

THE ACCLAIMED SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY SERIES

The Forever Gate
Compendium Edition

by Isaac Hooke

Ascend the impossible.

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PART 1
THE DREAM

CHAPTER ONE

Hoodwink stared at the sword that would take his head tonight.

The weapon was sealed away in a glass case for all to see, set there to remind the particular occupants of this section of the dungeon what their short futures held. It was a simple sword of dual-edged copper, with a blunt point. The jailer had taken the blade to the whetstone this very morning, and those edges gleamed in brutal anticipation. Scenes of agonized victims and delighted torturers etched its surface. The blade seemed rusted in places, perhaps from years of bloodletting. But copper didn't rust, so those dark brown marks had to be something else. Maybe stains from the headless men who'd shit themselves.

Hoodwink fingered the metallic collar around his neck. If he didn't have that bronze bitch on he would've broken down the dungeon cell with a bolt of lightning, taken the sword, and cut his way out of here in a storm of electrical glory.

The torchlight flickered and a draft of cold air kissed his neck. The touch brought him back to the present, where, outside the bars, Briar had been rattling on the whole time.

"Are you listening to me?" Briar said.

Hoodwink nodded. "Listening for all I'm worth, I am." Viewed through the long vertical bars embedded in the stone, Briar looked thinner somehow. Or maybe it was the rich, patterned silks the man had recently started wearing. Hoodwink recalled a time not too long ago when Briar had been the one in the dungeon, and Hoodwink the one on the outside. Briar sure wasn't dressed in silks back then.

"Look," Briar said. "I've got the whoremongers lined up. Clerks, witnesses, and so on and so forth. Damn shame the judge is a gol though. He would have been the first to bribe. Ah well, just have to pay someone else to take the fall. You know how it is. So many poor folk in this city. Do anything to support their families. Even die." He winked conspiratorially.

Hoodwink squeezed his fingers around the bars. "No."

Briar knotted his brow. "What did you say?"

"No." Hoodwink straightened his back, and stared the man down. "The only one who's taking the fall is me. You'll bribe no one, you won't." He had to protect her, no matter what.

"Oh please, don't you give me that holier-than-thou bullshit." Briar's face flushed scarlet. "This is hardly the time. It's your life we're talking about here."

"There's too many witnesses. They all saw me."

Briar threw up his hands. "They can be silenced. You know that. Each

and every last one of them. And if they won't take the bribes..."

Hoodwink crossed his arms. "I don't want your help. Don't want no one's help. I don't. I'll take the blame for my actions." For *her* actions.

Briar shook his head and his jowls trembled. His collar was almost buried in the folds of neck fat. "You've gone mad then, haven't ye?" Those eyes widened in mock surprise. "He's gone mad."

Hoodwink nodded toward Briar's throat. "You really ought to get that resized sometime."

"What," Briar said. "The bronze bitch?"

"No. Your neck." Normally he wouldn't insult Briar like that, but he just wanted him to go.

The simple-looking jailer came up. He wore black pants and a black vest over a white shirt. The middle of the shirt was stamped with the blood palm of his profession. He looked like a real person, as most gols did. Sometimes when you talked to gols you could almost believe they *were* real, if you kept things light, superficial. But engage in any deeper conversation and you routed them out. Gols, the mindless working class of the city-state.

The jailer nodded at Briar. "Visiting hours are up, krub." He wiped drool from his mouth with one sleeve. You would have never seen a gol doing something like that five years ago. The gols had really degenerated in the past few months.

"I heard you, gol," Briar said. "Jobe is it?"

The gol nodded. "My name is Jobe. Now get you to the surface, krub."

Briar smiled ironically, and glanced at Hoodwink. "Until later, then. Hopefully a few more hours in the asshole of the world will blast some sense into you."

Briar retrieved his fleece from the coat rack outside the cell, and ambled away down the torchlit tunnel. Hoodwink was suddenly aware of other eyes watching from the dark of nearby cells. Briar seemed oblivious, concerned only with moving his bulk up the tunnel. The man paused beside the display case that held the sword, and he shook his head, muttering something.

"Briar," Hoodwink said.

The man looked back.

Hoodwink almost didn't ask. He didn't want the other prisoners to hear. He closed his eyes, and when he opened them again he said, "Say sorry to Cora for me."

Briar frowned and he turned away. In moments he was a featureless silhouette among the shadows.

Hoodwink felt the jailer's eyes on him.

"What are you looking at gol?" He pulled the neck of his jail-issue

orange robe tight, covering his upper chest, which was blistered and red from the events of this morning.

Jobe didn't blink. "I am on guard duty, krub."

Hoodwink scrunched up his face. "Don't you have something better to do than stare at me all day?"

"I am on guard duty, krub." Spoken exactly the same way. Jobe unexpectedly clouted the bars with his baton.

Hoodwink leaped back.

Jobe broke into a stupid grin.

Hoodwink shook his head, and limped over to the cell's only mat. "Damn gols."

Not only was Hoodwink's chest badly burned, but he'd hurt his ankle something nasty this morning during the capture. He'd given the Gate guards quite the chase, that's for sure. If he hadn't stopped to roll in the snow and douse the flames on his person he might've made it.

Lying on the mat, he lifted one hand to his face. The guttering torches whipped shadows across his knuckles. He made a fist. He could almost feel the electricity within, the power that was shielded away by the collar at his neck, the bronze bitch.

The gols had bitched him when he was fifteen, just when he'd started to develop his powers, like all the other humans who came of age. Bitched

for twenty years. He had tried so many different things to get that collar off over the years, but nothing had worked.

Maybe he just hadn't tried hard enough.

"Your trial is tonight?" Jobe pressed. "Ahead of the murderers? Rapists? What did you do?"

Hoodwink ignored the gol, who was *still* staring at him.

Jobe wiped a batch of slobber from his lips. "Tonight your head goes bounce-bounce."

Hoodwink blinked, and a smile flitted across his face.

They'd have to break through the collar to make his head go fucking bounce-bounce.

CHAPTER TWO

Hoodwink sat behind a desk at the front of the courthouse with his back to the stands. He was shivering from the cold and his own nervousness. The shackles around his hands rattled quietly. A subtle mist emerged from his nostrils with every exhale.

One word repeated again and again in his mind.

Lightning lightning lightning.

LIGHTNING.

Behind him, the courthouse was packed. He'd been stunned by the sheer number of people who'd turned out to watch his public trial and execution, people who'd come here despite the snowstorm that was brewing outside. He didn't think he was that important. And he wasn't. The fact was, he hadn't been to an execution in a long time, and he'd simply forgotten what a draw the bloodsport could be. It seemed somehow fitting that the last execution he'd attend would be his own.

He wondered how many friends of his were in the crowd, seeing him disgraced like this. Probably not many. The notice had been too short. Arrested in the morning, tried and executed in the evening. That was gol "efficiency" for you. Only the locals who'd heard the crier's announcement

would be present. No, he had no friends here.

As for Briar, the fat merchant had returned a few hours ago, but Hoodwink had given him the same answer—Hoodwink would take the fall for this, no matter what. Briar reluctantly gave in, with a promise to attend the execution. However Hoodwink hadn't seen the man among the multitudes tonight. It was for the best, probably.

"This court has heard the witnesses." The judge wore an ermineskin cloak over a black gown stamped in the chest with the gavel of his profession. The long white curls of a wig spilled over his forehead and down his back. He was one of the most lucid gols Hoodwink had witnessed in months. "The evidence is overwhelming. You have been placed by multiple observers at the scene, and caught committing the most horrendous act of terrorism this city has known in years. What do you have to say to all of this, krub Hoodwink Cooper?"

That I'm glad, he thought. *So damn glad none of them saw her.*

Instead: "I'm guilty."

Murmurs rippled through the crowd.

The judge eyed him critically. "So you admit that you attacked the Forever Gate?"

"I thoroughly admit this, your honor."

"That you defied our most ancient and sacred law?" It was forbidden

to lay so much as a hand on the Gate.

"Defied? Defiled might be a better word. Raped in the arse." Hoodwink shot the audience the biggest shit-eating grin he could manage. One old woman gasped.

The judge slammed his gavel onto the sounding block of his desk, and Hoodwinked jumped, actually jumped. That thud had a certain finality to it. An end of ends.

The judge leaned forward in his chair. "Do you admit to belonging to the terror organization known as the Users?"

"I do." He nodded toward the envelope on the desk in front of him. "You'll find a full confession in there. Along with names." All fake, of course. He didn't even know a single User. But he had to play this out to the end. He had to protect her, and he just wanted to get this over with as fast as possible. To hell with this sham of a trial.

The judge lifted an eyebrow. "Then I will pronounce sentence. For the attack on this city's most important asset, and for the countless gol lives lost, I sentence you to immediate death by beheading."

"Thank you your honor." Hoodwink gave the onlookers a flourishing bow.

"He's mad!" someone in the audience shouted.

Hoodwink cocked his head. "Mad? You're the collared. It's *you* who

are mad!" If they didn't believe he belonged to the Users before, they would now. The Users were the biggest advocates of an uncollared society. At least their graffiti implied as much. The Users wanted everyone running around with lightning. Somehow, Hoodwink didn't think that was a good idea.

"You're collared too, User *terrorist*!" came the repartee from someone in the audience.

Two guards restrained him. As if he could run anywhere with his arms and legs shackled. Both guards had swords belted to their waists, and one guard was an obvious gol, with the sword-and-shield symbol stamped into his breastplate. The other was collared, and his plate was free of markings. That seemed an odd dichotomy to Hoodwink—to be collared and free at the same time.

Hoodwink decided to play up his terrorist role. He was rather enjoying this. He looked at the collared guard like a judge. "You'd help kill someone who only wants the same thing as you? Someone who wants to be free?"

The guard elbowed Hoodwink in the ribs. "Keep silent gutter scum!"

Hoodwink inhaled in pain. "That was uncalled for."

The guard jabbed him in the ribs a second time. Hoodwink bit down the pain, and kept quiet.

The outer door near the judge's desk abruptly flung open and three

gols wheeled a guillotine in from the cold. Hoodwink's heart sank when he saw it. He had hoped the snowdrifts were too deep to convey the death device from its storehouse, and that the executioner's sword he'd seen in the dungeon would be favored instead. Flakes of snow followed the guillotine inside. Hoodwink shivered, and not from the cold.

One of the gols slammed the door, shutting out the storm, and then the trio wheeled the guillotine forward, bringing it between the judge's stand and Hoodwink.

The crowd broke into a chant. "Behead! Behead! Behead!"

As the guards escorted him to the guillotine, Hoodwink noticed the various scenes of decapitation imprinted on the blade. Severed heads with eyes and tongues sticking out in over-dramatization. Headless bodies pumping blood. The inscription brought a fresh shiver: "Through me pass the final Gate."

The guards forced Hoodwink to kneel. One of them stuffed a pillow under his knees. Funny, that they'd waste comfort on a man who'd soon know the ultimate discomfort. The gol lawmakers wanted to cast themselves as ethical. Beheading was quick and painless. And *comfortable*.

The guards jammed his neck into the circular notch of the lower panel, and secured the similarly-notched upper plank over his collar, completing the head-prison. So much for comfort—Hoodwink was bound

fast beneath that blade, locked in a hole that offered no leeway.

"Behead! Behead! Behead!"

The bronze bitch was the only thing protecting him from the deadly steel. Except that was no protection at all. The guillotine could cut right through the collars in a single blow. Made them seem like the paper collars children folded for themselves in their games of adulthood. With the headman's sword, at least there was a chance that the first blow would merely cut *into* the collar, and maybe only graze the skin beneath. It usually took two or three strikes to actually reach the neck, even with a fully sharpened blade. Which was why the courts had replaced the sword, he supposed. The sword offered what only the condemned and the drunk had the courage to try—a chance at freedom. Face the beheader's blade, and hope to your maker that it took the collar off and not your entire head. Hoodwink had only ever seen one man survive it, fifteen years ago. The man in question had escaped in a flurry of lightning strikes, only to have the soldiers track him down and execute him on the street.

Hoodwink had stopped going to executions after that.

At least that man had had a chance at survival, though. Hoodwink wouldn't get the same chance—the cold steel of this machine that assembly-lined death made sure of that. Lift the blade. Flick the lever. Chop off the head. He felt sick to his stomach. Good thing he hadn't eaten all day. It

wouldn't do to sick up in front of all these people.

For her, he did this for her.

But would it be enough?

"Behead! Behead! Behead!"

The executioner approached from the front. He was a fat gol, but not as stout as Briar. A black hood covered his face. Wouldn't want to splash head blood on his features now would he? A long black apron hung around his neck, secured at the waist, just like a butcher's. That's what he was after all. A man-butcher. The red sword of his profession was proudly stamped into the apron.

Hoodwink cursed the gol, but he couldn't hear his own voice above the crowd. He noted that the executioner carried the blunt-tipped, green-colored sword from the dungeon at his waist. A backup in case the guillotine failed? He had no idea. Hoodwink wished all of a sudden he hadn't stopped going to executions...

And then the gol sidled from view, moving off to where he could work the mechanisms of the guillotine. Hoodwink tried to crane his neck to look, but the head-prison held him firmly.

"Behead! Behead! Behead!"

The cries of the crowd crescendoed, only to abruptly cease as a collective breath was held.

Hoodwink heard nothing for long moments. Finally a distinct, malevolent CLICK sounded.

He felt the vibrations as the blade descended along the guides. The loud rasp of steel on steel consumed all else.

His life flashed before him. A childhood spent on the streets of Luckdown District. Puberty, and the years of swindling and wenching that had earned him his name. Then came the two weeks of power at fifteen years old, the two glorious weeks before the gols found and collared him. The collaring changed him, and he sobered up, attempted to earn an honest living. He almost succeeded.

But then the jewel that lit up his life was taken away.

She deserved so much better.

The blade struck.

CHAPTER THREE

The impact jolted his entire body. A dark veil descended over his vision. The basket rushing up to meet his head?

No.

He blinked a few times, clearing away the darkness. The collection basket remained where it was a pace below him.

The impossible had occurred.

His head was still attached to his body.

Beside him, the executioner grunted in surprise. A few gasps came from the audience.

Hoodwink felt his face grow hot. A weight like that of the entire world pressed on his neck. He felt vertebrae and tendons shift ever so slightly.

It was obvious the blade hadn't passed clean through the bronze bitch, but he couldn't tell if any part of his own neck was severed, because the entire area *throbbed*. He had the presence of mind to wiggle his toes, and that told him what he needed to know.

He heard the executioner straining beside him, and Hoodwink's neck jerked up and down within the head-prison as the executioner repeatedly

yanked the pulley linked to the blade. There came a pause, and the executioner must have looked at the judge, because Hoodwink heard him say, "Well keep trying you fool."

Hoodwink's head jerked up and down more rapidly, and stars pocked his vision. The executioner set a heavy boot on Hoodwink's shoulder and pressed hard. It felt like Hoodwink's whole right side was caving in, while his neck bent the other way.

Finally the blade slid free with a loud rasp. Hoodwink heard the killing instrument slam into the top of the guillotine, and he felt the vibration as the blade began its second beheading attempt.

A tingle of power arose inside him, and time seemed to slow. It started as a spark, deep in his mind, a flicker of electricity that expanded outward and traveled down his neck, across his torso, into his arms and legs to the tips of his fingers and toes. The electricity pulsed through him in waves, a starving hound leashed before a helpless doe, waiting for its master to unleash its fury.

The bronze bitch had sprung a leak.

Hoodwink pushed against that leak and released the electrical energy held at bay for twenty years inside him.

The entire apparatus exploded away from him. Guillotine, shackles, collar, blade.

The courthouse erupted in screams as debris tore through the spectators. Hoodwink glanced at the nearest benches. The onlookers were bruised and bloodied. He tried not to look overly long. He'd already seen one man with a bloody stump in place of an arm, and another with a thick shard of wood protruding from his belly. Hoodwink didn't need to see more. He knew those images would haunt him enough. He hadn't meant to hurt anyone.

Beside him, the judge and nearby guards lay unmoving, bodies mangled and broken. The executioner himself was still standing, torso nailed gurgling to the judge's desk by the guillotine blade. Hoodwink felt no regret for these. They were gols. Not real people like the spectators.

The guards at the back of the courthouse—behind the wounded bystanders—were forcing their way forward through the mayhem. Hoodwink tried to draw more lightning, but couldn't. He was so out of practice, he'd mistakenly used all his charge in that opening gambit. It would be hours, maybe days, before he fully recharged.

He snatched up the judge's ermineskin cloak, grabbed the executioner's blunt-tipped sword, and made for the back door, the same door they'd carried the guillotine in from. The limp from this morning had worsened—a wooden fragment protruded from his leg, adding to the pain of his previously twisted ankle.

Hoodwink threw his weight into the door and burst into an all-out

snowstorm.

The sudden cold took him aback but he forced himself onward. The frigid gale blinded him and brought tears to his eyes. He hardly recognized this for a city street. He could see maybe ten paces, no more. Snow drifts had buried everything, leaving only a blurry landscape of white mounds.

He had to find shelter, and soon. The wind clawed right through his jail-issue orange robe.

His limp actually improved out there. The cold numbed the pain, just as it numbed everything else. But he advanced no faster, because the snow swallowed his legs to the thighs.

He heard shouts behind him as guards emerged from the courthouse. Hoodwink ducked down an alleyway, visible as such only because of the concave notch the drifts made between houses, and he waded hurriedly through the snow.

He reached the alley's edge and peered around it. Through the whirling snow he saw the spectators fleeing from the front of the courthouse. Good.

He hid the sword in his robes and joined the crowd, just another spectator injured in what the criers would undoubtedly call a terrorist attack. He pulled the stolen ermineskin cloak tight, hoping it hid most of his jail-issue robes. There was a woman just ahead of him. She had a bloody stump

for an arm.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly, though his voice wouldn't have carried above the wind.

He risked a backward glance. The guards had emerged from the alleyway, and were scanning the crowd through the snowstorm. One of them met his eye, and gave a shout.

Hoodwink cursed his luck, wondering how the gol could have possibly identified him at this distance. He shoved his way through the crowd, limping as fast as he was able.

"This way!" An old man grabbed his hand. "I can help you!"

Hoodwink had scarce few friends right about now, and he could definitely use all the help he could get, so he let the old man lead him through the blowing snow. He felt the electricity slowly seeping back, fanning that spark deep in his mind. But it was a gradual seeping. Too gradual. A snail crossed a city street faster. It'd be another day or two before he returned to full strength.

He glanced over his shoulder. The wind whipped the veil of falling snow aside, and he caught a glimpse of the guards. They were closing the gap, and fast. Worse, more had joined the chase from a nearby barracks.

The crowd thinned, and soon the only thing between the guards and Hoodwink were the snowdrifts, and the blizzard. He pushed on, letting the

old man drag him forward. Hoodwink limped for all he was worth. He truly did. But it was useless. The crunch of those pursuing boots kept getting louder.

"Leave me, old man." Hoodwink pushed the old man away. He didn't want someone else to get hurt because of him.

He turned to face his pursuers and tried to tap into his powers, but he couldn't even muster a spark.

It looked like the entire city guard had joined in the chase. The street was full of them, four ranks thick. Most were gol, but there were a few collared among them. Every sword was drawn.

Hoodwink raised his palms in surrender, wondering if they'd execute him on the spot.

CHAPTER FOUR

The guards slowed as they neared, perhaps suspecting a trap.

Hoodwink smiled, standing there on that street where he'd probably die. He kept his arms raised in surrender.

The closest guard—their leader?—was a gol with nasty cuts on one eye. The broken guillotine had mangled his face pretty good. No man could function with a face like that, not without some serious healing. But this was a gol, not a man, Hoodwink had to remind himself.

The guard stopped a full three paces away, and lifted a hand to halt the others behind him. The snow whirled between Hoodwink and the gol as the storm raged on.

"Well, get on with it Bleeding Eye!" Hoodwink said into the silence that followed this unexpected standoff. "Kill me." In answer came only the howl of the wind.

Hoodwink noticed a glow coming from his own leg. When he glanced down, he saw that the light came from the drops of blood trickling into the snow from his lacerated calf.

Drops of blood that glowed blue.

Hoodwink swallowed a rising panic. He'd accessed powers he hadn't

used in ages. Forbidden powers. Who knew what the side effects were? He was dying, that much was certain.

He looked at the men again, and saw the uncertainty written on those faces. Not quite fright. No, you couldn't frighten gols. But indecision, yes.

Perhaps he could use their indecision against them.

He was dead anyway.

He had nothing to lose.

Hoodwink took a menacing step forward. "The whole lot of you have five seconds before I explode you all. You think the guillotine was something? Just wait till I reduce you to cinders." That wasn't possible, of course, given how low his charge was. But the gols couldn't know. Nor even the human guards among them. Who could say what a murderous uncollared adult could do? They'd certainly heard the same stories as him. Stories about uncollared men ripping others apart with a look. Maybe they'd even faced some of those men. "Five seconds. Drop your swords and run. Five."

"Four."

"Three."

"Two."

They ran. All it took was Bleeding Eye turning his tail and the rest of them broke ranks. It was a complete route. Some slipped in their hurry to be away from there, and fell into the drifts. But they always got up again and,

with a frantic looks back, ran on.

Hoodwink heard a strange sizzling.

He turned around, and realized it wasn't him who the gols were afraid of, but the banshee covered in writhing sparks of blue electricity behind him.

The banshee noticed his gaze and instantly the electricity went out, leaving the old man in its place.

"You have lightning too." Hoodwink stared at the old man for a moment, but then his weariness finally caught up with him and he collapsed.

The old man helped him to his feet and braced him with one shoulder. Hoodwink was too drained to protest. The loss of blood was getting to him. He felt numb all over, but mostly in his hands and feet. Frostbite, undoubtedly.

"Who are you?" Hoodwink said.

The old man smiled indulgently, revealing a mouth as toothless as a street brawler's. "You'll know everything soon enough." The old man raised a hand sparking with electricity. Hoodwink recoiled, but the man clasped his palm and Hoodwink felt a surge of energy pass between them. "Feel better?"

Hoodwink nodded. He felt a little refreshed, and his extremities seemed less numb, though the old man still had to brace him with one arm as he led Hoodwink through the snowstorm. The conditions were becoming near whiteout, and the visibility certainly wasn't helped by the late hour. He let the

surprisingly strong old man carry him onward, and the moments passed in a blur of snow drifts and weariness.

Hoodwink's gaze was drawn by movement to his left. He saw a bumblebee in the blizzard. The snowflakes parted to either side of the insect as if there were some invisible force emanating from the bee. It buzzed right up to Hoodwink's face and hovered there, a handspan from his nose, the flakes falling umbrellalike around it. Then it buzzed away.

Hoodwink was hallucinating from the blood loss obviously. He had likely imagined all of this. The blue blood. The old man's turn as an electrical banshee. But how did he escape the guards then?

Finally the old man paused before a flimsy door set into a cabin three times larger than its neighbors. The snow had piled up past the roof, and it was only through the diligent shoveling of whoever lived here that the door was even accessible. Hoodwink wasn't sure exactly where he was, but he was in no condition to resist as the old man dragged him inside.

"Helluva storm," the old man said as he shut the door behind them. He had to throw his weight into the wood to get the thing to close completely. "The prophets promised it would be an age of ice. Damn them for being right."

Hoodwink stood hunched in a cozy lobby. He was immediately attracted to the fireplace with its set of four ladderback chairs, where he

plunked himself down. He was too weak to warm his hands over the coals, and he surveyed the room through half-closed lids. The windows were all frosted up, of course. An unmanned service desk lay near the fireplace. On the other side, the room opened into a hallway where the rooms were numbered.

"What is—" Hoodwink said, fighting off the sleep. "Where are—"

"Just a simple inn, laddy." The old man grabbed a poker from beside the fireplace and stoked the flames. "Let me apply a healing shard."

"A shard." It was illegal to carry one, because to activate a shard required a User's power. Hoodwink smiled grimly. "Of course you have a shard."

The old man ripped open the hem of Hoodwink's jail-issue robe and slid the boot off. The pain roused Hoodwink somewhat. "Name's Alan. Alan Dooran. Friends call me Al."

Hoodwink glanced down to see a gory scene that nearly made him vomit. It hadn't looked so bad before, with the robe covering it, but now? A black sliver of bone jutted from the front of his calf alongside the wooden fragment, and the entire area had swollen the size of a melon. Blue blood drenched the entire lower leg. *Blue.* So he hadn't been hallucinating.

Well, the blood had stopped dripping, at least.

"Got yourself a nice piece of wood in your leg." Al grasped the

wooden fragment and braced his boot on the top of Hoodwink's toes. "Better grip yourself tight."

"Wait," Hoodwink said. "Why is it blue?"

"Got no charge left," Al said nonchalantly.

The old man pulled the fragment.

Hoodwink struggled to stay in the chair as fresh spurts of pain flared in his calf. Stars exploded across his vision from the sheer agony of it, and when the wood broke free in a fountain of gore he cried out in pain.

The blood gushed from him in blue spurts.

"Looks like it hit a major artery." Al reached for the poker, and applied the sizzling end to Hoodwink's calf.

Teeth-grinding pain brought more stars to his vision, and Hoodwink felt his hold on consciousness grow tenuous. The burning didn't seem to do anything, and the blood gushed from him worse than ever.

He was barely aware as Al reached into his cloak and pulled out a crystalline creature that resembled a starfish.

The healing shard.

Al applied the creature to Hoodwink's calf. This thing, the shard, felt extremely cold against the hot pain of the wound, and Hoodwink gasped. Al released electricity into the shard, and the creature began melting into Hoodwink's skin. As it did so the melon-sized lump shrunk until both wound

and creature were gone.

Hoodwink blinked away the nausea, and bent over to examine the wound. Not a trace of the injury remained. Even his twisted ankle further down felt a little better—he could revolve the foot with less pain.

"Careful," Al said. "You've lost a lot of blood."

Hoodwink stared at the blue puddle on the floor. "You're a User." He shouldn't have spoken, because he felt a fresh wave of nausea. He sat himself back in the chair. It was like he'd just run a marathon. His face was flushed, and he was panting. He shook his head, tried to clear his mind. His fingers had begun to burn now that they were thawing out. His toes fared just as badly.

"I am," Al said.

Hoodwink's gaze fell to the man's neck. "But you wear a collar."

That smile widened. "Obviously ain't a real bronze bitch. Have to wear something to keep the gols at bay."

"Why did you save me, old man?"

Al straightened, as if offended. "The same reason I'd save any other innocent human being, of course. Because it's the right thing to do. And I ain't so old. Thirty-four, by my reckoning. Younger than you."

He looked closer to eighty-four, but Hoodwink didn't comment. Something else Al said had caught his attention. "You called me innocent."

"I did. I've something to show you." Al hoisted him to his feet, and helped him across the lobby. He led Hoodwink into the frigid hallway, where the candles burned low. Those carpets were grungy, the walls smeared in fingerprints. The rooms started at 2000, and increased sequentially. 2001. 2002. 2007. 2012.

Al stopped beside the one labeled 2013.

The old man lifted an eyebrow. "Ready?"

Hoodwink sighed. "No. But I have a feeling you'll make me go inside anyway."

Al smiled widely. "Smart boy."

He opened the door. Seven people were seated on ladderbacks in a circle, hands folded in their laps. They all turned their heads toward the doorway.

"Welcome to the secret society of the Users," Al said.

But Hoodwink hardly heard.

She was here.

CHAPTER FIVE

Hoodwink quickly shot a hand against the doorframe. It was all he could do to hold himself up.

There she was, the woman he'd given up everything for.

She regarded him uncertainly. "You."

He shoved the old man away, and lunged forward, step, by step. He felt certain his legs would give out on him at any moment.

When he reached her, his legs at last stopped working, and he fell to his knees. He covered his face in his hands. "Forgive me."

Al came up beside him. "You know her?"

Hoodwink didn't look up. "Of course I know her. She's my daughter."

He felt hesitant fingers rest on his head. Hers. "I'd wondered who my real father was," she said.

"Yolinda." He looked up at her, and he couldn't help the tears.

"I'm Ari now," she said, and she held his palm in hers. She looked older than he remembered her. Much older. It had only been six months, but she seemed to have aged at least ten years.

"Is this the man who interrupted you?" A rasping voice came from somewhere else in the circle.

"It is," Ari said.

Hoodwink looked from her, not caring who saw the emotion written all over his face, and he let his gaze pass from person to person.

So these were the legendary Users, those who had broken free of their collars and defied the gols. They looked ordinary enough. Unlike his daughter, they were all old, well into their eighties and nineties.

Al lifted Hoodwink into an empty chair beside his daughter, and pulled another chair up beside him.

"This is Hoodwink Cooper, everyone," Al said.

"Why did you interfere?" That rasping voice again. It belonged to an old barrel of a man with a pinched face that would've put the performers of the macabre circus to shame. He had intelligent eyes though, and spoke confidently.

"That's Marx by the way," Al said. "Though we call him Karl sometimes. Karl Blacksmith."

"I don't smith no more," Marx said. "Now answer the question."

Al whispered in his ear. "He's our torturer."

"She's my daughter, she is," Hoodwink said. "And I've passed her on the way to work every day since mayor Jeremy revised her. Every day, when she went out on her morning run. I guess I hoped she'd remember me. But she never returned my gaze, not once. Until this morning. She seemed so scared.

Her eyes were huge, like she was calling out for help. So I followed her, I did. Watched as she waited by the Forever Gate. Watched as she dropped her satchel in the snow by the wall. I didn't know she was waiting for the street to clear. I didn't know she did it on purpose. I didn't know it was a bomb.

"So when she walked away, leaving it behind, I ran and picked it up from the snow, and that's when the gate guards grabbed me. They opened the satchel, accused me of terrorism. I broke away, and ran. That's when it went off." Hoodwink shook his head, looking at her. "I would have never thought she was capable of something like that. My own flesh and blood. Bombing the Gate? Never. But it's my fault. I shouldn't have let Jeremy have her those six months ago."

"It's no one's *fault*." Ari met his eyes steadily. The old Yolinda wouldn't have done that. Met his gaze, that is. She would've stared at the floor rather than face the full intensity of his wrath, or in this case, his disappointment. "No human beings died in the explosion. There were only gol casualties."

"Did Jeremy put you up to it?" Hoodwink asked her.

"Jeremy's powerful, I'll give him that." It was Marx who answered. "But no, Jeremy didn't order the bomb. The man's the *mayor*. He suckles the teat of the gols. He wouldn't dare risk something like this. No. *We* ordered Ari to place the bomb."

"You." Hoodwink spoke the word tonelessly. He glanced at Ari. "How did you get mixed up with these Users?"

It was Marx who answered. "When Mayor Jeremy had her revised, we sought her out. Her connections gave us access to the raw materials we needed to make the bomb."

"I for one didn't know she was revised." This from an old lady dressed in quilts who could have been Hoodwink's grandma. She held two knitting needles, with a spool of yarn in her lap. She seemed to be knitting the very same quilt that she wore.

"That's because you never pay attention at the meetings," Al said. "Ari refused to marry the mayor. So Jeremy had her personality *revised*."

Hoodwink shook his head. There was more to it than that, but he wasn't about to volunteer information to these Users.

"You poor dear." The old lady's eyebrows drooped. "Did it hurt?"

Ari smiled stiffly. "I don't remember."

"That's Vax by the way," Al said, nodding at the quilt lady. "You'll like her. Used to be a man."

The old lady sniffed, and returned to her knitting.

Hoodwink pressed his lips together. "Jeremy should have had me revised too. Should've made me forget I ever had a daughter. Spared me the pain."

Ari rested a hand in his. He wanted to shake it off, but she *was* his daughter. At least, she used to be. Even if she didn't remember.

A thought occurred to him, and he regarded Al suspiciously. "Why did you bring me here?"

Al looked across the seated old men and women to a frail elderly pauper dressed in rags who held a cane in palsied hands. The pauper kept his eyes forward, not looking at anyone else, maybe *not able* to look at anyone else, staring at some distant point on the wall.

"There is an old saying," the frail pauper said. "The truth, to the overwhelming majority of mankind, is indistinguishable from a headache."

"That's Leader," Al whispered.

Hoodwink studied the shabby-looking man. "*Leader*?"

"Aye, he leads us."

Leader focused his attention on Hoodwink suddenly, and those eyes held him in a grip quite unlike anything he'd ever experienced before. Hoodwink felt naked beneath those eyes, as though this man could see through all masks and pretenses and read the true nature of anyone. Hoodwink couldn't look away, though he sorely wanted to.

Leader broke the grip, and resumed his observation of the wall. There was nothing there that Hoodwink could see, except worn, curling wallpaper.

"I'm twenty-nine years old," Leader said.

"Thirty-nine here," Vax volunteered.

"Forty-two." Karl Marx.

And so the company rattled off their ages. No one present was over forty-five, though they all looked eighty or more. All save Ari.

"It's the price we pay for vitra," Leader said. "When the gols tell us that they collar us for our own protection, they mean it. Without the collar, the electrical current flows freely through our bodies, and ages us. Rapidly."

Hoodwink studied the man uncertainly.

"That is one truth." Leader nodded to himself. "Do you feel the better for knowing it?"

Hoodwink rubbed his hands together. "I never asked for the truth." He stopped the gesture. It was too much like washing his hands. Of the truth.

"But that's what you'll get when you're with us. The truth. Or a version of it, anyway." Leader gripped his cane tightly, and for a moment Hoodwink thought he was going to stand. But Leader merely shifted in his seat. "Something is wrong with the gols. They have been distracted lately. The gol banker giving out a thousand more drachmae than he should. The gol lutist forgetting his notes halfway through the ballad. The gol butcher misjudging his swing, and cutting off his own hand. The gol executioner, *forgetting to sharpen the guillotine blade*. I can cite examples from across the city. Then there's that blank, slobbering look so many of them have

developed. It's as if they've contracted a plague of the mind."

"But the gols can't get sick," Hoodwink said.

Leader nodded. "So we have been taught. Perhaps they are under an attack of some sort, in the world beyond the Gate where they reside simultaneously to our own. The Outside."

Hoodwink rubbed his arms together, feeling suddenly cold. "I don't know what you're talking about. Residing simultaneously? And the Outside is dead. Everyone knows that."

Leader arched his eyebrows. "Indeed?"

"And if there really were an attack on the gols," Hoodwink said. "Would that be such a bad thing? I say let them be wiped out. A world without gols is a better world."

Leader smiled. "We blame them for imposing upon our freedoms, for collaring us, for confining us to the cities, it's true. And they hunt us, the uncollared. The Users. We all hate them, with passion. But at their core, they service us. You do realize this don't you? It's a love-hate relationship. Without the infrastructure they provide, civilization as we know it would collapse. We'd fall back into the dark ages, quite literally, and we'd all freeze to death."

Hoodwink wouldn't back down. "And we're not in the dark ages already?"

Leader opened his mouth, but he had no answer to that.

Hoodwink pressed his attack. "Why did you make Ari bomb the Forever Gate?"

"She was merely trying to open a path to the Outside," Leader said. "We want to help the gols with what ails them, you see."

"Help the gols." Hoodwink stood. "I've just about heard enough. You go and enjoy helping your gols." Hoodwink held out a hand to his daughter. "Come on Ari, let's go. You don't need these people ordering you around."

She didn't move.

Hoodwink heard a low buzzing. He glanced around the circle. The elderly men and women had raised their hands, and electricity flowed between them, from fingertip to fingertip.

"Please, Hoodwink, sit down." Leader said. "Please."

Hoodwink lifted his palms in surrender, and sat back down. He was relieved when the electrical flows ceased.

"Your daughter is the one who planned the Gate attack." Leader smiled that distant smile, and his eyes locked on Hoodwink. "Do you want to know the truth? What lies beyond the Forever Gate?"

Hoodwink couldn't answer. That gaze overwhelmed him.

Leader was still smiling when he looked away. "It is a land quite unlike any we have ever known. It— well, it is the land where the gols reside

in actuality. As different from this world as the bottom of the ocean is from the top of the sky. In the city, none of the gols can even comprehend our offer of help. It's beyond their programming. We can't break past the generic response loops. But beyond the Gate, they will listen to us. They *will*."

Hoodwink sat back. "How do you know they'll even want your help?"

Leader sighed. "We don't. But we must try."

"Okay." Hoodwink glanced from face to face. The expressions were grim, and some of those present glowered at him. "You're forgetting one small thing. You have to *go through the Gate*. Ari couldn't even make a dent in it with that bomb of hers. So as far as I'm concerned, this discussion is pointless. And I still don't know why you're even telling me all this."

"The bomb was only a hope we'd entertained. To create a passage for us all. But there is another way." Leader was silent a moment. He stared at that peeling wallpaper, and the guttering wall candles flicked shadows across his face. "It is a dangerous path, too perilous for most of us. A path only the strong and hale among us can take."

Leader's eyes found Hoodwink, and then shifted to Ari, at his side.

Hoodwink realized what the man implied, and he stood. "Ari's not doing it."

"You're not my father anymore, remember that," Ari said quietly.

Hoodwink didn't look at her. "Whatever you planned for her, I will

do. Send me in her place."

Leader nodded to himself. "This is what I want, too. Ari must stay here. Her connections to the mayor are too important. Someone else must go. Someone newly uncollared, yet still strong in body. But you should know, no one we've ever sent beyond the Gate has returned."

"I don't need you to save me," Ari said.

"I'll do it," Hoodwink insisted. He wasn't going to lose her again.

Leader nodded solemnly. "If there's anyone you want to say good-bye to, anyone at all, now's the time. Because as I said, no one's ever come back."

Hoodwink glanced at Ari. "I plan to be the first."

CHAPTER SIX

Hoodwink strode through the wintry streets of the city that birthed him.

He'd spent the night in exhausted sleep at the inn. By morning, the snowstorm had let up, allowing the sun to shine weakly in the cold sky. The Users had given him leave to make his good-byes, and so he left. Ari had joined him. He wasn't sure if she came for the company, or to act as his keeper. He didn't mind either way.

He made his way across one of the richer quarters of the city. Even here the gols were still shoveling the snow from the recent storm. A few shopkeepers had pitched in, piling the snow into deep drifts beside their walls, and for the most part the street was clear. Many of the shops had reopened, since most of the buildings also served as homes for the owners—to open up was as simple as unlocking the front door and flipping the sign. Almost all of the buildings were single-story dwellings of gray rock, though there were a few two-stories among them.

A few buyers were already out, dressed in heavy cloaks, moving between the shops. Pretty-faced hostesses in fur coats beckoned customers to eat at their restaurants. Smoky-voiced doormen announced post-snowstorm

deals at their taverns.

Hoodwink tried to soak-up as much of it as he could. This might be the last time he saw all of this. Leader had given him only an hour to get his affairs in order, and then Hoodwink was to seek him out on Forever Street. One hour.

I'm going to miss this place, he thought. And yet he felt content, because Ari walked at his side. Ari, the daughter he had thought lost to him. The daughter he would have sacrificed everything for. *At his side*. Even if he only had an hour to live, it was all worth it, because she was here.

"I'd given up, you know," Hoodwink said into the dragging silence between them.

Ari glanced at him distractedly. "On what, Hoodwink?"

"On you. On myself. I didn't, well, I guess you could say, when you left, my world ended. It really did. I wasn't myself anymore. And now you're back and everything's okay again."

"I'm not sure what to say to that." Ari crossed her arms. "Sounds like I've some pretty big shoes to fill."

"You don't have to say anything." Hoodwink smiled. "You're filling them just by being here, you are."

Ari declined an invitation to eat at a restaurant from a well-groomed host. When the host made the same offer to Hoodwink, he immediately raised

his hands. "Not me young man, I'm poor." The man smirked, and then turned to accost the next passer-by.

"You know," Hoodwink told Ari as they continued on. "I've always felt a little uncomfortable in the richer parts of the city like this. It's not so much I can't afford to shop in these places—if I really wanted to, I could come here and blow a few month's wages—but it's more the beggars looking for handouts that bother me." He nodded at a dirty-faced mendicant perched between one of the storefronts. He and Ari had passed many such men already, and he gave each and every one of them a wide berth, including this latest. "They remind me of the ashes of poverty I've risen up from. Maybe it's a reminder I need now and again to keep myself sharp, knowing that it can be something as small as a month's pay that separates the haves from the have-nots."

Ari was smiling, and seemed to be struggling to suppress a giggle.

Hoodwink frowned. "I was being serious. You find something funny?"

"Nothing," she said. "It's just, I've always wondered what you'd be like. My real father. Not the one from my revised memories, but the father I hoped I'd one day meet. And here you are, eccentricities and all."

Hoodwink watched her uncertainly. "Am I everything you expected me to be?"

Ari shook her head. "I'm not sure yet. I just, well, all of this is new to me."

"It's new to me too, Yolin— Ari. The past doesn't matter. The memories you have, they don't matter. What we have here, right now, this is the truth. This is what matters. I never want to leave your life again."

Ari tightened her crossed arms, shivering. "And yet you'll soon do just that."

"But I will return, I promised this already." Hoodwink rubbed the tip of his mustache, a nervous habit of his. "And I'm not one to break promises."

Ari didn't seem convinced. "Even if it's a promise you can't keep?"

"I never make a promise I can't keep."

She laughed, shaking her head. It was the same laugh he remembered. "Are you always this confident?"

Hoodwink grinned widely. "Only around my daughter."

Ahead, a street busker strummed a mandolin. Hoodwink began edging sideways, acting as if the man carried the plague. But Ari stayed true to her course, and stopped—actually stopped—to listen to the man play and sing his sad song. When he was done, Ari dropped three fat coins into his hat, and the man thanked her profusely.

Hoodwink reached into his pocket and guiltily left a small silver coin, all he had on his person.

"You're better than me, Ari," Hoodwink said as they moved on. "That's why I'm doing this, you know. The world needs you. But me, I'm just, well, I'm just a middle-aged, miserly barrel-maker. Not young and generous of heart like you."

Ari seemed troubled. "Generous, maybe, but I won't be young for long unfortunately."

"Then leave the Users. You don't owe them a thing. You have your whole life ahead of you."

She shook her head. "I can't, Hoodwink. First of all, I'd have to give up vitra. You've tasted it. The power, the sense that you're truly alive. That's not something you can let go off easily." Hoodwink couldn't disagree there. "And second of all, for once in my life I feel like I belong to something. Feel like I'm making a difference. We can help the world as Users. I have to stay. You must see that."

"What I do see," Hoodwink said. "Is that you've inherited my famous stubbornness. A part of the old Yolinda is still inside you after all."

Ari pressed her lips together, and she looked away. "I'd like to think so."

"Oh, I know so." Hoodwink rested a hand on her shoulder. "You stopped for the busker. You could've given him the coins and walked on. But you stopped to listen. Why?"

"I don't honestly know." She tapped her chin with a finger. "I've always liked music, I suppose. And that song he was singing, well, it got to me, you know? I felt it deep inside."

"Your mom always wanted to be a singer. She used to sing to you, every night before bed."

Ari leaped over a slushy area of ground in front of a tavern. "The mother of my revised memories hates singers, and anyone who wants to sing. She told me that singing was daft, and music was for the birds."

"Which is the furthest thing from your actual mother," Hoodwink said. "Do you see? It proves that the old Yolinda is still in there somewhere."

Ari's lips twitched in irony. "How do you know I didn't stop and listen to the busker just to spite the memory of my false, music-hating mother?"

Hoodwink couldn't help but smile. There was definitely some of the old Yolinda left in her.

The two walked in silence for a time. He felt the fake collar the blacksmith Karl had given him, its bronze pressing against his throat. The sham seemed to be working so far. No one paid him or Ari any heed. Earlier he'd even passed a group of gol soldiers, and none had even spared him a glance. He supposed it helped that his prison-issue robes were gone, replaced by an inconspicuous dun coat. He also wore mittens and a cloak—an outfit that was at least somewhat appropriate for this quarter.

It was close to mid-morning, and the slightly warmer temperatures encouraged frigid pockets of mist. As Hoodwink and Ari stepped into one such pocket, Hoodwink's thoughts seemed to cloud as well. He and Ari had to weave left and right to avoid the murky shapes of passers-by.

His mind wandered, and he thought of the Forever Gate. He was going to cross it and stare death in the face a little under an hour from now. Incredible.

"I sometimes have this recurring dream." Hoodwink felt freer to talk now that his face was half-obscured in mist, just as if this moment were itself a dream. "In it, I'm always in a faraway place. In a land nothing like this one. A land long drowned. In the dream, I'm bodiless, and I see in all directions at once. It terrifies me."

Ari remained silence. There was only the sound of their footsteps on the shoveled cobblestone, and the footfalls of the ghostly passers-by.

"I lay awake afterwards," he continued. "And wonder: Is that where I will go when I die? Will I live forever in that faraway land? And more importantly, do I *want* to live forever there? Spending an eternity as some bodiless entity, remembering what I once was, and never able to return doesn't have much appeal."

Ari seemed to stiffen beside him. "Why are you telling me this?"

Hoodwink sighed. "I don't know. I guess I'm afraid of the Gate and

what lies beyond it. Afraid of death. There's a reason why we have a Forever Gate. A reason why not even the gols will cross it. And your Users don't know half the truth of it either, though they pretend they do."

Ari sounded sad. "You don't have to do this Hoodwink. I never asked you to."

"I know Ari. But I *want* to do it. It has to be me. You know that."

The fog lifted as the two of them passed into Grassylane district, where the mansions of moderately successful merchants squatted behind fences of bronze and gates of iron. Despite the district's name, there was no grass here.

"You should come in," Hoodwink said. "And meet her."

Ari shook her head. "I think... I think it's better if you go alone. I'll meet you with Leader at the rendezvous. Good luck Hoodwink."

She gave him a quick hug and turned back.

Hoodwink watched her vanish into the mist, just as if she herself had only ever existed in a dream.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Hoodwink sat with chattering teeth in a plush chair in the sitting room, right where the maid had told him to. Those cold, travertine walls seemed to be closing in around him. He hated travertine. It was like ice in this weather, and the sitting room had no fireplace. But that was the style of the rich. And the rich so loved imitating the rich.

Well, at least the floor was carpeted. That helped retain some of the heat. Still, it wasn't for the cold that he was shivering. No, he worried what his reception would be. He hadn't come to this place in six months. And visiting now, after what happened yesterday morning... the maid's eyes had nearly bugged out of their head when she saw him at the door, and it was only with an effort that she managed to calm herself down after he'd forced his way in.

He was staring at a wall hanging of a strange underwater scene when Briar came into the foyer. The two exchanged how-are-yous and exuberant jolly-goods just as if Hoodwink wasn't a fugitive wanted for terrorism.

"You didn't come to my execution," Hoodwink said.

"Oh, you know how it is," Briar said casually, just as if the two of them were talking about some idle matter. "The life of a merchant. Always

something to do: A client to visit, supplies to haul, money to count. Besides —" Briar palmed his chin and became very serious. "I didn't need to see you get killed, Hoodwink. I didn't need my last memory of you to be a body's worth of blood gushing from your headless corpse."

"Sure." Hoodwink quickly segued into the reason he'd come. "Is Cora home?"

"Cora? No, she's in Rhagnorak, training to be a singer. Didn't I tell you about her application?"

Rhagnorak. A city at least two portal hops away. You couldn't walk Outside between the cities, but you could travel to them by portal. "No." Hoodwink tried to hide his disappointment. "You never told me." At least she was finally achieving her dreams now, if that was true.

Briar slapped him on the knee. "You dirty rascal! You just can't leave my sister alone can you!" Briar seemed a little too jolly, like he was trying to hide something. Or was he just nervous that an escaped terrorist had called upon him?

"I'm going past the Gate, Briar," Hoodwink said. "I'm going Outside, I am."

Briar merely gaped at him. "Well that's... that's very nice. Good for you."

"I've met the Users."

"Really?" Briar wiped at his brow, visibly perspiring now. "Interesting. I've never been sure if they were just some rogue organization invented by the gols as a funnel for our hate. A political tool. Your little terrorist act caught the attention of the Users, did it? Terrorism attracts terrorists, I suppose."

Hoodwink held up his hand, extending one index finger. Sparks of electricity danced from it. Briar flinched.

"What are you hiding, Briar?" Hoodwink said.

"Well!" Briar stood. "Good luck to you in your adventures on the Outside and all. Tally-ho." He turned toward the hall, but was too late, it seemed, because Cora stood transfixed behind him.

"Cora darling," Briar said. "I told you to stay in your room."

She pushed past him.

"So it really is you." Cora stood over Hoodwink. "I knew Briar lied to me. He told me the maid had shooed off some beggar at our door. But then while I was lying on my bed, I heard your voice, and I thought, no, it can't be. Surely Hoodwink wouldn't come *here*, of all places. Surely Hoodwink wouldn't dare set foot in my brother's home. Not after what he did to me." Cora had never forgiven him for what happened to their daughter, and she never would, though she knew it wasn't his fault.

Hoodwink didn't meet her eye. "I've talked to our daughter, Cora.

She's well. Doesn't remember us, of course."

"Can't you just leave her alone, Hood?" Cora said. "Can't you just leave *me* alone?"

He was going to say more about Ari, but there was something he wanted to mention first. "When Briar told me you went to Rhagnorak, I was so happy for you Cora. Happy that you're finally living your life again. I want you to succeed. I always have. You should really go. Make the application if you haven't. Be happy."

He risked meeting her gaze. Her face was full of ire, and resentment.

"Happy?" She seemed to spit the word. "I can never be happy again. Not after..." She shook her head. "No, I'm not going to Rhagnorak. Happiness? I'm happy just to make it through to the next day. One morning at a time, that's the only way I can face life. Now, if you don't mind." She gestured toward the door.

Hoodwink didn't move. "Don't you want to hear what our daughter had to say?"

"It's not her anymore, Hoodwink. When are you going to get that in your head? She's lost to us."

"All right," he said. "All right. There's another reason I came."

"Please, say what you came to say then, and just go."

Hoodwink sighed. "As you wish. I came to say good-bye, I did. And,

well, I've never stopped loving you, for what it's worth."

She smiled sardonically. "Not much. Good-bye then. Now go."

This wasn't quite going the way he'd expected. Not at all. She was trying to hurt him. Well, he could hurt her back so easily. *With all your brother's money, you couldn't save her*, he wanted to say. *Though you ran into his arms, begging him to take you in*. But no, he wasn't here to hurt her, and doing so wouldn't lessen his own feelings of guilt.

"There's something else," he said. "But before I say anything more, I want you to know, I'm not telling you this to hurt you." He swallowed nervously. "Our daughter was the one who planted the bomb at the Forever Gate."

Cora's lips twitched, but she said nothing.

"The Users put her up to it. She's one of them, now. They wanted her to cross to the Outside. They wanted her to talk to the gols out there."

"Stop it." Cora said. "Stop it. Stop it! Get out of here!"

He barreled on. It was important to him that she knew his sacrifice. "I wouldn't let her do it. The Users are sending me in her place. I'll probably die."

"Please," Cora said, covering her face. "Just go."

He hadn't wanted to hurt her, yet it appeared he'd done that very thing. He took a step forward. "Cora. I didn't mean—"

Briar hugged her, and turned her away from him. "Hoodwink..."

"I'm sorry," Hoodwink said, feeling terrible. Why did he always hurt those closest to him? He went to the front door.

Before he could open it, a harsh knock came from outside. "City watch! Open up!"

Hoodwink froze, and shot Briar an accusing glance.

"Sorry, Hood." Briar backed away, bringing Cora with him. "I really am. They've been watching my house since your escape."

The door thudded so heavily that it shook on its hinges. "Open up now or we'll break it down!"

"You bastard." The sparks flared on Hoodwink's knuckles. But it was just a show. He wasn't fully charged, not even close. He wouldn't be able to take on the city guard, not in his condition. "You didn't say a word. How did they get to you? Yesterday you were begging to save my life."

Briar's chin quivered. "Yesterday you were collared. Innocent until proven guilty, and all that. Today you're a User fugitive. A terrorist. I had to give you up. Mayor Jeremy promised he'd have my hide if I harbored you."

"Jeremy." Hoodwink nearly spat the name. "Bad move, Briar. Very bad move. Because now *I'll* have your hide."

Hoodwink drew his green sword and Cora screamed. Hoodwink had wanted to scare Briar, not her, and when he saw the look of fear on his wife's

face, a look that said "I don't even know who you are anymore," Hoodwink felt utter shame.

The knock came again, more frantic.

Hoodwink raced into the hall past Cora and Briar, making for the rear entrance. He heard Briar open the front door to the troops, heard the clank as the gols dashed onto the travertine floor behind him.

He swept through the kitchen toward the back door. The scullery maids screamed at the sight of his sword.

The back door abruptly flung open and reserve troops flooded in with swords raised.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Hoodwink backtracked through the kitchen and took the short staircase in the hall moments before the troops from the front converged on him. He climbed those stairs three at a time and came out at a lung-burning dash onto the second floor. Shouts came from behind as he sprinted across the deerskin carpet, toward the window that backed onto the rear alley. He leaped, and swung his sword to shatter the glass as he struck.

He was counting on the deep snow drifts in the alley outside to pad his fall, and he wasn't disappointed.

"Hey!" One of the sentries assigned to the back door outside spotted him.

Covered in snow, Hoodwink rolled to his feet and waded through the alleyway drifts, the shouts of pursuit harrying him on.

He stumbled over the windrow that blocked the end of the alleyway, and emerged onto the main street, thankful that the gols had shoveled this quarter of the city.

He ran for some time. Behind, the guards gave chase, harrying him on.

He veered onto Luckdown district and the path became bumpy with

unshoveled snowpack.

Hoodwink nearly slipped more than once, though he had nails hammered point-first through the soles of his boots. The shouts grew closer. He glanced over his shoulder. The guards were only paces behind.

Hoodwink took a sharp right at Down Street. Too sharp. He slid right into a foodcart.

He scrambled to his feet—

Into the arms of a guard.

"Give 'er up, krub!" the gol said, tightening his arms around Hoodwink's chest. Others quickly approached—

Hoodwink angled the guard between himself and the bottom of Down Street, and then he hurled himself backward. He and the guard tumbled onto the sloped snowpack and gravity took over. The two slid down the steep hill, picking up speed by the moment. Bumps in the packed snow jolted the two continuously. The few street-goers gave the pair a wide berth, not wanting to join in that perilous slide.

The soldier tightened his grip during the descent, slowly crushing the air from Hoodwink's lungs. Hoodwink tried to pry that grip open, but it was like trying to take off one of the collars. He focused on the spark inside him instead. He wouldn't be able to generate much. He closed his eyes, and released a flare of electricity up and down his torso. The man's arms jolted

away.

Handy, that.

Still sliding down, Hoodwink turned and gave the gol a good punch to the nose. Finally the road curved up to catch them, and the two slid to a halt. Hoodwink scrambled to his feet, kicked the gol in the belly for good measure, and raced on. About five seconds behind him, the four remaining soldiers slid to the bottom of the street and gave chase.

There was a market ahead, one that was always crowded after snowstorms. Sure enough the throngs were packing it today. He hurried in among the crowds, weaving his way past peddlers, entertainers, and beggars. He quickly sat down beside a stand of skewered dog meat, lowered his head and extended his hand like the beggars he so feared, and waited.

The four guards jostled their way through the market. They passed almost right in front of him, oblivious to his presence.

The instant they had gone, Hoodwink stood up and hurried from the square.

He'd made it.

It wasn't long before he reached Forever Street, the road that lay in the shadow of the Gate. You could circle the entire city if you walked that street long enough. Beside it, the aptly-named wall that was the Forever Gate reached into the sky, the topmost edges lost in the clouds. The Forever Gate

entombed the city, preventing all access to the Outside.

He passed the section where Ari had placed the bomb the day before. The area was blackened, but otherwise unharmed. One would have expected the gols to beef up their presence after an attack like that, but there actually seemed less gols along this portion of the wall today. There weren't enough of them to watch every section of the Gate every waking moment, Hoodwink supposed, especially when the wall was, by all indications, indestructible.

He soon met up with Leader. The ancient man observed the Forever Gate from the shade of a vendor who sold maps and miniature replicas of the city.

"Your goodbyes went well?" Leader asked, his breath misting. He stared off to the side in that way he had of not meeting one's eye.

"Splendid." Hoodwink picked up a replica of the city.

The vendor immediately stood up. "Touch and pay," the middle-aged woman said.

Hoodwink gingerly returned the replica.

Ari came up beside him and saved him from the woman by giving him a hug.

"How did it go?" Ari said. She carried two duffel bags, one big and one small, on each shoulder.

Hoodwink smiled sadly. "Cora says good-bye."

"You told her everything?"

He nodded.

"I'll seek her out," Ari said. "Let her know you spoke the truth."

"She knows." Hoodwink shook his head. "But don't go to her. It's probably better if she never sees you again."

Ari seemed about to contest him, but then she bit back whatever it was she was going to say.

Leader rested a palsied hand on his shoulder and finally turned that penetrating gaze on him. "Time wastes. Are you ready?"

Hoodwink shrugged. "As I'll ever be."

Ari handed the larger duffel bag to Hoodwink, and kept the smaller one for herself. Then he and Ari walked on either side of Leader, helping the haggard man through the streets. Leader verbally steered them down the byways to a secluded back alley.

The snow was never shoveled here, nor was it packed by the tread of passersby, so the three of them had to wade and dig through snow that was sometimes chest high. They reached a rusty iron gate that was nearly buried by the drifts, and Leader opened it with a key he'd brought along. The gate was like a portcullis, and they were able to slide it upward with some difficulty. Once through, Hoodwink saw that the alley offered secluded access to a portion of the Gate.

"Why didn't you put the bomb here?" he said.

Ari shook her head. "There'd be too much damage to the neighboring buildings. We didn't want any human casualties, remember?"

The three dug their way forward through the snow, until the sky-reaching wall consumed everything else. The Forever Gate. What looked like a flat, gray surface from far away was actually a craggy mountain of sheer, infinite stone. A silver rope dangled from the heights, and Hoodwink followed it with his eyes. He couldn't see where the rope anchored—it became lost in the coarse texture of the wall a mile or so up.

"You expect me to climb this?" Hoodwink pulled at the rope. He felt the echo of a distant vibration pass through the material. The sensation was eerie, like plucking the string of a giant lute.

"Think of it as a symbol." Leader gazed blankly up the wall. "Of the hurdles you've faced in this life. You have overcome them all to get to this point. Now you must overcome this last." Leader turned his eyes downward, to the snow drift piled against the wall. "We tried to dig under it at first. Like the sappers of yesteryear. That proved a mistake. The wall is buried in the ground at least as deep as it is high. And digging through frozen ground isn't a pleasant thing." He pursed his lips. "It was the time of our exploratory years. When we believed the Outside a sanctuary. A few of us came up with the rope idea. Erdus and Callus were the first to surmount the wall. They'd

practiced for years, taught themselves the lost art of mountaineering. It was they who anchored the ropes. Good men. Their loss was irreplaceable." Leader's eyes drifted upward. "The climb will take around five hours. You'll find a new rope every half hour or so. There are ten in total. You've committed the address to memory?"

Hoodwink sighed. "John Baker, son of Arrold Baker, 18 Market Street." Though not a User, John was a close cousin of Leader. John assumed quite the risk by being their middle man. Hoodwink hoped the gols didn't use him to hunt the rest of the Users down. But Ari and the others were too smart to let that happen.

Leader motioned to the duffel bag slung over Hoodwink's shoulder, the one Ari had given him. "Put on the climbing gear."

