for those denizens who had escaped into the barren desert beyond.

"The attack against us in Dhenn was obviously a distraction," Tanner was saying. "It had to be. They wanted to keep us from this place."

Ari frowned. "I'm not sure we would have been able to do anything even if we were here." She was still smarting from her loss against the hunters.

"When I find out which of the children is Amoch, I swear I'm going to throttle him," Tanner said.

"We're not even sure it was Amoch who did this. Let's go talk to the witnesses."

She left the base of the fallen tree and wandered through the ruins of the ground district. She reached an area where a Keeper named Jag had rounded up the survivors. He had given them food and water while other Keepers placed a new transit center nearby so that the refugees could transfer to other cities.

She approached a young woman who held a baby in her arms. Her

face was covered in soot.

Ari knelt beside her and tried to project as much empathy into the woman as she could with her expression. She offered her a small bag of gold.

"Thank you," the woman said, accepting the money. "I lost everything."

"What happened?" Ari asked her.

"I was at my home on Bole street when the entire oak began to shake. My husband told me to stay put. That's what we were taught to do during an earthquake. But this felt different than an earthquake. It seemed like someone was taking a giant ax to the base of the tree and hitting it again and again, with the vibrations of the impact carrying to our doorstep. I gathered up my babe and raced out the door. Others joined us on the wooden street. It was pandemonium.

"I made my way to the rope baskets and waited for a place. The oak shook violently, and I knew it was going to fall soon. I begged a man to give up his space in the basket for me, or to take my baby to safety. He reached out to grab my baby, but then grabbed me instead, pulling both of us aboard despite the protests of the other passengers, who had to shove aside to make room.

"The conductor tried to kick me out, but still other passengers told him to forget about me and just lower the basket. And so he did. We made our way down the trunk as he pulled at the ropes. My baby remained quiet through it all. So stoic, so strong." She rocked her baby in her arms and looked at it sweetly. "You're so strong."

She continued the story. "When we emerged from the branch cover, I saw a machine entirely unlike anything I'd ever witnessed. It was this great cutting contraption. Gols cranked a dial that drew back a massive blade at least three houses long and two wide. When the blade reached a critical point, the gols did something to the machine, and it released that blade directly into the base of the oak. It drove into the deep gash that had already been scored there, and the tree shuddered terribly. There was a cracking sound, and the oak began to list toward the cut in its base.

"The gols quickly withdrew their machine. Emerald continued its precarious tilt. Another crack, and then the falling motion increased. People in the basket screamed as we were hurled sideways. Then the motion ceased with a shudder as the top part of the oak struck the upper boundary of the Forever Gate.

"The conductor hastened our descent, the tree listing awkwardly above us. Flames erupted at the base of the oak, fanned by something I could not see. Those flames quickly rose higher and higher. The basket reached the ground and I hurried out. I made my way toward the nearest transit center, but everyone else had the same idea as me. A huge crowd had gathered outside it. I was lucky that crowd was there, because a moment later countless bolts of lightning struck the transit center, and it collapsed, killing everyone inside.

"There was an incredible explosion behind us. When the dust cleared, I saw that a hole had been blown into the Forever Gate. The throng fled toward that gap. I was nearly trampled in the onrush. I hid behind a boulder and waited for the rush to subside. I heard explosions around me and saw a hooded man moving between the various buildings of the ground district, a white staff in his hands. He was surrounded by men who wielded lightning. A group of city guards rushed to confront him, but his men incinerated them with their electricity.

"The hooded man pointed his staff at a building and a fireball erupted from the tip. The building was engulfed in flames. He moved on to the next building and did the same. And the next."

She shook her head. "I hid there, crouched low, hoping to avoid notice. I don't know how much time passed, but finally the hooded man and his followers were gone. When I deemed it safe, I scrambled to my feet and made my way to the hole in the Forever Gate. But when I found the waiting desert and its relentless heat, I turned back. I couldn't bring my baby out there to die.

"And so I returned to the damaged buildings, and the fallen oak. I hoped to scrounge what food I could for myself and my baby. And then the Keepers came and fed us. I am grateful to you gols. You tried to protect us from the hooded man and his crazy lightning wielders. I only wish... that my husband had come with me." She had been strong the whole time, but with those words, she finally teared up.

Ari rested a hand on the woman's shoulder. "Poor woman."

Ari got up and walked among the remaining survivors. Vacant eyes, grimy faces. Some were burned or maimed. She reached the last of them and then switched her gaze to the smoldering, fallen oak beyond.

Tanner joined her.

Ari reached out to grip his hand. She needed the reassurance of his

touch in that moment, even if it wasn't real. She squeezed once and he returned the gesture. Then she released him.

"I told you it was Amoch," Tanner said from beside her.

"The abilities of this Amoch remind me an awful lot of One." That was the designation of the primary AI that ran the system. It had gone rogue, thanks to the alien computer virus Jeremy had programmed into the system. She had believed that virus destroyed. Perhaps she was wrong.

Tanner regarded her uncertainly. "You don't think..."

"Like I told you before, I don't know what to think. Whoever we're dealing with was definitely inspired by that rogue AI, however."

"She said the man was followed by lightning wielders," Tanner said. "Judging from the descriptions we've heard of his powers, why would he need them?"

"Maybe he wants their approval," Ari said. "To feel powerful. To feel like a leader. Or maybe he's not as powerful as we think."

"Well, Leon did say he wanted to build an army of the uncollared."

"Yes," Ari said. "And his own utopia. Though I fail to see how destroying peaceful cities will help him attain that goal."

One of the Keepers approached.

"I just returned from the desert," the Keeper said. "It looks like there were uncollared individuals waiting out there to collect those who fled. I found one man who pretended to be dead, lying in the sand, and he listened in as the lightning wielders gave them the choice between death or joining their army. Apparently most of the refugees joined, which would explain why I found only a few dead bodies out there, plus the one man."

Ari glanced at Tanner and rubbed her forehead. "And let me guess, when we get back we're going to find that all the logs in the desert area were wiped, just like for Emerald proper." Which they had confirmed before injecting Inside.

Tanner sighed. "Like I said, I really want to throttle this guy."

nine

Ari walked the claustrophobic steel corridors of the real world. She needed a break from the stress of the Inside and the confusion in the Control Room of the Outside. A chance to clear her mind and think, among other things.

One of the Children was ruining the very world they were all trying so hard to create. One foolish, misguided crew member. She had already limited access to the Control Room, with only essential operators allowed on the Inside. But that wouldn't stop a rogue crew member from entering remotely through a terminal on a different part of the ship, or via a wireless access port. Those entries were supposed to be logged, but a clever hacker could hide his or her tracks. She wished there was a way to determine, in real-time, the exact location of every individual who was tethered to the Inside. Kade was working on a patch but he couldn't promise her anything until early next week. He said he was having trouble differentiating between those who connected via the pods versus the terminals. In the meantime, Ari had dispatched a security team to do a compartment by compartment sweep of the ship, but so far they hadn't reported finding anyone.

Problems, problems, problems. She rubbed her eyes, wishing that the burden of command resided on another's shoulders.

If Hoodwink were here, he'd know what to do.

But Hoodwink wasn't there. And he never would be again.

The translucent pods of sleepers lined the bulkheads. Her boots clanged on the iron grill that served as the deck; the grid-like nature of the material allowed her to gaze down to the level below, which looked much the same as the current one. Those grills had the ability to seal during a hull breach—the individual lattices would fold upward to form a solid mass.

She passed hydroponics and the smell of pine and mint drifted to her nostrils. That scent brought with it a sudden sense of peace and sparked recollections of those places where she had experienced similar aromas on the Inside. She remembered the first time she had seen a living pine tree shortly after they had lifted the ice age. It was in a city park in Severest. The tree had smelled so... alive. She had had the Keepers spawn a whole park full of similar pines afterward, and she returned there often, if only for the aroma.

She continued into a narrower passageway that was free of the human

pods. Instead steel pipes and plastic conduits covered the overhead and upper bulkheads—plumbing and wiring that looked like it was jury-rigged by the robots and engineering teams. Portions of the underlying bulkhead were a brighter polish than the surrounding metal, indicating where the repair drones had 3D printed fresh material.

She smiled slightly. Robots. Bulkheads. 3D printing. There was once a time when all of those words had been so foreign to her. She had learned so much since she had come to the Outside. But with that knowledge came burdens and responsibility.

She approached a patrol robot. Its steel torso was embossed with geometric symbols; there was a vent in its side that covered different colored wires tied together in bundles. A corrugated, flexible black bag that reminded her of a smith's bellows connected the torso to the treads the machine used for locomotion. It had telescoping arms that ended in pincers. Its hilt-shaped head had three camera lenses for eyes underneath a red proximity sensor. Underneath the noise of the rolling treads she heard the subtle clicks and whirs of other servomotors at work.

"Good morning, Commander Ari," the robot said.

Stanson thought it would be a nice touch to have the robots greet the crew members whenever they passed. The younger Children loved it, but all it did for Ari was make her spine tingle. She remembered all too well how unsafe these corridors had been, with robots running amok, their programming instructing the machines to recycle any awakened human beings.

She didn't answer the robot and instead edged far to the side of the corridor to give the thing a wide berth as she walked by.

In a few minutes Ari reached her destination: the relearning center. Inside she found those members of the recently awakened. Their ranks had swelled since the last time she had come there. Precariously so: it was so crowded, there almost wasn't any room to walk. It was a good thing she had implemented that sedation policy.

Some of the newly awakened exercised on various machines. In the cardio area, men and women jogged on treadmills; plastic tubes were connected to masks over their mouths to monitor their oxygen efficiency. Other people sat in circles on cleared areas; they wore aReal glasses and made mime-like gestures, picking up objects that weren't there or manipulating screens only they could see.

All of them wore short-sleeved patient gowns that ended at the knees. Underneath it, almost everyone had on a mechanical exoskeleton of some kind: their muscles still recovered from a lifetime of sleep.

Readily identifiable by the dark blue service utilities they wore, the relearning specialists were dispersed among the room. Some trained people one-on-one, others led group sessions. There were about ten people for every specialist.

Ari proceeded to a small area on the far side of the room where an old woman was teaching a class. She was the relearning center department head, and lead specialist. Her name was Helen, and she was like a surrogate mother to them all. She was the oldest woman to have survived the rebirth. Despite her bodily age, she behaved more like a young woman, with the associated hopes and dreams, and the same youthful energy. Which made sense: she had been twenty-nine years old on the Inside before her rude awakening.

It must have been difficult for Helen to awaken sixty years older than she had been, her youth robbed. Ari could relate: before her own awakening, her use of vitra on the Inside had prematurely aged her body so that by the time she was almost thirty she'd looked a hundred.

The awakening had been hard on Helen's body and they'd almost lost her. But she had a strong will and devoted herself to the trainings: though it took her longer than most eventually she was walking on her own two feet.

Helen noticed her presence and looked up. A smile crinkled her features and her eyes shone with delight.

"I want you all to keep traveling to the different planets," Helen told her students, who were wearing aReals. "Note down the first thing you feel when you see each world. We'll discuss it in about ten minutes."

Helen got up and made her way across the room.

"Ari!" someone said from beside her.

Ari would have recognized that voice anywhere. It was Caylin, the little girl who was one of the first Children Ari had ever met. Caylin wrapped her arms around Ari's upper leg in a hug.

Ari knelt. "And how's my favorite Child today?"

"Very good. Look what I made today."

Ari received an access request on her aReal. She accepted and a three-dimensional swan appeared on her display.

"You made that yourself?" Ari asked the little girl.

"I did!" Caylin said. "See how good I am? I haven't lost my skills.

When can I come back to the Control Room? I want to help change the Inside again."

Caylin had been instrumental in repealing the ice age, and she had been a good coder and excellent artist, but Ari hated to see the child wile away her youth inside a computer system. Unlike Hoodwink, she wasn't a big fan of child labor, especially considering that Caylin was both six years old in body *and* mind.

"You know you can't come back," Ari told the little girl. "Not for a long time."

Caylin blinked rapidly and for a moment Ari was worried she was going to cry. But the little girl forced a smile.

"I'm going to talk to Helen," Ari said. "We can catch up later. Okay?"

Caylin seemed a little disappointed. "Okay."

Ari rubbed a commiserating hand in Caylin's hair and stood.

"Ari, it's good to see you girl, it is," Helen said, hugging her.

Ari smiled. Helen had an accent that reminded her of Hoodwink.

"And you as well," Ari told her.

"So what can I do for you today?" Helen asked.

"I came to see how Zak was taking to the relearning." Since Ari had personally awakened him, she felt some responsibility for his reeducation.

Helen's face darkened at the mention of his name. The old woman shook her head. "I had high hopes for that one, but he's struggling to adapt. I have another specialist working full time with him. He keeps rejecting this world, keeps calling it an illusion."

"Maybe I should talk to him."

"By all means," Helen said. "Caylin, take Ari to Ben."

Lingering nearby, Caylin smiled and grabbed Ari by the hand. "This way, Ari."

She led Ari through the throng, eventually stopping beside a chest-press machine. Zak was inside it, moving the weights. A blue-clad male specialist counted out the reps. Ari's aReal identified him as Ben.

Zak stopped in mid-set. "You," he told Ari. "The gol."

"That's me," Ari told him. She glanced at Caylin. "Thank you Caylin. You can go."

"I want to watch."

Ari smiled. "Helen needs your help."

The little girl pouted, then quickly ran away.

"How goes the relearning?" Ari asked him.

"Just fine," Zak said.

"Tell her what you were just saying to me," Ben said.

Zak hesitated. "You tell her."

Ben looked at Ari. "He was complaining. Saying: 'why do I have to bother doing this, when none of it is real?' He says that constantly. He's got the worst reality disassociation I've ever seen."

"You think this isn't real?" Ari asked him.

"No it's not," Zak responded.

"Why?" Ari said. "They've turned the exoskeleton assistance way down by now. You're feeling the pain in your muscles as you train."

"Pain can be simulated."

"And what about vitra?" Ari said. "That's been ripped away from you. At least when you're collared, you can still sense it, just beyond reach. But now there's only nothing."

"It's an illusion," Zak said. "Vitra is still there. I know it is."

She glanced at Ben. "Have you tried sending him back Inside? Into the sandbox environment?"

"I have," Ben said. "We've done our workouts there, and returned here. It doesn't help. He says both environments are fake."

"I want to see my sister," Zak said.

"So that's what this is about," Ari said. "When we got you out, I didn't know you had a sister. I didn't know she was there. I wouldn't have been so quick to bring you to the Outside if I knew. But you have to let her go. Has Ben told you that she's not your sister, not really? Not by blood, anyway."

"She *is* my sister by blood," Zak stated. "I've been taking care of her ever since I was a kid. Ever since we ran away from home together. You can't imagine what life was like on the streets, growing up like that. You can't."

Ari knelt to look up into his face. She rested a hand on his knee. "Zak, I'm not a gol. I'm flesh and blood, just like you. None of this is an illusion."

Zak's hand suddenly darted forward and he slapped her arm aside. "Don't touch me, gol!"

Ari stepped back. The blow hadn't been light. A portion of the exoskeleton that covered his hand had torn into her flesh, drawing blood.

She showed him the wound. "Does a gol bleed?"

Zak shrugged. "A trick."

"I'll get the first aid kit," Ben said, departing.

"Things will go easier for you the sooner you let go," Ari said. "As far as you're concerned, your sister no longer exists."

"I don't have to sit here and listen to this bullshit." Zak started to stand.

Ari pulled up the access controls for his exoskeleton on her aReal and disabled the suit.

Zak abruptly froze. He struggled against the steel cage of the suit that held him, to no avail. "What did you do to me?"