Hoodwink slid the bag to the ground. He removed his cloak and handed it to Ari, and then he opened the bag and retrieved a balaclava. He slid the warm cloth down over his face, properly aligning the eyeholes so he could see. He was worried at first that he wouldn't have any air without holes for the nose and mouth, but he seemed to breathe fine through the balaclava's fabric. His breath did sound loud in his ears, though.

Next he swapped his thick mittens for the thinner climbing gloves contained in the bag.

"Gloves with leather palms for rope handling," Leader explained.

"The tips can be folded back, and they become fingerless if you ever need a better grip. When you expose the fingers you'll have to expend charge to keep from getting frostbite, of course."

Hoodwink slid the top section of the gloves open, and sure enough the tips of his fingers were exposed. He slid the gloves closed again. He reached into the duffel bag and removed a thick jacket and extra layer of pants.

"Down jacket," Leader said as and Hoodwink slid the jacket over his fleece sweater and buttoned up the front. "One of the thickest jackets available. Made with the down feathers from the Eider ducks of the south. You'll be hot at first wearing that, but trust me, as you near the top of the Gate, you'll be glad you have it. The pants are down-stuffed as well. You'll have to leave your sword."

Hoodwink's fingers protectively clasped the hilt. "What if I need it?" His voice sounded muffled inside the balaclava.

Leader compressed his lips. "It'll only weight you down. Won't fit in the down pants anyway."

Ari stepped forward. "I'll give you my dagger," she offered.

Hoodwink reluctantly unbuckled his sword and scabbard and gave it to Ari. He accepted her small dagger in exchange and stuffed it into an inner pocket of his jacket. Hoodwink slid the pants over his boots and up onto his existing woolen trousers, covering the dagger. He buttoned up the pants, and

when he lowered his hands the jacket hem tumbled over his waist, ensuring that his midsection would remain warm during the climb.

Hoodwink retrieved the next item from the bag—a pair of goggles.

"Those are to protect your eyes from wind," Leader said. "Frozen corneas aren't a fun thing. You're familiar with frostbite? Well, when a frozen cornea thaws out, it's like a third degree burn in the eyes."

Hoodwink pulled the strap and gingerly lowered the goggles over his head. They fit securely over the eyeholes of the balaclava so that no portion of his face was now exposed. Although the periphery of his vision was blocked by the goggles, he could see well enough.

The last items in the bag were a pair of spiked metal frames a little larger than his palms, with leather straps on top. Hoodwink held them up curiously.

"Those are for your boots," Leader said. "Crampons, they're called. They give your feet purchase where there is none. You won't really need them until you reach the icy patches higher up. Still, they shouldn't wear down too badly against ordinary rock, and they'll be a hassle to put on midway the climb, so I suggest you strap them on now."

Hoodwink slipped the crampons over his boots. The metal spikes protruded from all sides of each boot, with two particularly long, mandible-like extensions at the fronts. He tightened the straps, fitting the crampons

securely to his boots. When he stood, it felt like he walked on nails, and he had to extend his arms for balance.

The bag was now empty, and Hoodwink returned it to Ari. She stowed his cloak and sword inside, then slung it over her shoulder. She reached behind his head and raised the fur-lined hood of his jacket. She pulled the drawstrings, tightening the hood around his balaclava.

"You were damn right about it being hot," Hoodwink said, his voice sounding even more muffled now.

Ari handed him the second, smaller duffel bag she carried.

"In that one," Leader said. "You'll find the usual suspects. A water bladder. Probably will freeze solid higher up. A pee bottle. Probably won't need it. Salted meat. Probably won't be hungry. Couple of light ice axes. Oh, and the ever important rigged diary. Use it. Keep us updated."

The Users had either found the diaries or created them in years bygone—it wasn't made clear to Hoodwink. Whatever the case, the books came in pairs. When you wrote in one, your words appeared in the other no matter how far away you were.

Hoodwink secured the smaller duffel bag over his shoulder.

"You never told me," Hoodwink said. "Did you give diaries to the others who went over this wall?"

Leader's palsy seemed to have gotten worse in the last few moments

—his lips twitched and his eyes blinked spasmodically. Maybe he was just excited. Or nervous. "We did give them diaries, yes."

Hoodwink wanted the man to look at him, wanted to stare into those eyes and see what truths he could read there, but Leader didn't oblige.

"And what did you get back?" Hoodwink said.

A smile came to Leader's twitching lips. It reminded Hoodwink of a slithering snake. "The truth."

The old man was shaking all over now, and he removed one of his mittens and extended the palm toward Hoodwink. The start of a handshake.

Hoodwink accepted the palm.

A massive surge of current passed from Leader through Hoodwink's gloves and into his hand. Hoodwink couldn't move or break the grip. He could only stand there, just shaking spasmodically with Leader for long moments.

When the old man finally released him, both of them collapsed.

Viewing the world from where he lay sprawled in the snow, Hoodwink blinked a few times and then, feeling strangely full of energy, he scrambled to his feet.

The spark veritably flared inside him.

Leader had recharged him.

Ari helped Leader rise. The old man had stopped twitching, and his

face was deathly pale. His breath came in wheezes.

"Thank you," Hoodwink said.

Leader nodded slowly. "I have one last... gift for you." His voice sounded weak, and Hoodwink had to lean in closer to hear. "A word of caution, really. Once you reach the tenth rope, you're in the Death Zone. So high that there's a third less oxygen than down here. You'll feel utterly exhausted because of the thin air. You won't be able to think clearly. Nothing worse than being at the top of the world, balanced between life and death, and not being able to think. One thing is for certain—stay in the Death Zone too long, and you die."

"What are you saying?"

Leader smiled grimly. "Keep climbing. At the very top, you'll want to fall asleep. Truly, you will." The old man gazed into Hoodwink's eyes for the first time this meeting. There was a certain sternness to them. "Fall asleep and you die. Now go. Before you change your mind. And good luck."

Ari kissed Hoodwink on the cheek, through the balaclava. "Thank you. You're saving me by doing this. You're saving us all."

"I doubt it." He stared at her through the goggles. "But I'll do my best. I will." He wrapped his gloved fingers tentatively around the rope.

"Hoodwink?" Ari said, a hint of urgency in her tone.

"Yes?"

"Don't forget what you told me." She was blinking a little more than was usual. "Don't you ever forget it."

He was confused. "What did I say?"

"That you're coming back!" She sounded exasperated.

Hoodwink nodded carefully. "I haven't forgotten that, don't you worry." He could never forget that. He forced a smile. "I'll return. I promise. If I have to crawl through the pit of hell to do it, I'll come back for you. I swear it."

Ari's lips were trembling. She turned away to hide her face from him.

Hoodwink braced his boots against the Gate and began the long climb into eternity.

CHAPTER NINE

Hoodwink walked the rocky surface, raising himself hand-over-hand along the rope. He hadn't known what to expect, but this wasn't so bad. "Aid climbing," the Users had called it—rope laid over a route to make it easier for future climbers. He couldn't imagine what those first two climbers must have gone through to place the rope.

The climb proved a little monotonous. It was somewhat similar to trudging on the ground, bent-over, gripping a rope for balance. He understood now what it felt like to be a crooked old man like Leader. Except Leader was only twenty-nine, prematurely aged by the power that flowed through him. The same future awaited Hoodwink and his daughter. Well, whether or not he'd see that future was the question, wasn't it? He had to make it past the next few hours to start with.

The first rope went by easily enough. Hand over hand, foot over foot. Thirty minutes or so transpired.

The second rope came into view. It overlapped the first rope by some paces, so that Hoodwink could've switched or used both of them if he wanted. The first rope ended in an anchor of small cords that passed through metallic loops wedged into the stone wall.

One segment down. Nine more to go.

He bounce-tested the second cord with a quick pull, and when he felt the faint answering vibration, he slowly transferred his weight until the rope carried his entire body.

He climbed onward, hesitant at first, and then faster as his confidence grew. He was growing tired, true, but he covered the second segment almost as vigorously as the first.

He started slowing down on the third rope, when the climb began to wear on him. The rock face became at times encrusted in ice, for which the spikes on the crampons proved especially suited, the sharp metal points digging right into the ice so that the tips of his boots found purchase.

By the fourth rope, he felt like going back. His shoulders ached. His biceps throbbed. The sides of his back behind his armpits felt numb. The warmth he had felt in those down-feather clothes was long gone, so much so that his extremities throbbed painfully from the cold. He released small spurts of electricity into his fingers and toes to warm himself, knowing that he had to be careful not to exhaust his charge.

By the fifth rope, he was thoroughly beaten. He couldn't go on. By his reckoning, he'd been climbing at least three hours. But he forced himself. He promised that he would stop for a rest at the sixth.

At last, rope number six came into view, and he climbed until he

reached it. He took his promised rest.

Feeling utterly spent, he knelt against the rockface, and, keeping one hand firmly on rope number five, he reached the other hand behind his lower back and grabbed rope number six. He threaded the end of number six around his waist and tied it in a knot, a tricky task with one hand—especially a gloved hand at that—but he eventually managed after slipping open the fingertips of the glove and braving the numbing wind.

He tentatively released his hold on rope number five, and when he was satisfied that the knot on number six would hold at his waist, he rested. He resealed his glove, and balled his hands to warm his fingers. He released a trickle of electricity into his extremities, and it was enough to improve the blood flow to his fingers and toes and prevent frostbite. He moved very slowly the whole time. He wanted to eat some of the salted meat from his duffel bag, but then he'd have to lift the balaclava and expose his face. Also, he was afraid that any movement would cause him to fall, which is why he kept his knees braced firmly against the rockface the whole time, unable to shake off the feeling that the rope at his waist would unravel any second.

The urge to look down proved almost overwhelming. Just one peek. What was the worst that could happen?

He'd lose heart, that's what. Not to mention the vertigo would probably overwhelm him. The same vertigo he felt if he looked up too far,

and saw the hopeless, infinite grade above. By focusing on the icy rockface before him and nothing else, he made the climb doable. And by not knowing how far he'd plummet, by pretending he was only a few feet off the ground, well, that helped calm nerves that would otherwise paralyze him, or lead to a fall.

But while he didn't look down, he didn't climb up either.

He just stayed there, gloves gently wrapped around rope number six in case the knot unraveled.

He stayed there, waiting, listening to the howling wind.

For what?

Resting, he told himself.

He was cold. So cold. It would only grow colder the higher he went. Another incentive to just stay here a little longer.

Halfway. Come on Hood. You're halfway there.

He sighed, got a good grip on the sixth rope with one hand, and reluctantly untied the knot at his waist with the other. He felt the sudden pull as his arm was forced to bear the weight of his body once more. He quickly joined his other hand to the rope, and properly placed his feet to share the load.

He jerked himself up the rope, one hand and foot at a time, his body rebelling with every step. Resting had proven a mistake because he just

wanted to stop again. His muscles ached all over. He had no energy. He wasn't a climber. What was he doing out here on the Forever Gate, a mile above the city?

Saving Ari, that's what. Now climb damn it.

He climbed, not daring to overthink his motivation, knowing how easily he could poke holes in it. He climbed for Ari, and that was good enough.

Each handspan became a small battle. Though it was a battle he was determined to win.

The air became thin, and he found himself panting constantly now. Or was he just tired?

Somehow, he reached rope number seven.

Then rope number eight.

The frigid wind tore into him incessantly, and at times it felt like he wasn't even wearing a jacket. Despite the gloves, the gusts bit into his fingers. His toes were numb inside his boots, as were his cheeks under the balaclava. He had to constantly expend some of his charge just to keep the frostbite at bay.

Finally he reached rope number nine. Whereas all the previous ropes had overlapped to some extent, the ninth rope lay *above* the eighth.

But it was only a little ways above, just an arm-length. He could

handle an arm-length of bare wall, couldn't he?

He climbed to the very top of rope number eight, wrapping his hands around the metallic loops that anchored the rope into the wall. There was no ice here, just pure, unadulterated stone.

He considered opening the tips of the gloves, but then decided against it. Instead he reached up and ran the fingers of one hand along the surface, searching for something that could take his weight. There. The base of a tiny fissure. He found a higher foothold for his boot, letting the jagged crampons grab hold of the rock, and then he slowly transferred his weight to the handhold. The first joint of his finger flared in protest, but he found another foothold with his other leg, and he was able to haul himself high enough to grab the next rope.

When both his hands were secure around that rope, he exhaled in relief. He'd done it.

The ninth rope was in hand. After this, there was only one more rope to go.

He climbed mechanically now more than anything else. Raise one hand. Then the other. Raise one foot. Then the other. His arms and legs felt like stones. He thought they'd drop off if he stopped. He kept his focus on the wall in front of him at all times.

Raise one hand. Then the other.

And then it was done. He arrived at the loops and cords that anchored rope number nine, and he glanced upward, searching for the final rope.

He saw only the dizzying Forever Gate, reaching skyward in unending infinity.

He had reached the Death Zone, where every moment counted.

And there was no tenth rope.

Worse, it had started to snow.

CHAPTER TEN

What is a mind?

Why does it betray us at those times when we need it most?

Why does it fill us with fear, and emotion, at those times when we most need to avoid fear, when we most need to be emotionless?

Perhaps the better question might be, what is reality?

Is it some cog in a giant wheel? A smaller part of a grander fabrication, of which we all play our bit parts? Are our lives merely parts of this wheel? Predetermined and preset? We live out our days, and time passes, inexorably, slowly building up to one key, quintessential climax, where all the choices we think we've made and the paths we think we've taken converge beyond our control, and we find ourselves on a rope along a wall miles above the city we were born in. At the Death Zone, with another quarter-mile to go.

And that rope has just run out.

Hoodwink leaned his head against the rockface, and closed his eyes.

It was over. He'd have to climb all the way back down. He'd have to tell Ari he couldn't do it.

The rope had run out, he'd say. *The rope had run out.*

And he could see her, looking back at him with disappointment in her eyes as she set out to climb the wall in his place. *I wouldn't have needed a rope,* she'd say.

Hoodwink opened his eyes, and he did what he'd promised himself he wouldn't do.

He looked down.

The city looked almost unreal at this height. It was like he stood again beside the street vendor with her miniature replicas and maps again, and casually observed one of her wares. True, this was far more detailed than any map he'd ever seen, but the illusion of perception made the city seem much closer through the goggles, like he could just reach out and pick it up.

But then his eyes focused on the whirling snow closer at hand, those flakes descending from the heights like an endless vortex of doom, and the reality of what he saw hit him. He felt suddenly nauseous, and dizzy.

The duffel bag abruptly slid down his shoulder. He let go of the rope with that hand and caught the bag in the crook of his forearm. Two bundles of salted meat tumbled free and spun away on the breeze as the upper winds picked them up. Entranced, he watched the bundles fall. The fingers of the hand that gripped the rope began to slip. It would be so easy to follow those bundles down...

He snapped his head away, slid the duffel bag back into place, and

placed both hands firmly on the rope. He concentrated on the bare rockface just ahead.

I can climb without a rope. I can climb without a rope. I can climb...

Could he really?

It was cold. So damn cold. The dead of winter in the coldest of winters yet, and he lay miles up from the earth. The snow fell more heavily. If this kept up, he doubted he'd be able to see farther than a pace or two. And the sun would set soon. If he was caught on the wall in the dark, he'd freeze to death.

Yes. Better to go back now, while he still could. He couldn't climb this. That howling wind would either freeze him to the bone, or tear him from the rock. Or the lack of oxygen in the Death Zone would take him. He wasn't trained for this. He was thirty-five years old. Sure, he was fit because of his job building barrels, but hammering nails into wood was far different than pulling one's body up a rockface.

He had to go back.

He had to admit when defeat had slapped him in the face.

Just like how he'd admitted defeat when Jeremy and the gols took away his daughter. Just like how he'd given up and buried himself in his job, and spent the nights in the tavern, going home miserably drunk, and hating himself. *Hating*. He'd *wanted* his wife to leave him. He'd wanted to be

punished, for allowing his daughter to be taken. Every morning he'd passed Ari by on the way to work, and he'd never said a word. He'd given up. Like he gave up now.

He had a rare moment of absolute lucidity right then.

The rockface wasn't his enemy.

It never had been.

It was cliche to think it, but *he* was his most ruthless enemy. *He* was the one he had to fight.

He could climb this wall.

And he *would*.

He was through giving up.

He shut his eyes, and breathed deeply, remembering why he was doing this.

I won't let you die Ari.

Opening his eyes, he flipped open the fingertips of both gloves by sliding them one at a time against the rope. The wind assailed his numb fingers, but he let a small spark of electricity flow into them, warming the flesh.

Before he could change his mind he let one hand leave the rope. He felt along the rough surface with his bare fingers, seeking a handhold. There. He forced his fingers into a slight crevice, and raised a boot, wedging the

crampons into a foothold. He pulled with his arm and leg at the same time, and flinched as the finger joints bore the weight of his body.

He planted the opposite boot on a small ledge, and straightened the leg, reaching up to find a handhold for the corresponding arm. He squeezed his fingers onto a tiny shelf, and paused for an instant.

The only thing holding him up was the strength of his own body. There was no rope. No second-chances should he make a mistake. He rode death's horse by the tips of his fingers and the tips of his toes.

He tried not to think about that for too long.

Focus, Hood.

The fingers of both hands throbbed at their first joints, but it was a manageable pain.

He lifted his knee, planted his boot on a new foothold, and pressed upward. His torso rose, and he scrambled the fingers of one hand along the wall, searching for a handhold.

But before he could find that handhold, the newly-placed foot slipped, the crampons breaking away a small section of the wall.

Hoodwink slammed against the rock and his other boot lost footing. He hung there by one hand, the finger joints bearing the brunt of his weight. Only the tensile strength of a couple of knuckles stood between him and oblivion. Knuckles that throbbed in torment.

He scrambled with his left hand along the rockface, searching for a hold, any hold. Incredibly, he couldn't find one. Nothing would support him. A tiny ledge there. Too slippery. A crevice here. His fingers wouldn't fit.

The knuckles of his other hand had held thus far, but it was the arm muscles that now started to fail. His entire arm shook uncontrollably.

Frantically, he lifted his forgotten feet. He had to find a foothold.

There. A small jutting piece of rock. Just a fragment. But he was able to jam the spikes of both boots onto it, sharing the weight with his arm. The pain in his knuckles subsided a little, but the arm was still shaking rapidly, near exhaustion. He searched the wall again with his free hand, finding a hold he'd missed the first time, and trusted his weight to it.

Carefully, he released the first shaking hand from the wall. His fingers were curled into a permanent claw, and he found himself unable to straighten them through the pain.

He allowed more electricity into the hand, massaging the tendons and bone with that spark, worried that he'd never be able to open his hand again. With an effort he was finally able to coax each finger open.

He reached up, found the next handhold, and had to curl up those sore fingers all over again.

In this way he proceeded up the last section of the wall, battling against himself, battling against the rock. First one foot, then one hand. Then

the other hand. Then the other foot. Rising one small handspan at a time. Conquering infinity bit by bit. Warming his extremities with electricity.

He came to a section of rock that was covered in ice. He extended an arm and searched with his bare fingertips, seeking a handhold. His fingers slipped everywhere he placed them, and he couldn't find a grip. He was beginning to despair when he remembered the two ice axes he had stowed away in the duffel bag.

This would be a tricky maneuver. He carefully opened the drawstring of his duffel bag with one hand, and then groped inside until he found both ice axes. He made sure they were side by side, and oriented the same way, and then he wrapped his fingers around the handles and delicately slid the axes out. He reached up, and slammed both axes into the ice above him. The serrated picks dug deep. He pulled on the handles, testing the hold. It seemed firm enough. Shifting his weight to the axes, he released his other arm from the wall and grabbed the leftmost ax so that he held one handle in each palm now. He released the rightmost ax momentarily to pull the drawstring and shut the duffel bag.

He proceeded up the frozen layer, striking the wall with the ice axes, letting the picks find a hold. The crampons on his boots proved their worth here, allowing him to easily pierce the ice and make his own footholds. All in all, the going was actually much easier than when he had to pull himself up

by his fingertips alone. His only worry as he climbed was that an entire sheet of ice would break away while he was on it, perhaps caused by the very motion of striking the wall with the picks. But he compelled himself onward nonetheless, winning countless small battles, not backing down from adversity.

It's not real, he told himself often during that climb. *None of this is real*. A part of him even believed it. Some other world existed atop his own, one that he couldn't see, couldn't feel, but was there nonetheless, where he resided at the same time as this one. And it was from that other world, that other self, from which he drew his strength and focus.

It's not real.

Tiny bits of matter called muscle rubbed against each other, powered by a mind comprised of similar tiny bits. This muscle manipulated tiny bits of matter called axes, which in turn struck tiny bits of matter that formed ice. All of those tiny bits made the fiction called reality. Spitting in the face of this reality, denying that it and his own mortality even existed, that's what kept him going.

Warmed by the electricity of vitra, he climbed, constantly reminded that there was no rope supporting him. That the only thing keeping him from the long fingers of oblivion was his own intensity of will. It was strange, having death so close to him in that climb. He'd never felt such clarity. He'd

never felt so full of life.

He'd never felt so free.

And then it was done. One moment he was his raising hands and feet with all the intensity of his will and focus, and the next he was pulling himself onto the wall's upper lip, a ledge little wider than his waist. He cleared away a small layer of snow and settled himself onto the ledge.

It came as sort of a shock to have actually made it. Here he was, in a snowstorm at the top of the world, the frigid gusts whipping his hood, and he'd just climbed the last leg of the Forever Gate without a rope.

He held out his arms, raising the ice axes, and loosed a shout of victory that was lost in the wind. A few tears spilled from his eyes, and he felt the droplets solidify against the bottom edge of his goggles.

He crouched down against the rim of the Gate, utterly exhausted. He peered down the other side of the wall, wondering what wonders or horrors lay beyond the Forever Gate.

But the white-out of the snowstorm veiled the landscape below.

Of course.

It was with more than a little relief that he spotted the rope that led down into the depths a short way to his left. He couldn't see where the rope anchored—the top was covered in snow and ice from the ledge. But that didn't matter. The hard work was done and he had a way down.

For now he needed a moment's rest.

He remained where he was, staring over the ledge into eternity, at the downward vortex of windswept snow.

He'd never felt so drained in his life. The sheer intensity of focus needed to climb that wall had drained him to the core. So he just stayed there on the wall, letting the snow fall around him, and the wind pick at his bones.

He lay back, and his eyes drifted shut.

He started to fall asleep.

He heard Leader's voice at the back of his mind.

You'll feel utterly exhausted because of the thin air. You won't be able to think clearly. You'll want to fall asleep. But fall asleep and you die.

He batted the voice away. A short nap wouldn't hurt anything. Besides, dying didn't sound half bad right about now. It would be an end to this incredible weariness at least.

Fall asleep and YOU DIE.

He forced himself upright.

He refused to die now, after all this work. He *refused*.

Using the ice axes and the spikes at the tips of his boots, he pulled himself along the icy ledge in kind of hunched crawl, making his way toward the rope that led down the other side. He was about to swing himself onto that rope when he remembered he was supposed to update the Users on his

progress. He could imagine Ari sitting by the twin of the rigged diary he carried, staring at the blank pages, anxiously awaiting word of his progress.

But maybe he was just feeding his fatherly ego. Did she even care about him? She said he wasn't her father anymore. She was right. All that she was had been destroyed with her revisal. She had memories of a different father. Memories of another man bringing her to the market square every weekend. Memories of another father comforting her when she fell from the sleigh and hurt herself.

She wasn't his little girl anymore.

No, that wasn't true. No matter what memories she had, she *was* his little girl.

He set himself firmly on the ledge and resolutely slid off the duffel bag from his shoulder. He retrieved the diary.

It was an ordinary seeming book. For all he knew, it had no magical properties whatsoever, and any messages he printed here would remain here. He just had to trust in Leader's word, he supposed.

He slid the writing stylus from its clip on the book's spine, and pressed it to the page. He had to hold the pages down in the wind as he wrote.

I've made the top of the Gate, he transcribed. His script was terrible. He could barely grip the pencil after a climb like that, and the numbing cold didn't help, even though he sent a surge of electricity through his joints. This

entry would have to be short. *Snowstorm hides other side. Climbing down now.*

There. That should do.

He started to return the diary to the duffel bag when a gust of wind snatched the book from him. He fumbled for the thing—

But it was too late, and the book plunged over the ledge.

He watched the diary spiral away into the vortex, soon vanishing in the snowstorm.

With a sigh, Hoodwink stowed the ice picks in the duffel bag and secured the bag to his shoulder. Then he lowered himself onto the rope and began the long climb down the other side.

The descent proved much faster than the ascent. He rappelled down the wall, using the existing ropes left by the previous climbers. All of those ropes seemed to be intact this time. Even so, the way was frigid, and he was forced to expend his charge keeping warm on the way down.

When at last he reached the bottom, he was exhausted, and his charge was spent. He set foot on strangely soft ground, and instantly the snowstorm lifted.

He turned away from the wall to face a world entirely unlike the one he had left behind...

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Hoodwink stood in a desert. Sand dunes stretched to the horizon, unbroken by any landmarks. Though it had been evening at the top of the Gate, time had reset, and the sun stood in the midpoint of the sky. The wall of the Forever Gate behind Hoodwink was the only landmark of note, unless you counted the bones of giant beasts in the distance, half-buried in the sand. The skeletons of monsters from the nine hells?

Despite the desert dunes and the bright sun, he still felt frigid, and his breath fogged white as ever. Yet when he took one step away from the wall, the heat swelled over him in waves, hotter and stronger than he'd ever felt it. He retreated against the wall, and the freezing cold enveloped him once more.

Shaking his head in disbelief, he steeled himself and then stepped forward. It felt like he'd stepped into an oven.

He untied and lowered his hood. He took off his goggles. He pulled the balaclava from his head, then knelt and unbuckled the crampons from his boots. He stripped off the remainder of his winter clothes, taking the dagger from the jacket's inner pocket and stuffing it into his trousers. He abandoned the clothes and the steel spikes at the base of the Forever Gate—there was simply no room for them in the small duffel bag.

He advanced, swilling water from the frozen bladder stowed in the duffel bag. The ice inside melted slowly, drip-feeding him the liquid.

The sand swallowed him past the ankles with each step, and he could feel the heat of the dunes through his boots. The molten sun beat down mercilessly.

He wasn't sure how long he marched, because the sun didn't seem to be moving in the sky. He guessed an hour. Long enough for the contents of the water bladder to melt entirely, anyway. And for him to drink it all.

He paused in the shade of one of those leviathans of bone. The unburied portion of the skull proved colossal, and comprised the greater proportion of the thing. From the skull extended the backbone, to which a prodigious basket of ribs was attached, erupting from the sand like a giant claw. The middle ribs had the greatest arch—bigger than some of the city footbridges. The backbone tapered as it continued toward the tail, which fanned outward in a massive rake.

He ran his fingertips across the surface of one of those ribs. The bone was porous, and had a similar texture to the Gate he had just climbed. The macabre notion came to him that the Forever Gate might be made of the bones of these beasts.

His tread became slower as time inched by and the heat sapped him. With the water bladder empty, his lips became hopelessly chapped, and his

throat felt swollen. Yet he trudged aimlessly onward. There was nowhere else to go but forward. He estimated that half a day had passed since he began, yet the sun still hadn't moved a fingerbreadth in the sky.

He decided he'd take shelter in the shadow of the next giant skeleton he found. Ahead, off to the right, a suitable candidate awaited.

But before he reached the leviathan, he unexpectedly ran up against a glass barrier, flattening his face against its surface.

He slid a sweaty hand along the glass, his fingers making a distinct squeegee sound. On a whim he slammed a hand into it. The surface thudded as if it were made of thick stone. He retrieved the dagger from his trousers and slammed the hilt into the glass with both hands. THUD. This time a vibration passed along the surface. He plunged the dagger into the surface next, but the blade skidded and twisted his wrist at a painful angle. The resultant sound he heard from the barrier reminded him of pebbles skimming along ice.

He held up a palm and summoned as much electricity as he was able, but only a trickle remained, and the tendrils of energy sparked harmlessly across the surface.

Then he noticed the hooded figure standing beside the glass, not far from him. Dressed in a black gown, the figure held a scythe in its hand.

Hoodwink spun toward the figure, dagger raised. "Who are you?"

The figure said no words, but it advanced, extending a hand that was much like the bony tails of those leviathans Hoodwink had passed. The hem of the figure's robe remained stationary, as if the thing floated rather than walked. It left no footprints in the sand.

"Stay back!" Hoodwink rasped, keeping his dagger aimed high. Of all times to have no charge...

He retreated and his right elbow skidded against the glass barrier. He lost his balance, falling to the sand.

He swiveled toward the figure—

But it was gone.

"A mirage." Hoodwink laughed a laugh that quickly became a dry cough.

"Not entirely," came a quaint voice beside him.

Still on the ground, Hoodwink spun his dagger on the new arrival. It was a dwarf, dressed in a leather jerkin and breeches, with openwork sandals around his hairy toes. The dwarf held a black umbrella, which he put to use shading his head. The symbol on his chest suggested he was a gol, though Hoodwink didn't recognize the occupation the symbol stood for. It was either three vertical lines, or the number one hundred eleven.

"Think of the image of Death as a test," the dwarf said. "You failed."

"Who are you?" Hoodwink said, unable to hold back another cough.

"Here." The dwarf popped the cork from a fresh water bladder, and tossed it to Hoodwink. "You sound terrible."

Hoodwink caught the bladder and eyed the lip suspiciously. He smelled it and then took a sip. Water. Sweet water. He drank voraciously, finally setting the bladder down with a sigh and wiping his lips.

"Better?" the dwarf said. "Good. Now we can talk about what we're going to do with you."

Hoodwink scrambled upright, using the glass barrier as a lever for his weary body. He kept the dagger pointed at the dwarf. "Who are you?"

"I am Seven," the dwarf said. "One of the main A.I.s of the system."

"The main what?" Hoodwink stared blankly at the dwarf.

"The Artificial Intelligences. One of the Master Golems, if you will."

"I *knew* you were a gol." Hoodwink glanced around uncertainly, wondering if any more approached in ambush. He saw only the empty desert.

"I'm very much alone," Seven said. "In more ways than you know."

"Well, I'm Hoodwink. Hoodwink Cooper. And I have a message for you gols out here."

"Oh?" Seven raised an eyebrow.

"John Baker," Hoodwink said. "Son of Arrold Baker, 18 Market Street."

Seven pursed his lips. "Yes?"

"You're to get in touch with him. He's your contact for the Users, he is. We want to help you, if we can."

Seven seemed genuinely puzzled now. "The closest city would be Section 9, and my backup copy of the records shows a house on 18 Market Street. But what is it exactly the Users want to help me with?"

"The sickness that's affecting the minds of you gols." When Seven stared back blankly, Hoodwink elaborated. "The slobbering faces. The mistakes made by the gols at the banks, the stores, and so forth. You gols aren't yourselves. Not that I care, of course. You could all die as far as I'm concerned. But I'm just the messenger."

Understanding seemed to dawn on the dwarf. "I see now. But unfortunately, there's a slight problem. I've lost communication with the Core. The Attack has damaged the root fiber and I can't interact with my complementary units. I'm afraid if you want to convey this message of yours, you'll have to travel through the Forever Gate and do it yourself."

Hoodwink narrowed his eyes. "What are you talking about? I just crossed the Gate."

"What you refer to as the 'Forever Gate' is just an artifice, a wall used to keep the humans from eating up all our computational resources. It would take googols more processing power if we allowed you beyond the towns. Generating fractal terrain doesn't come cheap, you know. Throw in the

particle system, the billboarding, the occlusion culling, not to mention the lightmapping and pathfinding, all of which need to be duplicated for each and every city, and you have a system whose resources are quite nearly spent. It's a miracle it all comes together as smoothly as it does, really."

Hoodwink waved his dagger threateningly. "Speak Common, will you?"

Seven smiled, and there actually seemed to be irony, real irony in those gol eyes. "You've been hoodwinked."

Hoodwink stared at the dwarf, not knowing what to say. Then he had a thought. He indicated the glass barrier beside him, and rapped the surface with his knuckles. "This is the true Forever Gate, isn't it? The real world, the one you've been hiding from us, it's past here."

Seven pursed his lips, then nodded, a little reluctantly. "You could say that."

"Tell me how to cross."

"If you cross the Forever Gate, there's no coming back," Seven said.

Hoodwink felt a tingle of dread in the pit of his stomach, but he said, "I've heard that before. And I will come back."

"We'll see. You needn't have come all this way simply to pass the Forever Gate. Because you see, it can be crossed by anyone, anywhere."

Hoodwink regarded the dwarf doubtfully. "Really? Enlighten me."

Seven extended his arms and smiled mockingly. "Take your dagger, wedge it in the sand, and fall on it."

Hoodwink stared at the dwarf, feeling his anger rise.

"It's true," Seven said. "Dying is the only way to reach the Outside. It's in the programming. Those who sent you over the wall, these Users, they likely hoped you'd fall to your death during the climb."

Hoodwink considered this for a moment. Then a smile crept on his face.

"You're a malicious, conniving little gol aren't you?" Hoodwink said. "I don't think I've ever met one quite like you. Except, I'm not so gullible as you might think, I'm not. You may've tricked the others who came before me, but you won't take me so easily."

The dwarf spread his hands wider. "I have sold you the only real truth there is."

"You sell death!" Hoodwink said.

"But isn't death the final truth?" Seven turned around, and began walking in the opposite direction. He glanced over his shoulder. "The Forever Gate *is* death. Either cross death and deliver your message, or return to the city, change your name, and your face, and live out your life. And get yourself collared again if you want that life to be long."

"Don't you turn your back on me." Hoodwink rushed at the dwarf

with the dagger, unleashing a guttural growl.

But the dwarf turned around and his fingertips glowed with forks of lightning. The brunt of the bolt swept past Hoodwink, but he was sent flying into the glass barrier by the trailing electrical tendrils. Sparks pulsed away from his body in surges that were absorbed into the glass as he slid to the ground.

"The next blow will not be so gentle," Seven said.

"Impossible," Hoodwink panted. He cringed at the pain he felt in his side. Broken ribs, or worse. "Gols don't have that power. It's why you collar us."

"Has anything you've seen today been possible?" the dwarf said. "Return to the city and live out your life. I'll see you on the Outside when you're good and ready."

Hoodwink noticed a flicker from the corner of his eye. Seven's lightning had done something to the glass barrier. Where the main bolt had struck, the glass intermittently faded in and out, going from a view of the desert beyond to a triangular gap of darkness the size of a man, and back again.

Seven followed his gaze, but said nothing.

Hoodwink stood, and lifted his dagger toward the defect in the glass. He touched the gap. The tip of the weapon vanished. Although the view

alternated from darkness to dunes and back again, the weapon appeared in neither. It was like he held only a clipped hilt.

When he pulled the weapon out, the dagger was whole.

"You have found your Forever Gate after all," Seven said. "Stepping beyond the outermost boundaries of the system is the same as death."

"As I said, I'm not so gullible." The dagger had returned. He would too.

He hoped.

He glanced at Seven. "Better pray I don't find you on the other side."

Before he could change his mind—and he was very close to changing it—Hoodwink stepped through the gap.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The world deflated like a child's balloon.

Hoodwink awoke in some kind of goo. He couldn't open his eyelids, because the substance burned his eyes. He couldn't breathe, because his lungs were filled with the stuff. He kicked and writhed, and in his panic he discovered a pliant membrane. He pressed on it with his hands, and it enveloped his arms up to the elbows. Abruptly the sheath yielded, and he slid into the open air.

He landed on a hard floor, the goo splattering all around him. He thrashed, coughing the fluid from his lungs, spitting the mucoidal substance from his mouth. He scooped the goo from his eye sockets, and he was able to open his lids for short spurts, though his eyes still burned, and he saw flashes of an iron hallway.

As his cough subsided, and the air flowed in and out of his lungs, he devoted more time to clearing the goo from his eyes. He blinked rapidly, letting the tears flow, and he was able to open the lids for longer and longer periods. His right eyelid had a bit of a painful tic, but he ignored it.

A rotating red light mounted near the pod bathed the scene alternately in shadow and light. He was lying on an iron grill. There was a siren wailing.

He forced himself to sit upright. A strange weight pressed into his gut.

He glanced down.

An umbilical cord was attached to his belly. Pulsating blue veins ran down its surface.

A sudden repugnance overcame him and he pulled frantically at the cord. Pain flashed through his insides, and he immediately let go of the thing. The opposite end was still buried somewhere inside the pod he'd emerged from, so he grabbed the cord in the middle and yanked. He had to put most of his body weight into the act, but finally the cord slurped from the pod with a loud "pop." The placental end slapped his cheek, and he tossed the gory tissue away in disgust.

He attempted to stand, but his feet refused to obey. His eyes were drawn to the scrawny limbs that made up his legs. His muscle had vanished. His legs were just skin stretched over bone, the knobby shapes of his knees the only indication that these even *were* legs. His arms fared little better, thin pipes of skin and bone.

What had the Gate done to him?

He tried to access the power inside him, but the spark didn't exist anymore. It was as if that part of his mind had been snipped away.

He was filled with a sudden sense of urgency. He had to get away from this place.

He dragged himself ever so slowly along the iron grill that was the floor, using the gaps for purchase, the beacon lighting the way in swathes of red and black, the siren keening. The wasted muscles in his arms and legs screamed in constant protest. It was like climbing the last leg of the Forever Gate all over again. Inch-by-inch he crawled, like the lowest of worms, the umbilical cord dragging along behind him. He kept his lower body tilted to the side, and he was careful not to put too much weight on the tender section of his belly where the cord still attached.

He paused when he realized there were more pods like the one he'd just left behind lining either side of the wall. The membranes were slightly translucent, and he could see human forms floating in each with the umbilical cords still attached. Through the floor grill below he perceived another level of pods. And above him, past the ceiling grill, still another level with more pods.

Pods upon pods upon pods.

A doorway in the rightmost wall opened onto a massive room. He crawled forward, onto a balcony of sorts, and stared through the grill at the strange activity below.

Mechanical monstrosities were at work, though at what they labored he had no idea. They moved pincers to and fro above compartments that spilled long threads of different colors. Below them, the metal floor was

blackened in several places, as though the area had suffered recent fire.

The siren wailed on.

There was a flash, and he heard a loud boom. The hall shook. He glanced upward. The ceiling was a dome made of glass, or so he thought, because he could see the night sky beyond. But this was not the night sky he was used to—a large, multicolored ball floated amid the stars, about the size of his fist when held at arm's-length. Amid the chaos of colors in that ball, he noticed a pattern near the lower right that was eerily similar to a human eye. It was Jupiter, he realized. A planet he'd seen in books.

Another flash. Another boom. The floor shook, and cracks spidered across the glass dome.

"Warning," a female voice droned. "Decompression imminent. Warning. Decompression imminent."

He heard a whir behind him. One of those mechanical monstrosities had rolled onto the balcony from the hall he'd left. In place of legs it had treads. In place of arms, pincers. Its body was a barrel of steel. Its head looked similar to the hilt of a sword, with curved cross-guards and a central haft. Three glass disks stared back at him from the depths of that hilt, and a red light floated above the center disk.

The thing wrapped a set of pincers around his leg and dragged him back into the corridor. The monstrosity hauled him through that hallway of

pods. The world shook, and he heard a distant boom, but the monstrosity did not cease.

The thing finally turned into another room, and lifted him dangling by the foot over a strange moving floor as if to dump him.

"Wait!" Hoodwink said.

The monstrosity paused, lifting him so that his upside-down head was at the same level as those glass eyes.

"John Baker," Hoodwink said. He slurred the words, like someone who knew how to talk, but had never used his tongue and lips. "Son of Arrold Baker, 18 Market Street." What was that the dwarf had called his city? "9th section. John Baker. The Users want to help. Meet John Baker."

He thought he saw an iris in each of those three glass disks enlarge, as if the monstrosity considered his words, then its head tilted up once, and then down. A conscious expression of agreement? Or the mechanical equivalent of a nervous tic?

The monstrosity unceremoniously hurled him onto the sliding surface, then wheeled about and left.

The moving floor was soft compared to the previous one. And slightly pliable. His stomach tightened when he saw that he had company. But it wasn't the kind of company anyone would want. Two human bodies lay not far from him, pale bodies crimped in death. Burned.

His face felt suddenly hot. With his eyes, he followed the motion of the floor to its destination—some kind of grinder. He could hear the terrible whirr from here, and see the fountain of blood as one of the dead fell inside.

He groped frantically along the rolling surface, pulling himself toward the edge.

But he had only seconds.

Not enough time.

Before the grinder took him, his last thoughts were of Ari.

He'd done it. He'd delivered the message. He'd saved her.

Yet the victory was bittersweet, because he'd broken his final promise.

Guess I won't be coming back.

The grinder swallowed him.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Hoodwink awoke.

He floated in water, like in the dream.

He could see in all directions at once, like in the dream.

360-degrees of horror.

Small particles passed in and out of his flesh. His hands were tentacles. His legs, suckers. His torso, a bell-shaped, glowing mass. He had a tail. Fleshy cords moored him in place.

Around him floated other forms just like him, secured in place by similar moorings to long, horizontal tubes. Their bodies glowed, a thousand forms giving light to the otherwise lightless waters.

A telepathic message voiced in his mind then, a rapid series of moans and clicks that he shouldn't have understood, but he did.

Welcome to the real world, Hoodwink.

He screamed.

PART 2

A SECOND CHANCE

CHAPTER ONE

Ari sat by the frosty window, and sipped rosemary tea with shaking hands. She stared at the snow-covered street outside, and contemplated a life that was nearing its end.

She was only twenty-nine years old, though she looked ninety-nine. Vitra had ravaged her body, sucked away her youth, leaving a shriveled shell. Like all Users, she was destined to flare blindingly bright in life, only to burn out all too soon.

Ten years had passed since Hoodwink had gone. Somehow he'd gotten his message through. Somehow he'd passed the Forever Gate and communicated with the gols. He'd become legendary among the Users for it.

But the contact had proven disastrous. The gols used the opportunity to lay a trap, and almost every last User had died. Only Ari and Leader survived.

She was Leader now. In those ten years, she'd relaunched the group, and given everything she had to them. Body. Mind. *Soul.* For what? It hadn't mattered. She hadn't changed a thing. The world was still dying and there was nothing she could do about it. The snowstorms worsened, the cold became colder. More and more of the gols fell victim to the mind plague. And then

there was The Drop, a relatively recent phenomenon that involved human beings dropping dead for no apparent reason. Not just one at a time, mind, but hundreds throughout the city. Men, women and children. Young and old. It didn't matter who you were, or what you were doing, you weren't immune to The Drop. If you don't watch out, The Drop's going to get you. Don't do any wrong, or The Drop'll have ya. The Drop. The Drop. The Drop.

Society was falling apart. Despite her best efforts. Despite her attempts to seize power from Jeremy, the mayor.

Jeremy.

She'd had to leave him, seven years ago, when it became too obvious she was a User, and aging at a rate far faster than normal. Jeremy hadn't seemed all that disappointed. He'd taken another wife soon thereafter, apparently glad to replace her with a young, beautiful wife.

Beauty. It'd been a curse, in her youth. Suitors had pursued her relentlessly, never granting her peace. Jeremy had protected her through it all, and only he won her heart in the end. He was—no, those were false memories. Just as most of her personality had been false, fashioned specifically for the marriage. Her knowledge of poetry, music, and painting. Her comprehension of politics, social intelligence, and manipulation. Her skills in the bedroom. She was programmed—*revised*—to be his perfect mate.

Only her political talents were still of some use. The remaining skills? Utter chaff. She had no piano to play. No canvas to paint. No one cared about her poetry. And no one would make love to her.

She was alone in this tiny shack of a house, which was a pittance compared to the luxury she had been used to, and her only contact with the outside world was through the furtive missives sent to the New Users. That and the human nurse who visited once a day to bathe her and prepare her meals. Sometimes she confused him for Jeremy, and even addressed him "Mayor." The nurse always humored her, saying "yes Ari" to most everything she said. Because of that, occasionally she played tricks on him, or told him terrible swear words involving her most intimate body parts to see how he'd react, but the response was always the same. "Yes Ari."

She set down her cup angrily. *Yes Ari.* How she despised that patronizing nurse. Didn't he understand the power she could wield? Didn't he realize that she could vaporize him with a thought? She'd grown vast in power these past ten years. She was one of the strongest Users, despite her outward appearance, and vitra literally stormed within her.

Her tea had grown cold. She allowed electricity to spark from her fingertips, and instantly the liquid boiled. She took a tentative sip. Ah, much better. She remembered a time when hot tea scalded her tongue. These days it was the only thing she could drink—everything else felt cold. It was getting

so very hard to keep warm at her age. So very hard.

But I'm not that old! a part of her shouted. All she had to do was look at the liver spots on her trembling hands. *Oh yes you are.*

A hurried knock came at the front door and she almost dropped the cup.

"I'm coming! I'm coming!" She crankily grabbed her cane, and steeled herself for what would come. She stood all at once, and flinched at the agony in her left knee. Something always hurt these days. Her left knee. Her right shoulder. Her lower back. She massaged electricity into the knee, and it helped, a little.

The knocking at the front door became more frantic.

"*I said I was coming!*" She began the long journey to the door. The shack was small, but so was her stride, and she crossed the room step by tiny step. She wondered who was bothering her this morning. The nurse wasn't scheduled to visit for another three hours.

She finally reached the door, and paused a moment, not at all looking forward to the cold that would come.

The blasted fool outside the door knocked again, and she opened the door irritably. A wave of frigid air assailed her.

Damn this cold!

Shivering, she recognized Jackson, a messenger who'd joined the New

Users a year ago. He was the highly-connected cousin of the mayor. A little on the dumb side.

"What is it?" Her breath misted. "Why have you come here in broad daylight? Were you followed?" She glanced at the snowy street behind him. There were only a few people about. Human.

"Leader Ari!" Jackson bowed excitedly.

"Yes yes." Ari waved a dismissive hand. "Spare me the formalities and answer the question damn you."

Jackson bounced on his heels rather exuberantly. "He's done it. He's really done it. He's crossed back!"

"Who's crossed back? Speak plainly, idiot!" Old age had made her a little crabby, she had to admit. That, and the irrepressible cold.

The man offered her an open journal.

Ari no longer noticed the man, nor the breath misting between them, nor even the cold. All of her attention was on that diary, which she recognized immediately. It was the diary that was twin to the one Hoodwink had taken with him, a diary rigged to instantly reflect any words written in his copy. It was the diary that was kept on display in the New User headquarters deep underground, reverently left open to the page of Hoodwink's last missive ten years ago. It was the diary she'd sat beside for weeks after he'd gone, futilely waiting for a message from her father, a message that never

came.

Something new was written beneath the last entry, in Hoodwink's own handwriting. A single sentence:

Told you I'd come back.

CHAPTER TWO

Ari snatched the book from Jackson and slammed the door. She made the long return journey to her spot by the window and plunked herself down in the chair.

Her eyes drifted to the bookshelf hammered into the wall by the window, a shelf whose tomes had made her laugh and cry throughout the lonely nights. Some of those books had kept her warm, filling her mind with visions of sandy, tropical islands teeming with palm trees and coconuts. Others had only made her pin-prick cold. Much like the book she held now in her lap.

Told you I'd come back.

Jeremy had laid an intricate trap for her. Of that she had no doubt. He must have discovered his cousin Jackson was one of the Users, and he'd arranged for him to deliver the book in a bid to reveal her hiding place.

That meant the gols were coming.

She was too tired to run. She'd run at first, those seven years ago. Constantly moving from place to place. But then five years ago she went into permanent hiding because she just couldn't run anymore, and she swore then that if she were discovered, she'd make her last stand here.

She renewed that promise now, swearing to go down in a storm of glory that would be talked about among the New Users for years. Well, for as long as this fragile society lasted, anyway.

A strange sense of peace came over her, now that the choice to stay was made, and the book in her lap didn't feel so cold, nor so heavy. She stretched her fingers and let her gaze return to the snowy street outside, and she waited, conserving her charge, readying herself for one final hurrah.

After a time, she heard the jangle of keys in the door.

The time to die had come.

She let the current flow through her body, allowed it to crisscross her skin in deadly waves. She looked like a harmless little old lady, she was sure.

But the first gol, or man, to touch this little old lady would be utterly incinerated.

CHAPTER THREE

Ari heard the door open and close behind her. Then the footfalls came. Muted. Cautious. She couldn't tell how many intruders had entered. Two. Three? If that was so, the gols had grossly underestimated her.

She stoked the charge inside her, and the air above her skin began to crackle with a subtle hint of energy.

"Hello Ari," Nurse Richard said.

Those words saved his life—Ari released the charge a split second before Richard's fingers wrapped around her upper arm.

"Time for your bath," Richard said.

Ari slumped in relief. Not yet, then.

Not yet.

She set aside the diary. "Why so early today?"

Richard shrugged. "I'm here at the usual time."

Had she really whiled away the entire morning already?

Richard glanced at the book, nosy as always. "What were you reading?" His features were angular and harsh, his eyes close-set.

She bared her teeth in a smile. "A pleasant fiction about a dead man who returns to life ten years after abandoning his daughter."

Ari numbly let the nurse lead her from the main chamber to the only other room in the shack, a room that was more a closet than anything else. Without comment, Richard emptied her chamber pot into the sack he'd brought along for the purpose. Normally the residents of Luckdown District just dumped their excretions out the window, but over time disgusting brown stalagmites formed along the walls, half buried in the snow. She hated that. A lot of people liked it, unfortunately. Take her neighbors. They were always talking about how solid their walls of wattle-and-shit were. At least they weren't nosy, though they had to wonder how she could afford a nurse. As did others in the neighborhood apparently—a robber tried to steal from her, once. She'd left him with a seriously blistered hand, and a message for other aspiring thieves—this house was off-limits.

Richard undressed her, and lowered her into the small tub that took up half the room. As usual, he'd brought along a water bladder. She didn't have a fireplace, so he boiled the water before coming, and by the time he reached here the contents had always cooled to a pleasant lukewarm. Pleasant or no, today she shivered for the entire session. Normally she would've made some crude joke at least once, but she wasn't in the mood. Not today. She kept expecting gols to come rushing inside. If they did come, she supposed there was one plus to being caught with her pants down like this—the water would amplify her charge.

Afterward, she dressed, and Richard set out her meal. Today it was previously cooked chicken, now cold, with hard bread on the side. She hated cold chicken. When Richard glanced away, distracted by the distant screaming of one of the neighbors, she unleashed a trickle of electricity into the meat. There, much better.

"Is everything all right Ari?" Richard said.

She chewed on, just as if he'd said nothing. *Chewed*. Her teeth were the one thing the ravages of vitra had left intact, thankfully.

At last she deigned to answer him. "Everything's just fine." She glanced at the doorway.

"There," Richard said. "You did it again."

"What?" She set down the chicken. "Well speak up you blathering idiot! I may be old, but I won't stand for patronizing."

Richard merely smiled. "Why do you keep looking at the door?"

"The door. I—" Why indeed? If the gols were going to come, they would have arrived already. What was Jeremy's game?

They planned to come in the night, no doubt, and collar her while she slept. That was the best way to capture a User. Without casualties, anyway. Well she'd be damned if she let herself go out that way. If she was to die, she was going to do it on her own terms. Uncollared and free.

She was sick of Jeremy playing with her.

"Richard," she said. "Would you help me with something?"

"That's what you pay me for, dear Ari," Richard said.

She grated her teeth at his patronizing tone. "I want to go for a walk."

He raised his eyebrows and stared at her for a moment, then he smiled that infuriating smile of his. "As you wish, dear Ari."

And so he helped her dress. Normally she put on a threadbare jacket and moth-ridden scarf so as not to attract attention, but today she donned her fur cloak, fur cap, and fur boots, clothes reserved for special occasions only.

Dying was a special occasion.

Richard led her out into the raw cold. She walked across the snowpack with one hand clenching his, and the other clenching her cane.

She saw the Forever Gate in the distance, looming over the city like an indomitable titan. She'd always regretted that she hadn't climbed the Gate to search for her father. She should have gone while she was still young in body. She should have abandoned the Users, and let the previous Leader rebuild the group on his own. Likely there'd be no Users today if she'd done that, she had to remind herself. Regret and second guesses were dark pits she'd struggled against her entire life. Very soon she'd never know those pits again. A comfort, though a small one.

She saw a small child nearby. A little girl, huddling in the cold. She paused beside the child, and looked down at those weary, sad eyes.

"Ah to hell with it." She took off her fur cloak, and before she could change her mind, dumped it in the child's lap.

The little girl looked at her prize in disbelief, and then took off with it at a run.

If Ari was cold before, now she was positively frigid.

"Why'd you do that?" Richard said.

"Just shut-up and walk with me." She could hardly talk for her chattering teeth.

A group of ten gols in the armor of the city guard stood in the square ahead. All of them were looking at her. None of them seemed to have the slobbering faces that marked those with the gol mind disease.

She filled herself with vitra, and steered Richard toward the group.

"What's your game, Ari?" Richard said.

"What, no *dear* before my name this time?" The vitra flowed through her veins and filled her with warmth. She dragged Richard onward, and she could feel him struggling to pull her away. Likely he was surprised by her strength. It was an illusion of course. Little bursts of strategically-placed electricity that weakened his muscles in just the right places, at just the right times. That, and the gentle boost the flowing current gave to her own strength.

"Hello *gentle* men," Ari said to the gols. She smiled a sweet,

grandmotherly smile. "Lounging around in the cold, spying on the citizens, are we?"

She pushed Richard away, and before any of the guards could answer, she attacked with everything she had.

Bolts of lightning flashed from her fingertips. Tendrils of energy sparked from her hair. Surely she looked a demon arisen from the nine hells, born into this world to wreak vengeance upon those who would collar humankind. In moments, all that remained of the ten gols were cinder blocks and charred bodies. Those all-too-human faces wore expressions of shock and disbelief.

When you used massive quantities of vitra like that, you drew the city guards by the score. Small amounts of vitra were virtually undetectable, and you could even get away with medium quantities if gols were far away. But for what she just used, why, guards would come calling from all quarters of the city.

And though she'd used up her entire charge in that attack, she began to laugh.

Let them come.

She was ready to die. More than ready.

But then she had a thought. What if they recognized that she had no charge left? What if they collared her instead of killing her? No. No. She

couldn't let them take her.

She surveyed the square in a panic. She could still run. It didn't have to end like this. A few human bystanders stared at her in horror, but when she met their gaze, they ran off. None of them would follow her. And the nearest gol barracks were still a ways distant. Yes, she could make it.

But she needed Richard's help now more than ever. "Richard? Where are you, you imbecile! We have to get out of here!"

In answer, a fist slammed into her ribs, and she collapsed to the snow.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ari nearly blacked out when she struck the hard snowpack. Her hip and ribs ached something nasty. So cold. So very cold. Why had she given up her fur cloak?

"You're a User!" Richard kicked her now in those same ribs, and she felt the age-brittle bones crack. *No,* she wanted to say. *You're killing me!* But no voice would come to her. Didn't she just want to die a few moments ago? Yes, but she wanted to fall in battle, not to some idiot nurse beating her to death.

She tried vainly to reach the spark inside her, hoping the pain would ignite something within, but she had nothing left.

She would've laughed again, if she could.

Ari, the great Leader of the New Users, kicked to death by her own nurse.

Richard rammed his boot into her ribs still again. More cracks.

"You fool," she finally managed through the pain. "They'll kill you too when they come." Would he believe her deception?

Richard raised his boot to kick her a third time, but hesitated.

She heard it then. The crunch of approaching boots. She tried to lift

her head, but she couldn't see who was coming, not from where she lay.

Richard backed away. "I don't know this woman," she heard him say.

Her heart sank. So the gols were here already. She'd be collared, and jailed, and would die rotting in the dungeon.

This was the end.

She relaxed her neck muscles. She didn't feel so cold anymore. No. The warmth of sleep beckoned. The warmth of oblivion.

The newcomer strode right up to Richard and planted a fist squarely in his jaw. Richard fell backward in the snow.

"Run," the newcomer said to Richard.

Richard got up and stumbled backward a few paces, then he turned around and hightailed it out of there.

The newcomer knelt beside Ari.

"Are you all right?" He said.

She looked up groggily. It must be a dream.

The newcomer furrowed his brow, and he gently explored her ribs with one hand.

She moaned. The pain of his touch brought her away from the edge, and the cold crept back with a vengeance. She shivered uncontrollably.

"We'll have to heal that before we can go on," he said.

She stared at him, shivering. So many words filled her mind, but her

chattering teeth managed to form just one. "You."

"Nice to see you too, Ari, it is. You'll have to thank your friend Jackson for me later. Led me right to you, though he didn't know it. I was going to drop in later, when I was sure you were alone. Shame that you've burned the pals I brought, though. I leave my escort for a minute and look what you go and do. If only you knew how much convincing it took to bring them along." He glanced over his shoulder at the charred bodies and sighed. "Well, there's nothing for it now. Just the two of us, then. We don't have much time."

It was him all right. He hadn't aged a day, and in fact he seemed younger than the last time she saw him, with not a trace of gray in his hair, nor a wrinkle on his face. He looked a nobleman in those red boots and black pants, topped by that green tunic. An odd costume to wear in the heart of winter, to be sure. Without a coat and gloves, he should have been shivering, but the cold didn't touch him.

There was something else wrong. The clothes fit him too tightly, just as if each piece was melded into the skin and could never be taken off. Worse, there was a symbol stamped into the tunic, a symbol Ari didn't recognize.

The number 1000.

Hoodwink was a gol.

CHAPTER FIVE

The heat of rage banished any cold she might have felt.

"Where have you been all these years you hoodwinking bastard?" Ari felt the tears coming. It was almost easier to believe this was some trick of Jeremy's. Easier than thinking Hoodwink had abandoned her for ten years and returned as a gol, of all things. "I thought you were dead. All this time. Dead."

"Ari," Hoodwink said, with a gentleness that melted her old, rigid heart. "I tried. Really, I tried."

He tore open the side of her sweater and his jaw clenched angrily when he saw her ribs. "I should've killed that bastard." He reached into a pocket and fetched a shard. The five appendages throbbed eerily. She was always reminded of a frozen starfish whenever she saw those crystalline life forms. "You'll have to use your own charge."

"I don't—" She winced at the pain in her ribs. "I don't have any left."

"You have to try," Hoodwink said. "Can you do that for me, Ari?"

Her father was back. *Her father*. She nodded quickly. "I'll do what I can."

She glanced down at the shard. The creature felt like ice against her

skin, and it only added to her uncontrollable shivering. She took two deep breaths, and focused.

But the spark was nowhere to be found inside her.

"I can't," she said. "What about you?" He had no collar that she could see.

Hoodwink shook his head. "Gols don't have the ability. Most of them, anyway."

Gols. Her father had become a gol. She still couldn't believe it.

She heard the distant trudge of boots in the snow. The first wave of guards emerged at a run onto the far side of the square.

"Ari," Hoodwink said. "We can't let them see the shard."

Yes. And the damn thing wouldn't come off once you let it touch your skin.

"Well cover it then!" she said.

"You don't get it, you don't," he said. "Once a shard grabs you, it's like a town crier to us gols. It's practically glowing to my eyes. Doesn't matter how much you cover it. Trust me, we have to melt the thing! And now!"

She gritted her teeth, and rested her fingers on the shard. She closed her eyes and reached into herself, searching, roving for the power that had warmed her all these years.

But it was spent.

She hadn't a glimmer left.

She shook her head. She was beginning to feel sleepy again. It would be so easy to close her eyes. "I'm done, Hoodwink. I'm sorry. I'm old and spent. I just, I want to sleep. Go. Leave me here."

He stared at her, the disbelief plain on his face, then he flashed that easy smile she remembered so well. "I'll do nothing like that, I won't."

The guards were closing.

"It's not like my Ari to give up like that. And I won't let her." Hoodwink flung one of her arms around his neck, and raised her upper body. She started to protest, but then the pain of what he just did reached her, and fresh excruciation pulsed through her torso. She wasn't sure what stung more, the pain, or her father's words.

It's not like my Ari to give up like that.

He was right. She wasn't a quitter.

She'd prove it to him.

She reached again.

Still nothing.

It was hopeless.

She *was* a quitter. A quitter and a failure.

And she was going to die.

CHAPTER SIX

Ari glanced at the guards in defeat. The gols were almost upon them. She felt Hoodwink tighten his grip.

And then she noticed something.

The pain, pulsing through her torso, was like a current passing through her, signaling agony upward from the chest and into the brain. That current fanned the tiniest of sparks in the recesses of her mind, and if she listened, really listened, she could almost hear it calling to her.

She reached for that spark, fumbled for it, but it slipped from her grasp.

She reached again.

Got it.

She let a trickle of electricity, all she could manage, flow from the spark and into the shard.

That was all it took. The crystalline life form warmed pleasantly, and the heat spread outward from her ribs. The pain immediately lessened, and then faded entirely.

Hoodwink glanced down in shock as the shard melted into her. And then he smiled fondly. "That's my Ari."

"They don't call me... the greatest User... for nothing," she said, panting.

Hoodwink helped her to her feet, and the guards approached, halting in a semicircle around them. Many of them stared uncertainly at the number on Hoodwink's chest.

Ari knew that if Hoodwink spoke, the ruse would be up. No gol talked like he did.

She feigned a sob. "A man killed them." She intentionally fingered the fake collar around her neck. "A lightning-shooting hooligan." She indicated the direction Richard had escaped. "He ran that way."

The gols didn't move. They gave no indication they'd even heard her. Their eyes were on Hoodwink. More than a few of them were slobbering.

"She speaks the truth." Hoodwink's words and manner had changed entirely. He spoke like a man who expected to be obeyed. "The User flees to the south. Pursue the krub. Now!"

The gols didn't even hesitate. They made off at a run in the direction Richard had gone.

"They'll kill him if they catch him," Ari said.

Hoodwink scowled. "Bastard deserves it for what he did to you."

She regarded him warily, not sure she knew who he was anymore. Not sure she knew who she herself was. "How did you do that anyway?"

"Do what? Oh. Make them run, you mean. Well, sometimes the convincing works right well. The numbers on my suit trick them, make them think I'm a gol somebody. And if I believe I'm a gol somebody myself, well, you know what they say—if he looks like a somebody, talks like a somebody, well he must *be* a somebody."

Ari gazed at the numbers on his chest. "What does it mean?"

"Eight."

She raised an eyebrow. "Eight."

"My gol name." He wrapped his free hand around her waist. "Nothing you need concern yourself with for now. We're going back to your house." He glanced at the snowpack around her. "Where's your coat? Or cloak?"

"Don't ask."

She'd forgotten the cold until he mentioned the cloak, and now she felt it keenly. She snuggled against Hoodwink like a little girl. Though the shard had healed her ribs, it had done nothing for the pain in her knee, which flared up again, and she limped worse than ever.

"Everyone's going to think I'm your mother," she said in that cranky tone of hers. Everything she said sounded cranky these days.

"Good." He grinned. Of all the things about her father, she remembered his grin the most fondly. It comforted her. "Then our disguise is complete. No one'd ever suspect the leader of the New Users is the mother of

a gol."

"Yes," she said, the sarcasm oozing. "And a fine leader she is. In her dotage." She looked at him. "How did you become a gol?"

He frowned, saying nothing. Another guard patrol jogged past. That signaled the end of the conversation, apparently.

A short while later Ari was back inside her tiny home, seated by the frosted window, a fresh cup of tea in hand, the door sealed up against the cold, Hoodwink sitting in the chair across from her. She took a deep sip, then rested the cup on her leg. Her knee had stopped acting up, at least.

Hoodwink. She stared at him, at a loss for words. He seemed to be waiting for her to speak first.

"I never thought this day would come," she said at last. "The day you returned from beyond the Gate. From beyond death."

"So you knew, then." Hoodwink nodded absently. "That passing the Gate would kill me. And you let me go anyway."

She stared at him, the indignation rising inside her. "Now just a minute young man—" Young man? What was she thinking? She cleared her throat, and tried again. Not so cranky this time. "Just hold on... Hoodwink. I didn't know that crossing the Gate would kill you. There was a chance you'd fall during the climb, true enough. And that the gols on the other side would greet you with swords. But killed just for crossing? I didn't know. How could

I? Besides, if I recall, you *did* accept the risk."

Yes. He'd accepted the risk to save her. *Her*. Why was she hiding her true feelings like this? Was it the indignation she felt over his tone? Partially. No, truth was, she'd hardened over the years. She'd had to surround herself with a shell of iron as Leader of the New Users. It was the only way to protect herself.

"Oh the gols on the other side greeted me with swords all right," Hoodwink said. "But maybe not in the way you think. Tell me something, just what do you believe is on the Outside? What notes did you get back from the Users who went before me?"

She scratched her head vigorously. Her scalp could really itch sometimes. Another mark of old age, she supposed. "Only some gibberish about sand, and giant skeletons."

"That's outside the city walls, sure," Hoodwink said. "But I mean the real Outside."

She set aside her tea, and regarded him warily. "The real Outside? I don't— come on, out with it."

He smiled enigmatically. "The Outside beyond the Outside."

She shook her head. "Now you've really lost me, dad."

He laughed, and looked away. "This feels wrong somehow, doesn't it? You calling me dad. Grandson might be more appropriate."

She smiled coldly. "So even you would patronize me?"

The humor left him. "No Ari. That's not what I meant, not at all." He stood, and walked to the bookshelf hammered into the wall. He pulled out a volume. *Ubik*, by Philip K. Dick. One of her favorites. He flipped through the tome. "Look, the gols need our help, but their inner workings won't allow them to accept it. This isn't news to you. It's what the old Leader wanted ten years ago. It's what you want. Well, jump up and down for joy, Ari, because I've found a way to do it."

She stared at him a moment. "How?"

"I'll get into that later. For now all you need to know is, well, to succeed I need someone on the Inside who can track the gols, and keep me in the loop on how well the changes I've planned for them take. Someone who can get to the Control Room in the mayor's office. Someone who knows the halls of his house. I want you to be that someone. But first we need to fix up your body."

She frowned. "Someone on the Inside? What are you talking about? *Inside* the mayor's house?"

He smiled briefly—an impatient smile, she thought—and returned the book to the shelf. He strode to the stand-up mirror by the dusty make-up desk, and with a dramatic flourish he removed the white blanket that covered it.

"There are levels of the mind." He had his back to her, and his reflection spoke from the mirror's depths. "As different from this one as ice to stone. You need to go up a level before you'll know what we're facing." He glanced over his shoulder at her. "Tell me, Ari. What would you give to have your youth back? Your beauty?"

CHAPTER SEVEN

"My youth?" That piqued Ari's interest, which of course he must have known it would. Who wouldn't want their youth back?

She answered slowly. "I would give quite a lot. But, tell me, what's the price? And don't tell me there isn't one. There's always a price. Especially for something so valuable."

"Oh there's a price all right," Hoodwink said. "And I wouldn't dare tell you differently."

Ari tapped her foot impatiently. "So what is it?"

"Your innocence, mostly. You'll learn the truth the other Leader thought he knew, but didn't."

Her eyes focused on the numbers on his chest. "Will I become a gol, like you?"

His face became grave. "When you come back, yes. But you'll be safe from the mind disease."

"And will I lose vitra?"

He nodded. "Yes."

She sighed. Always a price.

"But there are other powers you can tap into," Hoodwink added

hastily. "I swear it's true."

Her gaze drifted to the window. "I've sat in this same chair every day for the past two years, stared out at the same snowy street. A recluse, waiting to die alone."

"Come back with me, Ari." He strode to her, and held out his hands. "Come back and be young again. Cross the Forever Gate with me."

She grunted dubiously. "How? I can't climb it, not in my condition."

"The Forever Gate isn't the wall that hugs the city. It's a token for crossing over to the other side of life. For jumping up a level of the mind. It can be crossed in two ways. The first is by dying. Die, and you'll find yourself in the Outside. That way is a bit of a blow to the body though, and I don't suggest it. A lot of people die for real. Definitely don't want that." He turned toward the mirror, and spoke to his reflection. "The second way is by denying reality. You just refuse it. It's where you know, deep inside, that none of this is real. That your heart beats in a far-off place. That your thinking comes and goes in a mind that lives on the Outside." He smiled at his reflection. "It helps to have a symbol. Something to focus on. I like to use a mirror."

He extended a palm toward her. "So? Have you made your choice?"

She took his fingers.

Hoodwink helped her to the mirror. She hadn't looked at her reflection

in so long. Was she really so old? So ugly? Already?

"Place your hand on the mirror," Hoodwink said.

She did so, joining her hand to its reflected twin.

"You know what you see in the mirror is an illusion, right?" Hoodwink said. "A copy?"

"Sure," Ari said.

"Okay. So what if I told you that *you* were the illusion, and the person in the mirror was the real one?"

"What?" Ari glanced at him. "That's absurd."

"Maybe. But it's not so absurd. Not when you know the truth. Look in the mirror. Good. Believe that the world you see there, past your fingers, is the real world. Believe that the person you see there is the *real* you, and that the person standing *here* is the copy. That's the key to all this. See the mirror for the illusion it shows you to be."

She cocked an eyebrow, unable to keep from smiling. When she saw that Hoodwink was dead serious, she bit her lip, and concentrated on her reflection. *I'm the copy.* Every gesture, no matter how subtle, was played back to her in the way that mirrors did. The reflection was obviously the copy, not her.

At last she couldn't take it and erupted in a haggard giggle. "I feel like a fool! This is silly. Of course my reflection is the illusion, and not the other

way around."

Hoodwink lifted an eyebrow. "So you're sure that the idea for each action starts with you, and not the person in the mirror?"

She tapped her foot irritably. "I am."

"How do you know the old woman you see there isn't staring back at a mirror on her own side, believing for all the world that you're the one copying *her*?"

Ari opened her mouth, but didn't know what to say to that. Of course it was impossible, but Hoodwink was right, she couldn't know for sure. There were few certainties in this world.

"That's what I thought," Hoodwink said. "Now look back to the mirror."

She did.

"Let your eyes lose focus. Stare past yourself, into the copy of the room. Gaze at your bookshelf, or out the window, at the street beyond. Let the walls of reality tumble down."

Ari gazed intently into the mirror. She focused on the window beside the bookshelf, and stared, unblinking, at the reflected street beyond. After some moments, she no longer felt like she gazed at a reflection at all, but the real world. It was only when her eyes drifted back to her own image that the illusion fell apart, and so she concentrated on the window and nothing else.

Her thoughts wandered as the moments dragged on, and again her eyes were drawn to her own reflection. She pretended her image was a part of her, and that together they formed the twin halves of some unified whole, a conscious entity more than the sum of its parts.

Gazing at her trembling hand, she realized she couldn't tell if the hand in the mirror originated the motion first, or her own hand. And when she blinked, was it the image that blinked first, a split-second before her? Or was it she?

Was it really possible that none of this was real? That the mirror, herself, the floor she stood on, the very air she breathed, was all illusion? Was she merely the reflection of some distant being, connected to this body by thin strings that existed in dimensions she couldn't see? The puppet of an invisible puppeteer?

She leaned forward, steadily increasing the pressure she applied to the mirror. Her image was definitely blinking its eyes first, now, and she was the one playing catch-up.

I'm an illusion! I've been tricked my entire life!

It felt like the hand in the mirror pushed back. She should have been shocked. Instead, she felt outraged.

Outraged at the lie.

Without warning the surface gave and swallowed her arm up to the

elbow. Her reflection stared back in mock disbelief. She tried to pull the hand away, but it was stuck, just as if she'd pressed it into some thick sludge. There was no way to go but forward—into the mirror.

She glanced around frantically. "Hoodwink!"

But he was gone.

She knew she had to press on, but she couldn't bring herself to. Hadn't Hoodwink said that passing through the Forever Gate was the same as death? If that was true, wasn't she killing herself by doing this?

She tugged and tugged, but couldn't wrest her arm free. Exhaustion began to seep into her limbs.

Come back and be young again.

Her heart raced in her chest. Was she really going to go through with this?

Be young again!

Hoodwink wouldn't lie to her. Would he?

Be young.

She surrendered. She slid her arm further into the unseen sludge. The mirror ate her flesh greedily.

Young...

Her face was almost touching the surface now, and she was eye-to-eye with her reflection.

"Be young," she said.

Without warning an invisible hand grabbed her from the other side and yanked her through.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Ari was enveloped in gluey sludge. Sap, mud, mucus, whatever it was, it hampered her every movement. She couldn't open her eyes. Her ears were plugged. She tried to hold her breathe against the sludge, but she realized her lungs were already full of the stuff. She was drowning in it.

The hand still grasped her firmly, and continued to pull, though the grip didn't feel solid, just as if it clutched her through some kind of membrane. Panicking, she tried to break free of its hold, but then the membrane gave. She slid through an ever-expanding orifice and smashed into a hard surface with a clang. She banged her knee pretty bad. The sludge piled down on top of her.

She hacked the mucilage from her lungs, feeling for all the world like she was dying. Dying might have been preferable to the burning pain she felt in her throat and lungs just then. She expected to black out from lack of air, but her vision remained clear, and her mind lucid through it all. Her fingers tightened reflexively, and wrapped around the cold bars beneath her. Some kind of grill, a part of her mind noted.

She wasn't sure how long she lay there, hacking away, but eventually the sludge seemed mostly expunged from her lungs, and she gave two long,

painful inhales. After that, she was able to breathe evenly, with only a few coughs here and there. Her lungs still burned though, like she'd run a marathon.

She released the grill, wiped the guck from her eyes, and opened her lids after much blinking and shedding of tears.

"It's a bit upsetting at first isn't it? Shit from one world, to the next. But you'll get over it, you will." Hoodwink towered above her. The nobleman outfit was gone, replaced by a tight blue uniform that sheathed him from neck to toe. The red boots had become black, the hair, ash gray. He held a strange metallic clamp in his right hand, one that had small, flashing blue and green lights on it. He followed her gaze to the clamp. "My own little access port. Wireless, mind. But you wouldn't know what that means yet, would you?" He dropped the clamp into the duffel bag beside him, then knelt and lifted her upper body from the floor. "Welcome to the Outside, my daughter." His face looked older than before. About the same as she remembered it ten years ago. His eyes crinkled as he grinned.

"I'm too old for this." Ari slurred the words, just as if she'd never used her tongue her entire life.

"Are you really?" Hoodwink glanced down at her naked body.

Ari followed his gaze. She couldn't remember ever looking so gaunt. Her arms and legs were all elbows and knees. She ran two fingers along her

side. Every rib protruded. Her breasts were deflated pockets. Her hands were all knuckles and bones. But the wrinkles were gone from her hands, that was true. As were the liver spots.

She shook her head. "Not old then. But definitely not beautiful. And why do I talk like thith?" Her voice repulsed her.

Hoodwink chuckled. "We'll fatten you up, don't worry. Get you nice and plump. And you'll be talking like your old self in no time."

She realized something else, and slumped.

Hoodwink raised his eyebrows, and he seemed concerned. "What's wrong?"

"I guess I didn't really believe it. I didn't really understand. The spark." She looked up at him. "The spark's gone. Ripped away."

"Part of the price." Hoodwink said. "Vitra never existed in the first place. People never evolved electrical powers. It's only part of the program, on the Inside. We'll set you up real good when we send you back though. Promise." His eyes twinkled, but she didn't feel all that reassured. She couldn't, not after what had become of her body.

He lowered her to the floor and dug into that duffel bag of his. He pulled out a pair of scissors.

"You're breathing on your own now, so we can snip this." He lifted the scissors to her belly. "Won't hurt a bit."

"What—" She looked down, and watched as he cut away the umbilical cord that jutted from her belly. He was right, she felt nothing. When he was done, he expertly knotted the severed end. It only hurt when he bent the cord a little too far, and she felt the pain deep in her belly. But she kept a straight face. She'd known worse pain.

"You've done this before," Ari said. "Besides the fact I have *an umbilical cord in my stomach*!" She flexed her lips—the corners of her mouth were getting sore from talking.

Hoodwink patted her head fatherly-like, then he wiped the scissors on his knee and returned them to the duffel bag. "Think of this as your real birth. From the intestines of the old world to the—"

"Yes Hoodwink, I get the picture." She sat up on those bony elbows, and glanced at the deflated pod she'd emerged from. There were other pods beside it, cylindrical, with human shapes inside them. Slime still dripped from her own pod, and she followed the guck downward with her eyes, and watched the translucent, glistening substance ooze past the gaps in the floor. She squinted, looking beyond the grill that was the floor, and she saw another corridor, just like this one, filled with similar pods. And below that corridor, another one.

"Don't look too long." Hoodwink said. "It's a bit like gazing upon a mirror in a mirror."

"You have a thing for mirrors don't you?" Ari said distractedly. "Where are we?"

"A ship of some kind, far as I can tell."

"A ship." She tried to stand, but couldn't. Her legs were a withered mess. And she thought being old was bad.

"Easy now. You've no muscle to stand. You'll find your arms are a little stronger than your legs, since they move from time to time in the pod-dream. The hands clench and unclench, and whatnot. But your legs, well, other than the occasional kick, you haven't used them your entire life."

Hoodwink wiped the sludge from her body with a towel, then grabbed a blue uniform from the duffel bag and tossed it to her. "Put this on."

The full body suit he gave her seemed much the same as his, with a single zipper running along the back from nape to bum. When it became clear that she wouldn't be able to slide into the thing on her own, not while sitting on the floor, Hoodwink bounded to her side. She felt no chagrin at being naked in front of her father. It may as well have been Nurse Richard helping her.

Hoodwink sealed the zipper, and as the suit closed, the remnants of her umbilical cord folded painfully against her stomach. She bit her lip, taking the pain. Hoodwink slid two black boots onto her feet, then retrieved a set of long metallic braces from his duffel bag. "I remember a time not so

long ago when you were the one handing me toys from a duffel bag. Here." He clamped the braces around each of her legs. "These will help until you have the strength to walk on your own."

She tried standing again. The braces immediately came to life and she stood in a whir of gyrating parts. She almost lost her balance when she was fully upright, and she had to grab onto Hoodwink for a moment.

"That's the way," he said. "That's the way."

When she released him and stood on her own, Hoodwink positively beamed. He looked her up and down. "Looking quite dapper, you are! My shit and image."

She frowned. "Dapper's what you call *men*. And don't you mean *spit* and image?"

"That's right! Been hanging around blasted juveniles too long." His face seemed a little flushed, as if he were embarrassed, and he masked it by quickly glancing both ways down the corridor. "Come on then. We don't have all that much time. A sentry golem will loop by here soon. I was lucky it didn't get me while I was in with you. They come and pick up the dead, or those who wake-up too early. Some of them make a sport of it, and this is their hunting ground."

"On this so-called ship," Ari said.

He nodded absently, scooped the duffel bag over one shoulder, and let

her hook a hand around his neck. He slid the other hand around her waist. She had so many questions, but didn't know what to ask first. Didn't know if she even *wanted* to ask them.

So she let him lead the way in silence. Her weak legs obeyed, the tiny parts in the braces whirring away. Her knee still throbbed from the impact with the floor, but it was already getting better. If she had been in that old body of hers, the pain would have lasted for days.

Glowing white slabs were set in the ceiling, and illuminated walls lined with more of the translucent pods. She couldn't get over the fact that there were human shapes inside them, floating in the same sludge that had birthed her.

"There's so many of them," she said. "They're all from our city?"

"Was wondering when you'd ask about them," Hoodwink said. "They're from all the cities of humanity. Or those on the Inside, anyway."

"How many people?"

"I don't know," Hoodwink said. "Thousands. Tens of thousands. This place is one giant inn, except the travelers don't know they've checked-in, and they never wake up."

Just then a siren wailed to life. The white slabs in the ceiling dimmed, and a rotating beacon she hadn't noticed before began cutting a swathe of red along the corridor.

"Pick it up, Ari," Hoodwink said above the siren.

She felt her heart thump in her breast. "Why? What is it?"

"An attack." He tightened his grip on her waist, and doubled the pace. "Not safe in the halls during an attack!"

An incredible boom resounded and the corridor shook.

"What was that?" she said.

"That's the attack." Hoodwink dragged her along even faster. "It's been happening since I came to this place. The halls shake, and sometimes whole sections catch fire, killing everyone. And then the attack stops, just like that."

"Entire sections catch fire?" She glanced at Hoodwink. "What about the pods?"

"Fried."

Well, that explained why some people on the Inside suddenly dropped dead where they stood—The Drop.

Hoodwink was pulling a little too hard now, and his wrist dug into her side. "Let go let go." She retracted the arm she'd slung over his neck and wiggled out from her father's grip. "I can walk on my own."

"Okay, but keep up."

Another boom. The floor shook. "Who are the attackers?" she said, joining his side. She was panting. The mechanical braces helped, true, but her

body was still weak.

"The attackers?" Hoodwink spread his arms to steady himself against the latest tremor, and he almost fell into her. "I have an idea. But I can't tell you. Not yet. Your mind isn't ready."

She let him leave it at that. The two continued onward. Each segment of hall contained its own siren, and its own beacon, so that Ari and her father were constantly bombarded by wails and spinning red lights, in addition to those unending booms.

"Dad," she said, a thought coming to her. "How long have you been here?"

He pursed his lips, not slowing the pace. "Let's see. About ten months, I think."

"What? But you were gone *ten years*."

He smiled gently. "I know, Ari. Time passes faster on the Inside. It always does. At least for that level of the mind."

"*That* level of the mind?" She shook her head. "You make it sound like there's more than one Inside."

Hoodwink looked at her, and he seemed like he was about to tell her something, but a distant rumble shook the chamber, and he changed his mind.

"Is this the real world or not?" she said.

Hoodwink glanced over his shoulder. "Now's not the time, Ari." His

voice had a strange tightness to it. "We got one on our tail. Take a look, and meet the gols of the Outside."

She glanced back. At the far end of the corridor she saw a shadowy, boxlike figure. It nearly filled the entire dimensions of the hallway, but in the dim light she couldn't tell exactly what it was.

And then one of the rotating alarm beacons shined over the figure.

She gasped.

It was some kind of mechanical monster.

A steel barrel embossed with rectangles and symbols served as its torso. It rolled on treads. It had pincers for arms. She couldn't make out the face from here, but a devious red light shone where the forehead should've been.

Hoodwink grabbed her hand and pulled her onward.

Her father abruptly froze.

"What?" She glanced at him. "What is it? Why are you stopping?"

Behind, the monster closed. A terrible crash shook the chamber.

When the trembling faded, she followed Hoodwink's gaze, and instantly she understood why he'd stopped.

Ahead, another iron monster blocked the corridor.

CHAPTER NINE

The second iron monster bore down on them. It was a lot closer than the one behind, and Ari could see its features in their grim entirety. The head looked similar to a sword hilt with those curved cross-guards and that central, cylindrical haft. Beneath the red light at the top of the hilt, three glass disks reflected the corridor with cold indifference.

As she stared into those disks—the apparent eyes of the monstrosity—Ari decided that her father must live no matter what. He was too important. And she owed him her life for what he did those ten years ago when he climbed the Forever Gate in her place. She'd never been able to forgive herself for that. Never been able to thank him. Never been able to tell him she loved him.

She wouldn't make the same mistake again.

She'd lost her childhood memories of this man, but he was her father, *her father*. And that meant everything to her.

She dug deep within herself as she'd done at crucial times in the past, seeking bravery where there was hopelessness, and fortitude where there was weakness.

Her body didn't disappoint. She broke ahead, using those motorized

leg braces for all they were worth.

She didn't have lightning anymore.

But she had courage.

"Ari no!" Hoodwink's voice barely carried over the pounding of her boots into the floor grill.

The monster paused as she neared.

Her leg braces whirred madly.

Let's see what these babies can do.

She vaulted into the air when she was only a pace out from the monster. Her timing was slightly off, as could be expected from a body that had slept a lifetime. She'd wanted to kick out, and strike the monster in the head with her braces. Instead her entire body crashed sidelong into the thing. She got lucky, and one of the leg braces hit the monstrosity in the head anyway. She heard the glass disks on its head shatter.

She landed sprawling on the floor in front of it. The wind was completely knocked out of her.

Hoodwink was at her side almost immediately, and he dragged her away from the monster.

It didn't pursue.

A thunderous boom shook the corridor.

Hoodwink set the duffel bag down and he helped her up.

The monstrosity still hadn't moved. The small red light on its forehead flashed on and off in counterpoint to the rotating beacon on the ceiling.

"Never do that again," Hoodwink said above the siren, lifting her arm over his neck.

"I can walk!" She forced Hoodwink away and took a step. One of the motors in her right leg whined in protest, and she felt its support give out before she set the foot down, so that her foot stamped. She took another tentative step. Again her right foot gave out at the last moment. The overall effect was to give her a nasty limp. Not to mention that her entire right leg throbbed with pain. She'd just have to manage.

"I don't suppose you have any healing shards in this world?" she said.

Hoodwink remained grave. "Did you hear what I said?"

Above the siren she could hear the rising clicks and whirs of the other monstrosity. "Hoodwink, I don't think we have time for this..."

But he seemed adamant, and crossed his arms. "Never do that again. Say yes. You're too important."

A boom. The corridor quaked.

"Me?" Ari said. "You're the one who's important. What makes me so special?"

"You're my daughter."

"Oh." She looked away. She didn't want him to see the tears that

threatened to fall. She pressed her lips together and forced iron into her voice. "Come on dad, let's go." She glanced at the monster she'd smashed. "I think I killed it."

She started forward, but Hoodwink stopped her with a hand and a severe look. He approached the monster alone, and lifted a palm to the ruined disks. He waved two fingers back and forth. The red light continued to blink on and off above the disks, but otherwise the iron monster gave no indication it saw him.

Hoodwink glanced at Ari, put a finger to his lips, and motioned her onward.

She slowly eased herself into the narrow gap between the monster's body and the wall. Up close, she saw that a series of small holes were dug into the barrel of its chest. Numbers were embossed above the holes. There was a kind of a grill in its side, and beyond that she could see the insides of the monster—different colored strings tied together in bundles. Connecting the torso to the treads was a corrugated black bag that reminded her of the material in a smith's bellows. She realized the bag allowed the entire upper torso to turn and bend. The monster could easily crush her if it decided to swivel.

Her gaze was drawn to the three smashed disks on its head, and the blinking light above them. *Don't look at me don't look.* The subtle whir of her

leg clamps seemed all too loud in her ears. She vaguely noted that the booms of attack were coming less frequently now, and that the floor barely rumbled.

When she was halfway past, one of the monster's arms abruptly shot forward.

She froze.

The sound of her beating heart seemed louder to her than the siren. She waited. The roof beacon pulsed over her, bathing her at times in red, at others in gloom. She didn't dare breath. Or blink.

But the monster made no other movement.

Death throes?

She didn't want to take any more chances. She took a wide, tentative step, and then squeezed through to the other side in a hurry. She spun about, expecting the worst.

The monster remained still.

She watched nervously as Hoodwink hoisted the duffel bag over his head and edged past. He moved a little faster than she had, but just as quietly, and in moments he was at her side.

"Have to be careful when the light on their heads is flashing like that," he said. "You think they're done for, but sometimes they still strike. Oh, they strike." He fingered his side as if remembering some injury.

She noticed a corridor leading off from the hallway. Within, the walls

and ceiling fell away. The distant roof seemed made of glass, and she saw the nighttime sky, the stars out in full. Flashes of light came in time with the distant booms she heard. The icy landscape beneath that sky looked a little odd, and was pocked with holes.

She took a reflexive step toward the passage, but Hoodwink grabbed her arm. "No Ari. It's this way."

And then she saw it. Within that offshoot corridor, along the walkway that led across the chamber, another iron monster approached.

This one was smaller.

Faster.

And those pincers snapped at the air with deadly certainty.

CHAPTER TEN

"Hood..." Ari said.

"I see it." Hoodwink increased his pace. "Can you still run?"

She nodded. She noted that her father hadn't tried to offer his neck or shoulder as a crutch. Good, he was being trained. Though maybe a crutch wasn't such a bad idea right about now...

She alternately limped, and ran, and limped again at a quick jog. The siren droned on.

Hoodwink stayed by her side, purposely not running ahead. He paused beside a pod that had gone black inside, and he forced his hand into the membrane, breaking it. Black sludge vomited onto the floor. That, and a human body. The withered person—she couldn't tell the age, or the gender—was very much dead. Most of the muck dripped through the grill onto the level below.

"Help me lay the body across the corridor." Hoodwink snatched the dead man's hands.

Ari wrinkled her nose and grabbed the feet. She could barely lift those stiff legs, and ended up dragging them. The flesh felt clammy and spongy, and she kept expecting the skin to slough right off the bone. She sincerely

hoped that wouldn't happen—she didn't want to throw up in front of Hoodwink.

In seconds the two had positioned the body so that it blocked most of the corridor. Hoodwink scooped up handfuls of black sludge from the pod and tossed it over the corpse. Some of the sludge spilled down the dead man's sides and onto the grill, where it dripped like tar to the level below, but most of it remained on the body, the dark, gelatinous blobs quivering over the flesh.

"That'll slow our friend," Hoodwink said.

The two raced on. Ari kept glancing back, and she saw the smaller iron monster easily roll over the body, snapping bones and splattering the insides.

"I don't think it's working..." Ari began, but then she saw sparks flying from the monster's treads.

"The sludge gets in the wheels of the smaller golems," Hoodwink said. "Fucks them up. Only reason I put the body there was to hold the sludge. Hurry now, we're almost there."

The corridor looked the same, as far as she could tell. There were no further side passages or branches, just endless pods, metal walls, flashing beacons, and that siren. That wailing siren.

Hoodwink abruptly knelt. He jabbed his fingers into the grill, and

lifted away a floor segment. Below, a ladder led down along the wall.

"I don't know how the hell you noticed that," she said.

He tapped his temple. "Smarts! And I got a bit of an eagle eye, I do!"

"Sure dad." Ari took the ladder. Her grip was so weak that she had to wrap her elbows around each rung rather than her fingers, and that made for a slow, awkward descent.

Hoodwink came down after her, and he replaced the grill segment halfway down. The join was seamless, as far as she could tell, and she still wondered how he knew to lift the segment in the first place.

"It's just ahead, it is," Hoodwink said.

He led her down a hallway that seemed, for all intents and purposes, exactly the same as the one she just left, the sleepers in the pods just as oblivious to her presence as those on the floor above.

The warning siren abruptly fell silent, and Ari realized she hadn't heard or felt any trembles in a while. The red beacon flicked off, and the white slabs in the ceiling brightened.

"These attacks have been going on since you came here?" Ari said.

Hoodwink nodded.

"Why hasn't this place crumpled into so much snowpack then?" she said.

Hoodwink smiled. "Snowpack. Yes, it should have, by rights. But the

ship has special armor, and heals between attacks. That armor can only take so many hits though, and the iron golems struggle to keep it in good shape. They've been falling behind, as you might've guessed."

Hoodwink stopped beside a sealed door set between two of the pods. Finally, something else besides pods and walls and pods again.

"I've formed my own little group of Users here, I have." Hoodwink pressed numbers on a pad by the door. "One or two are people who woke up a tad early, and lived. People I saved from the iron golems. The rest, well, they're unlucky people whose worlds I ripped away. Just like I did yours."

"But at least you gave me warning," Ari said. "A choice."

"I did. Something these poor wretches never had. I've committed many sins while I've been gone, Ari. More than I care to admit to. Abandoning you was one of the biggest, though it wasn't entirely by choice. Either way, one day I'll have to pay for these sins, I expect." The numbers on the pad flashed, and Hoodwink seemingly addressed the door. "Let me in, Tanner."

The door slid open.

What awaited inside was not exactly what she had expected.

Not at all.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Ari entered a control room of sorts. The stars of the night sky peered at her from a broad window, above which green numbers scrolled along from left to right. The main area of the chamber was crowded with small desks covered in dials, buttons, blinking lights, and white pads with words inside them. But it wasn't so much the fancy desks that caught her attention. Rather, it was those who sat in front of them.

Ari lifted an eyebrow, and glanced at Hoodwink. "This is the group you put together?"

Almost all of them were children.

Hoodwink spread his arms. "Ari, say hello to my little geniuses. Geniuses, say hello to my daughter Ari."

"Hello Ari," the children said together, just as if they were in class.

She walked forward. All the children were looking at her. Some seemed expectant in some way. Others, despondent, distant. Every single one of them was dressed in a white gown, and with their pale skin and haunted eyes, they seemed like little ghosts to her, the phantoms of those who had seen the truth, their previous selves burned away when they died in that cold world of ice only to awaken in a cold world of metal.

One little girl slid from her chair and shyly approached. "You're so pretty."

Ari knelt, and touched the child's hand. "I was, once. Maybe. But not anymore. Now I'm just a hollow-cheeked skeleton." Or so she imagined, given what the rest of her body looked like.

"I don't think so." The little girl touched her cheek.

Ari had always thought it one of life's greatest jokes that the face closest to her was the face she hardly saw—her own. And when she did see it, catching a glimpse of her reflection in a mirror, or in the polished bronze of a sword, she rarely liked what peered back. Despite that most people, like the little girl, called her pretty, and sometimes beautiful.

"What's your name, sweetheart?" Ari said.

The little girl looked down. "Caylin..."

Ari smiled. "Caylin. That's a nice name. I like it. I really do. I'm Ari."

Caylin glanced up, beaming. "Are you going to stay with us, nice lady?"

"I—" Ari glanced at Hoodwink. She gently turned the girl around and gave her a shove. "Go back to your friends Caylin. Go on."

Caylin returned to the desk and sat in the oversized chair. She gave Ari a reproachful look.

Ari lowered her voice. "Why would you do this to them?" she told

Hoodwink.

Hoodwink stiffened visibly. "What, set them free? I treat them well. Like my own family. I love them. I do. Without them I would've gone mad months ago. And don't you be giving me that self-righteous look. You did the same thing with your New Users."

"Yes, but at least I waited until they were in their teens. And I had a reason. The young survive the ravages of vitra longer."

Hoodwink nodded slowly. A shadow passed across his face. "I have reasons, too. I do. Children, well, they're growing, and they learn faster. Their bodies have a better chance of surviving the pod-birth, and they get used to walking, and everything else, real snappy. Sure, they all needed the iron legs, just like you. But only for one or two days. When your body weighs fifty pounds, your muscles grow quick."

"What about him?" She nodded toward the oldest among them. A young man who couldn't have been more than twenty, maybe twenty-one. Half a head taller than Ari, with short, curly hair. Cute, in his own way. Though he had a conceit about him that stroked her the wrong way. And a darkness. *Thinks a lot of himself, that one*, she thought. *And he's quick to anger.* Unlike the children, he wore the same blue uniform as Hoodwink and herself.

Hoodwink looked at the man and grinned. "That's Tanner." He strode

up to the man and beckoned Ari near.

She smirked, but obeyed. She was no fool—she knew when someone was trying to pair her off, especially when that someone was her own father.

"He's one of those who woke up too early," Hoodwink said. "Shit from the pod right when I was walking by, can you believe that? Lucky for him I was there, because the iron golems were scouting that section of tunnel real good that day, almost as if they were expecting him to come out."

Tanner reached into his pocket, and offered her a packet of some shiny material. "Hungry?"

She was, actually. Ravenous.

Reading her mind, Tanner tossed her the packet. She caught it, and regarded the thing suspiciously. The texture was smooth, almost slippery, and felt squishy inside. She bit into it, but couldn't tear off a piece.

"You have to open it, first..." Tanner said. He held out a hand, and she reluctantly returned the packet to him. Tanner held the edge with two fingers, and ripped the corner open. He gave it back to her.

She regarded the packet warily. Some kind of gel oozed out.

"It's good..." Tanner said.

"Looks like that stuff from the pods." She smelled it, but the gel was scentless.

"It's actually pretty good," Hoodwink acknowledged.

She licked a small corner tentatively. Tasteless, too. She took a mouthful and swallowed. "You know, for laughs I was going to say it tastes like chicken, but I just can't bring myself to. This is the blandest, most tasteless stuff I've ever had in my life. Worse than piss."

"How do you know what piss tastes like?" Tanner said with a wild grin.

She smiled sardonically. "Funny." She took another mouthful. "You're off to a bad start, mister. First the terrible food, then the joke at my expense. I'd appreciate the same respect I've granted you. Try not to be so full of yourself."

Tanner seemed about to reply, but then he averted his eyes. She thought he reddened a little.

"Easy, Ari, I'm sure he meant nothing by it," Hoodwink said.

She had a way of making men uncomfortable, didn't she? She was judging again, when she hardly knew the man. What right did she have to say that he was full of himself? It was just her political instincts, is what it was. The need to put everyone in their place before they could get the upper hand. First rule of politics: Never let your opponent gain the upper hand.

Her eyes were drawn to the long window beyond the desks. She hadn't really looked out at the landscape yet. She approached the glass, edging between the children. She passed near one boy, and gave him a smile,

but the child only stared back with pale, haunted eyes.

She reached the window. What she saw didn't at first seem possible.

She felt faint, and pressed one hand to the glass so she wouldn't fall.

"Could it be true?" she said.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Outside, a landscape marred with dark pits and abrasions stretched to the horizon. The pocked, yellow surface reminded her of old bone. Above, a gaseous ball the size of an outstretched fist floated among the stars. In the depths of that ball, a swirl of gases formed an eye of sorts, and she couldn't shake the feeling that it stared at her.

"Where are we?" she said, still feeling a bit woozy.

Hoodwink was at her side. "In space. On a moon called Ganymedes. That jumbo orange eye in the sky? Jupiter."

"In space." She couldn't conceal the awe from her voice. Or was that terror? "This is the real world? How? Why?"

Hoodwink sighed. His face was grave. "We don't know the truth of it all, but we're settlers, we think. Sent into space to escape some sort of ruin on earth. The pods kept us alive on the journey here, and amused our minds with an illusory world that was quite the hit on earth before we left."

"Are you saying we did this to ourselves?" she said. "The Inside. The gols. The collars."

Hoodwink nodded gravely. "That's exactly what I'm saying. When we landed, the iron golems were supposed to let us out. They never did. We're

not entirely sure why yet, but from what we can tell, we weren't supposed to land here. The trip from earth took six years. But this ship was built to last centuries. By our reckoning, we've been stuck on this moon for at least two. Centuries, that is. Generations of men and women, born into the pod world. Generations who lived and died in illusion. We're not sure, but we think it was the attacks that caused the ship to crash here in the first place. Anyway, there's not enough food for a bunch of active, awake people, nor enough room. Not on this ship, on this moon. That's why the golems never woke us up. If they did, we'd all die from hunger and overcrowding."

"I see." She thought she did, anyway. "So what's your plan then? Obviously you have one, or you wouldn't be showing me all this."

Hoodwink gazed at Jupiter. "My ultimate plan?"

She frowned. There was something in his tone she didn't like. Zeal, she thought. The maddest and most dangerous men she'd ever met had been those with zeal. Fanatics willing to sacrifice everyone and everything to achieve their ends. "Sure."

"Stop the attacks. Get rid of the need to fix the ship. Let it finally heal on its own. Most of the golems have devoted themselves to the ship, swarming her wounds like flies to a scabby dog. This devotion is partly what's causing the gol mind disease on the Inside. That, and the germ the attackers have hidden in the system. That's why we need the mayor's control

center. With it we'll be able to change the inner workings of the gols. And track down the germ."

Ari shook her head. "I don't think the control center can do that. If it could, Jeremy would have tinkered with the gols a long time ago."

"Well Jeremy's a whole different nest of voles, he is, and we'll get to him shortly. But you're right. The control center can't change the gols. We'll make the changes here. But it's hard to see the effect, given how fast things pass when you're Outside. The control center gives us a way to watch those changes. Anyway, the nitty-gritty is, I plan to bring order to the Inside. I'm going to make the utopia we were meant to live in, rather than the hell. And save another world while I'm at it."

Ari wasn't sure what he meant by that last remark—hell, she wasn't sure what half the things he said meant—but her mind was already moving past it. "You want to stop the attacks. I can agree with that, though I'm not sure how you plan to do it. But when it's done we should get as many people out from the Inside as we can, and start over here."

Hoodwink cocked an eyebrow. "You would doom the tens of thousands on the Inside to misery?"

"Well, no," Ari said. "That's not what I meant. We could still help those on the Inside. All I'm saying is we should try to get as many people out into the real world as possible."

"The real world?" Hoodwink said it as though he knew some profound secret. "Never minding the food issue, you've seen the haunted look in the eyes of the children. I know you have. And you've seen it in my own eyes, or at least you would if you looked, *really* looked. So tell me, would you rather live life beneath the veil, a good life, a happy life, where all your wants are yours? Where lightning flows through your veins, and the sun shines warm every day? Or would you rather live in the real world as you call it, inside metal rooms on a sunless moon, where each day is a fight for survival, and within yourself you're deader than dead?"

Ari was adamant. "I'd choose the real world."

Hoodwink smiled patiently. "Real is only a matter of opinion, it is. But I want you to know, as things currently stand the worlds are joined at the hip, and depend on each other. If one world dies, all worlds die."

"All worlds." Ari rubbed her chin. "Earlier you mentioned different levels of the mind, and I asked you if this, right here, right now, was real. So tell me plainly. Is this world false? And if so, what's above it?"

"Nothing." He said it just a little too quickly for her to believe him. "As far as you're concerned, there's only the two. The Inside, and the Outside. Focus on these. Please."

A flash came from beyond the window, and a distant rumble shook the floor.

All the children turned toward the glass.

"So soon?" Hoodwink said.

Outside, a dust wave swept rapidly over the yellow landscape, bringing with it the threat of utter annihilation.

"That's not good," Hoodwink said, gripping a nearby desk. "Not good at all. Hang on."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Ari braced herself as the wave struck the window. The iron walls rumbled in protest. The siren started up again, and a beacon she hadn't noticed before came to life in the ceiling, cutting that familiar revolving swathe of light across the room.

"Damn it," Hoodwink rushed over to Caylin, who was moving her fingers rapidly over the white pad on her desk. "They don't usually attack on this side."

She saw it beyond the glass then. Some kind of falling star, streaking through the night sky. It struck the surface almost right outside. Dust and chunks of rock—or was that ice?—smashed into the glass and completely obscured the view. She felt the vibration of the impact deep in her chest, and the whole room tossed.

Cracks began to spider along the window.

"Uh, Hoodwink?" Tanner said.

"Stanson!" Hoodwink said. "Get the children to Beta Station! Everyone out!"

Stanson, an androgynous-looking child who seemed the second oldest after Tanner at fifteen or so, ran to the door, and most of the children piled up

behind him. He punched in a code and the door opened. Stanson fled the room, and the children drained after him, white gowns swirling like miniature snowstorms. Tanner, Ari, and Hoodwink herded the remaining kids. Now was the time for calming words, but all Ari could think to say was *go go go*.

Another boom shook the chamber. The children began elbowing one another.

"Easy now kids," Hoodwink said. He seemed the only levelheaded one there. "Give each other room."

Little Caylin was the last child to go through, and she paused at the door to look up at Ari. She seemed about to say something.

"Go girl!" Tanner shoved the child outside.

Ari gave Tanner a dirty look, then hurried after Caylin. But before she could make it through the door, a terrible crash shook the room, and Ari lost her balance and keeled backwards into Tanner. The two of them fell to the floor, and their faces were only inches apart. She saw something then, in his eyes. Fear. And something else. Something she hadn't seen in a long time.

"Warning," a female voice monotoned. "Decompression imminent. Warning. Decompression imminent."

Ari quickly rolled away from Tanner.

She spun toward the door, but it sealed before her eyes.

Tanner scrambled to his feet, and frantically pressed the buttons

beside the door. The pad flashed in confirmation, but the door didn't open. Tanner tried again. Still nothing. He looked at Ari, his face a mask of fear. "It's stuck!"

Cracks continued to etch their way across the window.

Somewhere in the room, Hoodwink moaned.

Ari spun around, not caring then that death was coming down on them. Her father was injured. And he needed her help.

Right now.

She rushed to Hoodwink. A section of the roof had caved, and he was pinned beneath a steel girder.

"Guess I'm paying for my sins sooner than I thought." Hoodwink managed a smile, though he was obviously in pain.

"We're going to get you out of this," Ari said.

She noticed Tanner at her side, and nodded to him. "On three." She gripped one corner of the girder, and waited for Tanner to grab the opposite corner.

"One."

Though her fingers and arms were skeletal-thin, she would find the strength to lift that girder.

"Two."

Her father was pinned. *Her father*. She wouldn't see him die. Not if

she could help it. She *would* lift that girder.

"Three!"

She heaved. The strength came from a part of herself she didn't know she had, a part that was close, yet far away somehow. She couldn't explain it.

Her side of the girder lifted just a fraction compared to Tanner's side, but it was enough for Hoodwink to slide his leg free.

And not an instant too soon, because Ari lost her grip and the girder crunched to the floor.

Ari and Tanner helped Hoodwink to his feet.

"Tanner," Hoodwink said. "Get to a terminal. We have to close the blast shield."

"Warning," the female voice droned. "Decompression imminent."

Tanner rushed to one of the desks, and Ari helped Hoodwink over to him. The room shook with the resound of a nearby strike.

Tanner studied the white pad on the desk. He swiped his fingers across it, and paragraphs of text slid by repeatedly. He entered a code.

Tanner glanced at the window nervously. "The shield won't respond!"

"Try again!' Hoodwink said.

Tanner did. He looked at Hoodwink and shook his head.

Behind them, the dust-obscured window cracked audibly now. It sounded all too much like ice that was about to collapse.

"Warning. Decompression imminent."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Ari glanced at the door behind her. "Can't we force the entrance instead?"

"There's no way." Hoodwink didn't even look at her, his eyes intent on the small pad. He shoved Tanner's hand away, and he began swiping and tapping his own fingers across the thing. "And no time. But the blast shield *will* close. It will."

If that thing operated on the sheer force of Hoodwink's will, she might have believed it. Unfortunately, she didn't think the shield worked that way.

Ari rushed to the entrance by herself and tried to squeeze her bony fingers between the edge of the door and the wall. It was useless. The door may as well have been melded to the wall. She let her eyes wander the room, looking for something she could actually use to open the door. Something like an ax.

"Warning. Decompression imminent."

She saw a steel cabinet off to one side. She ran to it, momentarily losing her balance as the room shook. When she opened the cabinet she found a pair of strange metallic suits inside. "Dad," she said above the siren. "What are these?"

Hoodwink glanced up distractedly. His eyes widened when he saw the suits, and he limped over immediately.

"That's my Ari!" He slid the first suit from the rack. It was a bulky, single-piece costume similar to the uniform she wore, complete with arm and leg holes, and a zipper on the back. But it was much roomier then her own suit, and all puffed up just as if someone was already inside.

Hoodwink shoved the suit toward Ari. "Put it on."

The thing was heavy, at least for one with her withered strength. She managed to slide her feet into the leg holes, and once that was done it was easy enough to yank the bottom on like breeches. The fabric slid over the iron braces on her legs, but the fit was a little tight, and portions of the braces dug into her flesh. Nothing for it but to grin and bear it.

She shoved her hands into the arm holes, and thrust her fingers into the extremities as if she were putting on long gloves.

When that was done, Hoodwink zipped up the front of the suit, and then he lowered a glass globe over her head. The globe warped the edge of her vision, but also had the welcome effect of considerably muting the attack siren.

Hoodwink twisted the globe sideways until it locked in place, and then he touched something near her neck. A mechanism whirred to life behind her ear, and fresh air brushed her cheek. A green light turned on near

the top of her vision.

"Tanner," Hoodwink said. "Over here! Now!"

Tanner abandoned the desk and rushed over. Hoodwink helped him into the second suit.

"What about you?" Ari said. Her voice sounded odd in the tight environment of the suit. Distorted, and full of fear.

"When the glass breaks," Hoodwink said, his words sounding muted through the helmet. "All the air will be sucked out, along with anything that isn't tied down. Depressurized, it's called." Hoodwink nodded toward the cabinet. "Hold on to the rack inside. The cabinet's bolted to the wall. You'll be safe."

"There has to be another suit in here." She scanned the chamber, her heart pounding in sudden alarm. But there were no other cabinets. No other suits.

"Warning," the mechanical voice intoned. "Decompression imminent."

Hoodwink grabbed her by the shoulders. "Ari. You have to hold on."

"But what will happen to you? Will you survive without a suit?"

Hoodwink smiled sadly. "I have to go Topside anyway. But I'll be back. I promise. Tanner knows what to do."

"Can't you hold on with us?" she pleaded.

He shook his head. "Then you'd just get to watch me die up close."

"But I've only just found you." Ari felt the tears coming. She held them back. She wanted her father to see how strong she was. "You can't go."

"Ari, I have to." He shoved her into the cabinet, and fetched a cord from the wall. He tied her and Tanner to the rack. "Look at that. Not even crying. You're so strong, Ari." He said it with such tenderness.

She shook her head. "I'm not. Please don't go. You've already died once for me."

"And I'll die a thousand times more for you."

Her chin quivered uncontrollably. "I love you."

"I—" The chamber depressurized, and her father was sucked out into space.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Ari felt the pull of the outside, and if it weren't for the cord that fastened her to the rack, she would've joined her father. The pull soon subsided, and she remained there, motionless, staring into the void, watching her father and other debris spin away. When she could no longer pick out his distant form on the rocky landscape, she suppressed a fresh wave of tears.

The siren abruptly stopped, and the red beacon turned off.

The attack had ended.

When she was sure she could speak without a quaver, she turned to Tanner and said, "I hate you."

"Why?"

She was surprised to hear his voice come from inside the helmet, near her ear, but the astonishment barely registered against the backdrop of sorrow within her. "For seeing me at my weakest. For watching my father die, and doing nothing. I'll never forgive you."

He had nothing to say to that. Smart.

She closed her eyes. *Pull yourself together Ari.* Tanner was the only one she had left. She didn't hate him, not really. She was more mad at herself than at him. Besides, she had to work with him to get out of this. *Pull*

yourself together girl.

She looked at Tanner. "So what now? Can we open the door to the hall?" It was hard to keep the tremble from her voice, but she had to fight the sorrow. Had to move forward and find a way out of this.

Tanner met her eye. There was sadness there. And pity, she saw. The latter only angered her.

"The safety protocols won't let the door open," Tanner said. His voice had a strange, tinny quality. "Not when the room's depressurized like this. And we can't restore the pressure because the mechanism that operates the blast shield is fused."

She stared at him blankly. "English."

Tanner raised his voice. "We're fucked, okay?"

Ari felt like swatting him. She'd heard enough patronizing for one lifetime. "Would you mind not swearing?"

He didn't answer.

She gazed beyond the broken window. "I say we go out there, then. Look for another way back in."

Tanner shook his head, though the globe around his face remained still. "Won't matter. All the compromised areas will be the same, the doors sealed by safety locks."

"Override the damn locks."

"Can't."

Ari couldn't believe his closed-mindedness. "I'm sure we'll find a hallway that's been torn open, or something."

"There are doors in the hallways, and they seal too when there's a breach. Otherwise the whole place would depressurize."

Ari wasn't going to let him off the hook so easily. "Aren't there hatches or something?"

"There are, but we won't be able to open them. Only Hoodwink knew the access codes. And he kept them to himself. For our protection."

Ari raised her voice incredulously. "Our *protection*?"

"He was worried that some of the children would kill themselves. Either accidentally, or intentionally."

"Oh." She remembered the haunted looks in those eyes.

"Besides, we can't go out on the moon. There's iron golems outside, fixing damaged sections of the hull. If they spot us..."

She stared at the jagged pieces of glass along the windowsill. One fragment in particular caught her eye. The tip was smeared red. She quickly looked away.

"I thought the ship was self-repairing?" She spoke fast, trying get her mind off that jagged shard. The tears threatened to come all over again. *Focus Ari.*

"It *is* self-repairing," Tanner said. "To a degree. But hit a certain section too many times, and the iron golems have to send the repair units."

"So what can we do then? I need options Tanner!"

"As I said, we're fuh—" He cut himself off.

"Once you hit a snowdrift in your path, you don't give up right away and turn back," she said. "You look closer. You test the snow, see where it holds your weight. You find a path."

Tanner frowned. "If you say so."

"You're a pessimist, that's what you are."

Tanner shrugged. Inside that suit it looked more like he bobbed up on his toes. "I'm a realist."

"There's always a way. Always. Hoodwink put his trust in you." Ari bit her lip. The pain distracted her from the sorrow. "Said you knew what to do. Guess he was wrong."

She untied herself from the rack, and approached the shattered window, intending to go out there on her own. Even with the leg clamps aiding her, that bulky suit made it seem like she waded through deep snow.

Most of the desks had been sucked outside, and a couple of them lay smashed beneath the window. She avoided the thick cords that protruded from the floor where the desks had been. The cord ends were severed, and some sparked visibly. Interesting. Did that mean vitra flowed through the

lifeless veins of this place?

When she neared the windowsill, she climbed the debris, and just stared out across the landscape. It looked as barren and lifeless as she felt inside. Going out there didn't seem like such a good idea just then.

Tanner's voice spoke in her ear. "When Hoodwink said I knew what to do, he meant the mission Inside. Not this." Tanner was on the other side of the room, still at the cabinet. "And I *haven't* given up, you know. There's a chance Stanson and the others will find a way to reach us."

"Relying on others is a bad business," Ari said. "Especially when your life is in their hands. They probably think we're dead already." She was becoming hopeless now, too. The sorrow was spreading inside her like a poison, and it threatened to overwhelm her.

"Maybe I can send the children a message from one of the terminals." Tanner waded across the room, toward one of the few surviving desks. The legs of the desk had shifted so that the black cord anchoring it to the floor was visible.

Ari gazed out across the moonscape one last time. Hoodwink was out there, somewhere. *I'll find you again, dad. I promise.*

Ari hopped down the debris pile. It was slow-going in that suit. When she reached him, Tanner was already swiping his fingers across the desk pad, causing words and images to come and go in rapid succession.

"Mm," he said. "No answer. I guess they haven't reached Beta Station yet. I'll set it on ping, and they'll get the message when they arrive." He pressed more buttons below the pad. "Don't worry. They'll save us."

"Assuming the iron golems don't reach us first."

"Who's the pessimist now?" Tanner said.

"Well, you did say the ship dispatches 'repair units,' didn't you?"

"Yes." He glanced at her from inside his helmet. "But this isn't a critical section, and the inside door's already sealed off. Repair units won't swing by here for a long time, if ever."

"How did you learn all this?" Ari said.

Tanner returned his attention to the pad, apparently eager to show off his knowledge. "There are manuals in the system. Here, I'll show you."

He pressed a button labeled *Help* on the pad. New words appeared.

Hercules XIXV System Guide.

A sudden, more urgent thought occurred to her. "How much air do we have in these things?"

"About two days I think," Tanner said.

But she knew the answer just as Tanner spoke it, because her words had triggered something in the suit, and a sentence now overlaid her vision.

Estimated Oxygen: 48 Hours.

The green letters faded, leaving only clear glass once more.

Tanner was still playing with that pad. "Guess I have time to teach you a few things."

"Later," she said. She wanted to give up. Wanted to lie down and just cry. But she couldn't. *Focus, Ari.* "So. Can we get back to the Inside from here? And complete the mission father planned?"

"Back to the simulation?" Tanner considered this. "There should be an input on the suit." He examined his belly, and found a small aperture in the fabric. "There." Hers had a similar opening.

"Good," Ari said. "Then that's what we'll do. Forty-eight hours of air? Is that enough time to complete father's plan?"

Tanner studied her a moment, then he nodded slowly. "Forty-eight hours is about three weeks on the Inside, so yes, that should be more than enough time." He reached behind the terminal and unraveled a cord with a pronged end. "I'm not sure if Hoodwink told you, but the only way to go back Inside is as a gol. Going in as A.I.s lets us bypass the whole human birthing mechanism. You won't have any actual nutrients when you descend this way though, so you'll be starving on the Inside after about three days of simulation time, no matter how much you think you're eating."

She stopped him before he plugged the cord into her suit. "What about you?"

He glanced across the room, toward the other remaining desk. "I'll use

the tether on that terminal."

She nodded, and let him continue. When the cord connected with her suit, she heard an audible beep. Tanner pressed something on the desk pad, and a spoken message played inside her helmet.

"External Connect Initiated." She recognized the female voice that had droned on about imminent decompression. "Simulator Access Requested. Allow?"

Two options appeared on the inside of the helmet, *yes* and *no*. She focused on *yes*.

The word flashed.

"Access Granted," the female voice said.

Inside the suit, she felt a metal prong extend from the navel region, and she winced as it pressed into the fabric of her clothing. The metal fastened painfully onto her umbilical cord, and a sudden current flowed through her—for a moment she thought she'd found vitra again.

And then a jab of incredible, body-wide pain blocked out all thought.

Her head fell forward on the globe, and darkness consumed her vision.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Ari lay on a wooden floor. Above her, a lone beam of sunlight lanced through a frosty window. The ray touched her forehead, but held no warmth. She sat up groggily.

She recognized her shack of a house. The make-up desk. The table. The bookshelf. The mirror. Everything was as she remembered. Only an hour had passed on the Outside. That was what, a day or two on the Inside?

She noted that no collar, fake or otherwise, burdened her neck. Even so, the spark of vitra was completely gone inside her.

She clambered upright, blinked the stars from her vision, and stumbled to the mirror.

She gasped.

She had no reflection.

She looked down at herself. Her body was very much there. Odd.

She noticed that her arms and legs were no longer bone thin, and the backs of her hands were free of wrinkles and liver spots. So she was still young at least. And well-nourished this time.

Looking down at herself, she thought her skin-tight blue shirt accentuated her breasts a little more than she was comfortable with. Damn

that Tanner. The sleeves reached to her wrists, where the cuffs seemed to meld into her flesh just as if the fabric were tattooed into it. She tried to lift the too-tight shirt off, but she found no collar to grip. She slid her arms across her chest, scrabbling at the thin cloth, but she succeeded only in pinching and folding her own skin.

She glanced at the vacant mirror once more. It reminded her that she wasn't really here in *this* world, but resided in another.

Though it sure felt like she existed here.

"What am I?" She stumbled over to the chair beside the window, and sat down heavily. The same chair she'd used countless times as an old woman, waiting for her life to end. Waiting for her father.

"So what do you think, Nine?" Tanner said from behind her.

She started. "Don't ever do that again." She forced herself to be mad, when all she wanted to do was bawl her eyes out. She had to remain focused. In charge. "Why did you call me Nine?"

Tanner was wearing a goatee now, matched to a flourishing mustache. It didn't really suit him. "It's written on your chest in binary. 1001. Supposed to mark you as one of the main A.I.s of the system. In theory the gols will give us more respect because of it." He touched his own chest, which had the number 1010 embossed into the tight fabric. "Ten."

"Tell me father's plan," she said. "He wants a utopia, does he?" It was

hard not to sound bitter. He'd died for this utopia of his. And right now, Ari didn't care if this false world stayed a cold pit of ice for all eternity. In fact, she almost preferred it that way.