"Disabled your suit. So that we can have a proper talk."

Ben returned and wrapped gauze around her wound.

"Have you showed him earth, yet?" Ari asked the specialist.

"Yes," Ben said. "I ran the earth simulation on the same day he arrived. He doesn't believe it."

"Aliens on the earth," Zak said. "It's not possible."

Ari sighed. "You have your work cut out for you," she told Ben. "Help me carry him out of the machine so someone else can have a turn."

She and Ben lifted Zak from the chest press machine and set him down on the floor. The pair then sat down beside him.

"Sometimes it helps the healing to talk about your life on the Inside," Ari told Zak. "Tell me, what was your sister's name?"

"I'm not telling you anything," Zak said.

Ben glanced at her. "In the manual it's recommended that we don't dwell on the past, because friends and family may as well be dead to them."

"I don't intend to dwell on his past," Ari told him. "I just want him to get it out." She stared at Zak. "You know, I came to the Inside to collar you myself because I thought I sensed potential in you. I thought I sensed a man who could help make a difference in our cause. You evaded the guards for so long. That was real ingenuity. Or so I thought, until I learned that the hooded man was in fact helping you. He told you the guard schedule, and their patterns. He gave you the Lightning Rings. You weren't ingenious at all. You were just lucky.

"Did you know that this hooded man is actually one of us?" Ari gestured toward the people in the relearning center. "A man on the Outside who has been spreading chaos on the world of the Inside, pursuing some selfish, misguided agenda. By refusing to believe, you are indirectly aiding this man, who calls himself Amoch. He wants the world of the Inside to perish, you know. He will do to your sister what we have done to you. Is that

what you want? Do you want her to awaken as you have? So that you can be reunited? Assuming she even survives the awakening... she could be sixty years old. Eighty. The Inside changes our ages. If Amoch succeeds in destroying the Inside, and your sister is old and frail, she will probably die.

"You have a choice. You can choose to help us. Or you can choose to fight us. The decision is yours. But know that the latter option will only doom your sister."

Ari waited a moment, letting her words sink in. When Zak didn't answer, she patted him gently on the exoskeleton and then stood up.

"Gemma," Zak said.

Ari paused. "What's that?"

"My sister's name. Gemma."

Ari glanced at the specialist, then asked Zak another question. "Tell us about her."

His eyes defocused as his mind traversed the land of memory, and he smiled inside the exoskeleton. "She was a good kid. I remember one time, when we were picking the pockets of rich nobles in Grassylane District, this one target caught me and grabbed me by the hand. He brought me to the nearest guard. A gol. So as the gol is dragging me to the city jail, talking shit about how I'm going to spend the rest of my days rotting, Gemma goes and cracks open the pen of some cattlemonger's stall, letting loose three woolly mammoths right in front of us.

"As the cattlemonger shouts and curses at her, she jumps on the back of one of the mammoths and starts kicking it in the ribs, exciting it and the others into a rampage. The gol lets me go to concentrate on containing the mammoths. Other guards rush in to help. Gemma and I escape in the confusion." He laughs to himself as he reminisces, and then sighs. "That day I nicknamed her Woolly. A little in-joke among the two of us. Man, I haven't called her that in years. I'm going to miss her."

Ari waited for him to say more, but when it was obvious he was done, she released the freeze on his exoskeleton.

Zak, taken entirely by surprise, promptly collapsed.

She offered him a helping hand.

"I'm glad you chose to help us," she said. "Rather than fight us."

He reluctantly accepted her hand. "I haven't quite made my choice, yet. I still think all of this is fake."

"Yes," Ari said. "But you've opened yourself to the possibility that it's

real. And that's the first step in believing."

ten

Amoch toured the grounds of his makeshift camp in the desert outside the Forever Gate of Rhagnorak. The metal ferrule of his staff left thin disks of molten glass in its wake where it touched the sand.

Tents crowded the barren landscape as far as the eye could see. Groups of uncollared individuals gathered around trainers, learning the intricacies of lightning and vitra, or practicing with fire swords.

Amoch's plans were going well.

A small group of loyal followers walked with him. Hadrian, the man he had uncollared in Dhenn, was among them. As was Sammuel, the old man from the same city whom Amoch had convinced to fall on a sword. Amoch had sent someone to find Sammuel's pod in the real world and he had been taken out and moved to an abandoned part of the ship, where he connected to the Inside via a wireless access port. The compartment Sammuel dreamt within had two exits, with proximity sensors outside the hatches triggered to wake him and the others who sheltered there on the approach of either robot or man. The security team would never catch them.

Amoch neared the main tent and the two hunters with their giant daggers and telescoping blade weapons parted to let him pass.

Wraylor was within. She wore a hooded black robe similar to his own, except her version was tighter and accentuated her figure. Also unlike his outfit, her face was completely visible. Her eyes stood out like two glowing emeralds underneath that hood. She had chosen a green skin tone for herself, so dark it was almost gray. Her face was blemish-less of course, and her features slightly different as compared to the Outside: her cheekbones more chiseled, her nose more pinched, her face less circular. You could be as beautiful as you wanted on the Inside. Or as ugly.

Wraylor smiled when she saw him. Amoch couldn't tell if that was tenderness he saw in those glowing green eyes, or contempt.

"Welcome, my love." She wrapped her arms around him, enveloping him with limbs that quickly quadrupled so that he was enwrapped in the hug of an octopus. When she released him, she had two arms again. "I've missed you."

"You shouldn't be here," Amoch told her. "I want you on the Outside."

"But I thought we could—"

Amoch raised a dismissive hand. "Do not think. Do not. Return to the Outside immediately."

Wraylor seemed about to protest but then curtsied instead. "As you wish." She left the tent, no doubt to go somewhere quiet and disbelieve reality. Then again, he wasn't sure what exactly she would do.

"Follow her," he instructed Sammuel. "Make sure she leaves this world."

"Yes, my lord." Sammuel made his way toward the front of the tent.

"And Sammuel," Amoch told him. "Careful that you don't let her see you."

Sammuel nodded and hurried from the tent.

Amoch approached the planning table and stared at the layout of the miniature city before him. His advisors had already pinned out the best attack routes. Because of its sprawling size and the number of guards, the place wouldn't be as easy to take as Emerald, but Amoch had no doubts the city would eventually fall. No doubts whatsoever. Especially when he disabled most of those guards in one fell blow.

And when victory came, it would be their greatest yet.

"Sir." One of the hunters peered into the entryway. "There is a woman here requesting to see you. She says she met you before, and that you gave her brother a set of Lightning Rings."

Amoch waved a hand absently toward the gol. "Let her in."

An uncollared woman entered the tent. She was dainty and young, with a grimy face and torn clothes. Her movements seemed confident, though there was more than a hint of fear in her eyes.

"My lord," she said, bowing slightly.

Amoch simply stared at her, saying nothing. He would let the darkness that covered his face unnerve her for a few moments. At that distance, and with the current lighting, she could probably see the black swirling fog that made up the impenetrable mask. That darkness was only visible to outside observers, of course: his own vision was completely unmarred.

The young girl fidgeted, but to her credit, her fear didn't seem to increase. Amoch wondered if he should change that.

"My lord," she repeated. "My name is Gemma, do you remember me?"

"No I do not." He truly didn't. He had met far too many people these last few weeks and months to remember all of them.

"You let me serve you once before," Gemma said. "I would like to serve you again."

"I have no need of the service of one so young," Amoch said dismissively. He returned his attention to the miniature city.

"My lord, you gave my brother Lightning Rings. You taught us how to evade the guards. But now he is dead. The huntress gol killed him."

Amoch looked up. "The huntress gol?"

"Yes. The one who calls herself Nine. The one I have sometimes seen conversing with the Keepers. I will kill her, someday, along with the male gol who helped her. With your blessing, of course."

Could it be the sister? He could use that. Revenge was a powerful motivator.