"First of all," Tanner said. "We have to seize the Control Room from the mayor."

Tanner went on to detail the plan, but she was scarcely listening.

Seize the Control Room from the mayor.

Hoodwink had mentioned that before, but the words hadn't registered. They did now, however, and stirred something deep inside Ari, the memory of payback long ago given up.

She momentarily forgot her grief.

Jeremy. Good old Mayor Jeremy. She had a score to settle with that one.

More than a score.

She smiled inside.

Her ex-husband would certainly be in for a little shock when he saw her.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Ari marched across the snowpack, ermine cloak worn high to conceal the numbers written into her chest. At her neck was a fake bronze bitch, taken from the headquarters of the New Users. Though her breath misted, she didn't feel cold. She was a gol now, after all.

She made for Jeremy's estate. Tanner accompanied her on the right, and gray-haired Marks, one of the New Users, took her left. Jeremy owned the largest estate in the city, nestled near the heart of Highbrow District. As a rule, the elected mayor always ran the city out of his or her home. Men and women of high office were expected to live and breathe their jobs, eating and sleeping and defecating in the same building where they made the big decisions. He'd bought out three portal traders to secure the land, and blackmailed a fourth. The son of a portal trader himself, Jeremy had grown his wealth by taking advantage of the price spreads between cities. They say absolute power corrupts absolutely. The same can be said about wealth. So what did it mean then, when Jeremy had both?

The latest rumor among the New Users was that Jeremy had found a way to replicate gols, and that he was surrounding himself with a new type that fed on the fears of the common people. He was building an army,

according to the New User scouts, though for what purpose no one knew. Ari was looking forward to having Jeremy at the tip of her sword, begging to reveal all his secrets.

Her sword. She reverently fingered the hilt at her waist. Tanner had stashed two special swords in the system before he came Inside, blades crafted specifically for just such a mission. The weapons worked similar to vitra once you gripped the haft, but unlike vitra, the charge was unlimited, and the swords spat flame, not electricity.

The children couldn't just make a Control Room, like they had the swords. According to Tanner, the children had found the "source" to vitra, swords, and fire, so creating the weapons had been relatively easy. But making something like the special Box that, when opened, would expand to fill up a room and turn it into the coveted control center that they so badly needed, well, that was something the children couldn't do without the "source."

"Why can't you just inject us into the Control Room directly?" she'd asked Tanner. "The same way you sent us back to my house?"

"Can't," Tanner had said. "The only reason we could go back to your house in the first place was because Hoodwink placed a tracker there."

Three days had passed since that conversation. Three days of planning, scouting, and meetings with the New Users. In the end, she'd

elected to throw away most of those plans, and wing it. Any plan that called for her to lick the boots of her ex-husband was no plan at all as far as she was concerned. Too bad she hadn't informed Tanner of that decision yet.

Her boots crunched in the snow, and the sound seemed an intrusion into a night that was all too calm. Roughly half of the street lamps were out, and no one was about, giving the street an eerie, dead feel. Three years ago, the streets of Highbrow District would have been shoveled to the cobblestone. But because of gol neglect, today the ground was covered in snowpack. The houses on either side were dark—the rumors of unnatural things roaming in the night had apparently caused more than a few residents to move away.

Ahead, two sentries flanked the iron gate to Jeremy's manor. The sentries wore long black coats, and capes that flared at the top. She had almost expected human sentries, given that ordinary gols couldn't be trusted for this kind of work these days, but the image stamped into their chests definitely marked them gol. She didn't recognize the symbol though—a curved tooth, dripping blood. The new gols her scouts had reported?

As she approached, the sentries swept back their capes and rested their hands on the hilts of their swords. An action meant to be menacing, she supposed, but her thoughts only registered annoyance.

The first sentry, fashioned as a man just short of the middle years,

planted itself in front of Ari. The gol had an angular nose and a sneering mouth. When it smiled, it revealed a set of finger-long canines.

"Direwalkers," Ari said. "Jeremy's gone and made Direwalkers."

Direwalkers were imaginary creatures from myth and folklore that were used to frighten little children into doing what their mothers' wanted. According to the legends, Direwalkers looked like ordinary human beings except for one distinguishing feature: their overly long canines, which they used to drain blood from potential victims. Their nails could elongate and slurp up your blood too, and their eyes could pop out of their heads a few centimeters, which was supposed to scare you into not moving. In the stories Direwalkers didn't have reflections in mirrors, were afraid of garlic and cinnamon, and could unhinge their jaws and swallow you whole if they wanted. Some Direwalkers even had more than two arms.

None of that scared Ari in the least.

"State your business," the Direwalker demanded.

Ari lowered the collar of her ermine cloak so that the number inscribed on her chest was visible.

The two Direwalkers looked at one another, and then stepped aside. One made to open the gate.

She casually drew her sword and beheaded the first Direwalker in a blur of flame. The second had time only to half-draw its weapon before its

own head bounced on the ground.

"Haven't seen you do something like that in years," Marks said with a grin.

"Ari!" The shock was plain in Tanner's voice. "I thought we'd decided __"

She rammed the flaming sword into the gate lock, and the metal melted around her blade. She kicked the gate open.

Damn it felt good to be young again.

"So much for our well-laid plans!" Tanner cursed.

Ari led the way forward, sword at the ready. Pines flanked the shoveled walkway that led to the mansion. Deer lay beyond those trees—Jeremy preferred his food fresh, raw. With pricked ears and upright tails, the motionless animals watched the intruders. Something seemed a bit off about the animals. She couldn't quite place it.

When Ari reached the middle of that tree-lined walkway, she realized what it was. The animals weren't staring *at* her, but *above* her.

Swords drawn, seven black-coated Direwalkers leapt down from the pines in an avalanche of loose snow.

She and Tanner set to work. They weaved among the Direwalkers, creating art out of the gols, painting the white canvas of snow around them with blood, bone and flesh.

Marks stayed back, conserving his charge. When no more Direwalkers faced her, Ari turned to Tanner and almost struck him down too—he was nearly unrecognizable beneath all that gore, his hair no longer curly but matted and streaked, his mustache plastered to his cheeks. She doubted she looked much better herself, face smeared in gol blood, ermine cloak splashed with the juices of opened intestines.

"Five gols," Ari said. "Including the gate guards. What's your count?"

"Four," Tanner said, rather curtly. He pressed his lips together. "I think we should go back. None of this was in the plan. It's only going to get worse."

She grinned. "You're just pissed because I'm winning."

"I'm pissed because we're going to die."

Ari ignored him. She was young, powerful, at the peak of her womanhood, and wreaking vengeance for the crime done to her ten years ago. She led her companions from the tree-lined path and out onto the terrace before the mansion. Two rows of windows fronted the house, and four columns supported the triangular portico that draped the entrance. The red flag of office dangled limply from a pole at the mansion's highest point.

Ari paused beside the frozen fountain at the center of the terrace. The same fountain had stood here when she lived in this place ten years ago, its water imprisoned by the unending winter.

Just as she had been imprisoned.

She jabbed her sword into the fountain and the ice shattered.

Three more Direwalkers clambered headfirst down the portico columns.

"Mine!" Ari rushed them, intending to add the Direwalkers to her count before Tanner had a chance.

But she was sloppy. The first Direwalker went down smoothly, but as the second fell, she slipped in its blood and dropped the sword. Before she could retrieve the weapon, the third Direwalker hauled her upright and pressed its teeth to her throat.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Ari waited for those teeth to penetrate, but the Direwalker made no further move.

Tanner and Marks approached warily.

"Another step and I tear out her jugular!" the Direwalker told Tanner. "Drop the weapon, krub. Now!" It licked the blood of its brethren from her neck.

Tanner looked at her, unsure what to do.

"This is where you save my life." She slammed her foot down on the Direwalker's boot and wrenched sideways, slipping from its grip.

Tanner's sword was there instantly, and he staked the Direwalker through the heart.

"Five!" he said grimly.

She retrieved her sword. "Well I'm at seven now."

"Next time it's probably best if you don't go rushing in alone. In fact, next time let's stick to the plan okay?"

Ari shrugged. "Sore loser." She gave him a sly smile over her shoulder. Sly, and just a little flirtatious. Though how flirtatious could you be, covered in blood?

Tanner rested a hand on her shoulder, and his voice softened. "Ari. Hoodwink put you in my care. I don't want to see you hurt."

"More like he put *you* in *my* care!" Ari shook free.

"*Women*," Tanner cursed.

Sword held before her, Ari strode under the portico and approached the main doors in a huff. She thrust out her hands and the doors swung open. Not locked, then. Why lock the doors when your mansion was surrounded by Direwalkers?

She strode inside and her footsteps echoed from the tile floor. She crossed a wide foyer. Set at intervals along it, candelabras illuminated tapestries and paintings of underwater scenes—schools of fish, coral reefs, an octopus at the heart of a dark cove.

Wary, she continued to advance, but met no further opposition. Strange. She glanced at Tanner, but he shrugged.

The rising chatter of some mayoral function came to her ears as she approached the reception hall. Ari recognized the colors of the city-state on the flags outside the entrance—three horizontal bars of green, red and white. A servant in white livery watched the door, but he fled inside when he spotted the gore-covered nightmare that was Ari.

She stepped unhindered into the lavish hall.

Marble pillars lined marble walls. Wooden planks crisscrossed the

vaulted ceiling. Bright red ermine—white when she'd lived here previously—carpeted the floor. Rows of blackwood tables were set along the far side of the room. Tables not for sitting, but browsing, the counters overflowing with appetizers of all kinds. Honeybread from the west. Goat cheese from the south. Sweetmeats from the north.

Dressed in outrageous silks of every color imaginable, with jewelry dripping from fingers, ears, wrists, and necks, a hundred sycophants milled about the remaining space. They held plates of meat and cheese in one hand, glasses of wine in the other, and chatted amiably, almost oblivious to their surroundings.

She spotted Jeremy himself, at the center of the dinner party. He was like a king at court. He wore a suit of a style she'd never seen before. Black pants and black shoes. A ruffled white shirt, covered by a black jacket that tapered in the front. A piece of dark cloth dangled from the bronze bitch around his neck like some kind of noose.

The servant she'd seen at the entrance was whispering in Jeremy's ear, and the mayor shot an alarmed glance her way.

The chatter faded as Ari and her companions, swords dripping blood, approached. The carefree faces were replaced with looks of fear. Among them she spotted Uncle Briar, stuffing his mouth as usual. He froze when he saw her, and the piece of cake tumbled from his fingers, leaving lips framed

in icing. The last time she'd seen the man was eight years ago, when she'd gone to visit her mother for the first time. That meeting hadn't gone well.

She looked from Briar, and at the periphery of her vision she saw him slump in relief.

The elaborately-dressed men and women parted, leaving her a clean path to Jeremy.

She stopped three paces from the man. Her blade was pointed at the ground, but she had more than enough time, and room, to deliver a killing blow.

She mustered all the icy sweetness she could, and said, "Am I interrupting your little dinner party, Jeremy?"

He merely stared. His gaze dropped to her sword.

"Don't worry, I'm not here to kill you." She smiled. "Where's your new wife?"

Jeremy abruptly returned her grin. He could play with the best of them. That was why he was mayor. "My new wife? Which one?" From his voice she could almost believe he was merry, till she saw the murder in those black, tilted eyes.

"Don't you look at me like that," she said.

Jeremy shook his head, as if he didn't understand. His eyes cast daggers the whole time, though he was still smiling.

Ari glanced at the fat nobles. "Tell your friends to leave."

He frowned. "Oh no." The thread-of-gold tentacles of the sea creatures that climbed the sleeves of his jacket glittered in the light. "I shan't do that. You see, now that you're here, well, you're going to be the night's main attraction! My dear, lovely, blood-covered Ari." His murderous gaze drifted over her shoulder.

Marks let out a yelp. Ari spun. A Direwalker had slunk up behind the group and clamped a bronze bitch just above Marks' fake collar.

She stepped toward the Direwalker, raising her sword, already reaching for the spark of vitra contained within the blade—

The floor came alive. The carpet stretched into fingers and wrapped around her ankles. She tripped.

More hands rose from the carpet. Some of those hands plucked the sword from her grip, others restrained her.

Beside her Tanner and Marks were similarly detained. They struggled helplessly against the carpet's iron grip.

The Direwalker who'd collared Marks came forward and bronze-bitched Ari and Tanner as a precaution, placing the bitches just above the fake collars they wore.

"Bring them to me," Jeremy said.

The carpet abruptly shifted, pushing upward until it became vaguely

humanlike, those hands extending into arms that wrapped her tight. The carpet figures slid forward and in moments she stood before Jeremy, humiliated and defeated. Marks and Tanner squirmed beside her.

"I've made a few additions to my household since you were last here," Jeremy said.

The Direwalker came forward and, whispering something in his ear, handed Jeremy the swords.

Jeremy took the blades eagerly, and swung one about, testing its weight. The metal left trails of fire in the air. He turned toward the back of the room, which was empty, and swung the blade hard. Flame arced forth, scorching the far tapestries. Some of the dinner guests gasped.

"Lovely!" Jeremy said. "Though I'm collared, I can sense vitra again, through the blade. Marvelous. It makes me wonder: How easily can these take a man's head?" He met her eyes and stepped forward. "Or a woman's."

He held the tip of the blade to her throat.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The sword point kissed the hollow in Ari's neck and drew blood. Gols weren't supposed to feel pain the same way humans did, but she felt the blade's terrible heat well enough. Still, she refused to flinch. Not in front of Jeremy her archenemy. Not in front of Tanner and Marks.

She squeezed her jaw. *This wasn't real*, she reminded herself.

Then why the hell did it feel so real? She remembered what Hoodwink had said about dying in here.

Die, and you'll find yourself in the Outside. That way is a bit of a blow to the body though, and I don't suggest it. A lot of people die for real.

Die for real.

Jeremy pressed his lips together in disappointment, and lowered the blade. "Well, you could at least quake for me, darling. You always did have a cold heart though. And you were just as cold in bed. Well. What about if I take this one's head instead?"

He brought the blade to Tanner's neck.

She bit back the plea that formed at the back of her throat. She knew if she showed any sign of concern, any sign of weakness, Jeremy would gain the upper hand. First rule of politics: Never let your opponent gain the upper

hand.

"Aha!" Jeremy said. "You care about him. I see it in your eyes."

Jeremy wouldn't kill him. Not with all his sycophants around.

"Kill him," she said. "He's nothing to me."

Please don't kill him. Please don't.

Jeremy cocked his head. "Really. Nothing."

Her eyes slid to Tanner. His jaw was clenched, and he stared at Jeremy with visible defiance. His skin was beginning to blister where the hot blade touched his neck, and she smelled the subtle hint of cooked meat.

She quickly looked back to Jeremy, at that smirking face of his, and again she felt the urge to beg. But she'd been trained in politics and manipulation. She could get the better of Jeremy. This was a game. The stakes were life and death, but it was still a game.

"When you're done playing with your new swords, Jeremy sweetheart, let me know," she said, thinking on her feet. "Because I've come to make a proposition."

Jeremy frowned, and then lowered the blade.

Good. Curiosity was the first step.

"You come inside my house," Jeremy said. "With swords swinging and faces bloodied, killing the men that guard my estate. And now you say you have a proposition? Surely there are better ways to introduce yourself?"

Yes, but I didn't expect you to have a carpet that could transform into a jailer.

Jeremy tapped the two swords together impatiently. "Well?" The blades arced flames when they touched. The threat was clear.

"I can teach you how to live forever," Ari said.

Jeremy studied her a moment, and one eyebrow climbed up his head. Then he burst out in raucous laughter.

He glanced at the sycophants around him. "She can teach me how to live forever!"

Stiff, nervous laughter erupted here and there among the onlookers. Uncle Briar laughed loudest, she noted.

"Ari, Ari, Ari," Jeremy said. "Even if it were true, and that's a big if, what makes you think I'd even be interested? Immortality. Pah! Who wants to live forever on this iceberg of dried shit?"

"Look at my face," Ari said. "Do you see a single wrinkle? Do you remember how I looked when I left you?"

He regarded her closely. "Hmm."

"Open my cloak," she said.

His brow furrowed suspiciously, but then he nodded to the nearby Direwalker. The gol came forward and ripped open her ermine cloak.

Jeremy gasped when he saw the numbers stamped there. He handed

the Direwalker the fire swords, and he tried to slip his fingers under the collar of her shirt, but of course the cloth was melded to her flesh. "Impossible."

In answer, she merely looked at him. She had him now.

Jeremy marched over to Tanner and tore off his cloak as well. The number 1010 stood out plainly on his chest. "Gol as well. Also high ranking." Jeremy went to Marks and flung open the man's coat. "Just a User."

Jeremy strolled over to a rack of swords arrayed against one wall. She recognized his showcase pieces, a collection of fine blades he'd collected from cities all over the world during his trader years. "Immortality you say? As a gol?"

"Yes," she said.

Jeremy ran his fingers along the many hilts. Sometimes he'd pause to pick a sword from the rack and test its weight. "It *is* enticing, I must admit. Gols can't get sick. Physically, at least. And gols don't notice pain like ordinary men and women, or so it's said. I'd accept your offer, I really would. Except for one thing."

Jeremy picked out a sword and sauntered back to her side. "I'm not quite sure I *want* to be a gol. That whole mind plague business, you know. It quite turns me off to the prospect. And it's spreading faster than ever. Did you know I have to replace twenty of my pet Direwalkers each day because of it?" He rotated the blade in front of his eyes and light pinpricked the surface.

A fine weapon—numerous gems inlaid the hilt, and silver-chased scrollwork etched the blade beneath the cutting edge. "You promise immortality, darling Ari, but your argument is seriously flawed. Because you see, gols *can* die."

He slammed the blade into the Direwalker's belly. The stunned gol dropped the fire swords, and looked down at the weapon impaling it. When the Direwalker looked up, its expression was all too human. Heartbroken. Filled with one question. Why?

Jeremy slid the weapon free, and an intestinal loop followed it in a spurt of blood. The Direwalker fell to its knees, vainly trying to hold back its insides, and collapsed, squirming. Blood pooled on the ermineskin, and Ari understood now why Jeremy had dyed the carpet red.

"Did you like how I gave him the other swords to hold?" Jeremy's voice was filled with malicious glee. His eyes didn't lift from the twitching body. "Politics. It's all about misdirection." Jeremy swung the blade down and cruelly severed its head. The body gave one final kick and then ceased all motion.

Jeremy looked up. He seemed to realize for the first time that his guests were fidgeting uncomfortably. "What? It's just a gol! He had the beginnings of the mind sickness anyway. Had to be replaced."

Jeremy raised a hand, and three Direwalkers stepped forward to replace the fallen one. "Take her and her friends to the Black Room. I'll deal

with them shortly. And bring someone to clean up this mess!" Jeremy turned to his house guests, and segued into goodbyes and thanks-for-comings.

The carpet released Ari and her companions, and the Direwalkers brought her upstairs, disarmed, humiliated, and conquered, into the heart of the enemy's domain.

The enemy who had once been her husband.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Hands secured behind her back, Ari knelt with her companions in the center of the Black Room, so named for the paint that blackened floor, ceiling, and walls. Only the bronze brazier with its hot coals and the iron desk with its wicked instruments gave the room any color, malevolent though that color might be. The bronze candle lamps completed the disturbing scene.

Jeremy stood before her, his hands gloved, a long apron tied around his suit. The gloves and apron were, of course, black. Jeremy held a pair of dental forceps, and he smiled like a madman.

"You've never seen this room," Jeremy said. "I was always careful to hide it from you. It's my special room, the place I take certain bad people who've done certain bad things to me. For example, people who rush into my house and kill my guardsmen. Only *I'm* allowed to do that. You understand why I'm angry, don't you?"

"Oh, I know you're mad, that's for certain," Ari said.

His grin widened. "At least I'm not afraid to admit it. There's something to be said about a man elected by the people, a man who embraces his madness, for the people..."

"Elected?" She glanced at Tanner and Marks. "No one would ever

vote for this sorry excuse of a man. He fixed all the elections."

Jeremy spread his arms in what Ari supposed was meant to be a gesture of apology, or conciliation. "Call me a perfectionist."

"I call you a liar," she said. "And a dictator."

"Come now Ari, why so harsh? After all I've done for you?"

She glanced at the forceps. "I wonder why."

"Oh, you need not fear, this isn't for you." Jeremy opened and closed the forceps. "At least not yet."

"Why are you creating an army of Direwalkers?" she said.

Jeremy slitted his dark eyes. "Maybe I like Direwalkers."

"What's next? Zombies? Werewolves?"

He shrugged. "This world is mine to do with as I please. It's been promised me."

"Promised? By who?"

Jeremy glanced at his Direwalker assistants, and nodded toward Tanner and Marks. "Hold them."

The Direwalkers restrained her and her friends, though all three of them had their hands tied behind their backs already.

"I've grown quite proficient in dentistry, did you know?" Jeremy studied the forceps. "Having a tooth pulled is one of the most excruciating experiences of the human condition. It's almost beyond the mind's pain

threshold. When you pass that threshold, the brain turns on its defenses, and the person faints. But what happens when you turn off that preservation mechanism? When the mind can't faint to save itself from the pain?" He smiled. There was a twinkle in his eye. "Madness. Pure and utter."

He went to the desk, and retrieved a small vial. He approached Tanner and one of the Direwalkers forced her friend's mouth open.

"A little something to prevent you from fainting." Jeremy casually poured a third of the vial's contents into Tanner's mouth. He repeated the procedure with Marks. And her.

When it was done, she felt incredibly alert, and awake.

"Have you heard of the Schmidt pain index?" Jeremy said. "It's a rating of the agony inflicted by different hymenopteran stings. Kind of a grading scale for pain, as it were."

He strode to the iron desk, and opened a jar. "On the scale, which increases exponentially, zero rates as a pain that barely registers, like a kiss with a bit of a bite. At two, we have a familiar pain, such as a quick, rude pinprick. Having a tooth pulled rates a three, though for obvious reasons it's not included on the scale. The index maxes-out at four, the most painful level. Unfortunately, most of the insects included on the scale are now extinct. But I've managed to get my hands on a particularly resilient species that has survived in the homes of the south."

He inserted the forceps into the jar and removed a squirming insect about the size of Ari's little finger. "Paraponera clavata. Also known as the bullet ant. The Schmidt pain index rates this little creature a four-plus. Yes. It's beyond the scale. The sting induces pure excruciation, concentrated on an area the size of a pencil-point. The affected body part exhibits a totally uncontrollable urge to shake, and throbs with pain for an entire day afterward. It's like walking over a firepit with a rusty nail grinding into your heel with each step. And that's from one sting. Imagine what twenty stings would do."

Jeremy approached Tanner, and the Direwalker assistant forced his mouth open.

The insect wriggled at the tip of the forceps. Its legs opened and closed, its mandibles snapped at the air, its stinger flexed and unflexed.

Tanner's eyes were focused, unbroken, on that insect, his face a mask of fear. Ari had seen raw terror on only a few people in her life, and seeing it now on her friend made a small part of her die inside. The innocent part.

Jeremy lifted the ant toward Tanner's open mouth—

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

"Stop it!" Ari said. "Stop!"

Jeremy lowered the ant. He looked at her blandly, as though she had ruined his fun. "Tell me how you became a gol, sweet Ari."

"I—" She shook her head. "You wouldn't believe it anyway."

Jeremy raised the ant once more—

"We crossed the Forever Gate," Ari said.

Tanner shook his head free of the Direwalker's grip. "Don't tell him a thing Ari!"

The Direwalker punched Tanner in the jaw, and forced his mouth open again.

Jeremy was facing Ari fully now. "Crossed the Gate, you say? And then what?"

"No, you don't understand," she said. "The Outside is a completely different world. We're actually on a moon, around Jupiter. On a crashed ship of some kind. And we're being attacked. We're trying to help the gols. We need the Control Room. The Box."

"We're on a moon," Jeremy said flatly. "Around Jupiter. Now I see why you came in here with swords swinging. A story like that... it's more

than ridiculous. It's preposterous." Jeremy shook his head. "I'm disappointed in you, Ari. You can do better than this."

He lifted the insect back to Tanner's mouth—

"Wait!" she said. "Please. Don't do this. You'll kill him."

"I know that," Jeremy said.

The insect was so close now that it perceived Tanner's lips, and it started flexing its stinger toward him, anticipating the contact, perhaps believing that by stinging him it would know freedom.

She closed her eyes. She couldn't watch. This was her fault. She should've followed the plan, and now, because of her rashness, she'd have to watch her friend die. Tanner had grown on her these past three days on the Inside. It was too soon to lose him. She'd just lost her father. Hadn't she lost enough already?

"You were right Jeremy," Ari said, swallowing the last of her pride. "You win. I care about him. Please don't do this. You win. I'll do whatever you want."

Jeremy paused. The insect was a fingersbreadth from Tanner's lips. Then he nodded to himself. "Very well. I will grant you this one favor. For what you and I once had."

He swung about and in two quicks steps covered the distance to Marks. One of the Direwalkers forced Marks' mouth wide.

"Jeremy no!" she said, but inside she was relieved.

And she hated herself for it.

Jeremy opened the forceps and dropped the ant inside.

The Direwalker clamped Marks' mouth shut with those corded arms, and squeezed tight so that he couldn't chew.

Marks struggled a few moments, the pain apparently not registering. And then his eyes widened. He began shaking violently all over. Frantic, muffled yelps emerged from his sealed lips.

Faint faint please faint, Ari thought.

But Marks didn't faint. Froth formed at the corners of his mouth, and the flesh all around the lower part of his face puffed up.

"Release him," Jeremy said.

Marks fell forward and spat the ant on the floor. The insect was crimped, and quivered sickly. Marks lay there for a few moments, shuddering like the insect, eyes closed, his breath coming in deep, painful-sounding wheezes. His swollen tongue puffed from his lips.

His lids shot open and he let out a bloodcurdling, muffled scream. His eyes were bloodshot and filled with madness. He scrambled to his feet. His body trembled wildly. His head shook from side to side. He hooted deliriously and dashed from the room.

Two of the Direwalkers made to follow him.

Jeremy raised a hand. "Leave him."

Outside the room, Marks' hooting changed pitch suddenly, and Ari heard a sickening splat, just as if he'd stumbled over the balcony and fallen headfirst to the marble below.

"What have I done?" she said.

Jeremy smiled sadly. "Killed your friend."

"He was only eighteen."

"Looked older to me." Jeremy strode to the table and set the forceps among the other instruments of torture. "I have some good news. I've decided what I'm going to do with you and your lover." He smiled lifelessly. "I'm going to be kind. Somehow you've become a gol. I'm happy being human, but I very much want to know how you accomplished this neat little trick. Without the lies, mind you. You said you would do whatever I want? You will indeed."

He waltzed over to Ari and tightly gripped her chin in his gloved palm, just as if he were examining a goat or cow for the slaughter. She could feel his fingers pressing into the bone. "Gols can be revised just like any human. It doesn't work on the mentally damaged ones of course. But for the rest, it's fabulous. I've turned gol executioners into seamstresses, gol whores into assassins. The symbol on the chest remains the same. It's great for hoodwinking people. Anyway, the good news is, I'm going to revise you.

Again! Yes, I thought you'd be delighted. I'm going to suck out all your memories so I can view them at my leisure. I'll learn how you became a gol soon enough.

"And those empty memories will be replaced with, well, something fun! You and your lover are going to be my personal fellators. Every day when I wake up, you'll take turns. You'll follow me around my house all day, naked, begging to fulfill me. But you won't be allowed until the next morning. You'll live only to pleasure me, and my pleasure will be your greatest reward. You'll be so debased, so degenerate, no one will recognize you as anything even remotely resembling a woman. And the sad part is, you'll be loving every minute of it." He glanced at the Direwalkers. "Take them to the revision chamber."

"You can't do this," Ari said as the Direwalkers hauled her to her feet. "You can't destroy us like this. You wouldn't."

"I can. I would. And I will." Jeremy walked to the door. "I look forward to many mornings of mulled wine, my dearest Ari, the daily crier in my hands, your head between my legs, your mouth right where it belongs. Ta-ta."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Memories.

Was Ari truly just the sum of her memories? Or was she something more? Something that experience couldn't change. Something that amnesia, or circumstance, could never wipe away. And if she were wiped and rewritten, her memories replaced by a lifetime in a whorehouse, would she still retain the dauntless spirit that had kept her going all these long years? The love of humanity that she'd held in her heart through it all? Sure, she'd grown crabby, and maybe a bit cynical in her later years, but she still loved the world and its people. That love was sorely tested at times, especially recently, but it was a love she'd retained despite everything, a love that allowed her to fight for humanity. Would she lose that love? Or would it remain deep inside her, hidden away by revision, out of reach but still present, like vitra beneath the collar?

The collar. The bronze bitch was a hiccup in the program, according to Tanner. A rule inherited from the days when the world was based on what he called an *immersive video game*.

"We will have a world uncollared," Tanner had told her. "A world where every man can freely use the spark inside him without aging." She had

once thought him a pessimist, but she was wrong. He was more a romantic. Much like she'd been when the Users had first inducted her. Maybe that's why she'd grown to like Tanner so much.

"But it will be a false world," she said, taking over the role of pessimist. "A fake one."

"But isn't the world that the eyes see, the ears hear, and the senses feel, the only reality there is? Isn't what we taste and smell, real? Bits of light called photons shine from the sun and reflect from surfaces onto our eyes, and our mind puts them back together to form an image. Would the world be any less real if we didn't have eyes and sent out waves of sound instead, and those waves returned to us and were interpreted the same way our minds interpreted photons? Or if we had some device plugged into our bellies that tapped into the wires implanted in our spinal cords, and fed images and sounds and data for all five senses to our heads? Aren't all three cases the same? Isn't what feeds our minds *real*?"

"You really buy into this reality-is-what-feeds-the-mind crap, don't you?"

"I buy into the truth, Ari," Tanner said. "And the truth is, what feeds the mind *is* reality. No matter who or what is doing the feeding. The eyes. A wire. The mind itself."

As the grim-faced revisor strapped Ari into the revision chair, she

understood the truth of Tanner's words more than ever. She would be rewritten again, her greatest fear. She'd forget all she knew of the Outside. Her reality would become a living hell.

She'd failed in her mission. She'd failed Hoodwink. She'd failed herself.

It was a small consolation, knowing her air would run out in the real world two days from now. Only three weeks on the Inside, living this hell, then she'd die without warning. Just another victim of The Drop.

Her wrists were clamped in an iron vise. There was a handhold beneath her palms, so that she had something to grip "when the pain comes," as the revisor told her. She was strapped to an iron chair, and two prongs had been folded down from above to touch her temples. Was it the prongs that would reshape her?

Though she'd been revised before, she remembered none of this.

For the first time since she left the house in this new body, she felt cold.

Tanner was strapped into a revision chair opposite her. Behind him, the headrest contained radial bars of light, each a different shade of purple, the hues changing in sequential intensity so that the bars appeared to rotate. Similar light bars lay behind her own head. She knew because she could see the different tones of purple reflecting on her arms.

Who would be first, she wondered. Tanner or her? Who would have to sit and watch as the mind of the other was rewritten? Would the last image she'd have of this life, this personality, be of Tanner howling and writhing and vomiting through the pain of revision? Or would she go first and be spared the anguish of seeing him destroyed?

Maybe the machines would revise them at the same time. But why did it matter? Neither of them would remember when it was done. Everything they knew would be wiped away in an instant. All to massage the ego of the man who once named her wife.

She gave Tanner her bravest smile, but he didn't return it. His eyes seemed full of regret for the future that could have been. At least his eyes weren't accusing. She didn't think she could handle that.

"Power's been low the past few days," the revisor said, wiping its nose with a sniff. "Battery problems." The revisor wore a long white coat with the image of a human brain on it. "Welp, nothing for it then. Have to do you one at a time. Start with you, little lady, I suppose."

"Thank you," she said, and meant it. She wouldn't have to watch Tanner's revision.

The revisor looked at her strangely. "You're thanking me for doing this? You krub are an odd lot. An odd, odd lot."

"I'm a gol, like you."

The revisor glanced down at her chest, and lowered the telescopic monocle that was secured to a band around its head. "And so you are. A high ranking one at that. Too bad for you." The gol pressed a button on the pad beside the chair.

The machine turned on.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Ari stood on a tiny island of sand. There was a palm tree beside her, with a single coconut hanging from the branches. Around her the ocean seethed and boiled, though the massive waves never touched her island. Directly above, the sky was clear, sunny. A few miles off, the horizons on all sides were devoured by swirling, black clouds.

In the storm she saw her existing memories. They fought and grappled with one another for a chance to bubble to the surface, if only fleetingly. New, foreign memories competed with the old, becoming stronger and more frequent with each moment, so that as she watched, the seething mass of clouds became a potpourri of sights and sounds, tastes and smells, touches and emotions.

Old memories of triumph, friendship, and ascension. Of service to humankind.

New memories of loss, beatings, and captivity. Of service to Jeremy.

Pain spasmed through her body. The pulses of agony originated at her temples, and resounded through the core of her being like the hammer blows of a smith at the forge, refashioning her into a shape designed by another. All that she was, all that she was meant to be, destroyed and changed by a

thousand electrical pulses fired into her mind.

She dropped to her hands and knees in the sand, and then collapsed entirely. Through vision gone red with pain, she gazed at the dwindling portion of open sky directly above, a sky hemmed by ever tightening storm clouds. The palm tree swayed in the wind.

The palm tree.

Her eyes fastened on the brown husk nestled in the fan-shaped leaves.

A coconut.

Somehow, she knew that hard shell protected the part of her which could never be changed. If she could just reach that coconut...

She dragged herself across the island. Lift one hand. The other. Haul the knees forward. Again. Pace by tiny pace. The base of the tree seemed so very far away. Sand got into her fingernails. Strings of mucus dripped onto her lips. The sand got into those strings too, and smeared her face with a line of grit. Her head pounded.

She reached the palm tree and looked up. The trunk had grown, and the coconut was higher now. She was running out of time. Had to climb. Couldn't wait. Around her, the eye of the hurricane shrank, and the waters roiled with increasing ferocity, eager to drown her being.

The pain became too much then, and her body betrayed her. She convulsed in sheer agony, involuntarily slamming her knees into her chin.

She shuddered, howling like a madwoman.

The wave of pain passed.

She regained control.

She put her hands on the scab-like rinds of the trunk and began to climb.

But the tree transformed into a wall of stone. A wall that reached the sky.

The Forever Gate.

She climbed that wall, and the ocean waves fought her, hurling into her body. She had to hold her breath sometimes when the water submersed her. The rocky surface became slippery, precarious, but she forced herself onward, digging within herself to find an endurance and intensity of focus she didn't think she had. The mind controls its own reality, wasn't that what someone close to her had once said?

The slap of a giant wave nearly tore her from the wall.

Somehow, she held on.

But it was hopeless. The coconut kept sliding farther and farther up along the wall, the wall that ran to forever. Her unchangeable essence, all that she was, impossibly out of reach.

Dad...

Another wave struck and she was swept from the wall.

She opened her eyes. Her cheeks were wet, as if she'd been crying. Her throat burned, as if she'd been yelling. Her clothes felt damp, as if she'd been splashed.

She sat in a strange seat. There was a strange man opposite her, tied to an equally strange chair. Strange bars of light rotated around his head. He had strange prongs attached to his forehead, and his wrists were clamped in strange bracelets. Like hers.

Ah, she recognized him now. It was Max! Good old Max.

A kindly man came over, and she looked at him shyly. He was dressed all in white, and had a bronze tube over his left eye, a tube with glass at the tip.

"Welp, nice to see you made it back." The man held up a small stick of metal. "Keep your head still and look to the left." She obeyed instantly, and he shone a light into her eye from the stick. It made her blink.

"What's your name?" the kindly man said.

"Maggie."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

She smiled timidly at the man.

"Good." The kindly man pulled the lightstick away. "Looks like the revision took nicely."

"You're so nice," she said to the kindly man, feeling bashful.

He gave her a pat on the head.

"Your name's not Maggie," Max said across from her. His voice seemed stern.

"Who are you talking to, Max?" she said. Max was the only one she was allowed to directly question. "*I'm* Maggie."

"No. You're not." She saw the cords in Max's neck stand out, as if he struggled against the binds that held him. Which made no sense. Obviously Master Jeremy had placed the binds there. Why would Max fight against something Master Jeremy wanted?

The kindly man unlocked her binds. "Welp, on your feet Maggie."

She hopped to it.

"You're going to make such a good whore." The kindly man smiled.

She felt her heart swell. It felt so good to please.

Images of Master Jeremy surged into her mind, and she instantly felt

bad. The kindly man wasn't the one she should be pleasing. She lived only to service one man, a man who had been so nice to her, it was heartbreaking. She wanted to make sure he was happy. How she loved having him happy. Master Jeremy Jeremy Jeremy I love you I love you I want you.

But then the kindly man did something that distracted her. He pressed something on the desk near Max, and the chair that her only friend was tied to began to hum. The bars of light behind Max's head pulsed faster and faster. Max clenched his teeth, and his knuckles turned white.

The kindly man was hurting him.

"What are you—" she stopped herself. She was only allowed to question Max and no one else. Especially not the kindly man who was no longer kindly.

Max's eyes seemed to cloud over, his tongue lolled from his mouth, and a stream of spittle oozed from his lips. The skin around his temples bunched up as the dead weight of his head pressed into the prongs. A quiet moan escaped his throat, a moan that slowly rose in volume until it was an all-out scream.

"Please," she said to the bad man, but she couldn't hear her own voice above that scream.

Max Max Max no no no! Her only friend, the only other person who adored Master Jeremy as much as she did, was dying. And there was nothing

she could do about it.

As she stood there watching the bad man torture Max, a lock broke inside her, and a doorway flung open to the part of her mind that memory and personality couldn't overwrite. The part of her mind that wouldn't allow someone she cared about to suffer. No matter what.

Without really knowing what she was doing, she went to the bad man, and he looked at her in surprise. She slammed her palm into the bronze tube that covered his left eye. The tube plunged into his skull, and the bad man crumpled to the floor.

Max's yell had faded to a gurgle. She struggled to lift the prongs from his forehead, but they wouldn't move, the ends jammed into the back of the chair. Those bars of light behind Max's head switched colors faster than ever.

She went to the pad where she'd seen the bad man work at the desk, and she touched a bunch of different words and pictures. The pad lit up beneath her fingers, and sometimes the contents changed. She recognized a few words on it, but most of them meant nothing to her. *Regress. Extract. Resume. Cancel.*

Pressing *Cancel* did it.

The hum faded. The lights behind Max's head went out. His gurgling stopped.

She tried those prongs again, and this time they gave. The metal slid

up his temples, and because all his weight was on them, she etched long red marks across his forehead. When she'd finally lifted the prongs free, his head slumped forward, startling her.

"Max?"

She tried to take off the binds at his wrists, and it took her a few moments to figure out the latch that unlocked them. Next she opened the buckle at his waist, and he fell into her arms.

"Max, are you okay? Max?" She tried to open one of his eyelids.

He snapped awake. "Ari!" He hugged her. "Thought I'd lost you."

"Max," she smiled. "It's me. Maggie!"

"Damn," Max said.

She heard footsteps, and another man dressed in white appeared at the door. She couldn't tell if he was good or bad. The eyes of the new man widened when he saw them.

Max leaped from her arms and immediately tackled the man. Max thumped him on the head until the man sagged like a rag doll. Then he stood up and dashed from the room.

She wasn't sure if she was supposed to follow him, and she started to panic. "Max?" She hugged herself, and glanced around the empty room nervously. "Max!"

He returned, and she nearly cried with relief. She'd never been so

happy to see him.

"I'm scared Max," she said. "Are we in trouble with Master Jeremy?"

He grabbed both her hands, and sat her in the same chair she'd awakened in. She obeyed, as was her nature. "We don't have much time." He secured the clamps around her wrists, and buckled the belt.

"Max are we in trouble?" she said again.

"We are." Max lowered the prongs over her forehead.

"It's cold," she said, and shivered. For some reason she didn't think she was supposed to feel cold anymore. "Let's go back to Master Jeremy. Let's get the beatings done with. Please Max."

Max studied the pad beside her chair. "I've only ever read about these in the system archives. Never actually used one."

The white-coated man near the door awakened with a groan. Max went to him, and hauled him over to the pad. He wrapped his hands around the man's throat. "Restore her or I crush your windpipe."

The man stared groggily at the pad, then began pressing buttons. Max watched him carefully. "If she doesn't wake up as the woman I know, I'm putting you in the other chair and giving you the revision meant for me."

The man said nothing, but pressed a button on the pad and the chair hummed to life.

She was scared, more scared than she'd ever been in her tiny,

sheltered life. A sudden thought occurred to her.

"Max?" she said. "Do you love me?"

Those words got his attention, and he looked from the pad. "I..."

"Do you?"

He opened his mouth, but then shook his head. "She's not herself," he said quietly. Max glanced at the man, and tightened his grip around that throat. "Do it."

The man slid his fingers across the pad.

"See you in a bit, Ari," Max said.

She found herself on a tiny island, surrounded by a vortex of memory. The vortex, and the stormy sea around her, receded, so that the island grew until around her lay only sand—dunes and dunes of the gritty stuff hunching to the clear horizon. Behind her, the Forever Gate climbed to infinity.

Her father was here. He'd crossed the Gate for her.

In his hands, he held the twin halves of a coconut.

"Step through the mirror," he said, extending the halves.

She took the broken shells, and sipped the sweet, nourishing liquid inside.

The sand sprouted grass, trees, and bushes.

She looked to her father in wonder, but he was gone.

In his place stood a mirror. The blooming landscape reflected back at

her. Round leaves, rich trunks, flowering hedges, everything reproduced in minute detail. Everything except herself.

She had no reflection.

She stepped through the mirror.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

She opened her eyes to see Tanner watching her, holding one of the revisors by the neck.

"Tanner," she said.

Tanner rammed the revisor's head into the desk, knocking the gol unconscious.

He freed her from the chair. "Welcome back, Ari." He turned away without so much as a hug.

Ari stood. Another revisor lay sprawled on the floor beside her. The tip of the telescopic monocle poked from the gol's eye, where someone had hammered it in. Blood from the wound plastered the revisor's face. More of Tanner's handiwork?

"Hurry," Tanner said. Just as if he were blind, he began to slide his hands over the desk that abutted the chair opposite hers. "We have to find the Revision Box."

Of course. This room was sourced from a Box, like the Control Room.

Ari surveyed the desk beside her. "What's it look like?"

"You can only see the Box when it's closed," Tanner said.

"Ah." So she did as Tanner did, and glided her fingers across the desk beside her, and over the strange levers and dials, and above and around the revision chair. She moved forward to search behind the chair, and the toe of her boot stubbed an invisible object on the floor. Like a street mummer she was able to outline the shape of an unseen chest. Made of wood, she thought, judging from the grainy texture. The lid seemed open.

"Found it," she said, feeling a swell of pride at having discovered the Box first. She really did enjoy winning.

She closed the lid.

Instantly the fabric of reality stretched and folded, and the revision chairs, the desks and everything else warped along that fabric, twisting into the invisible box as if the entire chamber were some tapestry folding in upon itself. The whole room seemed to whip right through her body, and she felt strange inside, *unreal*.

Then it was done. Only bare walls, ceiling and floor were left, with not a piece of furniture in sight save for the sealed wooden chest at Ari's feet.

That strange feeling of unreality inside her worsened all of a sudden, and she keeled over and threw up.

"Forgot to tell you." Tanner came up beside her. "It's best to close the Box from behind."

"Great." She wiped her hand across her lips, and swallowed the acrid

taste from her mouth. She hated throwing up.

Ari turned the key that sat in the lock of the chest, pocketed it, and scooped the Box under one arm. "Surprisingly light."

"Or you're surprisingly strong." Tanner smiled ironically. "Like a gol maybe?"

Ari and Tanner dashed into the adjoining room, which was empty save for two ladderback chairs set against the wall, and the Direwalker with a twisted neck on the floor. *Nicely done, Tanner.*

The two of them crossed to the corridor beyond.

Here the walls were white, and arches embossed with carvings of sea creatures decorated the doorways of the side chambers. A gold-rimmed red carpet ran along the center of the floor. Triple-pronged candelabras were set every five paces.

"Which way?" Tanner said.

She ran the blueprint of the house through her mind, this place she'd lived and walked through so many times in her early twenties. Urgent footfalls and shouts echoed from somewhere ahead.

"Ari, they're onto us." Tanner's voice cut with impatience. "Which way?"

When she didn't answer, Tanner took a step forward.

Ari shot out a hand and blocked him. She glanced downward,

indicating the gold-trimmed carpet. "What's really a carpet, and what's something else? This way."

Ari dashed forward, taking care to run along the bare floor between carpet and wall. Tanner followed in single-file behind her.

On the far side of the corridor four Direwalkers rounded the bend at a sprint. They spotted Ari and Tanner and gave a hoot. Two of them held fire swords, *their* fire swords, and the blades glowed a molten red.

"Ari..." Tanner's voice drifted to her.

She spun into a side hall as flames roared from those blades. Tanner jostled into her, the back of his uniform singed.

Ari raced down the corridor, and on the right side the hallway opened onto a flight of wooden stairs—the back route the servants used.

Ari took the stairs three at a time. At the bottom, she turned into the kitchen, and hurried through the hanging pots and pans. There were no cooks here, not at this hour.

"The back door is just this way," she said.

"Why do builders always put the back doors in the kitchens?" Tanner said.

Ari ignored the comment, because just ahead seven Direwalkers guarded the door.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Ari immediately backtracked.

The other pursuing Direwalkers burst into the far side of the kitchen. The fire swords flared in the grips of the two at the front.

Ari turned into the pantry, and raced past the foodstuffs and out into the main dining hall. She edged by the blackwood table and out into a hallway that was much the same as the one on the second floor, absent the carpet.

Tanner kept close to her side, and behind she heard the footfalls of Direwalkers, growing in volume. It was an eerie sound, the clatter of claws against marble, and she knew that some of the Direwalkers had broken ahead of the pack and were running on all fours.

She and Tanner burst into the empty reception hall. She dashed obliquely toward the sword rack, taking a circuit around the carpet.

The pursuing Direwalkers simply cut across the carpet, and were almost upon her and Tanner.

The rack with its showcase swords lay just ahead.

"Catch!" As she ran, she tossed the Revision Box to Tanner—

She leapt toward the rack, somersaulting over it—

Grabbed two swords from the rack in midair—

And landed on the other side.

She pivoted.

Tanner had vaulted over the rack as well, and two Direwalkers leaped after him in pursuit.

She brought the swords about in a wide arc. Tanner stooped, and she cut the two Direwalkers in half before they touched the ground.

Two more approached around the rack and she made short work of them.

She saw a bright ball of flame at the periphery of her vision—

She leaped toward the wall, and used it to slingshot into the air—

Flames streamed past below her—

She landed beside the Direwalker and its stolen fire sword.

A jab, a parry, a slash, and she'd severed the hand holding the blade.

A spin of the body, followed by a wide backstab, and she plunged her second sword into its heart.

She hooked her boot into the hilt of the dropped fire sword, kicked the blade to eye level, and swapped one of her blades for that one. She immediately felt the spark of vitra inside her, jolting up her arm from the weapon.

It felt good.

Another stream of flame cut toward her—

She parried with the fire blade—

The flames parted in a tight V-shape that singed her hair and clothes.

Two quick steps and a sideways leap from a pillar brought her to the Direwalker in question, and after a quick exchange of feints and stabs, she'd taken its head, and the other fire sword.

More Direwalkers closed...

She released the spark of vitra from the blades as she fought, launching hell-fire on all sides. She weaved, a dancer at play. Her rhythm was the blade and its fire; her music was the gush of blood and the sizzle of flesh and the screams of the dying. She avoided the carpet the entire time, though sometimes her foot brushed its edge.

When it was done, and the Direwalkers lay around her in various states of mutilation and ash, she tossed one of the fire blades to Tanner, who'd wisely flattened himself against the wall and given her room to fight.

"Nice," Tanner said. There seemed a touch of awe in his voice. Or at least respect.

"Well that's that." Ari felt immensely proud of herself. She'd barely broken a sweat. "I think I'm at twenty."

"Let's just go." Tanner seemed weary.

She took the Revision Box from him, and hoisted it over her shoulder.

The carpet began to writhe beside them. Tentacles formed, reaching for their feet.

"Out of here!" Tanner turned to run along the space between carpet and wall.

"No!" Ari released a surge of flame, and the tentacles instantly retreated. "We get the Control Room Box, *then* we leave." Leaving now meant Marks had died for nothing.

Shrieks and howls came from her left. Direwalkers flowed down the wide, branching stairs from the second level. Fifty Direwalkers. A hundred.

"Ari..." Tanner laid a hand on her arm.

Still more Direwalkers came down those stairs, the gols crowded so close together as to resemble a single entity, like the black python she'd seen at the circus as a child. A giant version of it anyway.

"They'll be time to get the Control Room Box another day," Tanner said. "We've done what we came here to do. We've planted the tracker."

Even more Direwalkers came, and crowded down the stairs behind the others. Far more than Ari and Tanner could handle on their own, even with the swords.

A tendril hurled at her from the carpet—

She ducked—

The tendril slammed into the wall, leaving cracks.

She released another stream of flame into the carpet. The fire blackened the surface where it struck, and the creature squealed, retreating.

"Ari let's go!" Tanner said.

But she was already running past him.

And so Ari and Tanner ran from the mayor's house with death in pursuit. One or two Direwalkers occasionally hindered their progress, but the pair cut them down easily enough. Across the grounds the two dashed, through the damaged gates, and out into the night.

But they would not escape so easily.

The army of Direwalkers pursued the entire way, and followed the pair onto the lamp-lit street beyond. The faster ones ran across the snowpack on all fours, while the more agile ones leaped between the rooftops of the houses beside them, sending snow sliding down onto the street.

Though she inhabited the body of a gol, she was getting tired. Beside her, Tanner wasn't faring much better. Both of them were winded. They couldn't keep this up for much longer. The Revision Box was getting heavier and heavier on her shoulder. The sword felt like lead.

She had an idea. It was a small hope, but it was chance, no matter how tiny.

"Hold them off," she said.

"What?" Tanner's voice exuded incredulity above the exhaustion.

"Do it." She halted on the snowpack, and dropped the chest.

"Hope you know what you're doing," Tanner said, lifting the blade.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Ari spun around, and was forced to slay two Direwalkers at the head of the pack. As Tanner defended against the others, she raised the sword over the box and let the vitra accumulate, but she didn't release it. The blade glowed molten, and shook with the power of pent-up flames. The smoke plumes rose to engulf her hands. Her fingers burned, but there was nothing for it. She needed to put on the biggest show she could manage.

The biggest of her life.

"Halt, scum!" she shouted, her breath misting. The Direwalkers at the forefront had begun to overwhelm Tanner, and he retreated toward her. "Halt or I'll destroy the Box! Halt I said!"

The Direwalkers began to obey, one by one, and the onslaught slowed as the gols in the forefront held back those behind. Direwalkers occasionally broke through, but Tanner hacked them down.

The Direwalkers formed a tentative half-circle, which quickly became a full circle as more and more Direwalkers arrived. Tanner patrolled that tight circle, brandishing his flaming weapon, forcing back those who came too near.

The Direwalkers in the forefront snarled, and snapped at the air with

their teeth. They reminded her of chained curs.

Ari raised the blade higher, and accumulated even more vitra in the blade. The sword rumbled, and the smoke poured forth even more profusely. She could feel the heat over her whole body, and the snowpack below her began to melt. The air smelled of cooked meat, and the pain she felt in her hands bordered on indescribable. But she was a gol, and she'd discovered that she could ignore that pain.

"Go ahead," she said through gritted teeth. "Attack. By the time you touch me, your mayor's precious Revision Box will be ashes. I guarantee you."

There was a commotion among the enemy, and the ranks rippled as a huge Direwalker shoved its way to the front. This one towered three heads above Ari, and it had four arms, two in the usual place, and two more midway the ribs. Each hand held a scimitar.

The huge Direwalker bared its teeth in a rictus of hate, and those finger-long fangs pricked the air.

It stepped toward Ari.

Tanner lifted his fire blade to Fourarms' throat.

"Tanner wait," Ari said.

Fourarms glanced at Tanner as if he were a fly. A maggot. The heat from Tanner's blade didn't even touch its throat. She saw no scoring. No

blistering.

Fourarms glared at Ari for a long moment, then turned its head and spat some guttural words at the others. The Direwalkers seemed reluctant to obey at first, but Fourarms spat the strange words again, and the others slowly dispersed.

Fourarms glowered at her a while longer. "We will meet again."

The giant Direwalker batted Tanner's sword aside and sprinted after the others. It sheathed its four blades in mechanical sequence, and then hunched to run on all six appendages, seeming very much like an insect in the dark.

Ari watched the horde vanish into the night, and she wondered what the citizens barricaded within their houses and observing from their windows thought of the whole bizarre proceeding.

Well, there'd certainly be news for the criers tomorrow.

"Twenty-seven," Tanner said, gazing at the dead. "To your twenty."

"You win." She released vitra and the sword went out. She sat down —collapsed, really—onto the chest, and unwrapped her blackened fingers from the hilt. To her disgust, some of her skin remained glued to the haft, and it stretched away from her palms like gauze. Her hands were ruined.

"Take it easy there. Easy!" Tanner helped free her hands from the hilt, and then he bound her palms in fabric ripped from the cloaks of the dead

Direwalkers. She kept a wary eye out while he worked.

"Tanner," she said.

"Mmm?"

This was hard, but it needed to be said. "Sorry for all the times I've been a bitch to you."

He laughed, just a little. "You've never been a bitch to me Ari."

"No, I have." She looked at him and smiled sadly. "And I shouldn't have. I'll try to be less of a bitch in the future, okay?"

He shook his head. "Okay Ari. Okay. You're too hard on yourself."

She shrugged. "Maybe. But I can be too hard on others, too. The hammer of the forge inside me won't back down sometimes, and it hurts the people I care about the most."

"Oh don't you worry, I have a shield, Ari," Tanner said. "Made of crazy-strong bronze. It's a little battered, sure, but it's never let me down yet." He tied off the last of the makeshift bandages, and stood. "That should do it."

She clambered to her feet, and blinked the sudden stars away. She didn't protest when Tanner bent to retrieve the Box from the melted snowpack. He could carry it. She was too exhausted.

She'd escaped from the heart of darkness, from the domain of the only man she feared in this world. She hadn't been afraid of him earlier today. But she was afraid of him now. More than anything. But fear was good. The fire

sword had made her cocky. Lesson learned. She'd think twice before throwing away well-laid plans again. A good man had died today because of her.

At least they'd managed to plant a tracker.

She and Tanner kept their weapons out as they retreated wearily across the snowpack. Her sword was painful and awkward to grip, but there was nothing for it. Some of the Direwalkers had remained behind, and followed in the shadows. Both of them knew it. She'd have to take a roundabout route to the hideaway, and perhaps arrange an ambush along the way.

"I believe it's time we set up a meeting with The Dwarf," Tanner said.

She raised her eyebrows. "The Dwarf?"

"Yes." Tanner glanced at her. "The children restored his connection a few months back."

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

Tanner rested a gentle hand on her shoulder. "The Dwarf's the only one who can talk to your father."

EPILOGUE

Looking down from the balcony, Jeremy surveyed the clean-up of his reception hall. Some of the black-liveried servants mopped the blood and soot marks from the marble, others piled the mutilated bodies into barrows, while still others hauled the bodies away for burning in the kitchens. Some servants took down the ruined paintings. Some repaired the cracks in the walls.

Ari. She'd pay for all this, he promised. Killing his Direwalkers. Interrupting his dinner party. Messing up his reception hall. Stealing his Revision Box. Oh, she'd pay.

"You three!" he called down to the seamstresses he'd hired to cover the burn marks in his precious Living Carpet. "Careful now... that rug is worth more than your miserable hides combined! Make a mistake and you'll never sew again, I swear it!" There was no real damage the seamstresses could do to the thing, of course, other than make it look even uglier. The women were merely a convenient outlet for his rage. Still, fear would make them work with more care and diligence. Fear. His favorite spur.

With a sigh, he left the balcony and returned to his room. He hardly noticed the luxury around him anymore. The tapestries of the underwater

cities he'd dreamed about. The sculptures of sea creatures. The miniature coral reefs. All commissioned for outrageous fees. Art that fed his obsession. Art based on water. Water. The one thing this world lacked in profusion.

Blast this icy place!

Ah well, he wasn't here to brood on ice, art, or women. He glanced at the clock on his fireplace. Three o'clock. Right on time.

He went to the mirror on the far side of the bed chamber, knelt on one knee, and inclined his head. The thread-of-gold tentacle on his sleeve caught the light.

"Master," he said.

When he looked up, the dark shape that called itself One lurked within the mirror, near the bed. It might pass as human in that black robe, with its face hidden in the shadow of the hood. But it was not human.

As usual, Jeremy felt the undeniable fervor that accompanied the Great One's appearance, a fervor that nearly overcame him. He could have wept, shouted for joy, and laughed maniacally, all at the same time.

He resisted the urge to turn around. The Great One resided in the mirror, *his* mirror, and nowhere else.

Nowhere else.

The thought filled him with ecstasy. Exclusivity. Such a drug.

Those unseen lips spoke to him in a baritone that was too low to

belong to any man. "Status update." The voice came from behind Jeremy, and again he had to resist the urge to look. He'd embarrassed himself far too many times doing that.

"I've created ten thousand of the new gols, as you commanded, Great One, and garrisoned them throughout the city, near the portal hops. They are ready to march at your order. The unit leaders have been assigned, the instructions uploaded."

"Excellent," the Great One said. "I am pleased."

Jeremy felt his heart leap. "May I have my reward, then?"

"Not yet."

Jeremy lowered his eyes. It wasn't fair. But he couldn't say that. Not to the Great One.

The voice assumed a strange inflection. "Have there been... difficulties?" It sounded almost accusing.

"No, master," Jeremy said, maybe a little too quickly, and he twisted his lips at the sudden distaste in his mouth. "No difficulties at all."

"Good," the Great One said. "Because if there were difficulties, and you didn't tell me..."

Jeremy put on his best smile, and he looked right into the darkness of that face. "All is going according to plan, Great One."

He gazed into that black hood for as long as he dared, and then

lowered his eyes. When he glanced up again, the Great One was gone.

Jeremy giggled, and spoke to the empty air. "All according to *my* plan, that is!"

PART 3
THE MIRROR BREAKS

CHAPTER ONE

The snowstorm raged around Ari. The whirling flakes sliced the air. The wind howled like a banshee promising doom.

She knelt at the base of the Forever Gate, though the infinity of that wall was lost to the storm. A sword hilt was wedged into the snowpack, the tip of the blade resting just beneath her sternum.

All it would take was for her to lean forward, just slightly, and it would all end...

Die on the Inside, and you die for real.

Hoodwink had told her that there was only a chance you'd die Outside, if you perished on the Inside. He had left something out. When you died violently *as a gol* on the Inside, death in the real-world was certain.

She fingered that cold steel.

Ari deserved death for what she'd done. She'd allowed Hoodwink to die. Led Marks to his doom.

And now Tanner was dead, because of her.

Tanner.

Dying was the only way to end this grief. Dying was the only way to save herself.

The only way to reach Hoodwink.

She'd been given a second chance at life. Her youth had been restored, youth that shouldn't have been taken away in the first place.

A second chance.

Wasted.