He regarded the woman in a new light. Yes, she was dainty, but venomous.

She might be precisely what he was looking for.

"Can you fight?" Amoch asked her, glancing at the hilt that protruded from a scabbard tied to her back.

"I've been fighting since I was a child. I grew up on the streets. The sword is an extension of my hand."

"But do you know the sword forms?"

She hesitated. "The sword forms?"

Amoch smiled. "No matter. Come." He approached the back of the tent, set his staff against the fabric, and opened a small chest. He produced several items and set them out on the floor.

"This armor will give you strength." Amoch indicated the thin platemail that was covered in curlicued designs. "Speed, and agility. It will protect you from extreme heat and cold, and will deflect the hardest blows."

"It looks too big for my body," Gemma said.

"Once you put it on," Amoch told her. "It will shrink to conform to your figure."

He lifted the silver mask. Forged into the shape of a Chinese dragon, it had wide eyes, thick nostrils, and a gaping grin. "This mask will allow you to see through walls, and it will give you a complete overhead map of your surroundings at all times. You'll be able to easily pick out gols from a crowd, as they will be colored a bright red. And you will be able to see the glow of

vitra use through buildings."

He lifted the long, curved katana and unsheathed its blade. "And now the crowning item. This sword." He offered it hilt-first to Gemma.

She accepted the weapon reverently. It seemed to hum in her grasp.

"That is no ordinary blade," Amoch continued. "It will guide your hand. Teach you the sword forms as you fight."

Amoch retrieved his white staff from where he had set it against the tent wall and abruptly attacked her, sweeping high. Gemma instantly responded, blocking the blade. Her widening eyes betrayed the fact that the sword had acted for her.

He struck again, sweeping low, then thrusting. He moved impossibly fast, yet Gemma countered both movements.

"Impossible," she said, stepping back, staring at the weapon in awe.

Amoch grinned, though she could not see it. "Yes. I make the impossible, possible."

"It seemed... it seemed to pull my hand."

"As I said, it will guide you." He tossed her the sheath. "Once you don the dragon mask, you will see the sword's planned movements as a green path overlaying your vision. Eventually you will learn to anticipate its movements, and control it, rather than the weapon controlling you."

She sheathed the weapon solemnly.

"There is one last item I have for you," Amoch said. He reached into his cloak and produced a small, silver disk, which he handed to the girl.

"What's this?" she said, holding it to her face. The rim caught the light.

"An item you will use in your first mission," Amoch said.

Gemma wrapped her fingers around the disk and formed a fist. "Tell me my mission."

"I have decided that you will be the one to hunt down she whom you hate. The gol Nine."

"Thank you," Gemma said. "I won't forget this."

Amoch raised a hand. "I didn't say what you are to do yet. You are not to kill her, do you understand? Not this time, at least. I highly doubt you could do so on your own anyway, even with all that equipment."

Her expression became one of confusion. "Then what must I do? Tell me."

"Simply place the disk I have given you upon her head. It is up to you

how you wish to do it. Through combat or subterfuge or a mixture of both. I could care less. Though I suspect you'll have to resort to the latter option: she has a distrust for disks like these, due to certain past incidents. Whatever you do, don't underestimate her. She is a formidable foe. Find her, place the disk on her forehead, and then return to me."

Gemma pocketed the item. "If you are all powerful, why don't you do it yourself?"

Amoch couldn't hide the amusement from his tone. "My dear, I *am* all powerful, there is no doubt about that. I will say this, I'm not quite in the necessary mindset to face her. I fear that I would let our past interfere with my judgment. So I prefer to operate from afar, for now. From the shadows. Twisting and pulling the hidden fabric of the world, shaping it as I see fit without fear of guilt or hesitation.

"Besides, she is little more than an aberration at the moment, one with little bearing on my plans. That is precisely why I'm sending an amateur like you. Prove yourself to me in this, and perhaps I will give you greater missions. Maybe I will even let you kill her when the time comes."

The woman's eyes glinted with the fervent light of revenge. Perfect.

Amoch nodded toward the armor. "Take these and practice before you leave. Hadrian, see that she has a chance to try out her new equipment on living subjects."

Hadrian approached from where he loitered with the other followers. "It will be done."

Gemma donned the breast plate reverently. "Thank you for entrusting me with this task, my lord. I will not fail you."

"No," Amoch said slowly, the warning clear in his tone. "You will not."

eleven

Ari and Tanner were investigating a lead. One of Briar's eyes and ears had reported a hooded figure matching Amoch's description traveling through the streets of Rhagnorak. Stanson had informed her via aReal and she'd tethered to the Inside in the relearning center, while Tanner injected from the Control Room.

They had appeared in random places in the city and met up in the neighborhood where the hooded figure was last spotted. An hour would have passed on the Inside since then.

"You think we're too late?" Tanner asked when he joined her.

"It's possible," Ari said. "Keep an eye out for anything unusual."

She sensed the heavy, unexpected use of vitra then, coming from inside a nearby inn. She exchanged a glance with Tanner, and hurried to the building. Screams came from within.

In the lobby they discovered an odd scene. A lightning wielder was standing before another uncollared man who was forcing himself on a half-naked woman. Her clothes had been ripped.

Tanner was on the first man before he realized what was happening and clamped a bronze bitch around his throat. Ari did the same to the rapist and hauled him off the woman.

The man struggled in her grasp, but she held him fast. Ari asked the woman: "Are you all right?"

The frightened woman quickly gathered her torn clothes in front of her and then dashed upstairs.

"You are not Users," Ari told the man she held. She noted that neither of them wore Lightning Rings.

"Users?" The man laughed. "No, we're not Users."

"Where is your master?" Ari asked him.

The first man looked at the second, but didn't answer.

Ari lifted him into the air with one hand, taking advantage of the enhanced strength of her avatar. "Your master?"

"She's upstairs."

Ari felt her brows draw together. "She?"

Ari heard the thud of a ferrule striking wood as a robed figure with a staff descended the stairs. She threw the man toward the steps to free her

hands and then drew her fire sword. Tanner did the same with the second man and drew his blade, joining her.

Bone staff striking each individual step, the robed figure slowly descended. More and more of its body came into view until the face was revealed and the figure halted.

Those features weren't draped in darkness like she had expected. Instead, a beautiful woman stared back at Ari. She didn't recognize her. The woman's eyes were hued a deep emerald and seemed to glow. Her skin was colored a dark green, almost gray.

"Amoch?" Ari said.

Amusement filled those features. "I am Wraylor, not Amoch. Though my husband is looking for you."

"Your husband?"

"Yes," Wraylor said. "I'm debating whether or not I should give you to him. But if I do that, he'll discover I disobeyed his orders."

"We're taking you prisoner," Ari said.

Wraylor lifted an eyebrow. "Are you?"

"I can't move my body, Ari," Tanner said.

Ari turned toward him. "Wha—"

And then she felt it. Her own body had frozen. "What have you done?" She could still move her head and speak.

Wraylor smirked, then slowly approached, stepping between her two underlings, who wore similar expressions. When she reached Ari she slid a finger seductively under her chin. Ari tried, unsuccessfully, to look away.

"You collared my playthings," Wraylor purred. "That is not something I approve of." She tossed a key to each of the collared men and they removed their bronze bitches. They gave Ari defiant, victorious stares.

"Who are you?" Ari said. "What do you want?"

"I'm not sure of the answer to either question." Wraylor paused. "And that is the truth. Think about that for a while."

Wraylor stared at her for a long moment, the emerald glow of her eyes leaving afterimages in Ari's vision; abruptly Wraylor turned away and strode slowly toward the stairs. She spoke as she did so.

"I follow my husband and yet I'm not convinced I believe his plan is sound. And so I have come here to give you a warning. You see, I knew you would show yourselves when I was spotted in this city." She beckoned toward the uncollared men. "These two fools were supposed to keep an eye

out for you at the door, not play with the proprietor of the place. I will have to have a friendly discussion with them later."