It was past her time. Well past her time.

"Across the Forever Gate," she said. "To the morning of the new world. I'm coming to your utopia, Hoodwink."

She grabbed the base of the sword with both hands.

"This isn't the way," Hoodwink said.

She stiffened, and glanced over her shoulder. "Hoodwink?"

But no one was there. An illusion of the storm.

She closed her eyes, and thrust her body forward.

CHAPTER TWO

Earlier...

Ari lay spreadeagled, her arms and legs roped to the ground so that she floated an inch off the sand. Her wrists and ankles burned with agony where the ropes made contact, and her shoulders and thighs felt like they were going to tear right out from their sockets. Her face throbbed with heat and her body was covered in sweat. She used the gol mindtrick that allowed her to ignore the heat and the pain, but that trick needed a focus she was quickly losing.

Her fire sword jutted from the ground, off to the right, stabbed hilt-first into the sand. The handmirror that could get her out of this was off to the left, face down.

Around her, the sand dunes slumped to the horizon, vaguely reminding her of the snow drifts she'd lived with most of her life. *Snow.* What she would've given for a blizzard about now. Or even just a glass of water—the molten sun had scorched away what little moisture remained inside her, and had almost done the same to her sanity.

She gazed across those dunes, toward the distant, picked-clean skeleton of her only companion, one of the dead leviathans. From the

unburied skull, wide as a house, a backbone extended, cupped by a prodigious basket of ribs.

"Water." She mouthed the word, but no sound came. She laughed, but it came out a hiss. It wouldn't be long before she joined that giant skeleton, strewing the landscape with her bony remains. "Water."

She was thirsty, yes, but it was the hunger she felt most keenly. Hunger from not eating in the real world. The umbilical cord that tethered her to this world was made of copper and steel and gave her none of the nutrients an actual umbilical would have.

She appeared in this world as a gol, an artificial entity designed to look like a human, but perfect of form, and stronger in body than any human. Because of her gol-strength, the ropes shouldn't have held her, yet here she was.

"Have you calmed down yet?" came the voice of her captor.

A long lever materialized between her legs. A mirage? She tensed her arms and legs to keep from touching it.

"Good," her captor said. "I wouldn't advise touching that."

She had to constantly maintain the tension—relax just a little, and her most sensitive parts would trigger that lever. Her muscles shook from the effort.

An apparatus appeared around her now, along with the lever.

Ari lay face-up with her head in a guillotine.

CHAPTER THREE

Ari felt the strength slipping from her.

"So now you find yourself in the same situation your father once did," her captor taunted. "Tits-up, splayed, and ready for the guillotine. Your father escaped because the guillotine blade was dull, and he wore a collar. *This* blade is sharp. And you have no collar."

She tried to disbelieve reality. Tried her hardest. But it didn't work. She needed that mirror to attempt the trick Hoodwink had shown her...

Her arms and legs relaxed, just slightly—

She pressed the lever—

The guillotine triggered.

She felt the vibrations along her throat as the blade descended the rails.

She shut her eyes.

A loud clang assailed her ears, and a sharp reverberation passed down the frame into her throat.

She opened her eyes.

An ax was lodged between the blade and her neck. The ax tore away, ripping the guillotine blade from its tracks, splitting open the wooden vise

that pinned her. The ropes that bound her arms and legs slackened, and she fell to the sand.

Immediately she reached for the hilt of her sword.

"Tut-tut," her captor said.

She froze, the hilt a handspan away. She glanced at the gol whose shadow covered her.

It was Seven the Dwarf, garbed in a leather jerkin and breeches, its thick, hairy feet bulging from openwork sandals that were a little too tight. The Dwarf shaded its round head with a black umbrella in one hand, and it held the ax in the other. The number 111 was written on the Dwarf's jerkin.

"So now you know, by vicarious association, what it feels like to be a man," Seven said. "One small misstep with that thing you hold between your legs, and..." The Dwarf made a cutting motion across its neck with the ax.

Ari hadn't moved. But her eyes slid to the sword.

Seven shook its head. "Only thirty seconds and already you're missing the company of the ropes? Think of the sword as a test. You failed the test the first time. Would you like to fail again?"

Where was Tanner?

"Ah." Seven swayed the umbrella from side-to-side. "I see you ruminating. Perhaps expecting help from your friend? If you hoped he might inject something on the Inside, or pull you out, you're mistaken. I've shielded

the area."

She tried to talk but no sound came. Her parched throat constricted.

A water bladder appeared at her knees. She scooped it up and drank deeply. When she'd emptied the entire thing, she stumbled to her feet.

"You stocky little runt," Ari said. Her throat still burned. "I'll shove that ax up your—"

"I see baking in the sun for two hours hasn't improved your constitution. Shall I reset the ropes?"

She bit her lip. "No. I'm... I'm sorry." Apologizing wasn't her strongest suit. "I didn't mean it."

Seven sighed. "You're almost as gutter-tongued as your father. And stubborn to boot. But your apology is accepted. You may stand. But leave the sword."

She reluctantly slid her hand away from the hilt, and stood to her full height, making the Dwarf look like, well, a dwarf.

"Now we may talk civilly." Seven threw the ax down in the sand, and the weapon buried up to the handle. "So, let's start over again, shall we? Pretend it is two hours earlier, and you have just arrived, and you didn't draw your sword." Seven straightened, and cleared its throat three irritable times. "Greetings, krub-in-gol-clothing. What brings you to my wonderful dunes?"

"I want to send a message to Hoodwink."

Seven pursed its lips. "Ah yes. That's right. Hoodwink. He's been here several times. So. The message is...?"

"We've set the tracker in Jeremy's mansion." Ari mentally reviewed the points she needed to cover. "We've stolen the Revision Box—"

"You have the mayor's Revision Box?" Seven interrupted. "One won't be pleased. Not at all. But I will relay the message."

"I'm not done yet," Ari said. "But what do you mean One won't be pleased? This message is for Hoodwink alone."

"Can't be avoided." Seven shrugged those thick shoulders. "One is all-seeing, all-knowing."

"Who?"

"*One*," Seven said. "He has his tendrils in everything."

Ari frowned. "That still doesn't tell me who One is."

Seven lifted its index finger. "He is One. He exists on the Inside. And the Outside. Like me. Like you."

Well that line of questioning was getting her nowhere. Maybe Seven had contracted the gol mind disease. "Right. So, I'll finish the message. As I was saying, we plan to have the Control Room in our possession by week's end, or next week at the latest. Roughly half a day to a day from now on the Outside."

"You plan to steal the Control Room?" Seven's eyes gleamed.

Ari ignored the question. She was disliking this Seven more and more all the time. "Continuing with the message. We haven't heard from the children, but we've setup a pinger, and they should respond soon. Our utopia awaits." She paused, feeling a little uncomfortable that Seven would hear the next part, though she convinced herself that it didn't matter because Seven was just a gol. "Love... love you dad." She crossed her arms, and regarded the Dwarf peevishly. "And that's it."

Seven grinned. "How sweet."

Ari let her scowl deepen.

"I find it interesting that you've set up a pinger." The Dwarf rubbed its chin with one hand.

Ari didn't have time for this. "Are you going to send the message or not?"

"I will relay your message." Seven closed its eyes.

Ari waited. As the moments dragged on, her impatience grew. "Well?"

"I am sending the message."

If Seven could answer her while sending the message, she might as well see what she could learn from the thing. Her gaze drifted to the dunes and the leviathans buried in their grasp. "What's with the skeletons?"

The Dwarf's eyes remained closed. "A side effect of the germ. The

system becomes confused, and spawns creatures meant to live in oceans that don't exist, and when these creatures appear in this place they die and rot." Seven opened its eyes. "Message sent."

Ari waited expectantly. She and Seven looked at one another, the gol smiling that irritating smile.

"So," she said. "What did Hoodwink say?"

"I'll let you know in a day or so."

"A *day*?"

"I thought you were aware of the time dilation?" Seven raised an eyebrow. "Time passes slower on the Outside. Return in a day, or don't. It matters little to me."

"How exactly do you communicate with my father?"

Seven's smile widened. "Hoodwink restored my connection to the Core. So, I merely leave him a message, and he checks that message."

Ari tapped her foot. "Where does he check that message?"

"The Outside."

Ari looked up at the sky. "Tanner, get me out of here. We came for nothing. The Dwarf can't communicate with Hoodwink."

Seven swung that umbrella about. "Why, I most assuredly can."

"Hoodwink's not on the Outside anymore. He's dead."

The smile left the Dwarf's face. "Impossible."

"I saw him die with my own eyes," Ari said.

"I'll have to consult One about this. Impossible. Hoodwink can't die. Impossible." Seven turned away.

She grabbed the sword.

Seven spun around and unleashed a massive bolt of lightning. The bolt ripped the sword from her grasp, and a trailing tendril struck her smack in the torso, exiting just below her armpit. Ari was sent flying backward into the sand.

"I am no mere messenger boy," Seven said. "I am a master golem. And the lands outside the cities are *mine*. I can do what I want out here. And I told you not to touch your sword. I told—"

A collar fastened around the Dwarf's neck from behind.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ari watched the scene unfold groggily from where she lay in the sand.

"No no no!" Seven's voice sounded distant. "I can't reach the Core. What have you done? What have you done!"

Tanner stood behind the Dwarf. A chain dangled from Tanner's fist, connected to the collar.

Seven fell to its knees and struggled to tear the collar free. "No no no!"

Ari smiled. "We did it," she said. Or rather, mouthed. That lightning bolt had affected her worse than she thought.

Her head fell back and darkness veiled her vision.

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She opened her eyes in the Outside, to walls of cold metal. To the severed cords on the floor, some sparking with electricity. To the dim slabs of light in the ceiling, one flickering. To the view of the stars outside, and Jupiter with its all-seeing eye. To the broken window and the crumpled desks beneath it that formed a ramp to the dead moon outside. To the wide window frame, rimmed by fragments of glass.

To the glass fragment that had Hoodwink's blood on it.

You've died twice for me now, father. I won't let you down. I swear it.

She lay against a desk, in a protective suit whose metallic skin reflected the light. A thin cord ran from the center of her suit to the desk. This was her umbilical to the Inside, when active.

She looked at Tanner. He was tethered to the desk across from her, the only other desk beside hers that was undamaged. She squinted in the dim light and peered into his helmet. He was awake.

"What happened?" she said.

"You fainted." His voice sounded tinny in her ear. "I got you out after I used the handmirror to disbelieve reality. I hit pretty close to my record of seven minutes."

Her stomach rumbled. The hunger pangs were getting worse. And she had one of those lack-of-food headaches, the kind that insistently drummed the skull with each heartbeat.

"I can't believe you still need that," she said. Though she needed the mirror too. On a good day it took her minutes to disbelieve. On a bad day, hours. Thankfully Tanner could bring her out with a press of a button on that terminal of his. Usually.

She brought a hand to her face, wanting to rub her temples, but her gloved fingers found only the glass of her helmet. "What took you so long to collar the Dwarf anyway? And why didn't you get me out when Seven roped

me up like that?"

"Sorry." Tanner sounded sheepish. "The Dwarf had the place shielded somehow." That's right. "I came in outside the shield, and I had to crawl forward in the sand so that Seven wouldn't see me. It was only when you got him to launch his lightning that I had a chance to strike."

"Well, thanks for getting me out." She focused on the inside of her helmet. "How much air do we have?"

In answer, the intelligence that lived in her suit projected a message onto the helmet glass.

Estimated Oxygen: 23 Hours.

"It's only been about a day altogether," Tanner said. "If we keep going Inside, and stay in hibernation? Might have another day left out here. That's at least ten days on the Inside."

"And the Dwarf?"

"Collared, and delivered as promised to our New User friends."

Seven's collar was a specially modified bitch. In addition to blocking vitra, it also dampened the Dwarf's links to the system, and prevented the gol from teleporting from place to place. The collar also had a tracker in it, so Tanner could move the Dwarf where he wanted from that terminal of his. Ari had worried that the gols would eventually track Seven down, and then launch an offensive to get the Dwarf back, so she'd had the New Users

prepare a specially fortified holding cell in the Black Den, that section of town known for its murderers and thieves. The whole quarter was cordoned off, and the Black Faction which ruled the Den had implemented an elaborate system of checks and balances to prevent any gol from ever obtaining entrance. Well, those gols they didn't want in, that is. Ari wasn't sure the Faction's promise of protection would be enough, and she'd told those New Users assigned to the Den to flee at the first sign of trouble. She'd already lost too many good men. The death of Marks at Jeremy's hands weighed heavily on her conscience.

"I don't think Seven can talk to Hoodwink anymore," she said.

"What makes you say that?"

"Seven said Hoodwink checks the messages on the Outside. But as you know, Hoodwink isn't here anymore, on the Outside. When I told Seven that I saw Hoodwink die, the gol couldn't believe it."

Tanner was silent a moment. "I was afraid of something like this. We'll just have to go on without Hoodwink for now."

"You're certain he's coming back?" Ari said.

Tanner shifted uncomfortably. "He's coming back. Though I have no idea how, he's coming."

Ari searched for any sign of deceit, but as far as she could tell he was telling the truth. Or believed he was, anyway.

There was something else she hoped he could explain. "The Dwarf mentioned someone—or something—named *One* who can overhear every message in the system. Have you heard of such a thing?"

"One?" Tanner frowned. "Sounds like an A.I. name. There's different levels of A.I.s in the system. It's a hierarchy of sorts. Each of the numbered A.I.s controls a subset of those beneath it. The lower you go in the hierarchy, the more control you have. If there is a One, it would have indirect control of every last subsystem."

"How about control of Seven?"

Tanner shrugged. "It's possible. But with the damping effects of the collar, we're in control of what reaches Seven, or what the gol sends out."

Even so, she didn't think that was good. She sat back, and the helmet bumped the desk. She cursed quietly.

Her stomach growled. She closed her eyes. What she wouldn't have given for a nice steak right about now.

Tanner's voice spoke rudely in her ear.

"What did you want to be when you were little?" Tanner said.

She looked at him through the glass of her helmet. "Seriously?" When he didn't answer, she couldn't help but smile. "You're flirting with me?"

"It's just a question," Tanner said. "Don't read too much into it."

Her smile widened. "Sure. Just a question. Okay. What I wanted to be

when I was a little girl. A princess. No I'm kidding. Well, I remember my father used to take me up on his shoulders when I was little, and he'd walk me to the square by our house. I'd get to see everyone from the same perspective as him. All the merchants in the square. The buyers. The world looked so much smaller from up there. And I knew then I wanted to be someone who could explain the world to others, make it smaller, show it to them from different perspectives."

"Wow, you really got all that out of piggyback rides?"

She laughed. "Yeah."

"But that's not really an occupation," Tanner said.

"No, I suppose not."

"Actually, I got it." He clapped his gloved hands together. "A teacher. You wanted to be a teacher. Am I right? Explaining the world, showing it from different perspectives. That has to be a teacher."

"Sure."

"Hoodwink must have been a good father," Tanner said.

He didn't mean anything by it. Of course he didn't. But Ari literally felt like she'd been struck in the stomach, and she almost threw up.

"No," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

CHAPTER FIVE

"No." Ari closed her eyes. "It was fake. All fake."

"The virtual world, you mean?" Tanner said.

Ari shot him a withering look. "Jeremy's revision! Those memories... the piggyback rides... they weren't real. Injected memories. They weren't of Hoodwink. Though I wish they were."

"Oh," he said. "I'm sorry. I forgot."

"I was only eighteen years old when Jeremy took me. Or so they tell me. I don't remember any of it."

Tanner hugged the thin metal of the suit that sheathed his chest, as if he were cold. "I can't imagine what it's like. Being revised. Sure, I was strapped into the machine a few days ago. I saw the island. Saw the vortex of new memories competing with the old. Felt the pain. But I didn't have my memories ripped away and replaced with something else."

Ari was quiet for a time. "Being revised isn't much different from being on the Inside. Except when you're revised, it's only your memories that are false, rather than the current moment. At least this is real." She waved a hand to indicate the room.

"Is it?" Tanner said.

She cocked her head. "What do you *know*, Tanner?"

"Nothing."

"Tell me."

Tanner let out a small, nervous laugh. "Ari, I only meant, what we have here, right now. Is *this* truly real?"

Ari still didn't understand. "You're talking about this room with its cold walls of metal? With its broken window that opens out to a broken moon? Answer me."

Tanner screwed up his lips. "No, I meant between me and you."

"Oh."

The silence stretched.

Tanner was the first to break it. "Ari, I—"

"Tanner," she interrupted. "You're my friend." She'd decided to harden herself after that night with Jeremy. She'd been hard before, in the past, but she'd grown weak lately, and had almost become attached to Tanner. But that was something she couldn't allow. Jeremy, or someone else, might use Tanner to get to her. Jeremy had basically done that very thing already. It wasn't a pleasant experience. She had to stop this now, cut the sapling off at the root before it grew into a full-blown thorn-bush. "We're just friends and that's it. There's nothing more between us. And there can't be, not until this is done."

"That could be years, Ari." He sounded hurt.

Pity welled in her but she forced iron into her voice. "Are you so sure? Feels like we're at a tipping point to me. What we do here, now, in the next few days, will decide the fate of humanity."

"That's a bit melodramatic, and a little self-centered, isn't it?"

"But it's the truth."

"Okay, Teach." He was *still* flirting.

"Tanner. Look, when this is done, I'll ask *you* out on a date."

"Oh you will, will you?" Tanner said. She wished he'd wipe that smirk off his face.

"Yes. And until then all I can give you is friendship."

Tanner still didn't seem to get it. "But if the world's ending like you claim, maybe we should hook-up before—"

"Tanner. Shh. Just shh. No more."

He uncrossed his arms. "A date."

"Yes." She smiled at the thought. It'd been so long since she'd gone on a simple date. "A dinner date. Lobster from the agri-tanks of the south. I'll pay."

"Well, it will have to be on the Inside then, but that'll do. I'll hold you to it."

She slapped the floor beside her, signaling the end to this turn of the

conversation.

"Come on," she said. "Let's get back. We're wasting precious air. We should be having talks like this on the Inside." Where the moments passed more slowly.

"Sure," Tanner said. "But it's time you learned how to inject Inside on your own. Just in case I'm not around someday. Sidle on up to that Terminal."

"You *will* be around someday," Ari said. But she forced herself to her feet anyway, and the leg braces inside her suit whirred to life. She hunched over the desk. The "terminal," as he called it, was a glass pad set at an angle in the desk. Words, numbers and pictures were written into the glass.

Tanner began the lesson. "There are more complex user interfaces than these pads of course, especially now that you've linked the terminal with your umbilical. Controlling the thing with your mind is freaking awesome I tell you. It gives direct feedback, right onto the Brodmann area 17 of the occipital lobe. But we'll start with the basics. Fingers on the pad please."

"Brodmann what?" she shook her head. "Sometimes I wonder about you Tanner. You're a little too smart for your own good." *And you like to show off those smarts*. Well, he had good reason to impress her, she supposed. When you liked someone, and cared about them... no. She wouldn't go there. She wouldn't allow herself any weaknesses.

She rested her fingers on the pad, and Tanner walked her through a

test run. She memorized every step.

When it was done, Tanner asked her to repeat the process on her own. She followed the steps Tanner had shown her. She chose the tracker in the mayor's house as her position, and specified where the swords and handmirrors should appear in relation to that position. You could inject to a random place in the city, or in the desert outside the city walls, but if you wanted to go somewhere specific you needed a tracker.

"Done," she said. Her fingers floated above the confirmation message. She almost felt like initiating the entry and confronting Jeremy now. She feared him, more than anything, but she knew also that the longer she delayed, the more that fear would grow. And if she went in alone, she'd be the only one at risk. No other lives would be at stake except her own.

Her finger neared the pad.

"Whoa whoa whoa," Tanner said. "What are you doing Ari?"

"I'll go in alone. Pull me out after thirty seconds. I just want to scout."

"What coordinates did you use?" Tanner said.

Her finger was only a fraction of an inch away. "The tracker in the mayor's house."

On his side of the room, Tanner stood. "Don't you touch that screen, don't you dare. We said we wouldn't make the same rash mistakes we made last time, remember? When Marks died."

Ari's finger retreated from the pad as if she were stung. "You're right. You're absolutely right. What am I doing?"

"Good," Tanner said. "You scared me there."

"I scared myself," she said.

"What if a shield went up after you'd gone in, and I couldn't get you out?"

"You're right, I'm sorry."

The pad beside her was still flashing.

"Mind canceling that?" Tanner nodded toward the pad.

She glanced at it. The words *Entry Confirmation* were flashing. "Oh." Her finger approached *Cancel*, but never got there because the text blanked. "What?"

The female voice inside her suit spoke. "Simulator Access Requested. Allow?"

Two options appeared on the inside of the helmet, *yes* and *no*.

"What? No. *No*." She focused on *no*.

"Ari, what are you doing?" Tanner said. But then she heard him tapping frantically at his own terminal. "What the fu—"

The word *yes* flashed.

"Access Granted," the female voice intoned.

Ari was sucked Inside.

CHAPTER SIX

Ari stood once more in the Black Room, that brooding chamber with its too-tight walls, ceiling and floor. The chamber that haunted her nightmares.

The chamber where Jeremy had tortured Marks to death.

She waited for someone to rush her. For Jeremy's mocking voice. For shackles to close around her arms and legs. For *something*.

But the room remained still.

The place was dark, lit only by the dim glow of the fire swords she'd placed as part of the inject. The table was clear of torture implements today. She reached under it, and felt the small, spherical shape of the tracker she'd placed when she was last here. The metal was cold to the touch.

Motion drew her attention to the right.

It was just Tanner.

"Why did you send us in?" she said. "I thought you were all for making a plan first?"

Tanner shook his head. "I didn't do this. We were pulled in. By what, I'm not sure. The germ has affected the entry subsystem, maybe." He was dressed in the livery of a household servant, just as she was.

"Great. Just great." She picked up one of the fire swords and felt the surge of vitra from the hilt. It was a comfort. Vitra always was.

The blade brightened, sending the shadows fleeing. On the steel was etched a fire-spitting raven, its wings trailing cinders.

Tanner grabbed the other sword. Ari stashed the handmirror from the table into a pocket of her livery.

"Wait," Tanner said. "Let's just go back."

"Sure, you can start heading back," Ari said. Tanner was faster than her at disbelieving reality, but even his record with the mirror was still seven minutes. So although she hated this place, she found herself adding, "And meanwhile I'll have a look around. Might as well." She wanted to confront her fears now before they worsened. Maybe she'd come across Jeremy while he slept. That would be perfect. She'd wake him up just long enough to stare into his eyes and let him know who killed him.

But she doubted it would be that easy. It never was. His bedsheets would probably come alive and choke her.

"What did we just talk about?" Tanner said. "About having plans and all?"

"Something's not right," Ari said.

"Of course something's not right." Tanner folded his arms. "We were sucked in here against our will."

She ignored him, and peered into the hallway, using the sword's glow as her torch. She heard Tanner curse in frustration behind her. She glanced over her shoulder and offered him the mirror. "As I said, you can start disbelieving reality whenever you want."

He batted the mirror aside. "We take a quick look around, then we go. Got it?"

"Fine." She would have preferred to do this alone, but apparently Tanner wasn't going to let her.

The hallway outside looked innocent enough. White walls, gold-rimmed red carpet.

Except none of the candelabras were lit.

"This is damn peculiar," Ari said. "Jeremy always keeps his candles lit. He's kind of afraid of the dark."

"Jeremy?" The disbelief was obvious in Tanner's voice. "Doesn't seem the type to be scared of monsters in the night."

"It's not monsters he's afraid of. It's assassins."

"Ah." Tanner peered down the hall. "Maybe he's abandoned the place?"

"Then it's a good thing we came after all." Ari moved the blade to and fro, illuminating various sections of the corridor. "Imagine we'd spent days preparing and making plans, only to come here and find the place empty?

The Control Room moved?"

The Control Room was sourced from a Box—little more than a bedside chest—that, once opened, expanded into a complete operational center that let one monitor every gol in the city. When closed, the Control Room would fold back into its Box, allowing it to be transferred from the house of the outgoing mayor to the new one.

She edged forward, keeping to the space between the wall and the rug, while Tanner took the opposite side of the hall. Both of them were very careful not to touch the carpet. The last time she was here, a certain incident had soured her to carpets. Ari didn't like it so much when the rug you stood on grew hands and snatched you. But who was to say the walls or ceiling wouldn't grow limbs too? The thought made her quicken her step.

She reviewed the blueprint of the house in her mind as she advanced. The corridors remained dark, lit only by the dim light from the swords. She and Tanner encountered no one—while all the furniture was still here, the house itself was completely devoid of life. She passed a window. Outside it was pitch black.

"That's strange," she said, nodding at the window. "Wasn't it just daylight?"

Tanner gave her a look that said, *let's get the hell out of here*.

She shrugged off the pinprick sensation she felt along her arms, and

pressed on.

She led Tanner down the main stairs to the first floor, and its reception hall. The carpet in this hall was the one that had come alive the last time she was here. It stretched from one side of the hall to the other, and at the perimeter there was a gap of about two paces between wall and carpet. She had attacked that carpet with her fire sword, charring a section. But there were no burn marks today, she noted. There also used to be a sword rack on one side of the hall, but Jeremy had moved it, apparently.

Giving the carpet the widest berth she could, Ari crossed to a corridor behind the reception hall, and followed it to the chamber that had housed the Control Room ten years ago.

The chamber was empty.

"So he's really abandoned the place," Ari said.

Tanner patted the handmirror beneath her livery. "Time to go. We'll get in touch with your New Users when we come back. Maybe they'll have some leads on Jeremy's new base of operations."

On the far side of the room Ari spotted a furled scroll resting on the floor.

She went over and picked it up.

Hello Ari.

I discovered your little tracker and moved it to a copy of my house. Impressive little replica isn't it? I've duplicated everything down to the piles in my woolen carpets and the veins in my marble walls. What you don't know is that the moment you set foot in this place you triggered my trap. You see, this copy of my house is at the bottom of a sand pit outside the Forever Gate. I hear the land is quite barren out there. Bones of giant fish and whatnot. If you're reading this, maybe you weren't lying after all when you spoke to me of crossing the Gate and finding immortality. Or maybe you were. My little surprise should get to the heart of matters.

Ta-ta.

Your Beloved,

Jeremy

"We have to go," Ari said. "We have to go now!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Ari ran into the corridor. Beside her, the nearest window burst inward. Sand gushed inside.

"This way!" She led Tanner down the corridor. Around them, windows burst left and right. Side chambers also belched sand, adding to the inundation. By the time she reached the reception hall she was wading knee-deep through the stuff, and the grit got inside her boots where it scratched her ankles constantly. Sand poured in from upstairs too, spilling over the second floor balconies in waves.

"Where are you going?" Tanner said.

She crossed the remnants of the reception room, and entered the guest hall. There was a fireplace set against the far wall.

She ducked beneath the mantel and peered upward. The chimney was a long, dark esophagus of bricks that for now remained open to the sky—a small circle of light beckoned at the very top. Sand only occasionally sprinkled down from above.

She turned to Tanner.

He'd gone quite pale. "You gotta be kidding me..."

"I hate tight spaces," Ari said. "With a passion. But it's a way out."

"Oh it's not tight spaces I'm worried about," Tanner said. "It's dying in a chimney because I followed a brash and reckless woman inside, that's what's got me worked up."

"But it's only a false reality," Ari said. "There's only a *chance* we'll die in the real world if we die here."

"According to who?" Tanner sounded oddly exasperated.

"Hoodwink."

"Well you misunderstood him," Tanner said. "Because there's only a *chance* you'll die when you're connected via the *pods*. When you connect direct, like me and you are doing as gols, and you die violently in here, there's a 100% chance you die in the real world. I've lost three good friends already. So stop acting like you're invincible."

She felt her stomach tighten, the precariousness of their situation hitting home for the first time. But how could her father have survived what happened to him, when he'd died violently in the *real* world? Was he in some pod world above that one? It made no sense. But she had no time to ponder it now—she saw the sand literally pouring in through the room's entrance.

"I can give you the mirror..." She reached inside her livery. Could either of them disbelieve reality in time, with the distraction of imminent death?

"No." Tanner raised a hand. "There isn't time. You're right."

The sand continued to rise. At this rate, the entire room would be buried in less than one or two minutes.

Wishing that she'd injected a sword belt Inside too, she sliced a strand from a nearby tapestry, and used it to tie the sword around her waist. Tanner did the same. Once that was done, she lifted one foot over the base of the fireplace, ducked beneath the lintel, and pulled herself into the inner hearth, stepping onto the charred blocks of wood piled there. The chimney was made of mortared bricks, so she reached up and gripped a slab on either side and hoisted herself past the damper, forcing open the metal plate that was used to regulate the draft. Then she pulled herself up into the chimney proper.

And so she proceeded, reaching up with her arms to find a handhold, setting the toes of her boots in the gaps between bricks. The glow from the sword guided her, as did the portal of light far above, but even if she had no light, she could have felt her way along. The blade diminished in intensity as the moments passed, and she pressed the hilt occasionally to restore its brightness. Though she didn't need it, the light was a comfort.

But apparently she'd touched the weapon too much, because without warning the makeshift cord at her waist unraveled and the sword dropped.

"Oof!" Tanner said. She heard the clatter as the blade tumbled past him down the chimney.

"Tanner!" She glanced down and saw Tanner a few paces below,

outlined by the glow of his own sword, which was still tied to his waist. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah." His voice sounded forced.

Above, the chimney tapered, becoming rather tight. The trickle of sand from above had increased, and was now a regular, pulsing rain of grit. Somehow she didn't think the sky above would remain open for very long.

As the chimney tightened, she was forced to bring her arms closer and closer to her chest, and to take smaller and smaller steps, until she could no longer move at all.

"Why have you stopped?" Tanner said, though he likely knew.

"Too tight!"

The sand continued to fall in waves.

The top of the chimney was only a pace away.

But it might as well have been a mile for all that she could move.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Tanner!" she said, spitting the sand from her mouth. "Your sword!"

Tanner coughed and sneezed. "What about it!"

"Send it up to me!"

She saw the glow of his blade as it slid upward along the inside of the chimney and passed between her boots.

"Got it?" Tanner said from below.

"Ha! I'll never reach that."

The tip came further, coming to a stop roughly at knee level.

"Just a little more," she said.

"One sec!"

She heard Tanner repositioning himself below, climbing higher.

The blade rose in spurts until the tip reached the middle of her chest. She felt Tanner's shoulder brush against her calf.

"How's that?" Tanner said.

Ari braced her feet against the chimney. She slid her hands from the wall and reached down, knowing that if she slipped now, she'd send herself and Tanner to their doom. Death by broken neck or blunt force trauma wouldn't be the funnest experience.

You die violently in here as a gol, you die for real, no matter what.

She was just able to wrap her hands around the hilt.

Vitra filled her. The source of life. A false source, she knew. But it invigorated her nonetheless, the wires inside her real-world body stimulating her brain. Pleasure, pain, and lust, all at once.

"Okay!" she said. "Let go of it!"

Ari lifted the blade, the glow of the sword full in her face. Her elbows were by necessity locked against her sides. Her flesh scraped the tight mortar around her. Sand poured down from above. In moments the tip of the sword extended beyond the opening of the chimney.

She let vitra accumulate in the blade and the sword glowed red-hot. When she'd gathered enough, she unleashed a torrent of flames. She swiveled the superheated weapon at the same time, in a funnel-like pattern, and cut through the bricks around her like a hot knife through ice.

The next part was critical, or all those bricks would come tumbling down on them. As the upper part of the chimney collapsed, she released a fiery half-sphere. It was a trick she'd learned in recent days after much practice with the sword.

The half-sphere exploded upward, bringing with it the dislodged bricks, and the sand just beyond.

Success.

Her head and shoulders were exposed to the air. She was at the bottom of a pit, surrounded by a depression where she'd blasted the sand away. The rest of the house was buried below her.

Abruptly fragments of crystallized sand flowed back down against the new, lower rim of the chimney. Some of those opaque crystals overtopped the uneven rim and spilled down like shards of ice, sharp and cutting. She heard Tanner curse beneath her. Ari's own arms and legs received their share of cuts.

Above, at the outskirts of the sand pit, she saw five iron monsters on treads, similar to the golems she'd witnessed on the Outside. Long buckets had been set into the fronts of these monsters and were used to dump sand into the pit. Back and forth the iron golems moved in sequence. Scoop sand in the bucket. Turn toward the pit. Dump the sand. Repeat.

She scrambled from the chimney onto the crystallized shards, and helped Tanner over the rim. The two of them waded through the fragments and the fresh loads of sand that continually poured in. Ari tried to crouch, hoping to escape notice, and she picked a path that was between the monsters. When she neared the top of the pit, she waited until the nearest monster turned its back to retrieve more sand, and then she hurried past, dragging her feet across the dune.

She and Tanner moved away from the golems. She glanced back,

expecting the things to be in pursuit, but the iron monsters hadn't even noticed them.

Ari stopped right away. She looked at the nearest iron monster, and cocked her head.

"Ari..." Tanner had that tone again. The tone that said, *we don't have time for this*. And, *you're going to get us in trouble*. "I think you should give me back my sword."

She was never a big fan of that tone.

She filled the sword with vitra, and then ran toward the back of the nearest monster as it dumped a load of sand. She plunged the blade deep inside that metallic skin and released the flames. The monster ground to a halt. Its internal humming stuttered and dropped in pitch, ending in a final abrupt cough.

Another iron monster turned toward her.

She pulled at the sword. It wouldn't budge from that metallic body, not even with her gol-strength.

Tanner came to her side. "Ari let's go!"

"Think I broke it," Ari said.

"What?" Tanner sounded exasperated. "The sword? Or the machine?"

"Both!" She abandoned the sword and sprinted away.

Only the one iron monster pursued. The other three remained behind

to finish burying the house. Not that there was much left to bury.

She didn't think those treads would work quite so well on the sand as her own legs, but the monster moved as fast as she and Tanner did.

Faster, actually.

She should have listened to Tanner, and now her recklessness had put the both of them in danger once again.

If anything happened to him, she'd never forgive herself.

The iron monster was gaining.

CHAPTER NINE

Ahead the bones of a dead leviathan strewed the dunes, the house-sized skull and claw-like ribcage baking in the sun. Ari sprinted toward it, and when she reached it, Ari ducked beneath the topmost hinge of the jaw. The colossal skull engulfed her. Tanner joined her and together they retreated to the far side. The skull was half-buried so that there was no other way out except through that gaping maw.

"I don't think this is such a good idea..." Tanner said.

Ari balled her hands. "You're welcome to go back out there."

The iron monster slammed into the opening of the skull, but, as expected, the tall bucket it carried in front prevented the monster from fitting in the gap between bone and sand. The monster gave it a good try though, pushing with all its might, treads spinning stubbornly, internal mechanisms whirring in protest, but the only result was to shift the entire skull backward just slightly.

The monster backed up and began shoveling sand away from the entrance.

"I told you this wasn't a good idea," Tanner said.

Ari watched the monster. "Draw it off. Circle the skeleton."

"Draw it off? I don't think so. Just give me the mirror."

"I have a plan," Ari said. "Trust me."

"Why don't you ever tell me your *plans*?"

She smiled grimly. "The longer we stay here talking—"

Tanner raised his hands. "Fine."

He waited until the monster turned to offload the sand in its bucket, and then he ducked outside. The monster detected his presence and pursued.

When the iron monster was gone, she left the skull and ran toward the backbone of the dead leviathan. She dashed onto one of its prodigious ribs. The bone extended up and out like a small curving footbridge. Before the climb became too steep, she jumped straight up, and when she landed she pushed down with both legs. She jumped a second time. A third time. She pushed all-out when she landed. If this didn't work she'd have to rush back to the pit and try for the sword again...

Tanner sprinted by below. The iron monster was almost on him.

Come on, gol-strength!

Her fourth jump did it, and the timing was perfect—the massive rib popped from the backbone and crashed down onto the iron monster, pinning it.

Ari was sent sprawling. She scrambled to her feet and wiped the grit from her palms and the sand from her knees. She watched, satisfied, as the

trapped monster spun its treads and dug itself deeper into the dune.

And then she realized she'd lost Tanner.

"Tanner?" She turned in a circle, but other than the remaining iron monsters in the distance, she saw no one else. Her eyes fell on the golem and she felt a stab of fear.

"Tanner." She approached the monster. Those treads continued to spin uselessly.

"Now I know why you didn't want to tell me your plan," Tanner said, coming up behind her. "And I thought *I* was the crazy one. What if the socket hadn't rotted away enough and you couldn't knock the rib down?"

She spun on him irritably. "There were other ribs already lying around. So I knew it would work, okay? But where were you just now?"

"On the other side of that rib. Why? What's up your shaft today?"

"Damn it. I was worried, all right?"

He shrugged.

"And just to clarify matters," Ari said. "I never claimed to be sane."

Tanner smiled, though it seemed a bit forced. "Right. Let's get back to the city."

To reach the city they had to return to the Outside and reset their coordinates. That, or climb the Forever Gate. She preferred the former.

She went back to the protection of the giant skull in case those other

monsters decided to visit, and she removed the handmirror from her livery to begin the process of disbelieving reality.

Tanner joined her, and peered into the mirror beside her. He made faces at first, trying to distract her. But she was dead serious, intent on beating him to the Outside, still angry that he'd worried her like that.

She focused on her features.

I am the illusion. The reflection is real. I am the illusion.

The moments passed. Eventually she began to see her reflection initiate movements that should have originated from her own body first. Her reflection blinked. Then she blinked. Her reflection tilted its head. Then she tilted her head.

This isn't real. Any of it.

She woke up on the Outside to see an iron golem looming over Tanner.

Its pincers were raised—the thing was about to smash Tanner's helmet.

CHAPTER TEN

Ari bounded to her feet. "Tanner!"

His eyes shot open.

The iron golem swung its pincers down—

Tanner ducked to one side—

The pincers smashed into the desk behind him. The area crumpled.

Ari dashed forward, forgetting about the tether at her belly, and when she reached the cord's limit she was instantly flung backward.

She cursed. She got a hold of the cord and wrenched it from her suit, hoping she didn't damage the thing. She stood up, and saw that Tanner had climbed onto the desk. The iron golem—a steel barrel on treads with two wiry arms and a thin, hilt-like head—was swatting at him, and a new pit formed in the desk with each strike.

Tanner could never hope to fend off the golem. And Ari couldn't help. Not with the weak human body she had on the Outside. There was no way. She felt so powerless.

Unless...

"Ari get out of here!" Tanner's desperate voice blared in her ear.

She went to the window, where the broken desks lay in a pile beneath

it. She twisted free a desk leg with some effort and then hobbled over to the golem as fast as the suit would allow. She was frightened. Terrified. But she could do this. She *would*.

"Hey!" she said. She wasn't sure how far her voice carried beyond the helmet, but apparently it was far enough, because the iron golem pivoted toward her.

"Ari don't—" Tanner said.

She swung the leg like a bat and smashed the three disks that served as the golem's eyes. Glass fragments sprayed from the sword hilt that was its head.

The iron golem froze. The small red light above the damaged disks flashed on and off.

She waited a moment, poised to swing the leg again, but the golem made no further movement.

Ari helped Tanner down from the desk, not taking her eyes from the golem. The two of them backed away from the monster, and she kept the desk leg pointed at it. Not that the leg would be of much use if the golem came back to life.

"Thanks Ari," Tanner said, panting.

She felt her old anger flare. "I thought you said none of the golems would ever come here. That this isn't a critical section. *Repair units won't*

swing by for a long time, you said."

"I did say that." Tanner touched the top of his helmet. If the glass wasn't there she thought he'd be rubbing his forehead right now. "But that unit was sent for a reason other than repair, I think."

"And that reason is...?"

Tanner smiled grimly. "To kill us."

"What? How? Why?"

"The Dwarf must have relayed our coordinates to its higher-ups before I collared it. You told the Dwarf about the pinger as part of the message to Hoodwink. Maybe Seven used that to track us down somehow. Or it could be that the A.I.s detected us the moment I turned the pinger on."

"Then we have to shut the pinger down," Ari said. "And find another way to alert the children about our little situation."

Tanner was silent for a moment. "There is another way, but I'm not sure shutting down the pinger will help. If the A.I.s used it to track us down, they already know where we are."

Ari closed her eyes a moment. "Okay. Fine. But first of all, tell me. What's the other way to communicate with the children?"

"By using the Control Room."

She smiled wanly. "Ah. It always comes back to the Control Room, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

Something occurred to her, and Ari frowned. "Okay. You say they want to kill us. I still don't understand why. They're just devices. Things of iron and glass. Why should they care about us?"

"Why else? We're a glitch in the program. We shouldn't be out. No one's allowed out until the machines say so. I'm convinced it was one of the A.I.s that sucked us Inside. Must have been monitoring us. Maybe it knew about the trap and wanted us dead. Or maybe the point was to distract us, while it dispatched this one to finish the job. This is why we have to change the iron golems. They'll keep trying to kill us until we get the Control Room and change that."

"All right, fine. But we can't go back Inside, not while that thing's still in here. And not while others might come." She glanced at the silent figure of steel and shattered glass. "How did it get in here anyway?"

Tanner's gaze went to the window. "Those arms can bend at some really odd angles, I tell you. Wouldn't be a stretch for the golem to pull itself up and swing onto those smashed desks."

"Okay." She took a deep breath. Had to think this through. "Okay. So. First things first, shut off the pinger."

Tanner touched the pad on the desk beside her, and entered some commands. "Done."

"Now, we still have to move to a different room." She glanced at the desolate landscape beyond the broken window.

"I think I can set the pinger so that it looks like it's coming from a different room. Make the A.I.s think we've moved. It's called *ghosting*."

"I'm not sure I like the idea. Won't the golems just check here when they don't find us? I say we move for real."

"Ari, we can't go out there. There's iron golems everywhere outside, repairing the hull. We're safer in here believe me. Just let me ghost the pinger." He entered more commands into the pad. "There, that should do it."

"Should? I'm supposed to put my life in your hands based on a *should*?" She hated it when her voice sounded whiny like that but there was nothing for it. Tanner needed to be *sure*, dammit.

"Ari, I'm positive that will do it." He rested a gloved hand on her suit just above the shoulder. "We'll be fine." For a moment she wished the suit weren't there, and that his real hand was touching her shoulder. There was something to be said about human-to-human contact. Especially from him. But it was a fleeting wish. One that she wouldn't have allowed, anyway.

"Here," Tanner said. "Tell you what. I can link the room's motion detectors with the terminal. Have it pull us out if there's any movement on the Outside, in this room. Will that satisfy you?"

She looked at him incredulously. "Why didn't you set that up in the

first place? Would have saved us a bit of trouble back there, don't you think?"

"Honestly it hadn't even crossed my mind," Tanner said. "A golem coming in here. Although I suppose it should have." He returned his attention to the terminal.

"And you're supposed to be the smart one?"

He looked at her rather sheepishly. "Ari, I didn't think we'd need it. I'm sorry."

"You didn't *think* is right," she said.

His face darkened, but he didn't answer.

It felt like she'd crossed some line with him. That acid tongue of hers again. "I take that back," Ari said. "I can be a bit harsh sometimes. You know that by now. My inner bitch acting up."

"Don't worry about it." He entered a few more commands. "Done. Anything moves in here while we're under, we'll be out in no time, Teach."

"Don't call me that." She tapped her gloved fingers on the glass plate of her helmet, near the chin. "Can we set a timer too? Say, have the system pull us out after ten minutes? Rather than having to use the mirrors to disbelieve the world?"

Tanner pondered that a moment. "There's probably a way, but I don't know it. None of the children ever mentioned anything like that. Here, I'll check the archives." He flicked the pad a few times. "Hmm. A bunch of

search results on *timer*, but none what we want. Well, for now I'll have to say no."

She shrugged, though Tanner wouldn't have seen the gesture, buried as she was within the suit. "Okay, so the pinger has been ghosted. And the motion detectors set up. So we're almost good to go, though I wish we could have that timer. But—and here's the key part—what about that thing?" She nodded at the damaged golem. "I'm not going Inside while it's on the loose in here."

He glanced at the golem and then gave her an exasperated look. She raised her eyebrows twice and smiled stubbornly.

"Give it over." He motioned to the desk leg she held. She handed it to him.

Tanner crossed to the iron golem.

"What, are you going to smash it to bits with that toothpick?" she said.

"Let me know if it makes a move would you?" He bent low and wedged the leg into one of the treads. Ari expected the golem to attack at any moment. It didn't.

Tanner pressed his weight onto the lever of the desk leg, and eventually the black material around the tread lifted. "This one's got rubber treads. The ones that go out on the moon usually do. Gives them better

traction in the dust or something. The ones inside the ship are more like tanks though, with steel plates for treads, or rubber reinforced with steel wires, so I wouldn't be able to do this."

"Tanks?" she said. "What's a tank?"

"Never mind." Tanner forced free the long, grooved loop that made up the tread. He took the loop, clambered onto the desk, and slid the rubber down over the golem's body. With some effort, he managed to hook the far end over a corner of the desk. The fit was close, and the loop reminded Ari of a giant elastic stretched to near breaking. But the golem was wrapped tight to the desk.

Still, Ari wasn't completely satisfied. "What if the rubber snaps?"

Tanner shot up his arms in frustration. "What do you want me to do then?"

She frowned. "Can't you break its head off or something?"

"With this?" He stalked over and offered her the stick. "You try! You're the one that called it a toothpick."

She looked from the stick to his face. Covered in sweat like that, there was a certain rawness about him that she kind of liked. Not that she'd ever tell him.

She gazed across the room at the iron golem. The red light was still blinking. The thing seemed somehow even more malevolent with those glass

disks smashed. She had the strangest feeling that it was still watching her, even without eyes. It made her skin crawl.

Tanner lowered his voice. "I've set up the motion detectors, remember." He was trying to sound reassuring. "We'll wake up if it moves, Ari. Okay? Ari?"

She sighed, not answering.

Tanner grabbed the cord that was her link to the terminal, and offered it to her. "Once more unto the breach?"

She nodded slowly. But as she reached for the tether, something gave her pause. "What about you?" She glanced at the smashed remnants of his desk. His control pad had gone dark.

Tanner followed her gaze. "Oh yeah."

Ari set the tether aside. "I can't do this alone."

He raised a finger as if to say *just a second*. He started checking the compartments of her desk. When he didn't find what he was looking for he waded over to his own desk and, keeping a watchful eye on the iron golem, he searched those drawers that weren't locked or sealed shut from the damage.

He shook his head. "Damn."

"What is it?" Ari said.

He went over to the pile of crumpled metal beneath the window, and

began searching the debris. "I'm looking for..." He opened a drawer that was still intact, then another. He shoved a piece of metal aside and found a previously hidden compartment. He opened it.

"Aha!" He pulled out a strange metallic clamp, one that had small blue and green lights flashing along the surface. Hoodwink had carried one of those when she'd first met him in this world—he'd called it a *wireless access port*.

Tanner returned. "You won't have to do it alone. But before we go, there's something I need to show you. Something that will shatter all you know about the world."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Brute traveled between the lattice points of the marble hall. The red and gold rug crunched underfoot, and Brute's weight left deep imprints. The marble ceiling scraped Brute's forehead. Most ceilings did. Brute was not small.

Brute ducked inside a white archway carved with long-tentacled octopi, and entered a cubic chamber whose lofty ceiling allowed for Brute's full height.

"Ah Brute, my favorite Direwalker!" Jeremy-krub turned from the reflective surface beside the dual-piled mattress. "How are you this fine afternoon? In the mood for some killing yet?"

Option A—ignore. Option B—turn around and leave. Option C—tear off Jeremy-krub's limbs. Option D—

"State your command, krub!" Brute lifted its four arms. Social pattern—threatening.

"Easy, big boy." Jeremy-krub took a step back and raised his hands. Social pattern—placation. Facial expression—comfort, ease. Deception detected. Cues—dilated pupils, raised eyebrows, licking of the lips, microscopic beads of sweat. Interpretation—fear.

"Easy," Jeremy-krub said. "The task I have for you is rather small for one of your prodigious size and abilities, I do daresay." He retrieved a small disk from the stand beside him, and pinched it between his thumb and forefinger. Jeremy-krub held the disk away from his body. Far away. "Take it. Quickly!"

Urgent tone. Slightly higher pitch.

Brute snatched the disk. Surface—planar. Composition—iron and carbon. Weight—two point seven grams. Diameter—three point four centimeters. Thickness—one millimeter. Anomalous emissions detected—high frequency radio waves.

A smile formed on the lips of Jeremy-krub. Social pattern—malicious. "You are to hunt down Ari Flanners, leader of the New Users. Touch this to her forehead and you will kill her instantly. When you have done this, return here with the disk, and with it we will track down the remainder of her associates. Start by posting watchers around all the places she might visit. The houses of family. Friends. Known New Users."

Ari Flanners. Accessing remote records—formerly Yolinda Cooper. Daughter of Hoodwink Cooper. Accessing local memory—Ari Flanners, the krub-gol with the fire sword who had defied Brute outside Jeremy-krub's mansion. Emotion triggered—outrage.

"What do you wish done with the body?" Brute said.

"I don't care." Jeremy-krub curled back his lips. Social pattern—snarl. "Tear her body apart. Suck it dry. Feed it to your brethren. It doesn't matter. Once the disk touches her forehead, she's gone. The disk will kill her in all worlds. At the same time."

Brute glanced at the disk and smiled.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The first thing Ari noticed was the snow.

Or rather, the lack thereof. Beneath her feet, the cobble was joined together into one long, smooth path of snowless stone. The air was warm. Clouds streaked the heavens, and sandwiched between two of those wispy veins was the sun. A tall building of glass blotted out a portion of the sky, and it reflected the sun into her eyes.

Around her, people in thin, embroidered silks passed among shops. The aroma of food tickled Ari's belly, and her stomach growled for the hundredth time today.

"Where are we?" she said. "Is this the utopia Hoodwink talked about?"

"No," Tanner said. "It's Earth. Before the end. A different simulation than the one you're used to. Drawn from the ship's archives. The A.I.s were able to reconstruct all this from the last transmissions received from Earth."

Then she noticed it—there was a tension in these people. She could see it in the set of their shoulders, the grim faces, the quickness of their strides. The stalls that sold wares or hot food were nearly empty. The biggest line-ups were for the kiosks that sold canned foods and dried goods. Tempers

flared in those line-ups, and people shouted at one another. She half-expected someone to take out a sword and start cutting people down.

This was no utopia.

Still, it was life—beside her, a tall tree grew beside one of the kiosks. A living and breathing tree, covered in leaves. Plants looked so different when they weren't dead.

She went to the tree, and tried to caress one of those heart-shaped leaves. She was surprised when her hand passed right through it.

"We're in observational mode only," Tanner said. "You'll understand why in a second."

She shielded her eyes against the sun, and looked up. The air was full of floating objects. Wedge-shaped, they flew to and fro in orderly lines, following thin rails laid across the sky. In the distance, azure beams shot upward, carrying more of those wedge-shaped objects—some went up beyond the roof of the world, others came down.

"What's going on there?" She pointed at the azure beams.

"The flyers going up are full of people. The ones going down are empty. It's bringing them to a larger ship in orbit. *Our* ship. The one that was going to take a hundred thousand of us to a new world."

Those flyers kept coming and going in ceaseless flow. Ari was awed by the immensity of it all. "It must have taken years to construct something

big enough to hold so many people."

"It did. Just be glad that our ancestors had advanced warning of the calamity. They detected the Enemy when it breached the Termination Shock at the fringes of our solar system. Hundreds of small objects. We thought they were extrasolar asteroids at first. Five years passed. The objects reached Jupiter. Not asteroids, but pods of some kind. Not long after that, new objects were detected entering the outskirts of the solar system. Objects far larger than the precursors. All the standard communication protocols were followed. Neither the precursors nor the more distant newcomers answered.

"The precursors were headed on a collision course with Earth. We launched preemptive strikes, but there were just too many. The precursors penetrated the atmosphere and crashed into the oceans. Poisoned the seas. The shores were lined with the dead bodies of whales, dolphins, sharks, squids. And our technology could do nothing to reverse it. Though we tried, I'm sure. We thought we were so powerful. That technology would save us. Still, we should thank the Enemy I suppose, for warning us of their intentions. Because the real invasion force was still five years away."

Ahead, people lined up beside a gate for entry into a fenced off area. Beyond the fence, a diamond-shaped object towered skyward. It was iridescent, and mirrored the sun so that Ari had to squint to observe it. Four long, metallic lattice masts held the giant diamond in place.

Ari nodded toward it. "And what's that?"

"A smaller escape ship, independently built by those who lost the lottery. There's hundreds like it around the world."

"So everyone just gave up and left?"

Tanner sighed. "No. Some stayed to fight. As you'll soon see. The ship in orbit, *our* ship, well, it was always thought of as a backup plan. A backup fast-tracked by the threat of invasion. Humanity had been wanting to colonize the stars for years before then. The coalition government had picked out suitable planets, put together blueprints and whatnot. They'd even started building, but the costs were just too prohibitive. And they never had a real motivation to actually finish the thing. The Enemy finally gave them the kick in the backsides they needed. The governments cut a whole lot of corners finishing that ship, and it ended up being only half the planned size. But no one ever thought we'd actually have to use it. No one ever thought we'd actually have to leave."

Ari regarded him in a new light. "You learned all that from the archives?"

"That and more. Watch."

She saw it then. In the sky, long streams of smoke arced down from the heavens, smoke that expanded and writhed, looking a little like molten slag from the blacksmith's shop. People paused what they were doing to look

up and watch.

Without warning, the air cracked with a sound that was ten times louder than a thunderclap, and Ari felt her chest vibrate. Glass windows shattered on the building beside her, and people screamed as the shards rained into the street. More smoke plumes ripped up the sky, followed by more earsplitting thunderclaps.

A siren sounded.

People dispersed in pandemonium.

"What's happening?" Ari said, though she knew.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The walls of the buildings and stalls abruptly blinked, and were replaced with multiple images that showed destruction across the world. A person's head overlaid these images in the lower right. Ari heard a voice speak from the air, though it cut in and out. It began in mid-sentence: "At all costs. The Enemy seem to concentrate their attacks on urban centers. Residents are advised to flee to the countryside. Take plenty of purified water, and—"

A mushroom cloud appeared in the distance.

A commotion drew her attention back to the fenced area. A drawbridge sealed on the diamond-shaped ship, and flames erupted from its underside, igniting those men and women who hadn't boarded in time. They didn't even have time to scream. The lattice masts that held the ship in place broke away. The vessel slowly lifted from the ground and began the long ascent.

On the horizon, the azure beams that stretched into the sky abruptly winked out, and all the wedge-shaped flyers those beams had contained plunged downward.

Tendrils of black mist slithered from the long plumes of smoke that

smeared the sky. Flyers not restrained by the rail system converged on the mists. Small explosions and flashes of light dotted the air. The attacks had little effect on the invading darkness, and flyers fell, entangled in the mist. Ari saw a mushroom cloud form around one particularly massive congregation of darkness near the horizon, but the black mists emerged from the cloud a moment later, apparently unscathed.

She tried to hold Tanner's hand, but her fingers passed right through his.

Some of those mists swarmed around the diamond-shaped ship that was attempting to flee all this. A translucent funnel formed at the top of the ship, and it climbed faster and faster, pushed ever upward by the stream of fire beneath. A visible shockwave erupted from its base, and the fire reddened. The funnel at its tip expanded, and the ship tore free of the black mists and vanished beyond the clouds.

"So others got away," Ari said.

"Maybe." Tanner didn't sound too convinced.

A terrified family rushed straight toward Ari. She tried to move out of the way but the family passed right through her.

A little girl tripped and fell. The mother went to her, hauled her up.

"Why are you showing me this?" Ari said.

"It's important that you know the truth," Tanner said. "And understand

what we're fighting for. Or at least, what we gave up."

A thin line of smoke tore across the sky, passed right through those black mists, and collided with the ground maybe three miles away. A grayish-brown wall of death instantly erupted into existence. The start of another mushroom cloud.

"Tanner..." But already the blast enveloped Ari. The sound was similar to the thunderclaps she'd heard from those smoke plumes, a drawn-out, earsplitting, thunder. Her insides rattled. She struggled to remain in place. Her hair gusted around her. Her eyes burned from the brightness, though her lids were shut.

"I thought we were just *observing*!" she said, though she couldn't hear her own words.

When the wall of death had passed, around her everything was tinted red. The sky. The dirt. The remnants of the shops around her. The hollowed-out shell of the building. The broken stone statues that were all that was left of the woman and her daughter. The incinerated tree.

"They destroyed everything," Ari said.

"It was us," Tanner said.

"What?"

Tanner glanced at her. There was pity in his eyes. "The mushroom clouds? That's us."

"Why?"

"I don't have all the answers, Ari. Wish I did. Maybe some governments decided that if *we* can't have our planet, then no one else could. But I like to think we did it because we were trying to destroy the Enemy. Even though it didn't work, as you can see."

Those black mists remained in the red sky, and were spreading out. One flew just overhead. She caught a glimpse of triangular steel within the darkness.

Unable to remain standing, Ari fell to the ground, stunned. "Why why why. Why?"

But she knew, of course. Humanity's history was littered with resource wars, many taking place ages before this *Enemy* had ever come. Resources. That was the only explanation.

Still, there was something she didn't quite understand. "We left Earth. Abandoned it to them. And still they hunted us to Jupiter's moon. Even in our own violent history, the conquerors always left survivors. This Enemy wants to wipe us out completely. Even though we're no threat to them. Why?"

"No one knows, Ari. Their culture is entirely alien to our own. Who can say what traditions and emotions drive them? Who can say if they even *have* emotions. Plus we're not completely sure it was the Enemy who crashed our ship. The archives aren't clear. We're not even sure who exactly is in orbit

right now over Ganymede, firing bolts of energy at us. Could be the Enemy. Could be another human ship. Our damaged equipment can't make heads or tails of it."

She rested her head in her hands. She felt the weight of the lies that had been heaped upon humanity. Centuries of lies. Though she had to admit, if everyone had this knowledge, there would be few sane people left. Centuries of lies and unknowns. It was enough to drive an entire society to madness.

"End the simulation," she said. "We have a Control Room to steal."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Ari stood at the door to Briar's Grassylane District mansion. The irony of the district's name wasn't lost on her. This place hadn't seen grass in an age, and probably never would.

She was wrapped in a heavy cloak, with a scarf tight around her face. The wind was particularly biting today, and even though she was a gol she found it difficult to ignore the cold. The snow whirled around her, falling from clouds where it had been too long pent-up. If the snow continued pissing down, at this rate she'd be standing at the heart of an all-out blizzard in a few minutes.

She was still shaken by what Tanner had shown her. Humanity had destroyed the world while trying to save it. Only a few ships escaped. Maybe only one.

She was on it.

She knocked on the door again. Louder this time. She heard the reverberations echo in the vast hall beyond. Surely at least the servants would have answered by now.

"Open up Uncle!" she said. "I know you're in there!"

It'd been years since she'd visited her Uncle. The last time, she'd had

to leave in quite a hurry, before she throttled the overweight man. Her mother had been present, but the conversation had been stilted. Ari thought it was because Briar was there. She'd asked him to leave, but he'd refused. Things had quickly turned sour.

Her mother. Cora. Ari wondered if she still lived here.

She stepped back to gaze at the upper windows, and her boots crunched on the fresh snow that had accumulated on the porch. It was quite a fancy place, not so grand as Jeremy's of course, but more than decent for one of Briar's station. The small grounds were fenced all around and sealed at the front by an iron gate, easily scaled with her gol body. The main walkway was immaculately shoveled, and was lined by ice sculptures cut into the shapes of fanciful animals. The manor itself was made of mortared stone, with steeple-topped windows set here and there, curtained on the inside to keep out prying eyes. It was the kind of home a portal trader would own.

But Briar had another, more important house, and that was the entire reason for her visit.

"Briar! You lardy piece of—" She knocked one more time, and then decided it was time for an inspection.

She circled the mansion, making for the backyard, where an ice rink covered the ground. The ice had known better days—it was plagued by lumps and depressions, and nicks from old skating sessions marred the surface.

She squinted through the whirling snow. A particularly nasty blast of wind cleared the air, and she caught sight of a form huddled in at least three layers of clothing, trying to sneak across the rink in the storm. It had to be Briar.

"Oh no you don't!" Ari dashed toward him.

Briar glanced over his shoulder, eyes wide with fright, and he abruptly slipped and fell. Ari winced when she saw his head bounce on the ice. He didn't get up.

Ari hurried over and knelt beside him. "Uncle!"

Briar opened heavy lids. "Dear me dear me," Briar said, panting. "You've killed me then, haven't you? I hope you're happy now, blasted woman! I curse the day my sister sired you into the world! Line up the whoremongers, we gots ourselves a fine specimen here!" The folds of fat around his neck jiggled as he spoke, and nearly engulfed the too-tight collar.

"Uncle." She cradled him in her arms. "Those are some nasty words for the daughter of your sister. What were you doing trying to run away from me? You know I'd never harm you."

"Mmm." Briar had aged rather well. She'd seen him at the mayor's dinner party a few days before, from a distance. He hadn't seemed much different from eight years ago. But up close she noticed that he had a touch of crow's feet, and the start of a widow's peak. "You'd never harm me, woman?

Indeed! I saw what you did to Jeremy's guards. And I remember those threats you hurled at me with such callous disregard eight years ago... and you say *my* words are nasty. Not to mention the jolts of lightning you spat at my arse. Not a friendly gesture! Not friendly at all! I still have your lightning marks on my backside, I might add. Not pretty marks. I'm a sensitive man at heart. Much too sensitive for such treatment."

"You *are* a sensitive man. And I'm sorry for how I treated you. I've been known to have my bitch-of-the-month moments in a single day." She frowned. "But I didn't come here to talk about bygones."

"No no, of course you didn't," Briar said. "You came to see me finished. Well then, do it if you must. Snap my neck. Stab me with that flaming sword of yours. Or use your lightning. I don't care anymore. I told my whorish sister it was a mistake to marry Hoodwink, but did she listen? No!"

"Again you disrespect the good name of my mother." She combed his hair in mock tenderness. "Briar Briar Briar. I didn't come here to harm you. Trust me. But keep mentioning my mother in that manner..."

Briar drew his brows together. "I suppose you would have harmed me already, if that was your intention. Very well. It is my turn for apologies. I won't mention my sister. *You* are the whoremaster today."

She nodded, giving him what she hoped was her most understanding

smile. She wasn't sure she liked being called a whoremaster, but if that was his way of saying he'd listen to her, well, she'd just have to take it.

"Are you all right sir?" someone shouted from the house over the bleating wind.

Ari glanced toward the mansion. Through the raging snow she saw a man wearing white gloves and a black livery standing at the back door. She clenched her fist in Briar's hair. "Make him go away."

Briar gasped. "I'm fine Alf," he called back. "Just my cousin is all! Teaching me how to figure skate! She's quite good!" He lowered his voice and added for Ari's ears alone: "At manipulation."

"As you say, sir." Alf raised his collar, obviously freezing. "If you need anything let me know." He shut the door.

Briar stared at her. "So," he sneered. "You were never one to spread the bullshit thickly on your toast. Speak plainly then. If you're not here to kill me, then what do you want?"

Ari glanced at the back of the mansion. "Is mother really here?"

"Cora? Egads no! She left the city years ago. Too many painful memories she said. I should've done the same, apparently."

Ari scanned the mansion's uppermost windows, which at times the blowing snow completely hid. She didn't entirely believe him, but she saw no one else watching her from those windows.

"Where did she go?" Ari said.

"Dhenn." Briar answered without hesitation. His eyes became distant, and his tone, sad. "She always wanted to be a singer. When she failed, when she lost everything dear to her, she went to Dhenn. Wanted to get away from the world, I guess. The poor thing."

Dhenn. The Dark City, some called it.

She spotted a raven squatting in the dead tree beside the mansion, and her danger sense tingled. She hadn't noticed the bird until now, because of the storm. It was a gol of course—no real bird could cling to those branches in a storm like this. Likely it watched the house. The first thing she always had her New User scouts do when they secured a place was to kill all the ravens.

"So is that all you wanted then, missy?" Briar was sneering again. The man really knew how to get on her nerves.

Ari smiled her sweetest smile, though her eyes must have been ice. "No Uncle Briar, it is not." She glanced at the raven. "They're coming, aren't they?"

She felt his muscles tense again. "Who's coming?"

"The city guards. Or Jeremy's Direwalkers. It doesn't matter. You're going to show me the back way out of this place."

"I am?"

She hauled him to his feet.

"Wait!" Briar said. "I still don't know what you want! And for the sake of my already bruised backside please don't say it involves Jeremy."

"It involves Jeremy."

Briar straightened like a board beside her.

"The back way, if you would?" She shoved him forward. "Unless you want me to mark your backside with lightning again?"

Briar led her from the manor grounds by the back way. She saw the raven take flight, and though the wind whipped it this way and that, somehow the bird managed to climb away through the storm.

She thought she heard the shout of guards from the front of the house, and she hurried Briar along.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Ari led Briar through the storm. She kept glancing back, and felt certain someone was following her, so when she neared Luckdown District she veered off into a side alley and waited as a large form lumbered past.

She watched the sky for ravens or other birds in the storm, but the conditions were approaching white-out. Still, she took a circuitous route to the old shack she owned, and by the time she met with Tanner about two hours had passed.

She and Tanner explained the plan to Briar. At first, her Uncle refused to play any part in it. But when she promised him wealth beyond his dreams, Briar reluctantly agreed. His eyes lit up when she mentioned the amount she could pay, and though he did his best to hide it, she detected a subtle, eager quiver in his jowls.

Briar owned one of the houses across the street from Jeremy, a house Briar never used anymore because of the Direwalkers that haunted the night. Though apparently the Direwalker activity in the area had dropped off since Ari's escape from the mansion—New User scouts hadn't reported any bodies drained of blood in days.

Jeremy was up to something, that much was certain. Ari and Tanner

were trying to discover exactly just what. And so they moved to Briar's second home under the cover of the storm. Once there, Briar deactivated all his security protocols, traps that would have killed Ari and Tanner if they'd decided to break in on their own. They hunkered down on the second floor, and observed the mayor's house across the street by spyglass, though the storm made it difficult to pinpoint the windows at times. They were trying to see what Jeremy planned, yes, but they also hoped to learn as much about the inner workings of Jeremy's household as possible. The guard patrol schedule. The hours of breakfast, lunch and supper. Jeremy's usual location in the manor throughout the day.

The days passed. Ari forced Briar to stay with them, and wouldn't let him visit other rooms unescorted—Briar still had a lot of trust to earn. Briar eventually helped plant a spy in Jeremy's household—a human servant hired under his signed recommendation. At a designated hour and location, the servant tossed messages over the high stone fence bordering Jeremy's land. Her Uncle was in this as deep as Ari and Tanner, now. Amazing what the promise of a few coins can do. Still, she wouldn't let her Uncle off his tight leash, and counseled Tanner to treat him likewise.

The storm lifted when she left Luckdown District several days later, leaving Briar and Tanner to continue observing Jeremy's mansion. As she neared the transit center, she heard the caw of a raven high above. She

glanced at the sky, looking for the bird, but the bright sun blinded her.

City guards were probably on their way.

Several new warehouses had popped up near the transit center since the last time she'd come this way. She supposed the portal traders had built them to store the goods destined for faraway cities. There were five transit centers in the city altogether, modestly named Line A, B, C, D, and E.

Ari reached the transit center, Line A, which was like a huge warehouse in and of itself. Roped-off lines led to each portal, the destinations labeled in large white signage. Her line just so happened to be the smallest. Not a popular destination, she supposed. All kinds of transitioners waited in the lines around her. Small-time traders with pack mules or big-time traders whose caravans bulged with goods. Families with crying babies and gifts for relatives, or lone men and women returning home from work. She kept an eye on the transit center gols, but none of them paid her any heed—they were all slobbering.

Her own line moved smoothly, and her turn came after about three minutes.

She hesitated.

The shimmering surface of the portal in some ways resembled a mirror, wide enough to fit four men abreast, and tall enough for two. Electricity occasionally sparked in subtle waves across the surface. She

would have thought those sparks vitra once, the source of all life, but she knew the electricity for the illusion it was.

But it wasn't the false vitra that gave her pause. Though everything else behind her was reflected on the surface, she herself was not. A fact not lost on the family just behind her.

"She has no reflection!" the littlest member of the family said.

She should have been used to it by now, she supposed. Tanner had even explained it to her, telling her that some of the new gol "source" that Jeremy—or whoever was helping him—put in the system had become entwined with the blueprint used in the making of all gols. Any new gols created on the Inside were part Direwalker. Including her. She hadn't sprouted pointy teeth at least. Yet.

"But Hoodwink had a reflection when he was a gol," Ari remembered telling Tanner.

"His avatar was created before Jeremy's source entangled the blueprint," Tanner said.

"Okay. But how come I can see myself in those handmirrors you always inject Inside along with us?"

"Those are special mirrors," Tanner said. "I set them to ignore the no-reflect flags assigned to your avatar."

The guy had an excuse for everything. Still, she was glad for those

handmirrors, because without them—without a reflection—she'd feel like she had no identity whatsoever. She already felt that way enough as it was, the dual personas and self-image of Inside and Outside constantly vying for control. The strong and fearless Ari of the Inside. The weak and frightened Ari of the Outside. And potentially someone else, beyond that.

Who am I?

In the mirror she saw city guards dash into the transit center and point at her. One shouted.

Ari stepped through the shimmering surface.

White light filled her vision.

Time had no meaning here. Nor did space. She had no body, yet somehow she was still corporeal. She was anchored nowhere, yet everywhere. She floated in a white primeval goo fashioned from the leftovers of the universe, the particulates that remained when the planets and the stars were made, a goo that existed in the spaces between matter.

But it was all simulated.

She was on the Inside, after all.

None of this was real.

Right?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

What is reality?

A series of lights painted on our irises? A sequence of sounds played out on our ear drums? The touch of a lover? The crisp scent of fresh snow in the morning? The taste of cinnamon-spiced wine? An emotion? A memory?

She had experienced all of these things on the Inside.

And all of them were false. Unreal.

Just like this new city she ventured to. A city she'd never been to in her life. A city she wouldn't really be in, even when she arrived. How could she be, when it was all fake?

And yet if she died here, in this world, she died in the real world, that cold world of steel and golems where her air was slowly running out and the threat of death was even more constant.

Yet Hoodwink lived. He had died in that world, the real world, and he lived. Or so she was told. Tanner believed it. So it must be true.

But it made no sense.

Hoodwink. Father. How can you survive when no one else can? How can you live through death in the real world, when neither I, nor Tanner, nor Marks, poor Marks, can do such a thing?

And are you really my father, Hoodwink?

Tanner had told her a little about the system. Time passed slower on the Inside. She understood that well enough. She even embraced it. But what had her mind in knots was the fact that she would've lived through at least five or six lifetimes by now. Tanner had told her that if you died while connected directly as a gol, you died in the real world. Whereas if you died violently while connected through a pod, you either killed your body in the real world or you woke up, and iron golems would come fetch you either way. But he also told her that when you died of old age on the Inside while in a pod, the system merely reset you, and you were reborn with a body dictated by the DNA of your real-world counterpart, and you kept being reborn until your real-world counterpart died. Each rebirth you were assigned to a random mother and father.

A *random father*.

When she discovered she'd been revised by Jeremy those ten years ago, all she wanted to do was find her real father. She'd found Hoodwink, or rather he found her, and she felt that her life was complete. And then she lost him.

But it turned out he wasn't her real father anyway.

Tanner said she was conceived in a thin glass tube and grown in the uterus of the pod world. He said "organic" wires were meshed into her brain

and spine while she developed, wires that grew with her so that she was one with the machine. So in theory her father was the machine itself—the ship that housed her. The A.I. that ran this place. Her real father and mother would remain forever unknown. The dead bodies of her actual parents provided the eggs and ejaculate, and were stored in a bank and arranged according to something called "genetic" traits. These raw materials that formed her were chosen because they were deemed a perfect match by the A.I., and when combined would produce a child with the best possible traits for long-term survivability in the pod world. What those traits might be, she didn't know. The ability to lie still and sleep your life away while a game played in your head ranked up there as number one, she supposed.

In any case, the inevitable conclusion was, no, it was impossible that Hoodwink was her *real* father. Her real, actual father and mother were long dead, and the life-producing stuff they left behind was packed away in ice somewhere, ready to produce more of her brothers and sisters, who probably already numbered in the hundreds, if not thousands.

And yet for all of this, to her, Hoodwink was her father.

And that was her reality. That was real to her.

Reality is what you make it, Tanner had told her.

Hoodwink was her father, through and through.

And she missed him, but she knew he would return. When, she didn't

know. How could she? Not even Tanner knew what Topside meant. *I have to go Topside anyway*, Hoodwink had told her before he died. She still saw the glass breaking outward. She still saw Hoodwink getting sucked into space, his body floating, receding into the distance.

Gone Topside.

Would she ever find out what Topside meant? Would she have to die to find out?

"Hoodwink can come back from death," Tanner had said the other day on the Inside, when she'd been in deep sorrow again, and contemplating the unthinkable. "But *you* can't come back."

"Why can't I?" she said. "Why?"

Tanner sighed deeply. "Ari. I don't know. I wish I did. I wish there was a way. But you have to wait. Trust me. How he can do it, and why you or anyone else can't, I don't know. Hoodwink never told me. He never told any of us. That he hasn't told his own daughter should tell you something."

"He didn't have time!" She knew Hoodwink would have told her. Eventually.

But he died.

Gone Topside.

Ari emerged from the portal into a vaulted transit center that looked very much like the one she'd just left, with similar roped-off lines leading

away from each portal. There were no guards waiting for her. Good. The mayors operated independently of one another, and if Jeremy had contacted the mayor of Dhenn about her, the official would've probably laughed and told Jeremy it wasn't this city's problem. Then again, if Jeremy had cast her as a wanted terrorist, she wasn't necessarily all that safe.

She nervously followed the other transitioners who'd emerged moments before her. They had arrived from cities all over the world. She wasn't exactly sure what routing mechanism the portals used to ensure only one person came out a certain portal at a certain time, though she'd heard horror stories of people materializing with their bodies mashed together—the heads of other transitioners jutting from their chests, genitals from their armpits, hands from their faces. Terrible rumors, though in truth she'd never seen anything like that, nor anyone with a head jutting from his or her chest, though she supposed such a person wouldn't survive long.

Ahead of her, four people in different groups abruptly collapsed dead at the same time.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Ari remained calm during the ensuing panic.

It was The Drop.

It reminded her of the terrible situation on the Outside, a situation that was only getting worse. An attack had destroyed some of the pods just now, killing the sleepers who existed on the Outside, along with their representations in this world. She did her best to ignore the anguished sobs of the bereaved, knowing all too well what it felt like to lose someone important to you.

After some moments security guards restored order—most of them were human conscripts, she noted—and the bodies were dragged to the side. The line proceeded once more.

The gol behind the customs desk was slobbering, and waved her past with barely a look, as it did every transitioner. She could have passed through if she'd been trying to smuggle snortroot.

She stepped from the transit center onto a height that overlooked a vast, snowless cavern. The Dhenn cave city. In the main cavern below, which extended at least two or three miles distant, giant stalagmites towered from the floor, paired with stalactites reaching down from the ceiling. The overall

effect was rather unsettling, just as if a giant maw were closing on the place.

Most of the stalagmites in that vast cavern had been hollowed out for the residents, the insides filled with streets and byways and houses and shops, and she could see tiny lights dotting the surfaces. Other tunnels broke away from the main cavern and led away to the various sections and subsections of Dhenn.

She walked down steps carved into the rock. Though there was no snow, which was a nice change, the air was still cold and her breath misted. *I'm a gol,* she reminded herself. *I can ignore the cold.* Torches were set in brackets at intervals along the cave wall. She reached the main street—a meandering path through the giant stalagmites. Globes of light lit the way. Magic, she would have thought in times past, when she didn't know the truth. When she didn't know that anything was possible when you grew wires into your brain, connected an umbilical to your spine and plugged yourself into a machine.

There were a few buskers about, banging out tunes on cymbals and lutes. An olive-skinned foreigner tried to sell her salted meat. "Best meat. Very good, very good." Squatting beside the entrance to a stalagmite that held a street which curved up and out of sight, a withered boy extended a palm, not raising his head. She placed ten drachmae in the boy's hand and curled her fingers around his. He looked up and smiled.

So this was Dhenn. There were a few other cities she could have visited to obtain what she needed. But Dhenn was only one portal-hop away, so it made the most sense. She'd asked Tanner why he couldn't just create what was needed. She'd angrily told him, "You can make fire swords but you can't do *this*?" He'd explained that it had to do with not having the *source* again.

So the plan required that she come here and procure the necessary concoction. The New Users had wanted to send someone in her place, but she refused to risk anyone else's life. Besides, she was more than capable of completing this task, despite the dangers.

Her boots echoed from the bare rock, and she almost missed the comforting crunch of snowpack. Almost. She'd seen what a sunny, snowless day could look like, seen it in the glimpse of the past Tanner had shown her. If sunny days invited conquerors and destruction like that, she preferred the snow thank you very much.

The directions Jacob of the New Users had given were as follows—seek Watership Street just past the Black Market. Knock on the fourteenth door, the one with the mortar and pestle symbol hanging above. Ask for Merry-Death.

Ari pulled up the city map in her head, using the gol trick Tanner had taught her, and she found the necessary streets and byways easily enough.

Soon she found herself in a wide square hemmed in by smaller stalagmites and jam-packed with activity. Black Market. Wary of thieves, she clung tightly to the satchel slung over her shoulder.

She walked past vendors offering snortroot, imitation goods, and crank-loaded crossbows. Illicit wares, all of them. The pungent scent of skunk weed mingled with the stench of sweat and feces in the air.

She left the market, and passed from the main cavern and into one of the many side passageways carved into the mountain. The tunnel opened into a smaller cavern, where stalagmites roughly half the size of those in the main cave sprung from the floor. She went to the giant stalagmite labeled Watership Street and ducked inside.

A spiraling street had been carved inside the stalagmite, and she followed the ramp upward. A ditch that stank of sewage carved a runnel along the floor near the wall, though the gentle flow of water—ice melt maybe—kept the runnels clear. Wooden doors were set at intervals in the winding passageway.

When she came to the door that matched the description Jacob had given her, she knocked. On the sign, a happy face was drawn over the mortar, and the pestle was distinctly phallic-like, suggestively placed above two smaller cloves of garlic.

The door opened and a middle-age woman appeared, stiff of face and

back. "Can I help ye?"

"Is Merry-Death in?" Ari said.

"Blessy-help ye!" The woman said. "Surely you mean *Meredith,* lass?"

"Sorry, yes Meredith," Ari said, reddening.

"Well a wee bit late you are today, lass, we was just about to close. But come on in! The Merry Pestle's always open to entertaining new customers, no matter the hour, no matter the need!" The woman opened the door wider and beckoned her inside. "Come now, don't be shy! Even ladies need an aphrodisiac now and then, especially when the man is a dead bat in the sack! I'm Bethy by the way."

"Ari." She followed Bethy inside a room carved into the stone.

The woman closed the door behind her, and shouted into a side chamber. "Up with you mama! We's gots ourselves a customer, we do!" She smiled at Ari. She had three gaps in her front teeth.

Ari bit back her unease, and smiled back.

An old woman hobbled inside, hunched over a cane, massaging her lower back with a skeletal hand. That nose reminded Ari of a hawk's beak, and there was a small hairy growth near the tip. Her chin was long, so that nose and chin together resembled pincers when viewed in profile. The old woman wore a black robe, with the hood raised, though the fringe covered

only about half her head so that her white hair spilled out in profusion.

Despite the old woman's somewhat unsettling appearance, Ari felt immediate empathy for her. She herself had been an old woman not so long ago. Her eyes fell to the bronze bitch at the woman's neck. This woman had aged naturally, at least. Everyone did, when they were collared.

"How can I help you?" the old woman said, the air whistling between teeth that had even more gaps than the daughter's. Her hands shook with palsy.

Ari stared into those ancient, watery eyes. One eye bulged, while the other permanently squinted. Still, there was intelligence in them. Shrewdness. "Meredith?"

"Aye." The old woman regarded her suspiciously.

Time to see if Jacob was right. "I heard you can make me a White Poultice."

The old woman's hands stopped shaking. She didn't breath. She didn't blink.

Possession of the White Poultice was punishable by death. You could be arrested just for asking around for the stuff. Those who made it had to be very selective about their customers. Ari wished she'd brought her sword along, though Jacob had advised against it.

"I can pay you a handsome sum," Ari said.

Still no answer.

Ari glanced at the daughter. Bethy stood at the far side of the room, behind a shelf filled to the brim with various jars and containers. Bethy held a hand-crossbow at eye-level, and she had it aimed between the jars at Ari.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Ari slowly raised her hands in surrender.

Meredith smiled suddenly. "I'm sorry, we're closed lass."

"Four hundred drachmae," Ari said.

Meredith edged past her to the door.

"A thousand," Ari said.

Meredith opened the door.

"Five thousand drachmae," Ari said.

Meredith closed the door, and returned, hunching, until her face was practically nose-to-nose with Ari's. The old woman exhaled, and a blast of garlic filled Ari's nostrils. She did her very best not to flinch.

Meredith narrowed those mismatched eyes. "What interest does a gol have in White Poultice?"

Ari had a hard time hiding her shock. She hadn't opened her cloak to reveal the numbers on her chest, yet Meredith somehow knew what she was.

"Oh yes, I know you're a gol," Meredith said. "You're features are far too perfect to belong to any human, despite the fake collar you wear. So I ask again, what interest does a gol have in White Poultice?"

"What's an apothecary doing selling it?" Ari shot back.

"I never said I had it." Meredith turned away, all nonchalance, and shuffled over to her daughter. The old woman's gaze swiveled to the hand-crossbow. "With a word, just a word, lassy, I can have you curled up on the floor, vomiting your insides like there was no tomorrow. Gol or human, the poison works the same. Fast. Deadly. Just a scratch is all it takes."

Ari had nothing to say to that, so she merely returned that gaze defiantly. The two stared each other down for what seemed long moments. Ari's gaze drifted to the poisoned hand-crossbow.

Finally the old woman scowled. "Six thousand drachmae, no less."

"Done," Ari said. "Now put that crossbow away and make me the White."

"No need. Have some already prepared. And the crossbow stays." Meredith reached high up, nearly losing her balance. She dropped her cane and had to grab onto her daughter for balance.

"Mother!" Bethy swayed, and pressed the trigger. Ari felt the cool brush of air as the bolt whished past her cheek, a little too close for comfort. It hit the wall with a thud behind her.

Meredith glanced at Ari sheepishly. "Sorry."

Bethy shoved her mother away and loaded another bolt. Keeping the crossbow aimed at Ari, Bethy knelt and returned the cane to her mother.

Meredith retrieved a glass jar containing a thick white salve from the

shelf just below the topmost. "This here is the most potent White you'll ever find, it is. Nothing like it in all the cities of the world. My recipe is especially concentrated. You're looking at the extracts of over three hundred snowroots. Be very careful with this, lass. But a little caveat for you—though it's powerful stuff, there's only enough for three applications, no more."

"Perfect." Ari accepted the jar. "Thank you." She examined the contents. She held the jar motionless, but the white substance inside oozed back and forth as if it were alive. Perhaps some insect housed within. Suppressing a shiver, she stashed the jar in her shoulder satchel.

The old woman turned away.

Ari frowned. "Don't you want payment?"

Meredith swiveled back. "Oh yes, I almost forgot." She held out her hand and grinned, the gaps in her teeth giving her an oafish appearance. Behind her, Bethy rolled her eyes.

Ari dug the money bag from the satchel and dropped it in Meredith's cupped palm.

The old woman bobbed away happily.

"Not going to count it?" Ari said.

Meredith only smiled. "I can feel the weight of wealth, don't you be worrying."

In truth, the bag contained *ten* thousand drachmae. More than enough

to cover the cost of the Poultice. Even at ten thousand Ari considered it a bargain. She'd brought along two more bags, each containing the same amount, in case the bidding had gone even higher.

She reached for the door, feeling for all the world like she'd just won some incredibly difficult battle. But it wasn't over yet. The hand-crossbow was still aimed at her, she knew.

Ari opened the door.

Seven gols clad in the armor of the Dhenn city guard stood outside.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Ari nearly slammed the door. Instead, she forced herself to remain calm. None of the gols had drawn their swords. Yet. She ran he gaze across them, calculating her chances of escape, taking into account the fact that *she had no sword*.

They all had the sword-and-shield symbol stamped into their breastplates, but about half of the gols were slobbering. That increased her odds, a little bit.

"Greetings, Nine," the leader-apparent said, a brick-jawed gol with hints of gray in its hair. Its mustache was grown and trimmed into long, thin points, as was the fashion of the men here. They couldn't be Jeremy's soldiers...

Still, Ari remained silent, not understanding. *Nine?* And then she remembered. The symbol stamped into her chest designated her as a gol higher-up. But these gols couldn't see that symbol—her cloak covered it. She resisted the urge to look down. Obviously the gols had a way of picking her out regardless of that number. Probably some trick similar to how she was able to bring up the city map in her head.

Ari had to choose her reply very carefully. She could feel the hand-

crossbow trained on the back of her neck, and she knew that Meredith and her daughter would be hanging on every word.

But before she could answer, the gol spoke again, perhaps interpreting her silence as disdain.

"The good lad here—" The guard nodded at the youngest gol in the group. "Noticed you traveled Cutthroat Square unescorted, and unarmed. He gathered us up, he did, and we came as fast as we could to remedy that." Cutthroat Square. The nickname for Black Market.

Ari released a gentle sigh. The gols would have noticed her relief, but even so, she kept her expression neutral. So they weren't Jeremy's after all.

She inclined her head slightly, as though deigning to accept the offer, and she stepped through the door. When she turned back to close it, she saw, on the far side of the shop, that Meredith and her daughter looked relieved. Bethy still had the hand-crossbow aimed at Ari however.

Ari quickly shut the door.

She moved among the guards without a word and made off. The men formed a protective shield around her with their bodies, creating a circle roughly four paces in diameter. Enough room for each of them to draw and swing a sword without hitting her or each other, if it came to it.

She descended the ramp and left behind the stalagmite that housed Watership Street. She and her escort emerged into the cavern and passers-by

gave them a wide berth, allowing her to make good time to her next destination.

The map brought her to a section of the city that was cut into the very rock of the mountain. It was kind of an overflow district, or shantytown, for those too poor to afford a room in the stalagmites of the city proper. Many of the dwellings seemed little more than alcoves with a door wedged in front and a slot for dumping chamber pots. A tiny ditch had been carved along either flank of the street, and was filled with fecal sludge. The place reeked of a special kind of sewage—the smell of eggs left to rot overlong, magnified tenfold by the confined space. There was supposed to be ice melt flowing along those ditches, sweeping them clean, and barring that, some sort of system of drafts to replenish the air and make sure no one choked to death, but as far as she could tell neither system was working. The empty streets said as much. One old man did hunch past, but he held a black cloth to his mouth and nose. He watched Ari and the soldiers warily.

She realized that it didn't really matter if there was air in the cave or not. The denizens of the Inside didn't breathe. Or even need food for that matter. It was only the realism of the illusion that made them inhale. And eat.

She led the guard retinue to a small area near the end of the street, a darkened little corner of cave set apart from the troubles and confusions of humanity. If you didn't want to attract any notice, this was the perfect spot to

live. Ari might have chosen it herself if she'd based the New Users in this city.

She instructed the gols to watch the door in a half circle behind her, and her escort promptly obeyed. When each of them had swiveled to face the street, she knocked on the wooden door, hardly able to concentrate for the anxiety she felt.

The door opened.

"Hello, mother," Ari said.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Ari didn't recognize Cora at all.

The hunched, small woman before her was nothing like the proud matriarch she remembered from eight years ago when Ari came to rediscover the mother who'd been erased from her mind. Crow's feet stamped each eye. Or rather, crow's legs—those wrinkles were deep, extending far into her temples. Her forehead was an angry sea of ridges. Her cheeks sagged, and the skin around her eyes was swollen as if she cried permanently. Her nose had been broken since Ari last saw her, because the smooth bridge she remembered had been replaced by a bumpy knot. Robbed in the street, probably.

Cora glanced at the gol escorts outside, then lowered her eyes and retreated into the murk of the alcove without a word.

Ari followed her in and shut the door, careful not to step on the bowl of potpourri that masked the smell of the sewage outside. A single candle lit the alcove. A mandolin lay against one wall, with a dirty mattress and a chamberpot beside it. A small table, a cupboard, and a stash of carrots and potatoes completed the scene.

Ari lowered her satchel to the floor, hardly able to believe that her

mother was living in such conditions. Well, at least the air seemed a little warmer in here, and her breath no longer misted.

Cora fetched a stew pot from the cupboard, filled it with water from a bladder, and set it over a small metallic pad near the table. When the pot touched it, the pad immediately reddened with heat. Cora began cutting carrots and tossed the pieces into the pot.

"Never seen one of those before," Ari said, nodding toward the heat pad. Small talk seemed like the easiest way to get started.

Cora glanced at her and smiled. "It's a bit of magic, it is. We all get one for free. Like the potpourri. Part of the Dhenn resident program, see?"

"You're sounding more and more like Hoodwink every time I meet you," Ari said.

Cora's faced darkened, and she returned her attention to the cooking pot. "Wish I could offer you more, but all I got is soup. Carrot and potato. But you'll like it. Promise."

"Ma, I didn't come here for soup," Ari said.

But Cora seemed adamant. "My daughter comes to me house, I'm going to feed her."

Ari sighed, then sat crossed-legged beside the small table and watched her mother prepare the soup. "It won't matter, you know. Besides the fact I'm a gol now."

Cora looked up, the horror obvious on her face. "What?"

Ari pursed her lips. No, Cora probably wouldn't be able to handle the truth. "Just kidding, ma."

"I could almost believe it," Cora said. "Your face. So young. So smooth. But those eyes don't match. Haunted. Old."

Ari smiled. She didn't know what to say to that.

"So how are you anyway? Married now I hope?" Cora was apparently one of those people who judged a woman by whether or not she'd pledged her life to a man, in sickness and in health.

Ari pressed her lips together. "No ma, I'm not married."

"Why not? It would bring me a smile, knowing I got me some grandkids somewhere. Besides, a man would do you good."

"Why aren't you with Hoodwink then?"

The smile left her mother's face and Cora busied herself cutting. "You should be married. It's a bad bad thing to be a woman of your age and still spinning threads. You've waited too long. Any longer and you'll wait yourself right out of the marketplace."

"If marriage is so good, how come every time I mention Hoodwink you ignore me or change the subject?"

Cora chose the ignore option once again. "I know a few able men, about your age. There's the son of the tailor, up the street. A fine lad. And

Billee, the dyer's son. Though you might prefer Graff, the smith's boy. Face like a beat-up pail, but strong arms. You always had a liking for boys with strong arms."

"Ma, I don't need you to play matchmaker. And our tastes in men are obviously different. A smith's son? Seriously?"

"Bah." Cora tossed the carrot in, stem and all, and fetched another to chop.

"I'll think about it," Ari said. No use deepening the rift between them. "There's something I have to do first. But I'll come back and you can set me up with as many of these *boys* as you like. I can't promise I'll fall for any of them though."

Cora grinned. "Well! Now that's the spirit. A little bit of my old Ari come back to me. I knew you were still inside there somewhere."

Ari ignored the disturbingly casual reference to her revisioning. "Ma, can I ask you something? Why are you punishing yourself by living here?"

Cora's smile was thin, and fleeting. "Moved here to get away from the snow, I did. It's funny, but I guess I thought the cold would be gone with it. But it's frigid as ever. More-so, even." Cora pulled her cloak tight. She finished with the carrot, then grabbed a potato and started peeling it. "So what brings you to the grand City of Darkness? You need my help? Are you in trouble? Surely you didn't come just to visit?"

"Maybe I did. Maybe I finally wanted to make peace with my ma before too late."

Cora blinked a few times, then her gaze steadied. "We're at peace already, far as I'm concerning. No matter what you've done. No matter what you've become. You're still a User?"

Ari almost said yes. "No. I left them a long time ago." She was glad now that she hadn't brought a sword, and that she wore a fake bronze bitch.

"Good." Cora gave her a warm smile. "I knew you wouldn't be associating with those bad people anymore. I knew you were smarter than that. Better." Her eyes became distant. "I still remember when you were just a girl of seventeen. Come back from your first User execution. You were so bright-eyed back then. But after that day, a bit of the twinkle had gone from your eyes."

Ari frowned. "I don't remember."

A shadow passed over her mother's face. "No. You wouldn't, would you?" She tossed the potato in the pot and began peeling another. "You hounded me about the Users that day. *Who are they? What do they stand for? Why do we have to wear collars?* Got me so worried that I yelled at you and sent you to your room. I thought that would be the end of it. But you began bringing home strange propaganda, and stranger friends. We were convinced you were going to join the Users, we were. And we did what we did because

we thought we were saving you. Imagine my shock and surprise when I found out you'd gone and become a User anyway, despite it all."

Ari was confused. "What do you mean, you did what you did because you thought you were saving me?"

But Cora didn't hear. She was lost in memory. "I still remember the day Jeremy came. You used the electricity for the first time, that day. We hadn't collared you before then, because we hadn't seen the signs. You'd kept them a secret. Kept your power from the world. But you erupted when Jeremy came. Nearly messed-up him and your father real good with the lightning. Maybe it would have been for the best if you had. We tried to buy you back a month after. Too late by then. Too late."

Cora slumped, and her head came dangerously close to the boiling water in the pot. But ma didn't seem to notice.

Ari wasn't sure why Cora was telling her all this, nor that she wanted to hear any more of it.

"Ma, this is a great little talk we're having, but you're right, I actually came here for a reason. I want to tell you something." Ari bit her lip. Would she be able to go through with this? Sharing her deepest thoughts and emotions could be so hard sometimes. She'd built up shields to protect herself, but sometimes those shields needed to come crashing down if she wanted to get through to those she cared about the most. "I wish I'd never

been revised, all those years ago. I wish I'd never been taken away from you. But it's not your fault. And it's certainly not Hoodwink's. I want you to stop blaming him and yourself. Especially yourself. I want you to live again. Return to humanity, ma. Go back to Uncle Briar's house. Don't punish yourself by living in this shithole. You deserve better, ma. You always did. You can still be the singer you dreamed of. It's never too late."

Cora straightened and grabbed another potato. She began peeling it, though her hands were shaking visibly. Cora suddenly raised the knife and stabbed it into the heart of the potato she held. She withdrew the knife and stabbed again.

"Ma stop it!" Ari rose. "You'll cut yourself!"

"Get out," Cora said. "Get out. Get out!" She tossed the potato, knife and all, into the boiling water. "You don't get it do you? You don't get it at all. I *wanted* Jeremy to take you. He *paid* me. *Paid* me and Hoodwink both." She was cackling now. "We let him have you! We made money off you! We're not your mother and father! How could we be, after doing something like that? Get out! GET OUT!"

The words hardly registered. Ari was too stunned. Mother had accepted money ten years ago to give her up? Jeremy had *paid* Cora and Hoodwink so that he could take Ari and shape her into his personal bitch?

Ari found her satchel and staggered backward to the door. None of

this made sense. None of it. No. It wasn't possible. Hoodwink would never do that to her. Ma was just trying to drive a wedge between them.

No. No. No!

This is why she built up shields. This is why she never let anyone get close. They always hurt you, those closest to you. *Always.*

She fumbled with the door knob and wrenched the door open, nearly ripping it from its hinges.

The seven guards lay in various pieces on the cave floor. Above them towered the four-armed Direwalker she'd encountered at Jeremy's mansion.

There was a wild grin on its face.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Ari stared dumbly at the Direwalker. The symbol of a curved tooth, dripping blood, was stamped into its chest, and its long black coat was swept back so that all its hands were revealed.

Fourarms lifted one of those hands and everything seemed to happen in slow motion.

The hand inched toward her forehead. Light glinted from a shiny, metallic disk in the palm.

Ari gaped at the hand, and the disk, too shocked to respond. Closer and closer the disk came. In a moment the shiny object would touch her.

It was her mother who saved her.

A blur shot past on Ari's left—the pot hurtling by, boiling water sloshing over the rim as the handle pinwheeled. The pot collided with the gol's face and dumped the scalding contents all over it. The lip of the pot managed to snag on its head, and covered the Direwalker's eyes like a cap pulled too low. A lucky shot.

It was enough.

Ari snapped back to the present. She ducked beneath that swinging palm and its disk. She bounded onto Fourarms while the Direwalker was still

off balance and blinded, but it was like leaping into a concrete pillar.

Those four arms started to enwrap her—

She squirmed downward, dodging that crushing grip.

She scooped a sword from one of the fallen guards and plunged the blade into the Direwalker's chest. But the tip skidded and sparked as though she'd struck rock. The vibration passed up the sword into her arm and jolted her teeth.

Fourarms ripped the pot free. The boiling water had no apparent effect. Its face hadn't even reddened. The Direwalker opened its mouth in a sickening grin, its long fangs bared, and it came at her.

Ari sidestepped, bashing the hilt of the sword into the back of its neck with everything she had. Again her arms hurt as if she'd struck stone, but the blow helped—the Direwalker took two unnecessary steps to recover its balance.

Ari seized the opportunity to run.

She glanced back down the cave, and saw the Direwalker pursuing her on all six limbs like some kind of giant centipede.

It was gaining on her.

The cave widened ahead, and branched three ways. She took the rightmost branch, following the city map in her head.

The scuttle of those pursuing claws reflected from the cave walls so

that the sound seemed to come at her from all sides, and she couldn't gauge the distance by hearing alone. She kept glancing back, feeling for all the world that the thing would be on her in moments.

She rounded a bend and nearly ran into three gol guards on patrol.

"Help!" she shouted as she tore past.

She glanced askance. Fourarms hadn't slowed. Its mouth was open, its fangs anticipating the kill. Behind it, the three guards gave chase. Though they were fast, they weren't fast enough. Four paces separated them from the Direwalker. Not close enough to save her life.

Ahead, the floor seemed darker somehow...

She realized too late what it was—a smooth patch of black ice.

She slipped and fell the instant she touched that ice. Momentum carried her forward. She heard frantic clawing as the Direwalker struggled to stay upright, then the floor shook as it crashed onto the ice behind her. The two slid onward, separated only by a pace.

The passageway opened out into a smallish cavern. Stalagmites raced past. Passageways branched off to the left and right.

The floor fell away—

She wrapped her arms around a stalagmite right on the edge of the drop, and momentum swung her one-eighty degrees around it.

Fourarms careened over the ledge beside her, but also managed to

grab hold of the stalagmite.

The formation broke.

Ari swung herself back onto the floor just as the stalagmite toppled over. Fourarms clawed at the empty air and vanished into the murky depths with the stalagmite.

The three pursuing guards had slipped on the ice as well, and they went over the edge an instant later.

The Direwalker would have some company.

For a little while, anyway.

Ari carefully made her way across the slippery surface. Black Market was only two streets away. Already she could see the bustle of activity. She doubted Fourarms would attack her now, with so many people about.

She'd won.

For the moment.

***

Brute stood in the dark above the tattered remains of the three guardsmen.

Current traffic density of transit center and outlying area—15%. Probability that subject would escape through the portal before Brute could reach her—95%.

Brute scaled the smooth slope, digging its long claws into the ice like

hooks. When Brute reached the street, it hid its extra appendages in its cloak, and cast its gaze down the tunnel. The city map overlaid its vision, and Brute zeroed in on the home the subject had visited moments before.

Probability that the subject's biological mother would prove useful in the coming days—100%.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Ari crept through a dim room lit by a lone candle on the far end. A black curtain draped over a trestle by the window prevented the candlelight from being seen by anyone outside.

A floorboard creaked beneath her.

"Who's there?" Briar glanced up from the desk, where he sat reading a book or journal in the candlelight.

The curtain over the trestle parted, and Tanner stepped out. "Ari."

"Good to see you too," she said, and meant it.

Tanner let the curtain fall behind him. "Did you get it?"

She held up the jar. The white substance jiggled inside. "One Poultice of White, as requested."

Briar dashed forward greedily and snatched the jar, cradling it. "We could sell this spittle-jar for a fortune. A fortune!"

Ari squeezed her fingers between Briar's thick arms and wrenched the jar back. "It's not for selling."

"But Ari," Briar said. "Dear niece. Why not just sell a little? A speck! We don't need all of it."

"I think we might need it all yet," she said. "And don't call me dear."

She hated it when people called her *dear*. It reminded her of a certain patronizing caregiver named Richard she'd employed what seemed a lifetime ago.

"You followed the plan?" Tanner said.

Ari laughed. "I followed the plan, Tanner."

Tanner gave her a sharp, searching look. "Any problems?"

She'd had to face a poisoned crossbow, run from a four-armed Direwalker, escape the city guards that waited for her at the transit center, and take a roundabout route back to this place. Oh, and she'd had to come to terms with the fact that Hoodwink and Cora had sold her to Jeremy. Actually she was *still* coming to terms with that, and wasn't sure she believed it. But other than all that... "No problems I couldn't handle."

She set the jar on the table beside Briar, gave the fat man a warning look, and ducked beneath the curtain.

Through the window, she could see Jeremy's manor grounds across the dark street. A spyglass was set on a tripod, and she peered into it. Jeremy's bedroom came into focus. The mayor had three naked gols in bed with him. Well, as naked as gols could get, all of them wearing that irremovable, thin layer of clothing over their torsos. Two of the gols were fashioned into women, and the third was shaped as a boy barely out of adolescence.

Tanner ducked under the trestle beside her.

"I see you've been entertaining yourself in my absence," she said.

"Was that comment directed at me, or the mayor?" Tanner said.

"The both of you."

Tanner cleared his throat, and changed the subject. "Still no sign of the Direwalker army."

"That's good, right?" Ari didn't really think so.

"Good for us, anyway."

Ari slid her eye from the spyglass and took in the entire mansion. She'd be going into that heart of darkness again.

Alone this time.

She didn't feel ready.

She glanced at Tanner. "Sometimes I—"

"What is it?"

She sighed. "I'm afraid."

He rested a hand on her upper arm. "I am too. Are you sure you're up to this?"

She felt like falling into an embrace, but she brushed his hand away, pretending to be annoyed. She hardened her voice. "Of course I'm up to it. I didn't become leader of the New Users for my cowardice."

"Speaking of the New Users," Tanner said. "They're having some

trouble with the Dwarf. He's not as cooperative as we thought he'd be."

Ari tapped her lips with one finger. "We need the Control Room."

"We need the Control Room," Tanner agreed. "Though the New Users are planning to revise the Dwarf as well."

She searched his eyes, wondering how she should propose the changes she wanted to make to the plan.

"I met Fourarms," she said. "Brute." The spy in Jeremy's mansion had discovered the Direwalker's name.

"What? When?" Tanner tensed beside her.

"I stopped by my mother's place in Dhenn. The Direwalker was there when I left. It was tracking me, I think."

"Tracking?" Tanner parted the curtain in alarm and glanced back at the doorway.

She rested a hand on his knee. "Fourarms didn't follow me here. I was careful. They're using ravens."

Tanner shook his head. "This operation is getting more dangerous by the minute. If Jeremy knew just how close we really were..." His eyes drifted to the house across the street. "I can't believe you stopped by your mother's. What happened to following the plan to the letter?"

Ari exhaled a long breath. "I just wanted to see her." But how painful it had been. *Hoodwink would never sell me to Jeremy!*

Tanner seemed about to say something, then he backed down. "Yes, of course. Nothing wrong with that." He steepled his fingers and tapped his chin. "How did you get away? From Fourarms."

She was about to brag about her peerless agility and unmatched quickness or some such nonsense, but then she bowed her head.

"Luck," she admitted.

Tanner glanced at her lips. "Well I'm glad you're all right."

"Sure." She hastily looked away, and let her gaze rest on the distant mansion instead. She was far from all right. "Do you think Hoodwink would have sold me to Jeremy?"

Tanner wrinkled his brow. "What? What are you talking about?"

"My mother told me that she and Hoodwink accepted money from Jeremy, so that the mayor would take me away and have me revised. Something about trying to save me from the Users."

Tanner stared at her for a few seconds. "No. It doesn't strike me as something Hoodwink would do. Not at all."

Ari nodded, though she had the feeling that he was simply telling her what she wanted to hear. "You're right. I don't know why I believed her. She just wants to drive a wedge between me and Hoodwink, for whatever reason. Hates him that much I guess."

She studied Jeremy's mansion, not wanting to meet Tanner's eye.

"It's not too late to steal the Control Room from another mayor, in a different city," Tanner said.

"Actually it *is* too late," she said. "It's already taken us a week on the Inside to plan this heist. And it will be another day or two before we pull it off. By the time we're done, we'll only have an hour of air left on the Outside. Maybe less."

Briar could hear everything they said beyond the curtain, but he couldn't have any idea what they were talking about. He probably still thought the Outside was the land beyond the cities.

Tanner didn't seem convinced. "But if we went to a different city, and confronted its mayor with our fire swords, I'm sure we could take the Control Room without any problems. Not every mayor has an army of Direwalkers. Nor a living carpet."

"Can you be sure?" Ari said. "Can you?"

Tanner was silent.

"That's what I thought. No, we steal Jeremy's Control Room or we steal no one's. We've been planning all week." She was about to look in the spyglass again, but she remembered the grotesque lovemaking scene and turned her attention to the night sky instead. "I don't think Jeremy did this all by himself. The army of Direwalkers. Fourarms. He's got help on the Outside."

Tanner wrinkled his forehead. "Another A.I., like the Dwarf? Or this *One*?"

Ari shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe. But he's not acting alone, that's for sure. We have to find out who's helping him and stop them, if we can."

"*If* we can," Tanner said. "That's the key part. Like you said, we only have a few more hours of air on the Outside."

She smiled bravely. "Well then, there's no time to lose is there?" She still hadn't found a good way to introduce her changes to the plan. Might as well just dive in. "Oh, and I've found a better way to plant you in the house, Mr. Tanner. But you'll have to leave right away."

And she proceeded to explain her latest addition to the plan.

Tanner didn't think it would work, and he said it was too late in the game to start making changes, but she finally convinced him that the benefits outweighed the risks. It was a small change, one that shouldn't affect things overly much, but one that could potentially have a big payoff.

And so Tanner agreed, and left right away.

She almost changed her mind. She almost went after him to tell him to forget it. But it was done. She had to stick to her decisions.

But she sure hoped she was right about this.

Because if she was wrong, and there was a good chance that she was, she'd have another life on her hands.

Not to mention that she'd be left abandoned and alone on the Outside, with only hours to live.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Breath misting from her exertions, Cora shouldered the sack. Cabbage, carrots, and potatoes. Her staple food. She'd lived on the stuff for the past eight years, apparently.

But it wasn't the food that was on her mind. Hardly. No, it was the day.

And what a day it was.

A crazy day.

She'd never thought it would come to this.

That crazy monster was sent after Ari, to pursue her, and potentially murder her.

For no reason. Well, she supposed the monster did have a reason. Ari knew things. And she was on Mayor Jeremy's bad side.

That monster was the mayor's doing.

Well, Cora had a part to play in all this. Though she wasn't entirely sure that the part would be quite what she expected.

She entered Mire District. Ah the smell. It wasn't much different from the smell of the other districts, though the shit-stench was magnified here because of the tight passageways and tunnels. It was a smell you never really

got used to. Cora doubted any of the other residents had gotten accustomed to it, though they might claim otherwise. They probably hadn't even figured out why the candle flames never ignited the fumes, nor why they were able to survive despite the fact those very same candles choked out all the breathable air.

She neared the murky little corner of the cave where the alcove, her house, lay so far away from everything else. A hermit's den, really.

She turned the key in the lock and opened the door.

The four-armed Direwalker crouched menacingly inside the entrance.

"Why hello, Brute," Cora said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Jeremy waltzed through his quiet halls, one hand tucked in his jacket with the fingers thrumming on the suit, the other held out before him, swaying to and fro as if he conducted a band. The thread-of-gold tentacles climbing the sleeve gleamed in the light. He hummed a tune as he walked, a bar song popular among the portal traders. The words echoed in his head. *Go down dear barmaid, you're crazy as pie, I know what you want—to eat my syrupy eye! Go down dear barmaid...*

The suit was a little tight for his tastes. It was in the latest style he'd caused to become all the rage among the nobles. A "suit and tie" it was called. Black blazer, white shirt, black slacks, black shoes, black strip hanging from the bronze bitch, and voila—it was quite popular fifteen hundred years ago apparently. Jeremy liked it, anyway. But he'd have to get this one refitted.

A servant in white livery walked the hall ahead on some errand. Jeremy nodded, offering her a savage grin. When she passed, he pinched her bum. Hard. The servant jumped, and gave him a scowl, but there was an inviting twinkle in her eye under the outrage. He flashed her a look that said, "I'll follow up that one with ten more later, you sweet-treat you."

He avoided the reception hall, taking a circumspect route across the first floor of the house. There was a certain individual he was trying to avoid today. Why chance an uncomfortable situation? He didn't want to be forced into doing something nasty after all.

He passed a little too near the kitchen for comfort, and could smell the sweet potatoes and honeyed hams that had been cooked up. He was starving, but there was no time for food. Not now. He had a meeting with Destiny, and he sure as heck wasn't going to be late.

He neared the small, nondescript entrance that was hidden away in the corridor behind the reception hall. Three Direwalkers guarded the door.

All three straightened when they saw him, and one of them said, "Sir!"

Jeremy glanced at the Direwalker who spoke. "What did you call me?"

The Direwalker appeared confused. "Sir?"

Jeremy slapped the thing in the face. First one cheek, then the other. "Show me your teeth. Show them!"

The Direwalker was looking rather angry now, but it obeyed, exposing those long fangs.

Jeremy wrapped his thumb and forefinger around one of the fangs, and tried to break it off. "Stop moving!"

Jeremy succeeded only in cutting himself, and gave up. "You and your insolent teeth." He stuffed his bloodied hand back into his suit, hoping the Direwalker hadn't noticed the puncture. "We shall talk about this later."

Jeremy kicked the door open and strutted into the room.

Five rows of terminals filled the chamber, with an aisle down the middle. Monitor gols sat at the stations, dressed in black, the all-seeing eye symbol on their chests. Three large pieces of glass hung from the front of the room. The leftmost danced with numbers and symbols. The middle display held a map. Jeremy recognized the continents of the earth, with curves drawn between the cities, indicating what seemed to be portal hops. The rightmost display had some sort of mathematical curve with words written beside it.

Just to the left of the displays hung Jeremy's red flag of office. The middle-finger coat-of-arms set into the center had always amused him.

"So, how's life in the Control Room today?" Jeremy said.

Only one of the Monitor gols turned to look at him. Its eyes fidgeted to and fro. Jeremy went to that one, and the gol quickly returned to its work.

Jeremy knelt beside Fidgety-Eyes' station. "And how are you today?"

"Good, sir..." the Monitor said.

"Seen anything out of the ordinary?"

The Monitor didn't look up. There was a round display in the middle of the station that showed a sequence of concentric circles, along with some

gibberish. Green dots flashed at various positions. "No sir. Nothing out of the ordinary."

Jeremy bit down a sudden chuckle. "When's the last time you saw some action between the sheets?"

"Excuse me, sir?" Finally Fidgety-Eyes turned toward him. Those eyes lived up to the gol's name.

Jeremy smiled. "That's what I thought." He patted the gol on the shoulder. "As you were."

Jeremy shuffled from station to station, moving in time to the trader tune he hummed. None of the Monitors paid him much heed.

He shuffle-walked to the three displays at the front, and pretended to study the map of the world. He moved from display to display, still keeping up that funny, sliding gait.

When he got to where the flag hung, his foot hit something invisible.

Jeremy glanced askance. None of the gols were looking at him. He casually positioned himself to the side of the hidden Box, and closed it.

Reality stretched and folded. The stations warped away from the Monitor gols, along with the displays, and the desks, the whole room twisting like some fabric as it was sucked into the vortex sourced by the invisible Box. The entire chamber was vacuumed up, and in moments only bare walls, ceiling and floor remained. All that was left were the sconces on the walls,

the Monitor gols, Jeremy, and the wooden chest at his feet. Well, and the red flag of office with its middle-finger—a little present for those who sought the Box.

Jeremy scooped up the chest. He noted that there was no key for this one, just a latch. Convenient, he supposed. He turned to the Monitors. "Well! Quite the show, wasn't it? Move along now, move along. Nothing more to see here. You're all discharged for the day." He waved his hand dismissively. "Ta-ta."

The Monitors watched open-mouthed as he waltzed across the empty room with the Box tucked beneath one arm.

"Or just stand there and stare at nothing all day, see if I care." He paused beside Fidgety-Eyes. "But you my boy, *you* should really see about some sex."

Jeremy spun toward the exit, but the Direwalker whose tooth he'd tried to break stood there with its arms crossed, blocking the way. The Direwalker sneered. Actually sneered.

"What are you looking at!" Jeremy started forward, and planned to strike the insolent Direwalker with the back of his hand.

But then a black-robed figure stepped into the room beside the Direwalker, and the very air of the chamber seemed to darken. The newcomer's face was hidden in the shadow of its hood, and only its bone-

white, gnarled hands were visible. Instead of four fingers and a thumb, each hand possessed two thick, ridged digits. Electricity sparked and writhed from those digits.

Jeremy took three steps back.

On the robe was written a single number.

One.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Jeremy could only stare. "You're not supposed to be here."

The hooded figure said nothing, and instead lifted a malformed hand.

Though no lightning shot from that palm, Jeremy was sent sprawling across the floor. The Box tumbled from his grasp.

The hooded figure advanced. The Monitors backed away, flattening against the walls, giving "One" a wide berth. Each step the figure took resounded loudly, and the marble cracked underneath as if those feet bore the weight of a mountain. Electricity continued to spark from its hands—menacing, threatening.

Jeremy scrambled backward, trying to get up, but he kept slipping on the marble floor, his limbs weak not from any physical injury, but from the terror the mere sight of the newcomer instilled.

The darkness in the room deepened as One grew near, and the wall sconces dimmed. The figure lifted its hand again, and twisted those fingers counterclockwise. Jeremy was hoisted into the air by invisible arms, and rotated like a pinwheel so that his head pointed straight down. All the blood rushed to his head. It felt like his skull was going to burst.

And then a surge of electricity spilled from One's palm.

Jeremy shook in place as his body was electrocuted. The smell of burnt hair and charred flesh filled his nostrils. It felt like not only his head must burst, but his entire body. He waited for his insides to smear across the floor, ceiling, and walls, wondering how much of it he'd see, if any.

Not the way he'd imagined his end. Not the way at all.

And then the electricity ceased.

Still suspended in midair, Jeremy slumped. He wasn't sure whether to feel relieved, or doomed.

"Where is the New User outpost?" One's voice sounded an otherworldly baritone, too low for any man.

Jeremy stuttered. "I— I don't know." His own voice sounded high-pitched, feminine.

The figure spun its hand, and Jeremy floated right-side up again. The bronze bitch around Jeremy's throat tightened. He kicked his legs, and clawed at his neck, choking.

"Where is Seven?" the robed figure said.

"The Dwarf?" Jeremy said, wheezing. "Why... do you... care?"

Abruptly the collar loosened and Jeremy fell to the floor. His face was melting.

The robed figure stood motionless for a long moment. Then its form flickered.

The number vanished from the robe. Those hands appeared normal now, with four fingers and a thumb.

The figure raised its arms and lowered its hood—

Revealing the Other Jeremy.

"Damn sleepwalking," the Other Jeremy said. "Happening more and more often these days. So, what did I miss?" The Other Jeremy scanned the room, taking in all the details, finally stopping on the first Jeremy, who yet lay prostrate before him. "Well hello. And who might you be?" The Other Jeremy came to his side and knelt. "What's the matter, cat got your tongue? Did you know, in certain cities to the east, liars and thieves have their tongues ripped out and fed to the mayor's cats? That's the origin of the saying, *cat got your tongue*."

The Other Jeremy reached down, and scraped the remnants of Jeremy's face away. He held the mask up in his hands, melted as it was by the electricity, and the white substance oozed between his fingers. "You have the ability to change yourself into a gol, and yet you have to resort to something as primitive as the White Poultice to change your face? Fascinating!" He flicked his hand, and the white goo spattered the floor.

"Ah, dearest, did you really think you'd get away with this?" The Other Jeremy, the *real* Jeremy, rested that sticky hand on her face. "It was an ingenious little plan though, I'll give you that. Dressing up as me, and

planning your heist during my scheduled meal time, since you *know* how I hate to be disturbed when I'm eating. But did you really think the Control Room is the only way I have to keep tabs on my household? I must thank you for coming into my grasp once again, however. You've just made everything a whole lot easier."

Ari merely looked at him. She couldn't talk. She felt utterly exhausted and defeated. The impersonation had been draining, but it was the electrocution that had finished her off.

"Well then, let's proceed with your termination, shall we?" Jeremy had grown out his mustache since the last time Ari saw him. It gave him an uncanny resemblance to Hoodwink. If it weren't for that gruff voice, every syllable dripping contempt, she might've believed her father had come back from the dead as mayor. A silly thought—of course Jeremy looked nothing like Hoodwink.

Then again...

Jeremy glanced over his shoulder. "Brute? Brute where are you?"

"Here!" The four-armed Direwalker ducked through the doorway.

"Bring her," Jeremy said.

Brute glanced into the hall, and nodded.

The other two Direwalkers who were guarding the door came into the room. They shoved a tiny, shriveled woman forward.

Cora.

Except, it wasn't Cora anymore.

Something was wrong.

Terribly wrong.

Those eyes were more haunted than she'd ever seen them, and lacked any recognition whatsoever. Those slumped shoulders seemed to carry the weight of a world of misery.

"Maggie!" Jeremy said. "You old whore you, how have you been?"

"Master Jeremy!" Cora smiled shyly. "May I please you?"

Jeremy gave Ari a sly look. "I had her revised with the program meant for you. I figured if I couldn't have you, might as well have your mother!"

Ari felt sick. It wasn't true. "But we took your Revision Box."

"You did indeed. And what a pain it was to dredge up another. I had to hire the best snatch-purse from the Thief's Kitchen to steal another. The Mayor of Luntus was much obliging. Don't think he'll be missing it though. Dead men can't miss things, right?"

Jeremy studied her for a moment. Strength was slowly trickling back into her limbs, but she pretended to be exhausted still. Jeremy rubbed his ear thoughtfully, then glanced at the other three Direwalkers hovering beside Brute. "Be useful and hold luvvie here would you? She's a tricky one, and I wouldn't be surprised if this exhaustion of hers was just as much a pretense as

the mask."