The smirks instantly left those faces.

"You know where Amoch is?" Ari asked her.

"I do," Wraylor said, looking over her shoulder. "Or rather, I know where his army is."

"Where?"

"They are traveling through portal hops and are on their way to attack Crane at this moment. The city where I was born. Go there and stop him if you can. This is the only aid you will ever receive from me. Good luck. If we meet again, it will be on the battlefield."

The woman turned to go.

"Wait!" Ari said.

The woman ignored her. She walked up the stairs with the two men and in moments all three of them disappeared from view.

The invisible binds that held Ari released five minutes later.

She and Tanner bounded up the stairs to search for the woman and her minions but there was no sign of them in the hall. Ari barged into the various rooms but found only guests, along with the frightened proprietor, who still trembled in her torn clothes.

"We go to Crane?" Tanner asked her.

"First we return to the Outside," Ari said. "And dispatch reinforcements."

"The attack could be over by then."

"We have no choice," Ari said. "The two of us can't face an army of lightning wielders alone. And if Amoch has the ability to freeze us in our tracks like Wraylor..."

"You're right," Tanner said. "The Outside, then."

twelve

Ari opened her eyes in the Outside world. She was still in the relearning center. On her aReal, she pulled up Stanson.

"Stanson," she said. "I need you to summon all the Keepers and send them to Crane."

"Crane?" Stanson returned.

"Yes," Ari said. "There's going to be an attack. Tell them to gather as many of the Users as they can and prepare to defend the city. Spawn extra guards. None of the hunter class, this time. I don't trust their codebase. Also, I had logging enabled for my avatar. Download the last ten minutes and run the face of this Wraylor woman through the records. See if we can find a match."

"On it," Stanson said over the aReal. "By the way, I'd recommend against trying to collar the lightning wielders you find."

Ari frowned. "Why?"

"Because Dhenn was a mess. It took hours to collar everyone, and for what? The enemy used our preoccupation with the city to attack Emerald. We can't let them distract us like that again. I say we should just terminate any attackers with extreme prejudice. Let them wake up in the real world and have the system sedate them. We'll sort out their reintroduction into the Inside later."

Ari hesitated. "What if that's precisely what Amoch wants? Don't you remember the original threat we received? That we were to bring five hundred people into the Outside, or more bombs would go off near the Forever Gates?" Though Amoch had taken the threat much farther than that.

"I don't see how it could be what he wants," Stanson said. "If we're sedating them immediately upon wake up, and not allowing them into the Outside."

"Tanner agrees?" Ari asked.

"He does."

She sighed. "All right. I guess it makes things easier. Relay the orders to the Keepers and Users. We show the lightning wielders no mercy."

"Done."

"By the way... please tell me you have news on the lightning shields?" She had instructed Stanson to develop a personal shield against lightning attacks shortly after learning that Amoch planned to build an army of the

uncollared. Fire swords could be used to absorb incoming electrical attacks, of course, but it required immense concentration to turn the weapon into a lightning rod, putting the sword out of commission in the meantime.

"Henrietta tells me she almost has the shields ready. Just a few more tweaks and we can start injecting them inside with you."

"All right," Ari said. "Get them ready as soon as you can. Did Tanner surface yet?"

"He's here, yes," Stanson confirmed.

"Tell him I'm going back in, and have him meet me at the statues in Avian square."

"Will do. And Ari, good luck."

She smiled. "I make my own luck."

* * *

Ari materialized in the medieval streets of Crane. Screams drew her attention to the north, where several citizens were dashing toward her. Behind them, four lightning wielders unleashed havoc, destroying the buildings. They were using a lot of charge. Probably had rings.

Ari retrieved the sword that had injected inside with her and she buckled it to her belt. She recalled the order she had just given Stanson.

We show the lightning wielders no mercy.

She drew the weapon and began walking toward the lightning wielders. She increased her pace, changing to a lope, then a run, then an all-out sprint. She fanned the spark of vitra in the blade, pouring all of her being into it, until a veritable conflagration waited to be unleashed inside the glowing red metal.

She darted past the refugees. Two of the lightning wielders noticed her, but they reacted too late. She swung the sword as she ran, cutting a fiery swathe of death before her. Three of the attackers went down burning in that first strike.

The fourth man unleashed a stream of electricity at her. Ari ducked behind an apple cart, which was promptly incinerated. She dove into the adjacent building. The entrance splintered behind her.

She swung the weapon toward the open door and released a fireball. It struck the lightning wielder outside squarely in the chest, sending him hurtling backward, screaming as the flames devoured him.

She crawled to her feet, dusted off her blue outfit, and removed the cape. She was in an abandoned clothing store of some kind. She sheathed her

sword and pulled on an inconspicuous dun shirt and matching breeches. The human lightning wielders didn't have the ability to see her as a gol, so there was no point in broadcasting that fact: she might as well use the element of surprise to her advantage.

She made her way to Avian square. Pandemonium reigned as lightning wielders terrorized the populace, killing, pillaging, and destroying buildings indiscriminately. She took out as many lightning wielders as she could, though she avoided groups that were bigger than five. She had yet to meet any of the Keepers or Users she had ordered Stanson to install in the city. Maybe they were concentrated around the transit centers.

She finally arrived at Avian square. Statues of cranes dominated the central area, most of them damaged in some way, with three destroyed outright. Around them were the fallen tents and destroyed stalls that belonged to the hawkers who once frequented the square.

Ari ducked under one of the intact bird statues and waited.

"There you are," Tanner said from behind, startling her.

Ari spun. "Where were you hiding?"

"Behind the base. What took you so long?"

"I took out every lightning wielder I saw along the way," she said accusingly. That was a slight lie, of course; she didn't mention the overwhelming groups she had avoided.

"So did I," Tanner said. "So don't give me that accusing look. Nice outfit by the way."

Ari glanced at the silk robe he wore, which made him look like a rich merchant. "You too. Not exactly inconspicuous. Seen any Keepers yet?"

"No," Tanner said. "Best guess: they're holed up at the transit center, probably trapped."

"There's only one transit center in this city?" Ari asked him.

"Only one," Tanner answered.

"All right," Ari said. "Let's get ourselves to this transit center."

They retreated, following the signs. It wasn't hard to locate the transit center. The massive vitra use lit up their vision like a beacon. There were at least a hundred lightning wielders in the area.

Ari and Tanner slowly crept toward the attackers, whose backs were to them. The enemy was ducked behind upturned carts, or the sides of buildings, or the brims of rooftops, and concentrated fire on the terminal building. A few of them occasionally looked back, but since Ari and Tanner

moved in spurts, ducking behind whatever objects were nearest them, so far the attackers hadn't spotted them.

Keepers were definitely holed up inside the building, as well as Users, judging from the fireballs and lightning bolts that alternately issued from the place. For every fireball or bolt of lightning, the attackers launched four times as many strikes in return.

Ari pointed at a nearby rooftop and indicated the lightning wielders crouched there. Tanner nodded. He dashed across the street to enter the building and take them out. Ari meanwhile dropped to the cobblestone and crawled toward a group of attackers who sheltered behind an upturned cart.

She heard a yelp of surprise from the rooftop beside her and knew that Tanner had eliminated his targets, or was in the process of doing so.

The city shook as several massive explosions abruptly rocked the area.

One of the men she stalked suddenly turned around to look at her. He was the first to die. Ari swung her blade rapidly, extending flames with each strike, until all that was left of the four men were burning and flailing bodies. She crawled the rest of the way to them and finished the four off.

She and Tanner fought like that for the better part of an hour, stealthily eliminating pockets of attackers, sometimes drawing unwanted attention to themselves so that they were forced to flee, only to return and finish the job. Together with the trapped Keepers and Users, they managed to eliminate most of the lightning wielders in the area, and routed the rest. How much time they had actually saved by killing versus collaring was debatable, at least to Ari.

When it was over, a Keeper came running up. "The Forever Gate has been breached in multiple places! People are fleeing in droves!"