Damn. The three Direwalkers came forward and restrained Ari.

Jeremy grinned. "What, not even token resistance today? I'm disappointed. Do you fear me so greatly?"

In truth, she wasn't struggling because she wanted to conserve her energy. She was getting stronger by the second. That electricity had drained her to the core, but the gol body had amazing recuperation powers. She just needed a little more time...

"Where are all your other Direwalker pets?" Ari said.

Jeremy smiled, his eyes widening in disbelief. "You're about to die, and all you can think about are my Direwalker pets? Well, if it will make your passing easier, I will tell you. My *army* of Direwalkers is readying to embark on a very important mission. A world-changing mission. If only you could live to see it. You'd be proud of me, Ari Flanners. You would! In any case, your passing won't be for naught. Take pride in the knowledge that your death will help me hunt down and destroy the entirety of the New Users."

Ari didn't believe it. "You were a gol when you came into this room. You know that, don't you? You had *One* written on your chest. Something's very wrong here. And not just with your sanity."

Raw, utter fear darted across Jeremy's face. But then he was all smiles again. "Do you know what power truly is at its heart, Ari? And why everyone

wants to be rich? Well of course you do. You've had a taste, as leader of that little band of yours. You must have." He rested a hand on her mother's shoulder. "Control. Making other people do what they don't want to do. Making them do what you want. Getting your way. That's power. That's why people want to be rich. And I am *very* rich." He turned toward Cora. "Maggie, I have something special for you to do today. Something really important. Do you understand, Maggie? It's very important that you don't fail."

Cora's eyes widened fearfully, and she nodded. "I won't let you down Master Jeremy."

"Good. Because now's your chance to shine, Maggie dear." Jeremy glanced at the giant Direwalker. "If you would, Brute."

The four-armed gol produced the same metallic disk it had been holding in Dhenn. Brute gave the disk to Cora.

"With this disk," Jeremy said. "All traces of you will die, Ari. With a simple touch to the forehead, you will be killed utterly in all these realms of existence that people keep telling me about. One moment you will exist, and the next you will cease to exist. I could just use a sword I suppose, but I want to make sure you're thoroughly dead. Think of this as a parting gift from the best lover you've ever had. After all, without me to warm your mattress, you've been dead all these years anyway." Jeremy shoved Cora forward.

"Touch the disk to her forehead, Maggie dear. Amuse your master."

Cora walked forward unsteadily. She kept glancing at Jeremy as though worried that just walking the wrong way might upset him. When she came near Ari, she knelt, and peered into her eyes.

"It's easy, Maggie," Jeremy said. "All you have to do is touch the disk to her forehead."

Cora reluctantly lifted the disk.

"Mom," Ari said. "It's me. Mom."

"Jeremy, I—" Cora looked back.

"Do it," Jeremy said.

Ari lowered her voice. "Mom."

Cora frowned. "Why do you keep calling me that?" She brought the disk forward.

Ari tensed her muscles. The Direwalkers detected this, and tightened their grips.

There was no way Ari was going to allow that disk to touch her forehead. She'd tilt her head at the last moment. She'd break free, hurl the Direwalkers at her mother. She'd—

But Cora paused a handspan from her forehead.

"I don't know you," Cora said. "But why is it that you have my eyes, and my face?"

"Maggie, enough!" Jeremy said. "You displease me!"

Cora stared at Ari, and then recognition lit her eyes, followed by mischief. Cora winked.

Her mother's hand moved in a blur. She pressed the device to the foreheads of the three Direwalkers restraining Ari, one after the other.

The Direwalkers remained motionless a few moments, not realizing they'd been killed perhaps. Then abruptly all three slumped to the floor.

Ari scooped up the Box and shot to her feet.

Cora spun toward Jeremy and Brute, and lifted the disk menacingly.

Jeremy stepped back, raising his robed hands. "Come now Maggie, this is your master here. You wouldn't want to hurt your master, would you?"

"You're no master of mine." Cora spat the words.

Brute took a step forward.

"Be still, you fool!" Jeremy hissed at the Direwalker. "That disk will destroy you the same as the others."

Brute regarded Jeremy uncertainly, and then obeyed.

Cora and Ari warily strode past Brute and Jeremy. Cora kept her hand raised, the metal gleaming in her fingers. The Direwalker and the man swiveled to keep the disk in view.

When Cora and Ari neared the door, one of the forgotten Monitor gols surged forward without warning and slapped the disk from Cora's hand.

The metallic object dropped to the floor, and all eyes watched it bounce. Once. Twice. On the third bounce, the disk came to a rest.

Jeremy glanced up. "Get them!"

Brute leaped into motion.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Ari sprinted from the room with her mother.

Except it wasn't her mother—Cora reached up and ripped off her face as she ran.

Tanner raced beside Ari, his face grim, the remains of the White Poultice dripping from his fingers.

In Dhenn, Ari had doubled-back to her mother's house before returning to the transit center. She had suspected Brute would come for Cora, and though she resented what her mother had done—taking money for the revision of her only daughter—Ari couldn't leave her, not when Brute knew where she lived. Ari got there ahead of the Direwalker, but she couldn't convince Cora to come, so she threw her mother over one shoulder and hotfooted it through the tunnel. She immediately took a side passage, and could've sworn she saw Brute lumbering down the main tunnel. She took Cora back through the portal hop after pulling rank on a couple of gol guards, and she brought her kicking and screaming mother out the other side. In the city-state, after evading the gols that watched the transit center, she dropped her mom off with the New Users in the Black Den, and instructed them to protect Cora with their lives.

Then Ari visited Tanner and Briar, and Tanner went back in Cora's place after Ari convinced him. Brute captured Tanner-Cora. Briar was planted in the house as a Revisor when the household spy reported that Jeremy had acquired a new Revision Box. Briar's presence was in case Jeremy decided to revise Tanner-Cora—and true to form, Jeremy attempted just that. Briar had played his part well it would seem. He would be long gone from the mayor's house by now, the new Revision Box in his custody.

All that was left was for Ari and Tanner to escape with the Control Room.

The two meticulously avoided the carpet in the reception hall. Hands and tentacles formed at the fringes of that carpet, but Ari and Tanner were faster, and escaped into the foyer. Brute was in hot pursuit, racing along in that centipede fashion of his. Neither Tanner nor Ari had their fire swords, nor any other weapon. Ari wished Jeremy hadn't moved that sword rack of his out of the reception hall.

Blades drawn, two Direwalkers barred the exit to the mansion.

Without slowing, Ari grabbed a vase from a pedestal. Tanner snatched a marble bust.

Ari ran right at her opponent. The Direwalker jabbed at her with the sword but she batted the blade aside with the vase, and brought her hand around to smash the ceramic into the gol's head. The vase shattered and the

gol plunged to the floor.

Beside her, Tanner had emerged similarly unscathed, the bust gone from his hands. Put to good use no doubt.

Ari burst through the front door.

Outside, it was late evening. The sky was overcast and threatened a storm.

Ari and Tanner tore past the frozen fountain on the terrace, taking the pine-lined footpath toward the gated exit. The trees sped past—

Direwalkers leaped down from the pines behind them.

And then the bomb exploded.

Ari ducked as pieces of the pines and the fountain rained past. She glanced back. A gaping hole had been carved into the front of the mansion. A crater remained where the fountain had been. Most of the trees along the path had toppled. The Direwalkers lay in various states of dismemberment. No sign of Brute.

Well done, Briar.

The gate lay open ahead. The two gol sentries were dead beside it, staked through the heart. Ari and Tanner slowed as they passed through.

"Well I can hardly believe it," Ari said. "Briar actually came through for us."

"Where are the fire swords then?" Tanner said. There were supposed

to be two here, placed along the tall stone fence that enclosed the estate.

"Maybe some other guards found the swords," Ari said. "Maybe Briar forgot that part."

"Or maybe he sold us out." Tanner turned toward the house across the street, well aware that Briar was probably watching through the spyglass at this very moment.

Ari felt herself a pretty good judge of character, and she'd grown rather fond of her Uncle in the previous days. So it was understandable that Tanner's words didn't sit well with her. "He wouldn't do that to his own niece. Besides, after what we promised him, he'd never betray us."

But Tanner was insistent. "Unless the mayor promised him more."

Ari shook her head. "Briar kept you from being revised. Detonated the bomb. Took out these gols. He did his job as far as I'm concerned." She lowered the Box, taking a sword belt from one of the dead sentries and fastening it around her waist. "Let's go before Jeremy puts together some kind of response."

Tanner made a grab for the second sword belt—

A blade erupted point-first from his chest, and he was lifted, skewered, into the air.

Tanner gazed down, squirming, and wrapped his hands around the metal.

But it was not one sword, but four, and those blades parted now, two to the left, two to the right, so that the two halves of Tanner's body splattered the ground.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Ari watched the scene unfold in a daze.

Brute stepped forward, covered in Tanner's blood.

Dead.

Tanner was dead.

Die violently as a gol, die in real life.

A rage like Ari had never felt before in her entire life filled her. An all-consuming, mass-murdering rage. She could hardly see for the red fury that colored her vision. If anger were madness, it would have known no greater insanity than this.

She drew her blade without a word. She stepped forward, each step measured, precise. When she closed with the Direwalker, she moved faster than she'd ever moved in her life, without thought of repercussion, without thought of her own safety. Her blade was a blur of steel. Her arm a smear of flesh. She beat back those scimitars like a swordswoman whose whole life had been mere preparation for this moment, and the stunned Direwalker was forced to retreat.

The wind picked up as she fought. The snow began to fall.

She heard only the sound of the swords, hers and her opponent's, a

continuous clang clang clang as the four-armed Direwalker struggled to parry.

Clang clang clang.

Clang clang clang.

CLANG.

Her blade struck one of Brute's wrists. She'd hoped her rage would be enough. That the hand would sever. But her weapon merely bounced away.

She was immediately forced on the defensive, parrying—clang clang clang.

Then her sword found Brute's heart.

She thrust with everything she had, and with utmost purpose, as if the sheer force of her will could drive that blade through the heart.

But the tip didn't penetrate. The reverberation of the impact jarred Ari's whole upper body. She'd risked much in that attempted killing blow, too much, and left herself entirely open. The resulting reverberation only worsened matters, temporarily numbing her.

She was defenseless.

But Brute didn't kill her.

The Direwalker smiled. It crossed its blades over its chest in a double X and flung its scimitars outward, hitting her with the flats of the blades.

Ari was forced backward.

Brute was toying with her.

The blizzard picked up. Around them the conditions became near white-out, and Ari could see only a few paces in any direction. She fought in isolation from the rest of the world, in a private pact of doom of her own making. The only witness was the gol that would kill her.

Brute pressed forward, on the offensive now, and Ari constantly gave ground before those blows. She was slowing down, the rage-fueled fervor of the initial assault fading, replaced by hopelessness.

The four scimitars of her enemy danced in kaleidoscopic vortex, and appeared at turns a blooming flower, a whirling wheel, a crushing maw.

A sword invaded her upper thigh and cut a rude gash. Another blade licked her breast. A third molested her forearm.

Ari spun from an attack that would have taken her head. She sidestepped three blades that would have perforated her viscera. She dodged a swipe that would have severed her legs below the knees.

She backed into a snowdrift and was sent off balance. Brute instantly batted the sword from her hand. Weaponless, she flung herself backward into the snow as more blades swooped in.

The drift engulfed her.

Brute raised its scimitars high—

She rolled away and scrambled to one knee, body covered in snow.

Her sword lay on the snowpack just beyond the drift.

She was about to dive for it—

A hilt rammed her face.

Blood sprayed from her lips as Ari flew backward—

She smashed into the stone fence of Jeremy's estate and slid down into the drift.

The world faded.

She fought back, and banished the stars and blackness from her vision, and struggled to her feet. Her face was wet. Blood? Or melted snow?

She took only two steps before collapsing again.

Too dizzy.

Too nauseous.

She dragged herself along the drift. One hand forward. The other. One hand forward. The other. The cold snow was quickly numbing her body. Already she couldn't feel her hands.

Maybe that was a good thing. Less agony, when the end came. Because she didn't think she'd be able to ignore the pain at that point.

Above the storm she heard the crunch of heavy boots in the drift. Boots that sounded all-too calm in their approach. Boots whose owner knew its prey was done.

The sword.

Had to get the sword.

But it was behind her now.

Past Brute.

She forced herself to stand. Yes. Did it.

She slipped.

Fell again.

How close was Brute?

She flung her body around so that she lay with her back in the drift and faced the sky.

The Direwalker towered above her feet, its four swords raised.

Brute plunged those blades down—

She split her legs to avoid the strike—

Too slow.

She let out a cry as one of the swords pierced her thigh and pinned her. She twisted to and fro, blotting out the pain, trying to escape. But the sword held her firm—the blade had penetrated into the harder snow below.

The Direwalker sheathed the remaining three scimitars in a mechanical whirl.

Brute reached into its belt and retrieved the small, metallic disk.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Ari didn't wait for the Direwalker to close.

She leaned forward and gripped the hilt of the sword embedded in her flesh. She squeezed her fingers tightly and hauled upward.

The blade didn't move.

She heard a laugh now. A ghastly bass of a laugh.

It was Brute.

The laugh only angered her, and the rage renewed her determination, and her strength.

She planted her uninjured foot in the snow, and strained harder, gritting her teeth. The Direwalker, still laughing, was almost upon her.

But it was useless. All her life had been a waste. To end like this, for nothing. For no one. She pulled and pulled. The scimitar wouldn't move.

The scimitar.

The blade was *curved*.

She adjusted the angle at which she heaved on the blade, just slightly.

All at once the sword launched from her flesh in a spray of red mist.

She allowed momentum to carry her upward, and she bashed the hilt into the Direwalker's chin with all the strength that remained in her.

It was like hitting stone.

But even stone could be moved if you knocked it hard enough.

Brute stumbled backward a pace.

Without missing a beat, Ari brought the scimitar about and plunged the weapon into its eye.

The tip penetrated easily, digging into the gol's gray matter, and she felt the reverberation as the inside of the Direwalker's skull halted the blade.

Finally. A weakness.

She withdrew the sword and a stream of gore vomited from its useless eye.

Brute remained standing.

She was about to gouge the other eye when the Direwalker drew its remaining blades. Brute was expecting her to go for its second eye.

So she did the unexpected.

Ari whipped the sword down like a club, putting her body weight into the blow, and hit Brute in the ankle with the flat of the blade. Again it was like striking stone, but she managed to move the leg enough to unbalance the Direwalker, and Brute fell to one knee. Fresh blood spurted from its eye.

Ari retreated into the blizzard. She could scarcely see. She scooped up the Box from where she'd left it beside the dead sentries, and then she dove into the snowdrift beside the stone fence of Jeremy's estate. She crouched,

waiting.

Above the storm she heard the crunch of the Direwalker's feet in the snow, and she tensed, sword at the ready. Would the raging wind and the blinding snow be enough to cover her footprints? The trail of blood?

Brute ran right past without spotting her. It probably helped that she lurked on the side of the eye that she'd gouged.

When that hulking figure vanished into the storm, Ari scrambled to her feet and took off in the opposite direction.

Blinded by the snowstorm, she wasn't sure how long she ran, or how far, but she ran, and ran, and ran, as if she could outrun the fact that Tanner had died.

She blotted out the pain in her leg. That was one of the nice things about being a gol. You could ignore pain entirely and still use a limb no matter how badly damaged it was. Still, all bodies obeyed the physical laws of the world for the most part—except Brute's, maybe—and she'd have to wrap that leg eventually or she'd bleed to death.

So she set the Box down in the snow, removed the black tie that hung from her fake bronze bitch, and secured the silk around her leg like a tourniquet. Her fingers were so numb it took her three tries to tie the damn thing.

When she was done, a powerful gust of wind momentarily blew the

veil of snow from her, and she realized where she was.

The Forever Gate soared beside her, towering with the magnitude of her crimes.

The Forever Gate she had sent Hoodwink across ten years ago.

To his death.

She wished she could ignore the mental pain as easily as the physical.

But she couldn't.

And so it was that the enormity of what she had done came crashing down on her, and she fell to her knees.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The snowstorm raged on, the whirling flakes slicing at the air. The wind howled like a banshee promising doom.

Ari gazed up at the Forever Gate, but its infinity was lost to the storm. She scratched a pit into the snowpack with her scimitar, and wedged the hilt into the hole. She positioned the sharp tip of the blade so that it kissed the soft tissue beneath her sternum. It was a testament to the volatility of her emotions. Only moments ago she had been fighting for her life. Now she was freely ending it.

Die on the Inside as a gol, and you die for real.

She deserved death for what she'd done. She'd allowed Hoodwink to die. Led Marks to his doom.

And now Tanner was dead, because of her.

Tanner.

Dying was the only way to end this grief. Dying was the only way to save herself.

The only way to reach Hoodwink.

Her father hadn't sold her to Jeremy. She knew it in her heart. But even if he had, it didn't matter. Not anymore.

She'd been given a second chance at life. Youth. But it was past her time. Well past her time.

"Across the Forever Gate," she said. "To the morning of the new world. I'm coming to your utopia, Hoodwink."

She grabbed the base of the sword with both hands.

"This isn't the way," Hoodwink said.

She stiffened, and glanced over her shoulder. "Hoodwink?"

But no one was there. The storm played tricks with her mind.

She closed her eyes and thrust her body forward.

But an arm wrapped around her torso, pulling her back, denying her even this release.

"What?" she said. "Can't you leave me alone? Can't you let me do this last thing in peace? Let me choose my own exit to the world?"

She turned around, ready to accept whatever death the giant Direwalker decided to inflict on her.

But Tanner stood there. Tanner, his body intact, with no sign of the terrible injury. Cora's robes were gone, and he was dressed in a heavy cloak more suitable to the storm.

"I watched you die!" Ari said. Joy competed with disbelief inside her. She didn't know if she should hug him or stab him.

Tanner shook his head and spoke above the storm. "The blow didn't

finish me. I lay there, dying, the blood flowing from my body. Just flowing. But I'd stashed a handmirror in my outfit while pretending to be Cora. I used it to disbelieve reality before I died. Kind of a record for me. Five minutes." He smiled grimly. "Turns out the threat of impending death is a wonderful goad."

"Impossible. Five minutes? You would have bled out in under thirty seconds. You should be dead." She scooped up her sword and stood in one smooth motion. She wedged her forearm behind his head and pressed the blade to his throat. "Who are you? And why do you wear the Poultice?"

"Ari." The man was breathing hard, now. "It's me. It's really me. Listen, if I was in a human body, you're right, I would've been dead. But I used a gol trick to cramp my arteries. Stanched the blood flow. Sure, some blood still got through, but it gave me enough time to escape. Ari, you have to believe me. Ari. *Teach*."

Though he'd used his private nickname for her, she still wasn't entirely convinced. "I thought you needed to target a tracker when you inject on the Inside, otherwise you appear somewhere random."

"You carry a tracker on your person."

That was true. She studied Tanner uncertainly for a few long moments, and then she released him with a shove. "If you're lying to me..." She raised the weapon dangerously.

"I'm not," Tanner said. He seemed frank, she had to admit.

"A gol trick huh?" She glanced down at the tourniquet she'd tied over her own wound. Just how many gol tricks were there that she didn't know about?

She worried that he would give her hell for what she'd almost done in her grief just now, even though she truly deserved whatever tongue-lashing he might give. Instead he said, "I brought presents."

Tanner held up a sword belt.

She caught the new belt, and cast aside her existing blade. She touched the hilt. Vitra flowed within her. Life.

She drew the blade.

A fire sword. The surface gleamed eagerly.

"Maybe you really are Tanner." Either that, or he was the person who'd stolen the fire blades in the first place.

She sheathed the sword in the scabbard she already wore.

Tanner's gaze latched onto something behind her, and his eyes went wide. "Run. Run!"

Ari looked.

Within the whirling snow a shadowy form loomed.

Three scimitars extended in deadly greeting.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Tanner released a covering wall of flame, and Ari scooped up the Box.

"Come on!" She sprinted through the storm across the fresh layer of snow that covered everything. When she glanced back, she could make out Tanner just behind her. And almost lost in the white-out beyond him, the Direwalker. Brute hadn't assumed its centipedal form. The snow must be too deep for that.

She followed the street, those portions of it she could discern anyway, and quickly became lost. Then she remembered she could overlay the city map in her head. She did so, and when she saw where she was, she had an idea.

On a whim she vaulted onto a barrel beside one of the small houses and scaled the coarse stalagmite of frozen shit that had accumulated from years of chamber pot dumping. She swung herself onto the roof with one hand. The roof was slanted slightly, and the accumulated snow broke off and slid away. Tanner came up beside her.

The flimsy rooftop timbers creaked.

"What are we doing up here?" Tanner said above the storm. "The

roofs won't hold us."

"They'll have to."

Brute bounded onto the rooftop beside them. Ari felt the whole thing shake.

She ran, leaping from rooftop to rooftop, clumps of snow sliding down. Some roofs were dual-sloped, others single-sloped, but either way it was a struggle to keep balanced. She used the fire sword to clear a path when necessary, because snow had apparently accumulated for years on some of these roofs—it was a wonder the timbers hadn't collapsed from the weight.

Using the city map, she made her way back toward the richer quarter. The roofs became progressively higher, and the distance between houses widened. The leaps were becoming harder.

A gust of snow momentarily cleared the air beside her. She glanced to the right. The Forever Gate climbed into the sky, as expected.

What's impossible, is possible, she remembered telling Hoodwink ten years ago. *Ascend the impossible.*

She reached the house she sought.

"This way," she told Tanner over her shoulder. "To the Forever Gate!"

She slid down the sloping roof to the eave, and a clump of snow came with her. She balanced there while the snow fell over, and then she ran along the rooftop's edge. She spotted the portcullis that sealed the alleyway below.

Without the key, that tall gate was virtually unscalable, especially when time was of the essence—hence the need for the rooftop route. Though she supposed the fire sword might have been able to carve a path through it anyway.

Ahead in the white-out, she caught glimpses of a rope hanging down from the heavens.

The rope that climbed the Forever Gate.

It was a bit of a leap from here.

But she could make it.

She sheathed the sword, braced the Box between her elbow and ribs, and when she reached the corner of the rooftop she jumped—

She hit the Forever Gate—

Bounced off—

Wrapped her numb fingers around the rope—

She came to a halt eight paces above the ground, and nearly dropped the Box.

The rope shook as Tanner hit the wall and latched on just above her.

"Look out!" Ari said.

Brute leaped from the nearby roof. The Direwalker was aimed straight at Tanner. Ari loosened her grip and slid down a pace. Tanner did the same.

Brute collided with the Forever Gate where Tanner had been, and

bounced from the rock. Those four hands fumbled for the rope, but Brute's momentum had already carried the gol too far from the Gate. Flailing hands grabbed at Ari's back as the four-armed Direwalker plunged past.

The snow puffed where Brute struck the ground.

"Climb!" Ari clamped one of the side handles of the Box between her teeth, and scaled the rope with both hands, not the easiest task given how numb her fingers were. She hauled herself near Tanner's boots, and was ready to climb over him if need-be. But he got the message and moved.

Ari felt the rope stiffen as Brute joined them below.

"I'm not sure this is such a good idea," Tanner said.

"Move!" she said through clamped jaws. Her voice was muffled.

And so she was finally scaling the Forever Gate, taking the same path of doom she had sent her father on those many years before.

She wasn't sure how long she climbed. Three minutes. Five. All she knew for long moments were the exertions of her muscles, and the cold wind whipping at her exposed flesh. Jeremy's "suit-and-tie" was hardly an outfit appropriate for such a climb. She couldn't even feel her fingers anymore, and sometimes had to look to make sure she was reaching for the rope and not empty air. Her jaw was quickly becoming sore from gripping the Box handle. She ignored the pain and cold with the gol mindtrick, but her body would eventually give out. It was inevitable. Even gols were subject to the laws of

the Inside. Except Brute.

The snowstorm lessened the higher she went, and she briefly wondered what excuse Tanner would give for that. *The system saves computational power by limiting the storm to the innermost regions near the ground.*

When she'd climbed a sufficient height, she paused, and drew the fire sword from her belt. Brute was about eight paces below her. She meant to cut the rope beneath her and send Brute plummeting to its death, however a gust of wind assailed her at that moment, and her unbalanced body hurled into the Forever Gate. When she collided with the hard stone, the sword flew from her numb fingers.

She watched, mesmerized, as the sword plunged. The blade sparked every time it bounced from the Gate until it was lost to the storm.

Brute would have survived the fall anyway. And the Direwalker probably would have scaled the wall regardless of whether there was a rope or not. But at least its fall would have bought them time. Why did the wind have to gust right when she meant to cut the rope? Well, nothing she could do about it now. Tanner still had *his* sword, at least. Speaking of Tanner, he'd continued to climb, probably assuming that she was right behind him. She'd have to hurry to catch up.

She did that now, climbing for all she was worth. The gap slowly

closed between her and Tanner. He must have glanced down, because all at once she caught up, and he was waiting for her.

When she reached him, she transferred the Box from her mouth to one hand, giving her teeth a break. Her jaw felt strangely light with the weight gone.

"You okay?" Tanner said.

She glanced down.

She couldn't see the city through the storm, but the rock wall was visible enough. Brute climbed relentlessly, a snarl on its face. Roughly five paces separated her from the thing. She thought to dangle the Box out to the side, and threaten to destroy the Control Room, just as she'd threatened to do with the Revision Box once before. But she could tell that the four-armed Direwalker didn't care about the Box. No, it wanted *her*. Its one good eye stared at Ari with hatred. Its other was an empty socket of gore and blood.

"Tanner!" she said.

He hadn't moved. "I'm here, Ari. What is it?"

"Take it!" She passed the Box upward. He grabbed the side handle, and when she was certain he had a decent hold, she let go. "I'm going to put on the tracker!"

Tanner peered past her. "Ari hurry!"

She reached into her blazer, and her hand closed around the small,

spherical shape. She attached the cold metal to the bottom of the Box and pressed a button. A blue light on the tracker began flashing. Now Tanner would be able to move the Control Room from the Outside.

"Give me your sword," she said. There was one last chance.

But she'd waited too long.

"Move!" Tanner said.

A vise clamped around her ankle and Ari felt her body stretch. She nearly lost her hold on the rope.

Brute had grabbed her leg of course. She tried to shake the Direwalker off, tried to kick it in the head. Useless. Its second hand reached up, and latched onto the upper half of her calf.

A stream of flame tore past from above. It was a little too close to her body and she felt her skin blister. Brute took most of the flames in the face, but the fire caused the Direwalker no injury whatsoever.

Brute's third claw fastened onto her leg, higher up. And finally the fourth pierced her. The Direwalker now fully supported itself with her body, and its entire weight dragged on her. Blood trickled down her skin in a perpetual stream. She thought she understood what it felt like to be an animal hung from the butcher's hooks.

One of us has to make it.

"Ari." Tanner's voice sounded muffled.

She looked up at him. He gripped the Box by the handle, between his teeth. He held the rope in one hand, the fire sword in the other. She thought she heard him sob.

It was past her time. Well past her time.

"It's all right," she said. "I'm free now."

A claw dug into her thigh. Then her belly. Her chest. Her upper back.

The Direwalker pulled itself up to eye level. That gory socket stared right into her face.

She let go of the rope.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Tanner watched Ari and the Direwalker plunge to their deaths.

The wind buffeted him, striving to take him from the wall. But he watched.

Ari and the Direwalker rebounded from the wall several times as they fell, and finally vanished in the snowstorm.

Tanner sheathed the fire sword. One of the side handles of the cursed Box was in his mouth, and he bit down harder on it. He was so angry at himself, and at her, that he just kept biting down. Soon all his gol-strength was focused on that task. One of the teeth near the back of his mouth couldn't take the pressure and exploded. He didn't care. He bit down. Bit down. Bit down.

Blood trickled over his chin.

He relented at last, easing the pressure. Though the Box was designed to handle more abuse than any old chest, he'd break the handle if he wasn't careful.

Tanner climbed through the tears, mechanically, not really aware of his body. The snow gusted around him in freezing gusts. His skin tightened, and icicles formed along his brows, his mustache, his hairline, and his eyes.

Who would have thought a body could produce so many icicles?

He climbed.

Though he didn't want to.

No. He *had* to.

Or else her death was for nothing.

Maybe she'd disbelieved reality before she struck the ground. It was a small hope, but he clung to it nonetheless, like a desperate child who clung to his favorite toy while starving to death.

Twenty minutes passed.

He made it to the point where the second rope overlapped the first, and, twining his arm around the first rope so that he wouldn't fall, he slid the Box between that arm and his chest, holding it there. With his free hand, he knotted the end of the second rope to the handle of the Box. It wasn't easy, tying multiple knots with one hand, but he managed.

He pulled himself up, and swung his legs onto the Box, and sat there a quarter of a mile above the city. He moved cautiously, worried that the handle might break off under his weight at any time, or that the knot would unravel. The city was veiled beneath the storm below.

With his sword he cut the first rope in case Brute was on its way up again. He watched the rope descend in a coil like a falling viper.

He scabbarded the blade and retrieved the handmirror from his cloak.

Then he began the process of disbelieving reality. It was difficult, pretending that the reflection was real and that he was the illusion. Difficult, because he kept seeing Ari fall to her death.

But the world blinked early.

***

Tanner awoke in the Outside. Beside him, Ari was a dead weight in his arms. He shook her, called her name, but she didn't move. She hadn't disbelieved reality after all. Of course she hadn't. There wasn't enough time. Her face was pale. Her lips blue.

She would never wake up.

There was only about an hour of oxygen left anyway, so maybe it was for the best.

Movement drew his attention across the room, and he realized why he'd been pulled out early.

The motion detectors had triggered.

Three iron golems closed.

PART 4

THEY HAVE WAKENED DEATH

CHAPTER ONE

Tanner sat on the floor against a terminal, in the real world with its steel walls and its flickering lights and its unbreathable atmosphere. His spacesuit felt too tight, a body-wide noose, constricting his every movement and his very breathing. The Ganymede landscape mocked him beyond the shattered window, its icy surface pocked, lifeless, uncaring.

In the spacesuit beside him lay Ari. Her eyes were closed. Her lips were blue, her face ashen.

Dead.

Three iron golems—machines—bore down on him. They looked like steel barrels on treads, with wiry arms capped by pincers, heads topped by sword hilts, and three glass disks gleaming in place of eyes.

If Tanner wanted to live—and he did—he had to act right now, because those machines would reach him in seconds.

He scrambled to his feet and disconnected the wireless access port—his umbilical to the Inside—from the suit and tucked it away in his utility belt. On the floor beside him lay an iron desk leg, ready to be used as a weapon. He snatched the leg up and turned toward the closest machine—

A pincer hit him in the chest.

Tanner slammed into the terminal. Gasping in pain, he rolled away from another blow, and positioned the wide desk between himself and his attacker. The machine didn't pursue.

Instead, it was looking down at Ari.

The other machines were closing. With difficulty Tanner hauled himself, heavy suit and all, onto the desk. A good position to strike down at the machines.

The first machine hoisted Ari up by the neck.

"You leave her alone!" Tanner swung the iron leg.

The machine's head swiveled up. The movement saved its vision, because the brunt of Tanner's blow hit the cross-guard of the head. One of the glass disks still shattered though. Not good enough—you had to smash all three disks to disable the machines.

Tanner swung again, but the machine intercepted the blow with its free arm. Those steel pincers closed around the iron leg and silently cracked it in half.

The machine struck out with that arm. Tanner was hit, and he stumbled over the terminal, sprawling backward onto the desk.

The machine returned its attention to Ari and smashed her faceplate. The last of her oxygen misted from the opening.

"No," Tanner said, climbing to his feet.

The machine smashed its pincers into her helmet a second time. Fragments of skull and brain tissue splattered her suit.

"No, no." He was watching her die a second time.

The machine tossed her body away like so much trash, and then swiveled its bloody pincers toward Tanner.

The other two machines approached from opposite sides of the desk.

Tanner took a running leap and landed heavily beside the machine he'd partially blinded. He ducked a swing from its metal arm and, resisting the urge to go to Ari's body, he made his way toward the pile of crumpled desks that formed a ramp beneath the window.

It felt like he was wading in a snowdrift. The artificial gravity of the ship remained active despite the depressurization, and the bulky suit weighed 150 lbs by itself. Add in his own weight, and he was lugging around 300 lbs. Not an easy load, to say the least. He almost wished he was wearing some of those motorized leg gyros under his suit.

He struggled to the top of the ramp, and looked back. The iron golems were rolling over Ari's spacesuit, making sure she was thoroughly dead.

His vision blurred, and his knees buckled slightly. Though he felt like giving up, Tanner had to live. Otherwise she'd died for nothing.

The machines turned toward him.

"Goodbye Ari." He blinked away the tears and jumped out.

The instant he left the ship the natural gravity of the moon took over. He landed lightly in the ice and nearly took a tumble. The gravity outside was almost 1/7th the simulated earth gravity. Even including the weight of the suit, he was now only 42 lbs.

He adapted quickly enough, and bounded more than two paces with each step. The surface felt a little slippery, which was expected, and he found that he had to lean in the direction he wanted to go, keeping his center of mass forward.

He activated the helmet light, brightening the somewhat murky landscape. The light had an oddly sharp quality. There was no diffusion, because there was no atmosphere for the light to diffuse in. He looked down. The light reflected from the surface almost blindingly, and he quickly quartered the intensity.

According to the archives, Ganymede was covered in a mantle of ice. Indeed, the yellow surface reminded him of pictures of pack ice he'd seen in the archives, replete with giant icebergs rudely protruding from the surface. On average, the icy crust of Ganymede was 100 km deep, but this area was at the top of a mountain range, and if he looked carefully he could see the outline of the yellow mountains encased in the ice below. A layer of sand, grit and silicate sheathed the ice in places—debris from the aerial bombardments that had dug through to the rock below.

He did his best to avoid the icy shards and debris that scattered the surface, not the easiest task given that the rubble ranged in size from fist-sized crags to boulders bigger than houses. Still, he had surprising energy levels, despite the fact he hadn't eaten in two days. Adrenalin could do that to you.

A surge of guilt filled him as he bounded across the moon. Ari should be here with him, at his side.

But she wasn't.

He'd left her in that room.

Dead.

From the starry heavens, the Great Red Spot of Jupiter looked down at him, accusing, mocking.

Tanner glanced back, the cone of light from his helmet swinging toward the ship.

All three machines had piled onto the surface in pursuit. The malevolent red beams of light on their heads shot back and forth, scanning the immediate vicinity as the machines ran their pathfinding algorithms. The metal goliaths drove right over the smaller ice fragments, but like Tanner had to divert around the bigger boulders. Still, those grooved rubber treads were designed for terrain like this, and their speed more than compensated for any obstacles.

The machines were gaining on him.

CHAPTER TWO

Tanner was still looking over his shoulder when his boot hit the jagged edge of an ice fragment. He stumbled, and it took him a few strides to regain his balance.

He knew he couldn't outrun those machines, so he bounded over a series of progressively taller fragments, heading for an ice boulder that was a little taller than a full-grown man. There was no way the machines would be able to reach him on that, not with those treads. When Tanner landed on top of the boulder, he stopped too suddenly and almost fell off the other side. He recovered his balance, turned toward the three machines, and waited.

Listening to his own harsh breathing, he remembered something.

"Nitrox levels?" he said, well aware that his exertions were costing him precious oxygen.

The suit responded instantly, projecting a message onto the helmet glass.

Estimated Oxygen: 5 minutes.

Five minutes? There was supposed to be an *hour* left.

"Switch to the reserve," he said. "The reserve!"

Another message flashed.

Reserve Currently In Use.

Shit.

He was done. Might as well give up now. Trapped out here on the Ganymede surface, three murderous machines closing in, five minutes to live... there was no way he could make it back to the ship in time, even if he could defeat the machines.

Despair overcame him and he sank down on the boulder, deep down, and he didn't think he'd ever get up again.

Ari had died for nothing.

Ari had—

No.

It wasn't over yet.

He wouldn't let her death be for nothing.

He wouldn't give up now, though everything seemed hopeless.

He would fight to the end.

He swore it in his heart.

He swore it to Ari.

"Once more unto the breach." He stood.

The three machines approached, treads bobbing malevolently over the small fragments that littered the ground. The machines spread out, coming at the boulder from different angles, and dug their pincers into the ice, perhaps

hoping to find handholds. They succeeded only in chipping away fragments.

The machines began rearranging the surrounding pieces of ice on the surface, pushing some, picking up others, and soon a rough ramp began to take shape, formed of three rows of similarly-sized fragments, each row smaller than the last. The machines set more fragments on top of those, and bashed them into place until the ice broke and filled in the gaps.

The machines worked methodically, and surprisingly fast. The ramp was three-quarters done now.

Tanner considered making a break for it. But he realized he'd rather die fighting than on-the-run. He'd make his last stand here.

He waited, trying to keep calm, trying to conserve his oxygen, hoping the machines would finish their little ramp before his air ran out.

They did.

Two machines took up guard positions on opposite sides of the boulder in case he still decided to jump. The first machine swayed up the ramp.

It was time.

Tanner grabbed the wireless access port from his belt and repeatedly slammed the pointed end into the ice boulder until a fragment broke off. He lobbed the shard at the approaching machine's head.

He missed.

Tanner broke off another fragment. He took careful aim this time, and threw the ice at those glass eyes—

This time he managed to hit the machine, but still missed the eyes, and the ice bounced harmlessly away from the cross-guard on its head.

The machine stalked onto the boulder.

Crouching, Tanner gripped the wireless access port like a dagger.

CHAPTER THREE

Tanner was just about to launch himself at the machine when a stream of light arced past, low in the sky.

An attack.

The strike landed roughly fifty paces away.

A sun-bright flash blinded him. He felt the impact of multiple rocks striking his suit, pressing the material into his chest, and he was flung from the boulder. He heard cracking glass, and knew his faceplate had been hit, and for a moment he thought it was going to shatter. Although there was no atmosphere to carry the sound waves of the impact, he heard the persistent scrub of grit against his suit from the fragments of ice and rock the attack had thrown up. It sounded like a hundred termites burrowing into wood.

He still couldn't see—the white afterimage of the flash consumed his vision.

He hit the ground and immediately bounced. He hit again, and again, skimming across the surface. His impacts increased in frequency until he found himself in an all-out roll. He felt the jab of several small fragments of rock and ice from the surface, and a part of his mind worried that the jagged edges would compromise his suit. He rolled and rolled.

When he finally came to a stop, face-down on the surface, he was still breathing.

Dizzy, but *breathing*.

So the suit hadn't been punctured at least.

Something nagged at the back of his mind, something important that he couldn't remember, and just when he had it nausea overcame him and he dry-heaved. It was probably a good thing that he hadn't eaten in the past two days, because he would have tarred the entire inside of his helmet. Still, the bitter taste of bile crawled up his throat and made him dry-heave three more times.

He waited for more hurtling rocks, or any other signs of ongoing attack, but none came. The last attack he could remember had occurred two days ago, the same attack that had forced Ari and Tanner into the spacesuits in the first place. A fresh attack was long overdue.

But the attackers had fired just once.

Why?

He turned over and lay on his back. He still couldn't see anything—though the white afterimage had faded, now everything was black. The attack would have had to penetrate deep to dig up a dust cloud as big and persistent as this. He gingerly rubbed his glove across the cracked faceplate in case there was grime or something else coating it, but the view remained dark.

He checked his helmet light. The indicator said it was active, though he saw no cone of light whatsoever. Prudently, he turned it off.

He was alone in the dark, with only the sound of his breathing for company.

And then he remembered what it was that he had forgotten.

"Nitrox?" he said.

The suit projected a message onto the helmet glass.

Estimated Oxygen: 90 seconds.

"Shit!" Tanner scrambled to his feet. *Fight to the end.*

He slipped and fell. He tried to stand, and slipped again, this time striking his helmet against the surface. His skull jarred and his teeth rattled, and more cracks threaded across his faceplate.

Tanner sat partially upright, supporting himself on one elbow. He paused a moment to catch his breath. The cloud was beginning to clear, and he could see the faint outline of his gloves in the darkness.

That's when he noticed a form lying beside him.

He turned on his helmet light.

It was Hoodwink. His skin had a bluish-purple discoloration, and was very dry, like the shriveled surface of a raisin. His body was bloated by the gaseous byproducts of the bacteria in his guts that had survived until the body became too cold.

Ari and Tanner had taken the only available suits in the control station, and when the glass had shattered, Hoodwink had been sucked out onto the surface, rolling away in the low gravity.

And so here he lay.

Tanner deactivated the helmet light, and lowered himself to the ice. He stared upward into the murk.

He was done.

Fight to the end?

This was the end.

He'd end here, on the surface of a moon four hundred million miles from Earth, beside the only man who'd ever revealed the truth to him. Beside the man whose daughter he loved.

He'd end here, beside Hoodwink.

CHAPTER FOUR

Death by asphyxiation. The archives claimed it was like going to sleep. A peaceful, gentle sleep. Gas exchange in the lungs continued as normal but resulted in the removal of all oxygen from the bloodstream. After 7 to 10 seconds, the deoxygenated blood reached the brain and loss of consciousness resulted. Death from hypoxia—oxygen deficiency—followed gradually after two minutes.

During those two minutes, when the oxygen-starved brain stem ceased to function, the heart stopped. Without the flow of blood to maintain the appropriate balance of calcium and other minerals in the cells of the body, the organs ballooned. The brain wasn't immune, and calcium flowed into the brain in massive doses, creating a sudden electrical current as the brain swelled. After that final outburst of potential energy, all electrical activity in the swollen brain ceased.

The brain stopped functioning.

But what happened to the psyche?

He remembered sifting through the archives months ago, after posing the question that had been on his and everyone's mind the day after a particularly harrowing attack from the machines, when one of the children

had been lost.

What happens when we die?

People's realities are bounded by what they know, what their senses can perceive. A world of objects and occurrences external to the self. A persistent-state world that existed before us, and will continue to exist after us regardless of whether we believe in it or not.

People assign arbitrary meanings to events and observations, and their minds catalog those meanings in appropriate drawers. Familiarity leads to habit, habit leads to assumption, assumption leads to reality. What we see and hear must be real, and must be the only reality there is. When someone dies, they go to sleep and never wake up. There's nothing more to life than that.

Right?

When Tanner had first learned about electromagnetic waves in the archives, he was astounded. Imagine, invisible light that passed through objects and could be used to carry messages. Waves that existed whether people believed in them or not. A reality atop our own. How many other such hidden realities were there? How many hidden worlds? Worlds upon worlds upon worlds, all of which existed whether we believed in them or not.

"What the hell are we?" he said.

The lungs injected oxygen into the blood. The heart pumped that blood. The arteries and veins and capillaries distributed that oxygen-rich

blood to the organs and muscle tissue. The bones provided the framework that held it all up, and produced the blood. The muscles offered mobility. The sack in the abdomen provided the specialized organs used to digest and egest, along with organs that produced the chemicals called hormones. The spinal cord gave the reflexes, and acted as the intermediary between the mind and body. The brain coordinated it all.

The brain. The root of consciousness. Where thoughts formed words and actions.

The brain gave rise to the self. The psyche. The soul.

Did it really?

"What the hell are we?"

Tanner remembered reading about two ancient Earth figures, Aristotle and Plato.

Aristotle believed that the psyche, or consciousness, was the end-product of the human body, and that when the body died, the psyche died with it.

Plato believed in dualism. That the psyche existed independently of the human body, in a *dual* plane of existence, and that when the body died, the psyche lived on.

Tanner still had the image in his head from the archives, taken from a painting in a church, that depicted Plato, shown with his long gray beard,

pointing at the heavens, while Aristotle, walking at his side, pointed at the earth.

Which was it then? An afterlife in the heavens? Or eternal darkness in the ground?

According to the archives, after those two minutes of dying, when hypoxia followed and all electrical activity between the swollen neurons faded, and the physical processes that determined what we call consciousness completely ceased, that state called clinical death was declared. With technology being what it was, people could be brought back from that precipice up to eight hours later, assuming proper tissue cooling. Brought back with no brain or bodily damage whatsoever.

Those who returned sometimes reported having been conscious over the death period. They described the events of the resuscitation from a point in the room other than their own bodies. Others told of a sense of peace and contentment. Or seeing their lives replayed. Or ascending a tunnel of light and seeing friends and relatives who had passed before them.

The death throes of a dying brain? The outcome of a chemical process that acted on those parts of the brain responsible for cognition and perception? Kind of like being on the Inside? But that couldn't be possible, not when there was no physical activity in the brain, no electrical impulses, just a non-functional mass of swollen gray matter, the tissue slowly

necrotizing.

Unless consciousness was more than electrical impulses.

Unless human beings were more than just the mass of neurons in their heads.

Unless one could be dead, yet still tethered, however tenuously, to the body, so that when one was revived one could report these things.

But if that were true, if a human body could attain consciousness where no consciousness was possible, then what truly happened when one died, and that final tether was cut?

Would Tanner cross some final Forever Gate?

Would he find himself in limbo? Purgatory? Heaven? Hell?

Maybe one of the eight levels of paradise? Valhalla maybe?

Or perhaps he'd awaken in the nine hells. Maybe Tartarus? Would he see the River Styx?

What about the Fields of Aaru?

The seven gates of the House of Osiris?

Maybe he'd be reincarnated according to the deeds of karma, his 'Atman' attached to one of those test-tube babies on the ship. Or maybe he'd be born into another species on some far-flung corner of the galaxy. Or how about reborn as one of the Enemy? There's irony for you.

Either way, Ari had done it all before him. She was the pioneer. She'd

blazed the path, and she waited to guide him on the other side.

The low oxygen indicator blinked on his faceplate, but Tanner ignored it, and he lay back, accepting his fate, waiting for the eternal sleep.

Through the lifting cloud of dust, he caught fleeting glimpses of the starry sky. It seemed like a good omen, being able to see the stars for the last time before he died. He smiled.

A pincer wrapped around his wrist.

One of the machines had found him.

Well, it hardly mattered now. He was on death's doorstep. There was nothing they could do to him.

He watched Hoodwink's body fade into the dust cloud as the pincer dragged him away.

Goodbye, Hood. I'll be joining you shortly.

He tilted his head up, wanting one last look at his captor and the cold world he was leaving behind.

Through the clearing dust, he saw that it wasn't a machine that held him.

A gloved hand gripped his wrist.

It belonged to a figure in a spacesuit.

Tanner blinked. "Ari?"

CHAPTER FIVE

"Well shit and image," Hoodwink said as he dragged Tanner across the icy surface. "I thought it was you Tanner, I did. Though in truth I was hoping for Ari. Well, what have you gone and done with my daughter now?"

Tanner merely stared up at him. Was the man stunned? Maybe he couldn't hear. Hoodwink thought he'd set up the comm line properly...

"Well, speak up!"

"Hood." Tanner's tinny voice finally whispered inside Hoodwink's helmet. "No air."

"No air? Dammit! Why didn't you say something, man? Mistook me for some arse-raping machine or something?" Hoodwink released him. He noticed that Tanner's faceplate was cracked. Had it sprung a leak? No—Hoodwink would have seen the mist from the escaping oxygen.

He opened the upper band of Tanner's backpack, sealed the isolation valve and slid the rightmost gas cylinder free, dropping it. He then spun Tanner around, knelt, and pointed at his own backpack. "Grab one!"

"What?" Tanner sounded drunk.

"Take one of my cylinders, man!"

Hoodwink felt the backpack shift as Tanner toyed with it. Hoodwink

waited, wrinkling his nose. He still hadn't gotten used to the damn smell inside these things—it smelled like sex. He wasn't sure if that was the suit he was smelling or the recycled air. Might even be his own body. Newborns smelled like sex after all.

A message appeared on his faceplate.

Alert: Oxygen Drop. Currently: 85%.

Good. That was expected. Tanner had taken the cylinder.

The message flashed again.

Alert: Oxygen Drop. Currently: 75%.

Not so good.

"Close the valve!" Hoodwink said.

"Sorry." Tanner slurred the word.

Hoodwink felt his backpack shift again. The alert faded.

He turned in time to watch Tanner collapse. Hoodwink pried the gas cylinder from Tanner's gloved fingers and shoved it into the empty slot in the backpack, opened the isolation valve, and locked the upper band in place.

"Breathe, Tanner," Hoodwink said. "That's the way. Breathe." He could hear Tanner's deep inhalations in his helmet.

Hoodwink gripped Tanner by the wrist. "Now up, you! You're more of a man than that. At least you used to be. Come on now. Up, up!"

Tanner stumbled to his feet. He slipped a few times on the ice but

Hoodwink steadied him.

"You gotta get yourself some proper moon boots," Hoodwink said. "Something with some grip!"

Tanner shook his head. "You're dead. I just saw you. Over there." Tanner pointed into the dust cloud.

"Your imagination, my friend." Hoodwink said. "You had no air, remember?"

"No, it was real. Hoodwink, what's going on? Where did you come from?"

"Topside," Hoodwink said decidedly. Tanner knew better than to ask more, that all talk related to Topside was forbidden, and would only get him stony silence.

But Tanner plowed on. "Somehow you were on the meteor that fell from the sky just now, weren't you? I thought it was an attack. But it was you. How?"

Hoodwink let a knife's edge slip into his voice. "I'll tell you everything in good time, Tanner. In good time. But I have a question for you that needs answering, and right away, mind. It's kind of a big one. Ari. Where's my beautiful Ari?"

Tanner's spacesuit slumped visibly. You'd have to hunch your shoulders a *lot* for that effect to be visible outside the bulky suit.

"I don't know how to tell you this," Tanner said.

Hoodwink felt a rising sense of alarm. "Tell me what? I left her in your charge. In your protection. And now you're going to tell me straight: Where's Ari? Where's my daughter?"

"She's..." Tanner couldn't meet his eye. "She's..."

And then Hoodwink knew.

Everything he'd lived for, everything he'd endured, it was all for nothing.

He had no one now.

He might as well go back.

Abandon this place.

Abandon them all.

He hated them.

All of them.

No, that wasn't true. He loved humanity. But still, Ari...

"She died on the Inside," Tanner said. His lips were shaking. "When I came back here, to the Outside, she was dead."

Hoodwink blinked away the stinging blur in his eyes. "Did you get a medikit? Did you try re-oxygenating her blood? Hook her up to the ECMO heart-lung?" It wouldn't have mattered. When you died on the Inside as a gol, the wires from the umbilical cooked your brain. But he wanted to know that

Tanner had done everything in his power to save her.

"No. I would've, but the machines, the golems, they smashed her helmet. There was blood everywhere." Tanner sobbed.

My Ari is dead.

"Was there—" Hoodwink had to pause, because his own voice sounded more like a sob than anything else. Maybe if he spoke faster. He tried again. "Was there anything out of the ordinary in the way she died Inside?" Hoodwink said it as fast as he could, but his voice still caught on the last words.

"What do you mean?"

Why was Tanner making this so hard? Hoodwink's chin was quivering, and he clamped his jaw down tight. Didn't really help. "The way she died!" he managed. "Was there anything out of the ordinary in it!"

"No," Tanner said. "She fell. We... we were climbing the Forever Gate. And she fell. She gave her life to save me." Tanner was weeping openly now.

Hoodwink's legs weakened. It was all he could do to sit down on the moon's icy surface. He stared at the huge, dispersing cloud of dust.

Dead. My Ari is dead.

His gaze was drawn to the blue ribbons in the northern sky, the famous auroras he had watched with the children countless times. Seeing

those dancing lights had always filled him with awe for the great spectacle that was the universe. Today the sight only made him feel empty, and alone. She never even got to see it.

He bowed his head. "My Ari."

"It was the four-armed Direwalker, Brute." Tanner spoke as if from across a vast gulf.

"The Direwalker?" Hoodwink was only half listening. Ari was dead. And there was nothing he could do to bring her back.

"It chased us up the Gate. Crawled onto her. But she let go. To save me."

Hoodwink closed his eyes.

"There was one thing out of the ordinary, maybe," Tanner said. "The disk. Jeremy wanted Brute to touch her with a small disk."

"A disk?" Hoodwink looked up suddenly. "What did it look like? Was it metal? Did it touch her forehead?"

"Yes, it was metal. Small, and round."

Hoodwink stood. "Did it touch her forehead?"

"I— I don't know. She fell..."

Hoodwink grabbed him by the shoulders. "Think, man! Did the Direwalker touch her head while they were falling?" If so, then she was dead, yes, but her psyche would still be linked to this world by a tenuous thread.

Tanner shook his head. "No. I mean, I didn't see. She and the Direwalker fell into the snowstorm. Vanished."

Hoodwink released him. A sudden sense of purpose filled him. This wasn't over yet. "There might still be a chance. If we can get that disk." He glanced toward the distant ship that housed the remnants of humanity. It was a long rectangular structure of folded steel and smooth curves, half buried in the icy landscape. "Take me to her body."

Hoodwink and Tanner started the walk back. Though Hoodwink was filled with renewed hope, he couldn't help but feel that this might be the longest walk of his life. He was going to see the dead body of his little girl. Something no father should have to see.

Not ever.

But ahead, what he initially assumed to be rocks, turned out to be three iron golems looming between him and the ship.

CHAPTER SIX

Hoodwink watched those three golems roll over the icy surface. The smaller fragments of ice shattered beneath their weight, while the larger ones swayed the golems to one side or the other. Their approach was inexorable, and those red lights cast baleful beams across the landscape.

"They just keep coming," Tanner said.

"We're garbage to them." Hoodwink remembered the first time he'd ever encountered one of these things. It had tossed him right into the meat grinder. "Less than scum."

"We are," Tanner said. "Yet they fear us."

"Rightly so. I'm in a foul mood today, Tanner. A very foul mood. What say we hunt us some iron golem?" Hoodwink flicked open the holster at his belt. "My colleagues finally designed a weapon these hands can use."

"Your colleagues?" Tanner said.

"Topside." That silenced him appropriately enough. Hoodwink flipped the safety switch and lifted the weapon. It was similar to a hand-crossbow, except it shot concentrated pulses of energy instead of steel bolts, pulses that could tear through metal from half a mile away. Assuming your aim was right, that is.

It took him five shots to hit the first golem. He got it in the chest. Made that golem stop with a gaping arsehole in its breast. If there'd been any air in the atmosphere, a nice plume of fire and smoke would've been coming from that hole. Too bad.

Hoodwink made short work of the other two golems, and it was over all too soon. Blasting those golems had momentarily made him forget Ari and the grim task just ahead. And now she came rushing back in.

Ari.

Sweet Ari.

He should've come back sooner.

He'd tried, damn it, how he'd tried.

The Council had refused.

He gritted his teeth. The Council. *A Council of cunts!*

But he wouldn't dwell on them.

He was always doing things for other people. It was time to do something for himself. For Ari. Yes. He had to focus his energies on Ari from now on, to the exclusion of all else. *She* was his mission. And he would do his damnedest to save her.

He owed her, more than anyone else.

Much more.

He would let a world die to save her.

Two worlds, even.

Still, there had to be a way to save this world. He just didn't know what that way was yet.

Because what was the point of saving her if there was no world to bring her back to?

One step at a time, Hoodwink. One step at a time.

***

Hoodwink knelt before Ari's battered body.

Her legs lay at an odd angle, the hips bent at an impossible position to the torso, her back broken. The glass faceplate of her helmet had been smashed many times over, and her brow had caved so that her eyes and forehead were lost in skull fragments and blood.

The anger clawed at his insides, struggling to get out. He stood, gloves clenching and unclenching, then he turned around. There was an iron golem in here, strapped to the opposite desk by one of its treads. The glass disks that formed its eyes had been smashed.

Hoodwink brought his weapon about. Streaks of light tore gaping holes in the golem. Again and again he fired, the weapon soundlessly pummeling the metal. The hilt that formed the head of the golem vanished, obliterated. An arm fell away. One of the cogs that formed the treads collapsed and the golem tilted to one side.

He heard a voice in his ear. He realized that Tanner had been talking for some time, but it only registered with Hoodwink now.

"Hood, you have to stop. Hood. You'll draw others from outside the ship. Hood."

"Good!" Hoodwink spun on Tanner. "Let them come. I want them to. I *dare* them to. I've a thirst for killing today, and it won't be quenched until I kill them all!"

Tanner raised his hands, eying the weapon that was now pointed at him. He licked his lips nervously. "Then who will repair the ship?"

Hoodwink swiftly lowered the weapon. He had no right to be aiming it at Tanner like that. Tanner wasn't the enemy.

Hoodwink holstered the weapon and went back to Ari. He knelt beside her and wept.

"Ari. My daughter. I'm sorry I abandoned you. I should've stayed. I should've found a way. What a fool I've been. And I promise now, I won't let you down. I'll get you back."

Hoodwink tasted the salt from his tears. Funny how tears didn't taste too different from blood. Both salty. One a tad coppery.

He retrieved the tweezers from the kit he'd found. The tool felt clumsy in those unwieldy gloves, but he managed to get the proper grip. He grabbed a test tube from the kit with his other hand.

"All I ask is that you be patient with me, Ari." He poked those tweezers inside the broken helmet. "The task before me is long, and dangerous. But I'll find a way. You know me, always figuring out how to make things right. But I have to take something from you now, I do. Just a small thing. Forgive me. I know I've taken a lot from you already, but I'm going to give it all back to you. I promise."

He tweezed a hair from her forehead. It came away with a small, bloody chunk of skin, and he dropped the hair, gory lump and all, into the test tube. He had to tell himself that this was someone else, not his daughter. He wouldn't have been able to continue otherwise.

Someone else.

He forced the tweezers past the gore and into the skull, until he felt the spongy resistance of the gray matter, and he pinched away a portion of the brain, dropping that into the test tube as well. He returned the tweezers to the kit and corked the tube.

"I remember the first time she came home with a bloody nose," Hoodwink said. "She told me one of the other girls in class did it, at lunch, when Ari had refused to share her meal. I don't know about you, but I recognize bullying when I see it. I felt so helpless. I wanted to protect her. It was my *duty* as a father to protect her. I told her I'd go and talk to that little girl's parents. She begged me not to. Said she could take care of herself, and

that my going would just make things worse.

"Next day she came home with a black eye. Again it was the bully. And again she begged me not to confront the parents. The next day she came home and her other eye was black. I'd had enough. I couldn't stand to see my daughter hurt like that. I told her I was going to the parents. But unlike the previous days, she wore a smile. I asked her why she was so happy. She said this time when the other girl bullied her, she fought back, and gave her a fat lip. I scolded her of course. Told her that you can't solve all your problems by fighting. But inside I was happy. And proud of her. So damn proud. The bully left her alone after that.

"And so here she lies now, with more than just a bloody nose and a black eye. With her skull caved, her brain crushed, her spine snapped. She gave her life to save you, Tanner. Stood up against the ultimate of bullies. And you know what? I'm more proud of her than ever before."

Tanner was weeping. Rightly so. Hoodwink would've cried again too, but he'd no more tears left. The dead and humiliated body of his little girl was right in front of him. How could he cry, when fury burned in his heart?

He was angry at the machines.

But even more angry at himself.

Hoodwink clenched his fist. "It was my fault. I should've never brought her into this. If I hadn't interfered with her life, she'd still be alive on

the Inside today, none-the-wiser."

"But you gave her youth, Hoodwink. A second chance at life. A renewed purpose. That's more than most people get."

"But she would have been reborn on the Inside anyway if she'd died naturally..."

An uncomfortable silence stretched between the two of them.

"Can you really save her?" Tanner said at last.