That explained the massive explosions she had heard earlier.

"Has anyone spotted Amoch yet?" Ari asked her.

"No," the Keeper responded.

Ari glanced at Tanner. "Looks like we're on the tail end of the attack."

"Maybe he didn't come," Tanner said. "For all we know, he might be staging a simultaneous attack in a different city."

Ari ordered most of the Keepers and Users to disperse throughout the city to eliminate the pockets of lightning wielders that remained. She took the remaining defenders with her and Tanner as she headed toward the gaps in the Forever Gate. When she reached the first one, she assigned a Keeper there

to prevent more people from passing into the barren land beyond. She instructed a sizable portion of the Users to go out there and round up the citizens who had fled into the desert. She told them to eliminate any lightning wielders they encountered.

She went to the remaining four gaping holes and set up a watch in front of each.

"What now?" Tanner asked when that was done.

"I want to make a final run through the city," Ari said. "And see if we can find this Amoch."

She turned around to begin that last run when a figure leaped down from a nearby rooftop and onto the street.

Crouching low, the newcomer was dressed in body-fitting silver armor covered in swirls and curlicues. The tight fit accentuated the figure of a woman.

In her hands she held an unsheathed samurai sword: a curved, single-edged katana with a square guard.

Her face was hidden behind a silver dragon mask.

thirteen

Ari gazed uncertainly at the Dragon Lady. The eyes of her foe were completely hidden behind that silver mask

"What do you want?" Ari said.

In answer, the Dragon Lady tilted her head very slightly, almost mockingly, and then rushed her.

Ari barely raised her own blade to defend.

The woman moved in a blur of steel, her curved katana darting in and out, slicing and thrusting. Ari was completely taken aback by the unexpected speed and ferocity of the attack, and she was forced to give ground. She had no time to launch any counteroffensives and instead parried constantly.

Tanner abruptly joined in, his blade a deadly blur beside her.

The opponent immediately switched to the defensive and Ari pressed the advantage. Her blade struck the curlicued armor in the rib area, but the sword deflected. A few moments later another opening presented itself and Ari thrust the tip forward, aiming for the heart. Her blade connected with a loud clang but didn't penetrate. The resultant reverberations passed up the sword into her arms.

The Dragon Lady batted Ari's weapon away and Tanner scored a similar blow, this time to the neck. Again the weapon didn't pierce the collar guard she wore.

"What the shit is this?" Tanner said.

Ari was reminded of the invulnerability of another AI, one that had called itself Brute. And she wondered if the Dragon Lady was an AI, too.

The opponent batted Tanner's weapon aside and retreated a pace, appearing uncertain.

Ari used the momentary respite to fan the spark of vitra in the blade, letting her weapon become molten hot. Then she pulled ahead of Tanner and resumed the attack, striking hard and fast with her red sword.

The woman retreated under the onslaught, struggling to counter the blows. Ari hit the armor several times, but still her superheated blade failed to penetrate. When the proper opening appeared, Ari jabbed her weapon once more toward the heart, unleashing all the fury of the sword's pent-up flames at the same time.

The fire tore into the Dragon Lady upon impact, engulfing her and

sending her hurtling backward. She skidded along the cobblestone before coming to a halt beside the collapsed ruin of a lute shop.

Ari and Tanner approached, treading through the lutes that strewed the street in front of the shop.

The Dragon Lady lay there motionless, her armor smoking. The central portion of the breast plate glowed a blue hot color. Her katana protruded from the strings of a nearby lute, just out of reach.

"I'm going to unmask her," Ari told Tanner.

"Careful," Tanner responded. "She might have a dagger or something. And how do you know that's even a mask? It could be the gol's face."

Sword at the ready, Ari crunched through the lutes and approached. She hesitated above the body, but still the Dragon Lady had not moved.

Keeping her sword in front of her torso, Ari slowly knelt, then extended her free hand toward the mask. She heard the opponent's breath behind that silver dragon, the respirations deep and measured, as of one asleep. Or unconscious.

The instant Ari's fingers touched the edge of the mask, the breathing ceased.

Without warning the Dragon Lady's hand shot up. Ari caught a glimpse of something metallic in her palm. A disk?

Ari reacted too late and the object struck her forehead as she pulled away.

The Dragon Lady removed her hand. The disk was gone.

Ari staggered back, frantically scrubbing her forehead. She felt only bare flesh. The disk had absorbed itself into her skin.

Ari was filled with a sudden fright. She remembered another disk that had touched her forehead in what seemed a lifetime ago. She had blacked out immediately and only learned afterward that the disk had drained her consciousness, moving it to a machine. She shuddered at the thought, and the hell that Hoodwink had gone through to save her.

The Dragon Lady abruptly rose to her feet, retrieved the katana, and fled.

"Get her!" Ari erupted into a sprint. "She did something to me!"

Ari and Tanner pursued the Dragon Lady. Their foe ran with gol speed, and though Ari summoned all the reserves available to her enhanced body, she could not close the gap.

With her sword, she instead hurled fireballs and streams of flame at

the woman, but the Dragon Lady glanced back often to avoid the incoming attacks.

The woman leaped onto a shed and then hauled herself onto the roof of one of the shops.

"I'll follow her on the rooftops!" Tanner said, breaking away. "You stick to the ground. See if you can head her off!"

Ari was about to contest him but it was a reasonable plan. Tanner leaped onto the roof while Ari continued the pursuit from street level. She occasionally lost sight of the woman thanks to chimneys and other rooftop structures that got in the way.

A building had partially collapsed up ahead, and Ari was forced to slow down to navigate the stone bricks that had spilled onto the street.

The Dragon Lady was about five houses ahead of her by then, with Tanner three house-lengths behind her.

The woman abruptly leaped off the rooftop, zip-lining across a rope that had been strung across the street in front of Ari. Decorative lamps hung from it, but the Dragon Lady's silver mask easily broke through each one, hardly interfering with her flight.

Ari unleashed a stream of flame toward the far side of the rope, severing it, and the woman plunged sideways into a nearby shop.

Tanner leaped down, beating Ari inside by a few paces.

Within, the Dragon Lady was pulling herself from the wreckage of a glass case she had fallen through. Tanner threw himself at her.

The woman parried his blows and managed to trip him. She sidestepped his body and hurried toward the entrance.

Ari intercepted her. "What did you do to me?"

In answer the woman threw herself at Ari in a flurry of steel. The Dragon Lady forced her backward and before Tanner could join in, the woman dove through the gap between Ari and the door.

Outside, the Dragon Lady scrambled to her feet and made to retreat.

Ari launched a fireball, striking the woman in the back and sending her hurtling across the street into the opposite building. The Dragon Lady slid down and landed chest-first on the cobblestone.

Ari and Tanner rushed toward her. When they were halfway there, forks of lightning abruptly erupted to their right.

The next thing Ari knew, she was flying above the cobblestone. She felt an intense pain in her side. She landed rolling on the street. Tanner

sprawled beside her, his ribcage blackened and smoking.

"Tanner," she started.

"I'm fine," he groaned.

Ari got up in time to counter the next lightning attack. She positioned herself between the two figures at the far end of the street and poured vitra into the blade, using all of her focus to make the steel act like a lightning rod. The sword absorbed the incoming tines of electricity.

Tanner joined her and together they advanced in that way, making their way toward the attackers, using their blades to absorb the relentless attacks.

Ari momentarily glanced toward the spot where the Dragon Lady had fallen. The woman was gone.

When they were thirty feet from the two lightning wielders, Ari and Tanner released their pent-up flames, choosing one target each. The men screamed as the flames devoured them.

She checked the overhead map. Unsurprisingly, neither gols nor Keepers were depicted. *Still not working.*

Ari hurried to the location where the Dragon Lady last lay and she dashed into the adjacent shop.

"Check this floor," she ordered Tanner as she ran upstairs.

She searched the bedroom on the second floor, tossing aside the mattress and cutting open the closet. She went to the window and scanned the surrounding rooftops. No one.

Tanner joined her a moment later. "The downstairs area was empty. I checked the back room and the shared courtyard. If we get to the roof, there's a chance—"

"Forget her," Ari said. "She's gone. We won't find her, not now."

"What the hell did she do to you back there?"

Ari rubbed her forehead. "I don't know. But whatever she did, I doubt it was anything good."

fourteen

When Ari and Tanner returned to the first floor and reached the shop entrance, they were met by a Keeper.

"Another city was attacked at the same time as this one," the Keeper told them. "Red Mesa. There were sightings of a hooded man with a staff."

Ari shook her head angrily. "Wraylor lied to us."

Tanner nodded. "Or perhaps Amoch lied to her. It's possible she didn't know."

"Damn it." To the Keeper: "Gather up as many of the other Users and Keepers as you can and go to Red Mesa. We'll meet you there."

"Understood." The Keeper sprinted down the street.

Red Mesa was three portal hops away. It was slightly faster for Ari and Tanner to disbelieve reality than to run all the way to the transit center and then hop between three different cities.

As such, Ari retrieved the handmirror from the pouch that hung from her utility belt and began the process of disbelieving reality. She could usually do it somewhere between thirty seconds and three minutes. Tanner was a little faster, averaging around forty-five seconds.

Tanner retrieved his own mirror and vanished after fifteen seconds. Nice.

Ari focused all her being onto that mirror. She concentrated on her features. *I am the illusion. The reflection is real. I am the illusion.*

Beyond the mirror frame, the world at the periphery of her vision began to liquefy and swirl: her return was imminent.

The world abruptly flickered but refused to wink out.

That had never happened before.

She tried again.

Once more, right at the point when reality should have returned, her surroundings merely flickered and she remained on the Inside.

She sighed, stowing the mirror, and waited for Tanner to bring her out manually.

The fabric of reality swirled and flickered before becoming stable again. That would have been Tanner's attempt. Several more such flickers came, spaced out over the next few minutes.

It was at that point Ari realized she wasn't going to be returning to the

Outside. She thought of the disk the Dragon Lady had touched to her forehead. Apparently one of its effects was to trap her there.

She had neglected to bring a tracker with her on her last inject into the system, so Tanner wouldn't be able to teleport to her position. As such, Ari began to make her way to the transit center. When Tanner returned to the Inside, that would be the most likely location where he would meet her.

Not in the mood for fighting, she avoided a pocket of lightning wielders as she made her way through the streets. She joined up with a group of Users and they escorted her the rest of the way to the transit center.

Sure enough, Tanner was waiting there. His face was set in grim lines.

"We can't get you out," Tanner told her.

"I know," Ari said. "It's the disk she touched to my head."

Tanner rubbed his forehead as if imagining what it must be like to have the small metallic object embedded there. "Someone must have sneaked in a patch somewhere along the line, appending rogue code to prevent an avatar from returning when a certain disk was present in the inventory. Stanson has assigned two Children the task of reviewing the code check-ins for the past year."

"I wish them luck," Ari told him. That could be tens of thousands of lines of code.

"I sent a few medics down to the relearning center in the meantime," Tanner continued. "They'll be connecting you to a total parenteral intravenous. It has dextrose, lipids, vitamins, the works. So you can stay Inside as long as you need. You won't starve. Plus they're also hooking up an excretion collection device, so you're covered in every department."

"Sounds... unpleasant," Ari said. "But if it keeps me alive, I guess there's nothing I can do about it. What about exercise? My muscles will atrophy. I'll have to start wearing an exoskeleton again."

"I'm hoping we won't have you stuck Inside that long, Ari."

"Trust me," Ari told him. "I'm hoping that, too."

"By the way, we couldn't find a match for Wraylor's face in the system."

"Figures," Ari said. On the Inside, you could be whoever you wanted. "Let's get to Red Mesa."

They joined up with a group of Keepers and Users who were headed to the city. After taking the three portal hops, they emerged to find the city mostly destroyed. The Users who had arrived before them were defending the

last transit center, and that was basically the only building in Red Mesa left standing. The rest of the city was a smoking, ruined mess. Most of the enemy army had already retreated, apparently using temporary portals, leaving only scattered pockets of abandoned lightning wielders, just as in Crane.

"Why is he doing this?" Ari said. "Destroying all these towns. And killing the people? He must know by now that I gave the sedation order. No one's going to wake up on the Outside." She sighed, shaking her head. "Feels like I'm losing control of the Inside. What happened to the utopia we planned, Tanner? Feels like all we have is a war-ravaged hell."

"Maybe that's exactly what Amoch wants," Tanner said. "By undermining us, making it look like the world is a place of war and suffering and enslavement, he sows the seeds of discontent. Especially if he can promise those who follow him a city free of war. Even though it's his very followers who are causing the strife."

"We'll have to start clearing away the ruins and placing new houses as soon as possible," Ari said. "I want to show the citizens that we're not going to let their cities fall into disarray."

"I agree. Let them know we haven't abandoned them."

Ari tapped her lips. "But back to Amoch... you say he promises a land free of war? I think his main draw is he wants to create a city free of collars. Though I have no idea how he plans to instill order in such a place. Lightning wielders running amok? He'll have to rule with an iron fist."

"Maybe that's exactly what he plans to do."

"Why wouldn't he just go about it diplomatically," Ari said. "And petition the Council to start an uncollared city?"

"Would they really allow that?" Tanner asked. "Would *you?* Especially after the uncollared community experiments we tried?"

"No, probably not."

"Not to mention the fact that we're against creating dictators here," Tanner pressed. "And the only way he'd be able to run such a community would be as a dictator."

Ari had to wonder if she wasn't a sort of dictator herself: she had great influence over the Council. Maybe too much. It might have been enough for some members of the crew to create these Amoch and Wraylor characters.

"If all he wanted was power," Ari said. "He could have simply launched a private simulation for himself in his leisure time and presided over a world where he was a king among AIs."

"But having power over gols and AIs isn't the same as having actual power over real, living and breathing people," Tanner said.

"I disagree. In here it's all the same to the mind. Ever since we got rid of the computer virus, and eliminated the 'gol mind disease,' the only way I can tell the difference between a gol and a human is by the symbols on the chests of the gols. And the presence of the collars on the humans. The AIs are complex enough to be indistinguishable from actual human beings. No, this Amoch wants something more than power. I think he really believes he's helping humanity. That he's setting these people free."

"So we have a power-hungry, self-righteous fanatic who thinks he's the savior of humanity on our hands?"

Ari pressed her lips together. "Sounds about right. Basically the worst kind of fanatic."

"Why would he want to trap you in the system?" Tanner said.

"Because he knows it reduces my effectiveness. I can't just jump to any city I want anymore. I have to take the portal hops."

"But that's about all trapping you here does," Tanner argued. "You can still issue instructions in near real-time to the Children, as long as you have at least one Keeper with you whom you can send out. You're still in command, if by proxy."

"Very true," Ari said. "But trapping me here also means I'm at his mercy. He knows I'm stuck on the Inside. He could have someone watching and following me at all times. Maybe one of the birds Jeremy was so fond of using as spies." She searched the smoking ruins of the nearby trees but saw no sign of any ravens.

"Watching you," Tanner said. "Why?"

"Biding his time," Ari explained. "Waiting for that moment when I prove too much of a thorn in his side, that moment when he finally decides to kill me."

fifteen

Ari was surveying the damage to Red Mesa with Tanner and helping the Users flush out the last lightning wielder hold-outs when a new Keeper rushed to join her.

"What is it now?" Ari asked warily.

"I have brought a gift," the Keeper said. He placed a small steel ball onto an intact area of cobblestone. The item was quickly absorbed into the stone: a tracker.

A moment later a pyramidal pile of escutcheons appeared above the spot. On the shields was embossed a common emblem: a raised hand deflecting a lightning bolt.

Ari felt one of her eyebrows rise. "You finally made the lightning shields?"

"We finally made the lightning shields. They deflect flame, too."

"Now we just have to find a place to try these out," Ari told Tanner as she collected a shield. She turned toward the Keeper. "Distribute these to the others."

Ari proceeded through the ruins with Tanner. Renna and Jan joined them, and they made an odd quartet: Renna in her skin-tight outfit and cape, Jan in his farmer's clothes, Tanner in a similar outfit, and Ari in loose-fitting black utilities she had procured from a seamstress. The four carried their shields in one hand and their fire swords in the other. All save for Jan, who in place of a sword wore recently refreshed lightning rings.

When they walked into a deserted square whose buildings were mostly intact, the ambush came.

Lightning erupted from all sides. Ari, Tanner and Renna ducked behind their shields but Jan proved too slow and was struck.

"Back to back!" Ari shouted.

The three survivors pressed their backs to one another and crouched, hiding behind their shields as the lightning came in.

"You wanted to try these shields out so badly?" Tanner said. "Careful what you wish for..."

"I'm going to draw the lightning away from you two," Ari said. "When I do it, step into the open and attack."

"Lightning rod time?" Tanner asked.

"Lightning rod time." Ari agreed. She focused her attention on the sword, pouring vitra into it.

She raised the weapon to draw the next electrical strike. To her surprise the incoming tines completely ignored the sword, instead striking the shield and the ground around her.

"It's not working!" Ari said. "You two try."

Tanner and Renna attempted the defense in turn. The incoming bolts similarly ignored their uplifted swords.

"Amoch must have changed something in the system!" Tanner said.

"Damn it," Ari exclaimed.

During a break in the attack, Ari peered beyond the edge of her shield and unleashed flame toward one of the rooftops. An attacker toppled over the edge, his body on fire as he struck the cobblestone with a sickly thud.

Lightning came in a moment later from another position nearby, forcing Ari to duck.

She heard the eruption of flames behind her as Tanner and Renna similarly attacked targets.

"There are too many of them!" Tanner said. "We have to retreat!"

"We stay," Ari returned. "Too dangerous to move. Let them exhaust the charges on their lightning rings."

"That could be quite a while," Tanner said.

And so they holed-up there in the center of the square, waiting out their opponents. Ari had the trio edge toward a collapsed fruit stand, which they used for further cover. The lightning attacks continued, but so far the shields held.

She noticed motion on the rooftops and realized the attackers were leaping from building to building. She thought they were trying to gather in one place, perhaps to combine their attacks.

She unleashed fire at them, taking down two men before she was forced to duck behind her shield once more.

She heard a yelp from one of the rooftops and a man plunged to the ground; he clutched a bloody wound in his stomach.

"Who did that?" Ari said.

"Wasn't me," Tanner responded.

"Nor me," Renna said.

"Looks like we have a white knight helping us," Ari commented.

Several forks of lightning struck the rooftop area where the dead man

had fallen from. A gurgling scream filled the air.

"I think they got our knight," Tanner said.

Several moments of quietude passed.

"You think they gave up and left?" Renna asked.

"No," Ari said. "They're planning on waiting us out." She lifted her head and shouted: "We're going to stay here all day, assholes!"

In response, the worst lightning barrage she had experienced yet was thrown from those rooftops. Most of the attackers had gathered in one spot by then, and they concentrated their fire on her. They weren't aiming for the shield. Instead their lighting chewed up the cobblestone in front of her.

Ari quickly lost her balance and fell into the resultant crater.

"Ari!" Tanner shouted.

She narrowly rolled onto her back and deflected the lightning that came in. She curled up her legs, hiding behind the shield—the only object between her and oblivion.

Tanner attempted to come to her but lightning shot out, pinning him in place behind the fruit stand.

"Stay there!" Ari told him. She could see the heads of other attackers on the rooftop above him. "They've left a few men behind. They'll strike you in the back the moment you leave cover."

A yelp arose. One of the attackers fell from the rooftop. An instant later another attacker in the same area was sent flying into the air, his body on fire.

"Looks like our white knight survived after all," Ari told Tanner.

Lightning erupted in droves, none of it aimed at the trio.

Tanner and Renna used the diversion to strike at the attackers with flames. Ari meanwhile leapt to her feet and rejoined them behind the stand.

The lightning focused on them a few seconds later.

"Pinned once more," Tanner said. "So much for your white knight."

"Don't rule him out yet," Ari said.

"Who do you think it is?" Renna asked. "Stanson, maybe?"

"No, he wouldn't come in," Ari said. "I gave him strict orders to remain on the Outside."

"What about Briar?" Tanner said.

Ari laughed. "I don't think he has the heart for this sort of work."

"You would be surprised," Tanner said. "He proved himself when we faced One."

Lightning struck just above her head, forcing Ari to duck.

"Well, whoever he is, let's hope he can help us even the odds."

More screams came, followed by bodies alternately pierced and burning tumbling from the rooftops.

In moments the square was completely quiet.

Ari scanned the rooftops but didn't see a soul.

"Hello!" Ari said. "Show yourself!"

There was another scream, then a final man was sent flying into the square. His burning body dropped right in front of Ari.

She heard a thud as someone landed on the cobblestone behind the stand. Then the crunch of boots as the individual approached.

"What if he's not on our side?" Tanner said.

"Be ready," Ari told him. She stirred the vitra in her sword.

A man stepped around the collapsed fruit stand. He had a glowing red fire sword resting over one shoulder and seemed oblivious to the searing heat that was no doubt emanating from the weapon. He wore a leather jerkin clasped over a purple silk shirt with ruffled sleeves—the kind nobles favored. His black pantaloons flared above the ankles where they were tucked into black boots. A red bandanna wrapped his head.

As for his face, well, he had sharp, intelligent eyes framed by thick brows. A hooked nose bent very slightly over a mustache and goatee. He was attractive in a roguish way. She'd never seen him before.

"My, but you are a sight for sore eyes," the man said.

"Who are you?" Ari asked. She kept the tip of her blade pointed at the man. She was more than ready to unleash the pent-up flames.

The stranger crooked a grin. "I'm Hoodwink, I am."

epilogue

In an abandoned corner of Red Mesa, far from any fighting, the ruins of a collapsed building stirred.

A three-fingered fist punched through the wood. The skin was hued red. The talons black.

Another hand emerged, and a third. A fourth. The creature hauled itself from the mess, crudely birthing itself into the street.

It stood and flexed its four upper limbs. It towered over its surroundings.

It touched its naked torso and its face in a probing, exploratory manner, as if it had forgotten what it felt like to have a body. It examined its hands and appeared momentarily surprised: it had expected a different hue to the skin than red, the color of blood. Though that color was suiting, it supposed.

It looked at its belt and regarded the four swords scabbarded there. Its gaze moved downward, past the loincloth, and the red legs muscled like a bull, to the feet and the incongruous fur-topped boots it wore. Those boots might have been appropriate in colder weather, but not the current environment. Not that temperature affected the creature in any way.

It waded through the ruins toward the clear portion of the street, the wood splintering and the stone crumbling underfoot.

It reviewed its internal instructions: seek out the krub-gols who called themselves Keepers and eliminate them one by one. The instructions were an annoyance, because there was only one being it wished to terminate: the krub-gol known as Ari Flanners. She had bested the creature once, long ago. That was something it could not forgive. It swore that when its task was done it would avenge itself on Ari. The others would die quickly, but hers would be a slow, painful death.

The creature stepped into the street and made its way toward the flows of vitra it detected. After crossing four avenues it heard the sounds of battle. Swords clanged. Lightning exploded.

A streak of flame abruptly flew skyward above the rooftops: it was sourced from an adjacent street.

The creature grinned in sadistic delight. Already it had found a Keeper.

It withdrew its four swords at the same time in a deadly smooth motion.

Brute had been reborn.

The End.

Or is it?

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postscript

Please help spread the word about *Rebirth* 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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— Isaac Hooke

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