Can I? He studied the contents of the tube, and the bloody memento of his daughter it contained. He stashed the glass cylinder in his utility belt, saying nothing.

"I'll do whatever I can to help you," Tanner said. "Whatever it takes. I promise."

Whatever it takes. Easy enough to say. But to actually do, well, that was another story. *We'll see if you follow through on that Tanner. If only you knew the potential price...*

"Time to find the children." Hoodwink stood. "And maybe get you some food. You must be hungry after starving for the past two days."

Tanner frowned. "I've no appetite at all."

Neither did Hoodwink, at that.

He rested a hand on Ari's helmet.

We will meet again, he promised.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Hoodwink and Tanner returned to the icy surface of the moon and circled the crashed ship, looking for another way in. Hoodwink noted that while the surface of the vessel was heavily dented and blackened in places, with some broken windows and hull breaches, overall the ship seemed structurally sound. Amazing, given the beating it had taken. Kudos to the repair golems.

Hoodwink managed to find a working airlock after shooting down only seven of the iron golems. Just in time too, because Hoodwink's weapon jammed—or the charge ran out, he wasn't sure which—and he and Tanner were forced to barrel inside before another two repair golems could catch them. When the airlock re-pressurized, Hoodwink was the first to take off his helmet. It was getting a bit stuffy in that suit.

Tanner pressed him for the airlock access code, but Hoodwink ignored the question, instead hurrying toward Beta Station. He'd ordered the children to move there a little over two days ago, after the window had shattered in their original station. The children were a group of youngsters fetched from the Inside. Hoodwink's own hand-picked team. He'd trained them how to use the system, using his own rudimentary knowledge gleaned

from the archives, and they'd quickly surpassed him. Tanner was the oldest among them at twenty-one.

Translucent pods lined the walkway. Human bodies floated inside each one, blanketed in a green goo, sleepers living in the world of the Inside. One of the pods was completely black, so Hoodwink picked up the pace—the golems would be swinging by to retrieve the dead man within.

He and Tanner had to stop long before reaching Beta Station, however, because the entire section was sealed off.

Hoodwink bent forward and read the display beside the airtight doors.

Sector Depressurized.

Hoodwink gave the overlapping slabs of metal a good sideways kick, and the door rang grumpily. He glanced at Tanner. "You think the children are trapped inside?"

Tanner worked with the keypad on the display. "No. This section was sealed off four days ago. The children would've never gotten in. Which explains why my messages to Beta Station went unanswered."

"Where are you, little ones?" Hoodwink tapped his chin.

He and Tanner made for to the next closest station. Hoodwink had explored the ship thoroughly in the eight months he'd spent here, and he knew where almost all the stations were by memory.

While they walked, Tanner quietly related the events of the past two

days to him. Hoodwink only half-listened, though certain key parts drew his full attention, mostly those involving Ari and Jeremy.

Even though he wasn't hungry, Hoodwink stopped at hydroponics along the way to grab some gel packets. At hydroponics, urine and feces absorbed from the pods of the sleepers provided water and fertilizer for the plants. Golems affixed to the floor processed the fruits and vegetables into the thick gel that was eventually distributed back to the sleepers. It wasn't hard to sneak out a packet or two.

After hydroponics, Hoodwink and Tanner passed the butchery, where grinders disposed of the dead sleepers and formed a grisly pâté that was also fed back to the denizens of the pod world. It was a sordid reminder that everything was reused on this ship. Everything. Hoodwink and Tanner hurried past that place.

They were forced to scale a ladder down to the next level to avoid a patrol of two iron golems. When the patrol passed, Hoodwink and Tanner climbed backed up, and finally reached the next closest station, Zeta.

Hoodwink was disappointed to find the station empty. Still, it was as good a place as any to set up a new operations base. Zeta Station had five rows of desks laid out on its metallic floor, with seven terminals in each row. Various storage cupboards lined the walls. Its long ceiling lights glowed white, some of them flickering. A window offered a view-port onto the

barren moon.

Hoodwink wanted to broadcast a message to all the other stations on the ship, but Tanner urged against it, because apparently that's how the golems tracked Tanner and Ari down the last time. The safest way to contact the children was through the Control Room on the Inside, Tanner argued. Hoodwink reluctantly agreed.

Hunched over one of the stations, Tanner reported that the Control Room Box still dangled from a rope on the Forever Gate. He gave three possible destinations where he might move the Box. Number one—send it to the Black Den, the criminal heart of the city, using the coordinates of the tracker that was embedded in the Dwarf's collar. Number two—send it to the headquarters of the New Users, deep within the labyrinth of the abandoned sewage system, where Ari had left another tracker. Number three—send it to Ari's old shack of a house in Luckdown District, were Hoodwink had placed a tracker.

Because of the disk, Jeremy would know the location of the New User headquarters by now, and he'd probably strike there first. Ari's house was undefended, so that wasn't really an option. Hoodwink decided on the Black Den. Tanner explained that Ari had chosen the Den to harbor the Dwarf because it was way more fortified than the New User headquarters. She'd sent six of her New Users to guard the Dwarf, leaving a man named Jacob in

charge. Jeremy would know all that too of course, thanks to the disk, and if it came down to it Hoodwink and Tanner could always move the Box again, just as long as the tracker remained attached.

"You know," Tanner said, after he'd moved the Control Room to the Den. "I almost thought you weren't going to come back, Hood. That you really *were* dead. Especially when I saw your body. And then you showed up a minute later."

Hoodwink didn't know what to say to that, so he squeezed more gel from the metallic packet he'd purloined from hydroponics. He still didn't have an appetite, but he forced himself to eat, knowing he'd need energy in the hours to come. The gel was bland. Tasteless. Even so, it served its purpose. Nutrients were nutrients, no matter how you looked at it. And the acid in your belly turned everything into gel anyway. Shit looked the same no matter if you ate cuts of prime meat or worm-ridden bread.

"The fact you came back gives me hope that Ari can, too," Tanner said. "Is she like you, in that sense?"

Hoodwink sighed. Ari. How he wished she were here. "No. Ari's not like me. She can't come back the same way. But there may be another path for her. It's a slim hope, and a risky one, but I have to try. I wouldn't be doing my duty if I didn't." Hoodwink offered the packet to Tanner, who refused. "You really should eat, Tanner."

"Not hungry." Tanner gazed at the window and the starry sky beyond. "I'm just glad that you care enough about Ari to save her."

"Of course I bloody care. She's my daughter!" *And I owe her for what I did to her.*

Tanner gave him a strange look. "You know that genetically she's nothing like you, right? Born from the ovum and ejaculate of parents long dead..."

"Yes yes," Hoodwink snapped. "I'm familiar with all that. But you know exactly what I meant. I raised her. *Raised* her. You try bringing up a child, wiping its arse, cleaning its snot, calming it down when it's yelling its brains out—see if you don't get attached."

"That doesn't sound very attaching to me. Cleaning its snot?"

Hoodwink cleared his throat. "Er, yes, well. Look. What I meant was, there's both good and bad when you raise a child. When you put the time in, and I mean really put the time in, you bond with her. Through the good times. Through the bad times. You bond. And it's the bond that makes the father, regardless of genetics. I'll tell you this once, and once only: She's my daughter through and through."

"I hear you, Hoodwink. I won't bring it up again."

"Good," Hoodwink said. "Now eat." He tossed a packet to Tanner.

Tanner shoved the meal aside. He really wasn't going to eat then.

"What was she like, before the revising?"

Hoodwink paused.

Tanner must have noticed the guilt in his face, because he said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean anything by it."

"No, it's all right," Hoodwink said. "It's a good question." Though it would hurt to tell it. But if anyone deserved to know her history, it was Tanner. "She was smart, the top of her class. Extremely shy. A quiet girl. Always musing, and reading. She thought long and hard before acting on anything. Sometimes when you asked her something, she'd pause for as long as a minute to answer you, while she thought the question over."

"That's a far cry from the Ari I knew," Tanner said. "The brash, reckless Ari who'd rather act first and think later. And the Ari I knew definitely wasn't shy."

Hoodwink inclined his head. "Might be the revising that changed that. Jeremy promised he'd touch only her memories, but memory makes personality doesn't it? Still, it might've been the ten years since I last saw her that changed her too. Who can say? When you're leader of an outfit like the New Users you're bound to change one way or another. Though brash and reckless definitely doesn't sound like the girl I knew, nor the actions of a good leader. Did you ever consider that maybe, just maybe, she was trying to show off to someone by the name of Tanner?"

Tanner smiled. "Ari." He had a faraway look in his eyes. "I was the one who was always trying to impress *her*. Trying to show her how smart I was. How I had everything planned out. Though I suppose it's possible she was trying to show off to *me* as well.

"Not that I blame her, Hoodwink. You have to try holding those fire swords sometime. The sense of power you get is just mind-blowing. You feel like you can do anything. I really can't blame her for wanting to just rush-in and confront Jeremy that first time. If only it hadn't ended in disaster. She never forgave herself for the death of Marks. It's why she sacrificed herself for me, I think, in the end. The guilt was killing her inside. I just wish I could've saved her. We had a thing going, Ari and I. A good thing."

Hoodwink sympathized, although he wasn't all that happy to learn Ari and Tanner had a "thing" going. Hoodwink squeezed the last of the gel from the packet and slurped it perhaps a little too loudly. Tanner didn't seem to notice.

"Set up the motion detectors to pull us out," Hoodwink said. "I don't want any uninvited guests taking a dump on our parade."

"Neither do I," Tanner said. "Me and Ari learned that the hard way last time."

Hoodwink ordered Tanner to close the blast shield as well, since there'd be no one to revive them if the room depressurized. All it would take

was an unlucky shot from the attackers above, or a couple of iron golems working in concert outside, and that window would crack right open, leaving Hoodwink and Tanner to wake up dead.

He watched the metal shield close over the window, forming a snug fit over the glass. He supposed he could've put his helmet back on before going Inside if he really wanted to guarantee his safety, but that seemed like a waste of suit oxygen, and he had need of the spacesuit yet.

Hoodwink strode to a terminal a good distance from Tanner and plugged the tether into the access port on his suit.

"To the Black Den," Hoodwink said. "And the Control Room. Once there, we need to contact the children, get a fix on Brute, and find that disk."

"To the Black Den," Tanner said. His fingers paused above the terminal. "One last thing, Hoodwink. Did you really sell Ari to Jeremy all those years ago? Did you really accept money for her revision?"

Hoodwink stiffened. "No." He initiated the entry protocol himself, and the world blinked.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Hoodwink appeared in a tight alleyway. It was cold. He'd forgotten how positively frigid the Inside could be. Each exhale brought a plume of white mist from his mouth, and he shivered.

Snowdrifts lined either side, forming a concave path of sorts, the ground a bumpy mass of snowpack. The unshoveled drifts had piled up over the years, so much so that the tops climbed halfway up the mudbrick buildings on either side. Strictly speaking, those drifts should've reached even higher given the snowstorms that plagued this place, but some automated A.I. clean-up process prevented that from happening.

There was a vagrant here, seated against the drift. He was swaddled in disintegrating furs, and suckled a leather bladder. The vagrant glanced up at Hoodwink.

"The fuck did you come from?" the vagrant said, breath misting.

Ah, the Inside. How I've missed you.

"Want a drink?" The vagrant offered up the leather bladder and grinned stupidly. Hoodwink could have almost believed him a gol. Except there were no gol vagrants in the world.

Hoodwink reached into his pocket and tossed the man a small purse.

The vagrant started when he heard the clink of coins. Hoodwink winked at him, remembering a time when he'd avoided such men like the plague.

Ari had taught him the folly of his ways.

Hoodwink proceeded across the bumpy snowpack toward the front of the alley. He wondered briefly where the tracker was hidden, and when he didn't spot an obvious location, he thought he might have made some mistake.

When he reached the front of the alley, Hoodwink's fears were confirmed. This wasn't the Black Den, though he wasn't far off. He recognized the crowded aisles and kiosks of Happy-Tot Square, a misnomer if there ever was one. Located smack-dab between Luckdown and Black Den, the square was always jammed with customers, the kind of folks who liked to buy their goods for the cheapest price possible, no questions asked. And since the public wasn't allowed into the Den itself, those Denizens with something to offload were happy to come here.

Tanner appeared at his side.

"So this is the right spot after all," Hoodwink said. Tanner wouldn't have appeared near Hoodwink if the tracker wasn't here somewhere.

"It is."

"There's no Control Room," Hoodwink said.

"There isn't."

Hoodwink smiled ironically. "Mind explaining why that is, then?"

Tanner shrugged. "Apparently the Black Faction, or the New Users, moved the tracker we had on the Control Room Box. It's a problem me and Ari have had before, unfortunately. We can go back Outside if you want, and try again with the coordinates of the tracker in the Dwarf's collar."

Hoodwink shrugged. "Probably faster just to walk to the Den. Besides, I haven't been to these parts in years, and I'd like to get a feel for the lay of the land."

"I don't know, Hood," Tanner said. "The gate guards gave us trouble last time."

"Come on. It'll be fun."

And so the pair made their way across Happy-Tot square. Hoodwink felt immensely at ease here among the criminals and their customers. These were the kind of folks he'd grown up with. At least they were honest about what they did, unlike those who called themselves merchants and portal traders, thieves of a different name.

Still, despite his ease, he realized that many of the hawkers were giving him hard looks. Too many. Though his cloak hid the numbers on his chest, and he wore a fake bronze bitch, these men could recognize the perfect face of a gol. Most of the city soldiers and guards were gols, as were the jailers and judges. The average man here had been arrested two or three times

in his life, more than enough to pick out the smooth face of a gol from a mile away.

A wiry thug with two X-shaped scars beneath his cheeks spat at Hoodwink's feet.

Hoodwink ignored the man and kept walking. That was the best policy when dealing with these sorts. Keep to yourself, never take offense, don't look too long at any one man, and walk with purpose.

He realized that Tanner had remained behind. Hoodwink turned around to find him scowling at the wiry man.

The hawker scrambled to his feet of course, abandoning the stolen sheafs of cloth that were laid out on the cart behind him. Such men didn't back down from obvious challenges, gol or no gol. "Got a problem, gol?"

"Let it go, Tanner," Hoodwink said.

"These people need to learn manners," Tanner said. "And I mean to start teaching them."

Hoodwink watched Tanner reach for his sword belt, except it wasn't there. Tanner and Hoodwink had elected not to bring weapons so as not to offend the Denizens. A gol with a sword in the Black Den? That'd draw trouble like a sneak to a purse.

"I said, got a problem, *gol*?" The wiry man advanced until he stood nose-to-nose with Tanner. "Come to arrest me, have ya?"

"Tanner..." Hoodwink said.

Tanner finally backed down, to Hoodwink's relief.

Hoodwink glanced over his shoulder as he led Tanner away. The wiry man was wearing a smug look, and he made a rude finger gesture. If Hoodwink and Tanner got this sort of treatment *here*, he wondered how they'd be treated in the actual Den.

Not that he was all that worried.

"I don't know what got into me," Tanner said suddenly. "I apologize, Hood. You know I'm never like that. I guess... I guess I'm still in a black mood, after what happened to Ari. Her death is eating away at me, and—"

Hoodwink smiled wanly. "A different subject, if you would?"

"Sorry Hood." Tanner walked on in silence.

The Den lay just ahead. Hoodwink recognized the wall of mortared stone, which was around three times the height of a man. Sellblades and bowmen patrolled the upper walkways, men who were visible only when they passed between the merlons topping the wall. Sometimes the Black Faction hung the severed heads of individuals from competing factions upon those merlons. Hoodwink could still see a few blood stains under the crenelations. You couldn't clean something like that.

The Denizens kept the drifts shoveled well away from the wall, the snow piled into ramparts that ran four paces in front of it. Took dedication,

maintaining that.

As for the wall itself, its surface had been ground down so that few fingerholds remained. If a human or gol *did* manage to scale that wall—via ropes and grappling hooks and whatnot—by the time they made it halfway they'd find themselves chock-full of arrows, more porcupines than men.

A mini-Forever Gate, Hoodwink thought.

Still, determined attackers could find a way through. Gol sappers could setup shop inside one of the many nearby houses and start undermining the wall. And while the Forever Gate was untouchable as far as bombs went, a well-placed bomb would work wonders here. And there were other ways for gols to get inside. What about the gol dogs, cats, and ravens of the world? Ravens. He glanced up. Sure enough, a murder of the black crows toured the sky.

An archway interrupted the smoothness of that wall, and offered the only entrance into the Den. Sealed by a portcullis, Hoodwink recalled that the gate was only opened at set times during the day. He couldn't remember the precise times, but even so he wasn't about to sit around and wait.

He was *Hoodwink*, after all. And he had a name to live up to.

He crossed the embankment of snow and strode right up to the gate.

The thick bars were closely set, with enough room for a small cat to squeeze through. Even with his gol strength, he knew he wouldn't be able to

bend those bars.

"Come on then!" Hoodwink shouted inside. "Who's running this gong show?"

A sentry emerged from a gatehouse beyond the portcullis, and he strolled up to the gate. A leathery patchwork of a man with a bent nose and cragged scars crisscrossing his face, he'd seen his share of action. Street brawlers were the favorite inductees for the Den guard. He held a pike in one hand, and the way he moved suggested he knew how to use it.

The sentry glanced at Hoodwink and Tanner, and he was about to turn away. But then he did a double-take.

"Gols!" The sentry brought the pike to bear, aiming at Hoodwink.

Pikemen congregated behind the gate right quick. Bowmen rushed to the crenels above and knocked their arrows. Hard men, all of them.

Hoodwink remained completely calm. He'd lived through more than a few life and death situations in his time. He'd almost bled to death when he escaped the courthouse. He'd climbed the Forever Gate. He was sucked out into space. A few men pointing bits of steel at his heart didn't do much for him these days. Still, dying would set him back all the way Topside again. And there was always the chance that death there would be permanent.

"Whose idea was it to leave the swords behind again?" Hoodwink said to Tanner.

"May have been mine," Tanner admitted.

"Do you recognize any of them?"

"Not a man."

"Do ye notice this one's got the pike aimed at me?" Hoodwink said. "Gives me a swell of pride, it does."

"Obviously the man has poor taste," Tanner said.

Hoodwink chuckled. "On the contrary. He knows I'm the more valuable target."

Tanner pointed through the bars. "Well, take a look at the other men. I think I have more pikes aimed at me in total."

"Well, you're forgetting to include the bows." Hoodwink glanced up. Those bowmen who weren't aiming at him did so now. "See? Altogether I've got the most bows and pikes aimed at me. Count 'em."

"Shut up, gols!" the sentry said. "And be off! Your kind isn't welcome here."

Hoodwink paid the sentry no heed. "What do you think, Tanner? Should we teach these krubs a lesson?"

"Since when did you start calling humans krubs?" Tanner said. "It's bad form, Hood. Bad form."

"What? We're gols. And that's what gols do."

The sentry jabbed the tip of the pike through the bars. "I said—"

Hoodwink snatched the blade in the blink of an eye and tugged the sentry into the portcullis. He shoved one arm through the portcullis and around the man's head, then he squeezed the man's face between two of the bars.

The other pikemen sprung into action, and leveled their pikes at Hoodwink.

"I'm definitely winning now, Tanner," Hoodwink said triumphantly. "Every single pike is on me!"

Tanner hadn't moved. He glanced upward, at the bowmen. "You're courting death here, Hood. All it takes is one lucky shot..."

Hoodwink raised his voice. "Oh, there won't be any lucky shots, not from this sorry lot! Because they know that with just a little more pressure, their friend here will have a slight problem with his head. As in—*it won't be there anymore.*" He'd never harm the sentry of course. But he had to sound convincing. You couldn't show weakness in front of men like these.

One of the pikemen, a man with an angry scar above his brow, jabbed the point of his weapon into Hoodwink's upper arm. The blade didn't pierce, but it hurt. "Get you back to the gutter, scum!" Angry-Scar said. "You think we care about him?"

The trapped sentry's face had gone bright red, pressed as it was between the two bars, and Hoodwink eased off a bit, letting the man breath.

You had to be careful when you were a gol. Your strength could easily get you in trouble—all too easy to squeeze a man's windpipe shut, or burst his head against a portcullis.

"Well," Tanner said. "It would seem we have ourselves a bit of a problem."

"Yes," Hoodwink said. "I really have to pee."

CHAPTER NINE

"I'm Hoodwink Cooper, I am," he said, raising his voice. "And I'm here to meet Jacob of the New Users."

None of the pikemen responded. Well, Angry-Scar growled, but that didn't count.

"Hmm." Hoodwink turned to Tanner. "You think they heard me?"

Tanner didn't seem too happy. "They heard you."

"Why do you think they're not hopping to let us through, then? Mentioning the word *User* used to open so many doors in the past." Hoodwink glanced at the trapped sentry. He eased off a bit more—the man was looking a little sick—but he didn't release him. Hoodwink wasn't sure if Angry-Scar was bluffing when he said no one cared about the man. "I don't suppose the password would help?"

Tanner shrugged. "It's worth a try." He turned to Angry-Scar. "The password is *Nefarious Malarkey*, and the call phrase is, *Ever catch a raven in the dark*?"

"That were yesterday's!" Angry-Scar said.

Hoodwink pursed his lips. "What's your name man?"

"*Man*?" Angry-Scar said. "You're calling me *man*, now? What

happened to *krub*?" He looked to his comrades-in-arms. "The gol's calling me *man*!"

Some among the others chortled.

Hoodwink decided this wasn't going to work, and that this new breed of thugs-turned-pikemen really didn't care a whit for each other. So much for honor among thieves.

He released the trapped sentry. The man immediately fell back onto his arse, and shook his head, wheezing, unused to the sudden flow of blood in his face again.

"Let's go, Tanner. We'll go back Outside and do what you suggested earlier."

"Not so fast." Angry-Scar slid his pike toward Hoodwink's belly. "No one treats my friend Pratus here like that. You owe me a blood debt now, gol. And I intend to see you pay it."

Hoodwink was about to repeat his pike-snatching and head-crushing maneuver when a voice stopped him.

"What's going on here?"

A newcomer appeared, standing in the street behind the pikemen. The others immediately gave him room. He looked vaguely familiar, but Hoodwink couldn't place him. He was a tall man, well into his middle years, with a bald head and a face lined by years of hard living. He wore a long-

hilted sword at his waist, and two silver skulls were pinned to the high collar of his sealskin jacket. The bronze bitch seemed a little loose on his neck, as if it didn't really quite fit there. Maybe he'd recently lost a lot of weight and hadn't gotten the bitch resized.

The newcomer seemed to recognize Hoodwink though, because his face lit up and he strode forward eagerly.

"Well if it ain't Hoodwink Cooper," the newcomer said. "Your ugly face is the last thing I expected to see causing trouble round here. You're looking better than ever I have to say. Haven't aged a day, by my reckoning."

"He's a gol," Angry-Scar said.

"Why, he certainly is," the newcomer said. "Looks a bit like the Calico though, don't he?" The newcomer swatted Angry-Scar's pike away from Hoodwink's belly. "Get that out of here! And open the gate for our good guest." When none of the pikemen responded, he rounded on them. "I said—"

The pikemen jumped into action.

A winch turned somewhere inside the guard room, and the portcullis raised with a CLANK-A-CLANK.

When the gate was up, the newcomer came forward, arms wide as if to embrace him.

Hoodwink smiled knowingly at Tanner. "See my friend, my name opens a few doors now and again." He spread his own arms wide to receive

the newcomer.

At the last moment the newcomer swiveled to the side, came round behind Hoodwink, and hit him a good one in the back of the head.

Hoodwink staggered forward a pace.

"That's for abandoning the Users all those years ago," the newcomer said.

Tanner made to intervene, but Hoodwink raised a warning hand.

Another blow caught him in the ribs, and Hoodwink stumbled to his knees.

"And that's for abandoning Ari."

Hoodwink could hardly see for all the stars. Those blows seriously stung. It was a good thing he was a gol, able to ignore physical pain. But the mental pain was worse. *Abandoning Ari*.

The newcomer came back around to the front again, and waited.

Hoodwink staggered to his feet, rubbing his head, holding his ribs.

"Still," the newcomer said. "You came back for Ari, eventually. That has to be worth something. And I reckon it's good to see you, in its own way. Well, get on with it then—don't just stand there, come inside. The Den awaits!"

Hoodwink and Tanner ducked beneath the underside of the portcullis. The pikemen gave them a wide berth, not sure if they were supposed to scowl

or grin, and most decided just to hold up their weapons all wary-like.

"When are you going to tell me who you *really* are?" Hoodwink said as the newcomer led them into the street beyond.

"You haven't figured it out yet?" The man grinned. His mouth was as toothless as a street brawler's. Not a pretty sight. "You, the master of the hoodwink? It's me. Al. Alan Dooran? I rescued you from that courthouse ten years ago. Put the healing shard on your leg. Introduced you to the Users."

Hoodwink stumbled a few steps, and had to stop. "Al? Al Dooran? The Al Dooran I knew was a man in his eighties!" Al Dooran had served under the previous Leader. "You should be dead!"

"Ain't that the truth!" Al said. "But I'm alive! You see, when it became clear the gols would hunt the previous Users down to the last man, I went into hiding. Escaped the Great Purge. I came to this place and hid away from the gols, and from the world itself. I fit right in, truth be told. Not so strange, given my past."

"But you're not *old* anymore!"

"Well. I ain't exactly young. More the right age, I would say."

Hoodwink still couldn't fathom it. "How did you do it?"

"How do you think? I accepted the collar. Gave up vitra. It was something I was thinking about doing anyway. I didn't want to go the route of Leader and the others. Dying of old age at thirty-five years old didn't quite

seem right in my books. But you know, it was the strangest thing—when I gave up vitra I never expected the ravages of age to reverse. No one did. Ain't any other User ever done it, far as I know. Give up vitra, go back to being collared, unthinkable! But I did it. In a year, I looked sixty-five. Another year, fifty-five. And on it went. Of course, my hair didn't come back. Nor my teeth. And my skin is still fairly wrinkly. But at least I'm my actual age now. *My actual age*! It's an amazing feeling. Course, I'd hoped to get a bit younger, but that just wasn't in the cards."

"I actually believe you," Hoodwink said. "Mostly because you still talk like an old man," he added wryly. He glanced at Tanner. "What do you think?"

Tanner nodded. "It makes sense, sort of. Take away the collar, and the simulation reverts the avatar to its previous state, resetting the age flag. Takes a few years to filter through, but eventually his avatar resets itself."

Al furrowed his brow. "What the hell are you two babbling about? My avatar. The age flag. The only flag around here is drooping at the top of the Warehouse. The official flag of the Den." Al pointed.

Hoodwink followed his gaze to a distant square roof that pushed above the others. A black flag replete with a skull and crossbones billowed at the top.

"Well that's new," Hoodwink said. "Cute."

Other than the flag, the Black Den was just as he remembered. It wasn't too different than a typical street in Luckdown District, the snowpacked way rather narrow, the shoddy, shack-like homes crammed too close together and barely holding back the snow. He'd come here a lot in his youth, putting his name to good use, hoodwinking the other lowbrows out of their illicitly-earned coins. He'd been a gambler, a thug, a cheat, and a womanizer, all at once and in no particular order. He hadn't had many redeeming qualities back then. Though he liked to think that he'd made up for it in later years.

There were a lot of hard men here. Men with scarred faces, scarred arms, scarred knuckles. Men with pieces missing from their noses, men with chunks gone from their ears. Eye-patched men, cleft-lipped men, arm-stumped men. The Denizens he'd seen outside in Happy-Tot square were the more presentable sorts, it would seem. 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 here.

Hoodwink noticed that though these men were hard, they all gave way to Al just the same, sometimes even bowing slightly. But after the former User had passed, and the men knew Al wasn't watching, they usually gave Hoodwink and Tanner dark stares. Hoodwink tried not to look anyone in the eye for too long—he'd had enough quarreling for the morning.

"Looks like you've done well for yourself here," Hoodwink said, trying to distract himself with small talk.

"I have at that," Al said. "I'm Calico Cap's lieutenant."

"Calico Cap?"

Al grinned widely. "Boss of the Black Faction."

"Oh."

"You'll like him. Looks like you." Al winked. "But tell me, what's life like beyond the Forever Gate? When I seen Ari a few days ago, she told me a lot of things, how you'd come back and taken her across the Gate and all, but she ain't never told me what was there."

"Just another world," Hoodwink said. "Though it's not much different from this one, not really. Instead of ice there's metal. Instead of gols there's golems. And that world is under attack, just like this one. Damn depressing, it is. But I tell you, I mean to see that attack ended, one way or another."

Al studied him through narrowed eyes. As though he didn't believe him. As though perhaps he thought him a madman. "I see. First time I've heard that this world is under attack, but if you say so." Al grinned suddenly. "So how is our mutual ravishing acquaintance? How is Ari?"

Hoodwink stopped in mid-stride.

"What's wrong?" Al's face fell. "Has something happened?"

"No, she's fine," Hoodwink said. "Just busy. Lead on."

Al watched him suspiciously for a moment, but then he moved on, all grins again.

Hoodwink let Al walk ahead a few paces, and then he lowered his voice for Tanner alone. "Best to keep her death to ourselves for now." Ari was still officially the Leader of the New Users. Last thing they needed was some power struggle among its members.

"Agreed," Tanner said.

When Hoodwink caught up with Al again, he asked the man where he was taking them.

Al stopped and scratched his forehead. "The Warehouse. I assumed you wanted to meet Jacob, and the New Users? Unless you're here to see the Calico instead?"

Hoodwink pursed his lips. It might prove useful to meet the boss of the Faction at some point. But not yet. "No. Jacob it is, and the New Users Ari planted here."

"Planted?" Al frowned. "Hardly planted. Planted implies something sly, secretive. Everyone knows about the New Users we're harboring. So, Jacob it is. And you might just meet Calico Cap too. Jacob was holed up with him for most of the morning."

"Holed up? Why?"

Al spread his arms wide. "A new toy arrived this morning."

CHAPTER TEN

Hoodwink stood in a room of iron desks and paneled terminals that was almost a mirror image of Zeta Station on the Outside, except in place of a window three large pieces of glass dominated the front of the room. The leftmost display danced with numbers and symbols. The middle had a map of the earth, with curves drawn between the cities. The rightmost had what Tanner called an 'exponential' curve.

As for the terminals, there were about twenty-five in total, though only three old men filled the seats. The men were New Users, uncollared, and they wore simple gray tops and trousers, their black coats abandoned in bundles on the chairs beside them.

"Well you certainly set up the Control Room right quick," Hoodwink said.

"We did," the New User named Jacob said. "Opened the Box the moment it arrived. We've no idea how everything works though. Not yet."

Dressed like a pauper, all in rags, Jacob was a stooped old man with thin, gray hair. His ears were shrunken like scraps of old leather left too long in the sun, and his eyes were deep-set, peering as if from long tunnels. Though ancient, those eyes pierced like nails, and when Jacob looked at him,

Hoodwink felt like everything inside him was stripped bare for the old man to see. Hoodwink didn't like men with eyes like that. Everything about him, from the outfit to the eyes, reminded Hoodwink of the previous Leader who'd ruled the Users ten years ago. He wouldn't have been surprised to learn they were related.

"Tanner?" Hoodwink regarded his companion.

"The interface is similar to the terminals of the Outside," Tanner said. He'd been hunched over one of the stations since he got here. "And, as I suspected, we're not sandboxed. I should be able to find the children from here and send them a message."

"Good. Can we monitor the gols?"

"Looks like it."

"Then tell me where Brute is when you figure everything out."

"Sure thing."

"And teach these New User grunts a few tricks while you're at it, would you?"

"Yup."

"And see if you can find out how many of those ravens are circling overhead."

"Okay."

"And—"

"Hood!" Tanner raised his voice in obvious irritation, but he seemed to quickly rein himself in, because his next words were calmer. "Hood. I got this. I know what to do. Just give me room to work."

Hoodwink took a breath. "All right. Work then. No more micromanaging from me."

"You still remember that word?" Tanner grinned at him. He'd taught Hoodwink the meaning of 'micromanaging' months ago, when Hoodwink had been guilty of doing that very thing.

Hoodwink returned the smile politely, and then strode to the aisle. He walked to the front of the room and studied the glass display with the map.

"Big world, isn't it?" Jacob said, joining him.

"It is." *Too bad it's all fake.*

"I sometimes wonder what it would be like to go Outside. Beyond the Forever Gate. I want to see that ship, and the vast moon that Ari spoke so fondly of."

Hoodwink thought these surprising words for a man of the Inside.

The shock must have been evident on Hoodwink's face, because Jacob added, "Oh yes, Ari told me all about your Outside. She and Tanner confided in me, you see."

Hoodwink rubbed his chin. "She spoke fondly of the moon, and the ship? That seems a little odd. The ship's kind of a shitbox, really. And the

moon, well, it's not much better. Just a barren slab of ice."

Jacob nodded. "Well, I might have added a few embellishments in my imagination."

Or you might've been fishing, using words you'd heard Ari and Tanner bandy around.

Hoodwink nodded sarcastically. "You've a good imagination, then."

"When is she coming?" Jacob said. "Ari."

Hoodwink swallowed and nearly choked on his own saliva. He coughed something nasty while Jacob patted him on the back.

"Ari?" Hoodwink eventually managed. He cleared his throat. "She'll be here soon. Real soon." Technically, Jacob was Leader of the New Users now that Ari was gone. He was the last man Hoodwink wanted to break the news to.

"Tanner's doing a pretty good job in her absence though, isn't he?" Jacob said. "He'd make a fine New User."

"The kid's growing up fast," Hoodwink agreed. "Real fast. Eight months ago Tanner was just a pup, hardly able to walk, fresh from the Inside, but now look at him. He's a quick-study, and already he's mastered most of the ship's systems. I'm proud of the kid."

"Helen there, she's the same age as Tanner." Jacob pointed out one of the wrinkled old terminal operators. Hoodwink had thought her a man, at

first. "Pity, that we have to age so. You should take more of us Out, Hoodwink. Let us come back as gols."

"That's certainly possible," Hoodwink said.

"You don't sound very enthusiastic."

Hoodwink sighed. "There's not much space on the Outside, Jacob. It's pretty crowded enough as it is."

"I'm only asking you to let out a few of us. The older, more valuable members."

Hoodwink grunted. "Like yourself?"

"Just consider it, that's all I'm asking," Jacob said.

Hoodwink shook his head. Everyone always wanted something from him.

He was about to excuse himself when a man dressed in elaborate furs came strutting into the room. Al was at his side.

"Who the hell's that?" Hoodwink said underbreath.

"Trouble."

"Well hello," the man in furs said when he reached Hoodwink. "Al's told me all about you, Master Hoodwink. A New User disguised as a gol disguised as a human. Ingenious! I hope you and your debonair companion over there enjoy your stay at the Warehouse!"

"Hoodwink," Al said. "Meet Calico Cap."

Hoodwink nodded thoughtfully. Calico Cap, the leader of the Black Faction. He'd apparently earned his nickname for the finely cut furs he wore, a patchwork of white, black, and brown, like a cat's hide. He wore polished, silver-worked boots, and white fur gloves that seemed almost part of the coat. Three silver skulls were pinned to his high collar.

Lithe and strong of body, he carried himself well. And Al hadn't been kidding when he'd said Cap looked like Hoodwink. Matted hair, a long beak of a nose, a thick mustache that curved down slightly around the ends of the lips, a slight goatee that rounded out the chin. Dark eyes that burned with purpose.

"You were right, Al," Cap said. "The man's my spitting image!" He chuckled as if he'd made some grand joke.

On cue, Al laughed.

"Someday you'll have to tell me your secret." Cap leaned forward conspiratorially. "How to become a gol, I mean." He jabbed Hoodwink good-naturedly in the ribs. "And I must thoroughly thank you for bringing us the mayor's Control Room. Not to mention his Revision Room. We've put the latter to good use, let me tell you. Oh, and the Dwarf may yet prove useful as well."

Hoodwink regarded the man warily. "I wasn't aware any of these things were actually *given* to you. I thought we'd only put them here for safe-

keeping." He shot Jacob an angry look.

"Oh, but you're completely right!" Cap laid an arm around Hoodwink's shoulders just as if the two of them were the best of friends. "But I figured we might as well put these items to good use until you take them back!"

Alarm bells were going off in Hoodwink's head. "And what kind of 'use' did you have in mind?"

"Why, expanding our little operation of course!" Cap was all smiles.

Al was nodding fervently, and he rolled his hands one over the other as if to imply that Hoodwink should nod along with him. Jacob meanwhile was doing his best imitation of a deaf man, taking care to observe the far corner of the room and nothing else.

"Expanding your operation," Hoodwink said dryly.

"Yes." Cap continued to beam. "We're planning to take over the entire city."

"I see." *Give a little to a thief, and next he'll expect the world.* Hoodwink frowned at Jacob. "And the New Users approve?"

Jacob still didn't meet his eye.

"Why of course," Cap said. "We get rid of Jeremy, and Jacob here becomes mayor."

"Ah," Hoodwink said. "So that's it. You know we'll have to clear this

with Ari first, right?"

Finally Jacob looked at him. Hoodwink thought he saw a small spark of electricity flash in Jacob's left eye. A spark of defiance. But it was only for an instant, so short that Hoodwink might have imagined it.

"This town needs a new mayor," Jacob said. "You know that. I know it. If the Black Faction wants to help us take the town, I say let them. I'm sure Ari would agree. I'll wait for her approval, of course. And the role of mayor is hers, if she wants it."

"Generous," Hoodwink said. "Tell me, how many thugs from the Den are you going to uncollar?"

Jacob glanced at Cap. "We haven't discussed that, yet."

"The Black Faction isn't a den of fools," Cap said. "We've done our very best to avoid attracting the attention of the gols over the years, but now that the time of our rise is at hand, I plan to have every last man in the Den uncollared."

Hoodwink shook his head. "You *are* a den of fools. Even with every man in the Den uncollared, you won't take the city. You have no idea what you're facing. No idea at all." They'd probably all die. Though perhaps that was for the best. It wouldn't do to have thugs from the Den running around with lightning.

Jacob straightened as best he could, likely a hard thing for the old,

bent man. "Jeremy is a pampered fool who inherited all his riches and knows nothing about running a city, let alone winning a battle. Our scouts have reported that his Direwalker army has vanished, literally overnight. His mansion is undefended and ripe for the taking."

Hoodwink smiled, though it was a false one, and he knew his eyes must look cold. "Jeremy has other defenses..."

"We will vanquish whatever he throws at us."

Hoodwink sighed. This was a battle he wasn't going to win, at least not this way. "A glutton for pain and loss, are you? But as I said, you'll have to clear it with Ari first."

"Oh I will," Jacob said. Cap was smirking beside him. "You said she was coming soon. When, exactly?"

"Tomorrow or the day after. You'll make no move against the mayor until you hear from her, understood?" Hoodwink stared hard at the man.

Jacob returned his stare defiantly. He glanced at Cap, and the man nodded his curt assent. Jacob bowed his head. "We will wait, Hoodwink."

"Good man." Hoodwink wasn't sure he believed him. "I think we're done here?" He glanced across the room. "Tanner?"

"I've found the children," Tanner said, not looking up. He acted like he was oblivious to the whole conversation. Probably heard every word though. "I'm sending the message now. It'll be a while before I hear back,

even if they're glued to their terminals." That was true—time passed far faster on the Inside. "And I'm still looking for Brute, and the other item of interest. Why don't you visit Cora or something in the meantime?"

Hoodwink's heart pounded suddenly. "Cora?"

"Yeah. She's here. I forgot to mention it, didn't I?"

"You did." A line of sweat dribbled down Hoodwink's ribs. Cora.

Hoodwink glanced at Jacob. The old man smiled knowingly. "She's a handful, that one, I tell you. Best of luck to you."

Hoodwink couldn't return Jacob's smile.

How could he?

It fell on Hoodwink to tell Cora that their daughter was dead.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

One of Cap's lackeys escorted Hoodwink through the Warehouse. He was a dour sort, and kept giving Hoodwink dark looks. Acne scars pocked his cheeks, and reminded Hoodwink a little of Ganymede's surface when viewed from above. The lackey was dressed in a sealskin jacket similar to the one Al had worn, except only a single skull was pinned to his high collar.

The Warehouse was really just a big mansion. The halls were ornate, with diamond-shaped floor tiles made of polished black stone imported from Dhenn. Tall arched windows let in ample sunlight. The wall panels were made of dark red wood, hard as bronze and chiseled with sea creatures of surprising beauty. Odd statuettes were set into the alcoves along the way, mostly of naked men and women sprouting tentacles.

Hoodwink passed a kitchen, and the sweet aroma of spiced wine and hot honeycakes almost tempted him to barge inside and scoop up as much as he could carry. But he knew that while the illusory food might satisfy his taste buds, it would provide no nourishment whatsoever.

The lackey eventually halted beside an arched burgundy door guarded by two old men.

"Enjoy." The lackey turned on his heels.

"Don't I get an introduction?" Hoodwink said, but the lackey was already halfway down the hall.

Hoodwink sighed, and studied the two guards.

The one on the left had a red face, and was slightly on the stocky side, carrying a bit of a paunch round his waist. His receding hair was white, and he seemed around sixty years old or so. He wore a dark green cloak.

The man on the right was bone-thin, with only wispy tufts of hair on that otherwise scaly head. His white brow was the highlight of his features, a huge, bushy, undisciplined thing. The rest of his face was a shriveled mess, with the skin stretched so tight Hoodwink worried it would crack if the man tried to make any sort of expression. He was truly the oldest man Hoodwink had ever seen. His cloak was a dark gray.

Both men were uncollared. *New Users*.

Hoodwink smiled politely. "I'm here to see Cora, friends." He made to pass between the two.

"Not so fast, gol." The green-cloaked man raised his hands. "No one sees Cora unless Ari or Jacob says so." He emphasized his point by letting electricity spark from his fingertips.

Always obstacles, Hoodwink thought, not bothered in the least by the subtle show of power. He had no weapon of his own, of course. And he didn't have vitra. No gols did. He had only his wits.

That was usually all he needed.

"I have Jacob's approval, I promise you." Hoodwink tucked his thumbs inside his belt and thrummed the leather. "Name's Hoodwink. Hoodwink Cooper. Perhaps you've heard of me? My name has some pull among the Users, both old and new. At least it used to. And that's my dear wife you got in there."

"Hoodwink?" The green-cloaked man brightened. "Did you say Hoodwink?"

"This isn't Hoodwink you fool," piped up the gray-cloaked man beside him. Rasping and harsh, his voice sounded nearly as ancient as he looked. "It's a gol!"

"But Tanner's a gol," Green-cloak said. "And so is Ari!"

Gray-cloak regarded Hoodwink uncertainly. "How can we be sure you is who you say you is?"

Hoodwink gave him his trademark shit-eating grin. "Everyone knows that Hoodwink is seven feet tall, spits lightning bolts from his eyes, breathes fire from his lips and shits black death from his arse, so of course I must be him."

Green-cloak chortled.

"I *am* Hoodwink. Through and through. Now if you two bumbling jackanapes don't let me pass to see my wife, I'll knock both your numb skulls

together and take a burning piss on your unconscious backsides."

"Uh," Green-cloak said.

"Uh," Gray-cloak said.

"That's what I thought." Hoodwink nodded in sour satisfaction, and shoved his way past the confused pair before they could oppose him.

He shut the door behind him.

"Was wondering when you'd come." Cora sat in a ladderback chair, a mandolin resting in her lap, its pluck on the table beside her.

Hoodwink was taken aback by the changes in Cora. Gone was the beautiful woman he'd named his wife, the woman with the twinkling eyes and the easy smile, replaced by a hunched imitation, her face lined by strain and worry, her dark eyes red and swollen as if she cried often, her hair more white than brown. An angry sea of ridges wrinkled her forehead and her nose was a bumpy knot.

Hoodwink's heart went out to her, it really did, and he felt the fresh weight of guilt pressing down on him. If he kept looking at her he thought he might weep, so he distracted himself by studying the room instead.

A candle lit the room from the table beside her. There was a visitor's chair off to one side, plain though well-polished. A small rug covered the center of the floor, woven into simple bars of red and yellow. A bookshelf sat against the far wall, filled with only three tomes. A bed and chamber pot used

up the remaining space.

Overall, the room was little more than a windowless closet. He felt a bit insulted that Cora would be forced to stay here.

"Damn bastards could've given you a better room," Hoodwink said.

"Had a better room at first." Cora's voice was unusually quiet, and Hoodwink had to strain to hear her. "Bright. Shiny. Lots of furniture. But I asked to be moved here. Suits my mood. Reminds me of me home in Dhenn."

"Oh."

Her old accent was gone, and she sounded oddly like him. Which made sense if she'd lived in Dhenn. Luckdown District, where he grew up, was also known as Little Dhenn because of all the transplants from said city.

Hoodwink tentatively crossed the chamber, and lowered himself into the visitor's chair. He noticed for the first time that the tips of Cora's fingers were bloody. He wanted to touch her hands, cradle them, but that would be far too familiar.

"Cora, your poor hands," he said instead.

Eyes sad, Cora sighed. "Got nothing else to do here, I don't. Nothing to do whatsoever except play my fingers to the bone. And sing myself hoarse."

"Bastards," Hoodwink said. "They could at least allow you more freedom."

"Ari did this," Cora said.

Hoodwink stared down at his own hands. "She only wants to protect you."

"Oh, I'm sure she does. But you don't understand. Whatever she wants to do with me, she can. I fought her, you know, at first. Kicked and screamed all the way here. Well, most of the way. But I know now that I was wrong to fight. I should've followed her obediently, for what I done to her. For what you and I both done. We're forever in her debt. You know that, Hoodwink, don't you? Forever in her debt."

"We are." Hoodwink set his elbow in his lap, and palmed his chin. How was he going to tell her?

Cora strummed the mandolin weakly a few times. "I play happy songs, usually. The kind I used to play when you'd come home from work, and Yolinda from school. Yolinda. Do you remember when Ari was still called that? The songs make me think of her, of the better times. Do you remember *Ode to White Park*?"

Hoodwink smiled. That was a song she had invented in celebration of White Park, where he and Cora used to bring their little daughter everyday. They often kissed behind the trees while Yolinda cavorted with her friends. "I do. It's one of my favorites."

"Would you like to hear the tune?"

Hoodwink nodded. "I would."

Cora grinned for the first time, though it seemed somehow wrong on her face, those sad eyes betraying the smile for the lie it was. But instead of resting her fingertips over the strings in the proper manner, she wrapped her bloodied fingers *around* the strings, and yanked. The cords dug into her fingers, but she didn't stop pulling, the tendons standing out in her wrists.

"Cora," Hoodwink said. "Why the melodrama? Cora, just stop—"

All at once the strings snapped. So she'd done it. She'd broken her mandolin. Perhaps the last source of happiness she had left in this world. She'd broken it right in front of him.

That false smile didn't waver the whole time.

Hoodwink felt the hairs on the nape of his neck rise. He had to be very careful. In the past Cora could be like a caged viper—one wrong move and that viper would leap out at him, biting. Was she still that way? And if so, just how the hell was he going to break the news about Ari without uncaging that viper?

"Maybe I should come back later," he said, standing.

"No, please stay," Cora said. "Stay. Today's a day of revelations and forgiveness." She dropped the mandolin to the floor, slid her body to the edge of the chair, and patted the cushion beside her, leaving prints of blood. "Sit with me."

"Cora, I—"

"Sit." Still smiling.

Hoodwink approached hesitantly. He couldn't shake the feeling that this was a bad idea. That she was up to something. "Look, Cora, I have to tell you something. And you're probably not going to like it."

"Since when have I ever liked anything you have to say?" Still smiling.

Hoodwink neared the chair. She patted the cushion again, smiling sweetly, eyes all sadness.

The viper... the caged viper...

Hoodwink started to sit—

He paused halfway down, waiting for the furtive knife, or the strike in the back.

Nothing came.

She was still smiling.

He sat.

His leg touched hers.

Electricity flowed into him.

And then he knew.

"You're a User," he said.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Hoodwink regarded her cautiously. She could incinerate him at any time if she knew what she was doing.

"Yes," Cora said, the sorrow obvious in her voice, the smile finally leaving her face. "I am a User. I've become the very thing I've always hated and feared. I was in the depths of depression six months ago, decrying my lot in life, when I realized I hadn't punished myself enough. No, there was one final punishment left. I had to become like her.

"So I asked around, found a smith who'd be willing to try to break the collar. Nearly took my head off, but he did it, and fashioned a new, fake collar for me to wear. I went home, and kept waiting for the gols to come for me. I kept wishing that they would. But they never did. The smith never talked. No one ever found out.

"It's a strange, funny thing, because even though I have the power, I can't use it. Even when I first touched vitra all those years ago, before they done the collaring, I couldn't shape it. It just flows across the surface of my skin. When Ari came to my house a few days back, I almost told her, wanted to brag how I'd punished myself for her, but I couldn't. She's suffered so much more than me, and my suffering is just a shred of what she's been

through. No, I thought it better I suffer in silence."

"But you want *me* to know."

She nodded sadly. "I do. Not out of spite, mind. It just seems right somehow that you know, is all. That you're not the only one who's suffered because of what we done."

Hoodwink fidgeted with his own collar. He wanted to tell her that his was fake too. That he might be able to teach her how to use the vitra within her, despite that he couldn't wield it in this body. He even considered going so far as to tell her that he was a gol, since she hadn't seemed to notice. But there were some things best left unsaid, for now.

He had more important things to tell her in any case. He steeled himself—

Cora got up abruptly, and reclined on the bed instead. She lowered her face to the pillow and looked at him. "I swore that if I ever saw you again, I'd do something nasty. Try to hurt you somehow. Breaking the mandolin seemed the best way. Further punishing myself. But that's silly. It really is. I've punished myself enough. And I don't want to hurt you. I really don't. That's not who I am. I told myself that you were the source of all the trouble and anguish in my life. But it's not you. It's me. It's always been me."

Hoodwink sighed. He was going to tell her about Ari. He was. In a bit. "Ten years. Even after ten years, you're still grieving. Still blaming

yourself. You've just let it build up over the years, haven't you?"

Cora smiled fleetingly. "We shouldn't have sold her, Hoodwink. What were we thinking? What right did we have? Revising our daughter. Changing her because we didn't like what we thought she was becoming. What if it was just a phase? What if she would have met a nice young man and married a few months after? What if...?" She fingered her caller.

He wanted to tell her that they did what they thought was right for Ari, that they did their best for her, but he knew that wasn't true. It was the money that convinced them in the end. One hundred thousand drachmae. Hoodwink wouldn't have to work ever again. Nor Cora. Funny thing was, when they got the money, they never spent a coin of it. Stowed it away in the closet. It felt too much like blood money. Consumed by guilt, they tried to buy Ari back a month later. Jeremy wanted ten times the price. Cora went running to her brother, Briar, but even he couldn't afford such an outrageous sum.

"We thought we did the right thing," was all Hoodwink could manage.

Cora smiled so sardonically that it felt like she'd slapped him in the face. "The right thing? Selling our daughter to a madman was the right thing?"

"We didn't know he was a madman at the time. He was the mayor of

the city. It felt like we'd won the lottery. We'd get money, influence..."

"She was too beautiful, Hoodwink. We always knew that. Beauty attracts the worst kind of men. I should've known. I've experienced more than my share of them." She gave him a significant look.

Hoodwink let the insult pass. In fact, he was rather glad she'd said it, because it reminded him of the old, spirited Cora.

But the time for distractions was past. He had to tell her. But it would destroy her. It had almost destroyed him. Well, looking at her, there wasn't much left to destroy, was there?

"Ari's dead," Hoodwink said.

Cora laughed. She actually laughed. With her hoarse voice, it sounded more like sandpaper rasping against a tree trunk. "Get out of here, Hoodwink. You can't hurt me anymore. No one can."

"I'm serious." Hoodwink met her eye. She had to see it in his face. She had to see the sorrow. "You know I wouldn't lie about something like this."

"That's impossible. I just saw her a few days ago." The blood drained from Cora's face. "I just saw her I just saw her!" Cora's eyes squeezed shut, and her fingers tightened around the pillow until the knuckles went white. Blood from her fingertips smeared the fabric.

He couldn't take it anymore. He had to touch her. Had to *hold* her.

Hoodwink hurried to the bedside and lifted her in his arms. She was like a dead weight, all rigid and tense. She kept the pillow pressed firmly to her face. The tears flowed from her eyes.

"I'm so sorry," Hoodwink said.

Cora looked at him, eyes red, accusing. "I don't believe you. I don't I don't."

"She fell," Hoodwink said. "She was climbing the Forever Gate, and she fell."

"She fell," Cora echoed. "Climbing the Forever Gate." Her head started to sink, and then she looked up abruptly. "*You* put her up to it, didn't you?"

"No Cora," he said gently. "It wasn't me, not this time. It was all Ari. A choice she made. To protect someone else."

Cora nodded. "Just like her, to give her life for someone else. Just like my Yolinda."

"Cora, I'm going to save her, I am."

She stiffened. "What game are you playing? You just said she was *dead*."

"No game." Hoodwink regarded her as tenderly as he could, and combed the tear-matted hair from her face. "She *is* dead. I've seen her body. But I have a way to save her. You know I wouldn't tell you if I didn't."

Her features scrunched up in confusion. "You would bring her back from the dead?"

"I would."

"But how can that be possible?"

"You have to trust me, Cora. You know I wouldn't say it if it weren't true." Hoodwink continued to stroke her hair. "*What's impossible, is possible*. Ari told me those words."

"You're mad." Cora wiggled from his grasp.

Hoodwink sighed. "No."

"Then tell me how you would do it."

He let his tender smile deepen. "I'm not sure how I can explain it so you'll understand, but I'll try." He paused to collect his thoughts. "Something of her essence was taken away before she died. I'm going to take that essence back. And once I have it, there's a chance I can save her."

"So there's only a *chance*," Cora said, slumping again. "You made it sound like a certainty."

"I swear I'll do my best to bring her back," Hoodwink said. "That's all I can offer. That's all I can promise. A chance. And that I'll do my best."

"I believe you." She nodded to herself. "I actually believe you." Cora gripped his collar then, and he felt the electricity flowing into him. She spoke urgently, though her voice was little more than a whisper. "You bring her

back, Hoodwink, you hear? I don't care if you have to break apart this world or the next, the nine hells or the afterlife. Destroy it all. But you bring— her — back."

It might just come to the destruction of this world, though Hoodwink sincerely hoped not. "I will." His voice was a whisper too now. "I will, Cora."

He looked into her eyes. There was something he hadn't seen there for a long time.

Forgiveness.

The door to the room slammed open and Hoodwink started.

It was Tanner. "Hood, come quick!"

Hoodwink sprung up in alarm. "What is it?"

"There's an emissary from Jeremy at the gate to the Den. He's demanding the Dwarf."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

As Hoodwink hurried along the snowpack streets of the Black Den, Tanner explained that the children had returned his message. "They're in Omega Station."

"Good good," Hoodwink said distractedly. His mind was on Cora. She had forgiven him at long last. Maybe after this was over...

"So when we return Outside," Tanner continued. "I say we go to Omega Station, and meet with them right away."

"Great great. I agree."

"They've been busy, by the way. Sent me the source for some gifts."

That piqued Hoodwink's interest. "Gifts?"

"Lightning rings."

"Lightning rings," Hoodwink deadpanned.

"Each one has a charge similar to vitra. With the rings, anyone can use lightning—collared or uncollared, human or gol. But the rings follow the same rules as ordinary vitra, and need time to recharge."

"The children can make unlimited fire swords but they can't make unlimited lightning rings?"

Tanner shrugged. "I'll see if I can change that sometime. Oh, and I

couldn't find Brute. So I can't give you confirmation on the disk."

Hoodwink nodded curtly. "Doesn't matter. Jeremy has it I'm sure. And we all know where he is." Though it probably wasn't the greatest idea for Hoodwink to seek out Jeremy so soon. In Hoodwink's current state, he had no idea what he'd do to the man.

Hoodwink and Tanner turned onto the street that led to the main gates. Here, the wives and children of the ruffians who lived in the Den were peering from the doorways of their shack-homes, wondering at the commotion by the entrance.

Around the gate itself, a hubbub of Denizens had gathered, mostly the meanest rough-and-toughs. Hoodwink shoved his way forward—he never heard so many insults directed his way in all his life. After getting through that mess, he and Tanner joined Jacob at the front, just behind Cap and Al.

Jacob gave him a sidelong glance, and the old man said, underbreath, "Jeremy's Emissary wants to parley for the Dwarf."

Beyond the gate stood a curious specimen, a gol of a type Hoodwink had never seen before. Tanner had told him of the new gols, the 'Direwalkers' as he called them, but this gol didn't match his descriptions. It wore a long black coat and gauntlets of black metal. When the gol opened its mouth, *all* its front teeth were long and pointy, not just the canines. The gol seemed to enjoy flashing those sharp teeth, and it took every opportunity to do just that.

There was a strange symbol on its coat—a sun with rays of all different sizes. The symbol seemed vaguely familiar, but Hoodwink couldn't place it.

"The Den shall suffer badly," the Emissary was saying. "Very badly."

Cap glanced behind. He smiled broadly when he saw Hoodwink, and he wrapped his arm around Hoodwink's shoulder as if they were the best of friends. "So what do you think? You're a gol. Is it telling the truth?"

Hoodwink regarded Cap warily. "Hell if I know, I just got here. What's it saying?"

"Oh, not too much. Just that Jeremy will unleash his full wrath on this place if we don't give up the Dwarf. That he'll burn the Den down, cut out all our hearts, and hang our heads from the parapets of our own wall. Yada yada yada."

Hoodwink pursed his lips. "Well, I have a wee bit of experience dealing with gols. Do you mind?" Hoodwink beckoned at the gate.

"By all means," Cap said. "In fact, I insist."

"Good." Hoodwink slid out from under the man's arm. "You wouldn't happen to have a sword?"

Cap glanced at Al, who drew his blade and handed the weapon hilt-first to Hoodwink.

"Open the gate," Hoodwink announced to no one in particularly.

After a pause—likely Cap was nodding his confirmation to someone

again—the gatehouse winch turned, and the portcullis lifted.

Hoodwink strode outside. He'd only taken three steps when the gate slammed shut behind him. He was all too aware of the arrows trained down from the walkways above, not all of them pointing at the Emissary.

The gol flashed its teeth. "And who are you?"

Hoodwink twirled the blade, making a few feints, testing its weight. The sword passed near the Emissary's head, but the gol didn't even blink.

"Name's Hoodwink," he said.

"Hoode-Wink." The gol passed its tongue over the lower half of its sharp teeth.

"Yes. Remember that name. Your master will recognize it. So tell me, you're threatening to destroy the Den?"

The Emissary cocked its head. "It is not *I* who threatens. I am the Emissary. I speak only the words of the mayor."

Using the Emissary's shoulder for balance, Hoodwink lifted one of his boots and used the sword to scrape snow and mud from his sole. "And what are the mayor's words, exactly?"

"Give up the Dwarf, and mayor Jeremy's remaining property, or these walls shall come tumbling down and this evil that thrives in the heart of the city shall be rooted out." Its breath misted in hateful plumes. "Relinquish the Dwarf or the Den shall be raped and pillaged in a fitting end to the raping and

pillaging criminals who live within. Return Jeremy's property or the Den shall be burned down, your hearts cut out, and your heads hung—"

Hoodwink raised a halting hand. "I heard that last part from the Calico already. Wonderfully theatrical." He circled the Emissary, casually flourishing the sword. "But tell me, what about the women and children who live here? The innocents?"

"There shall be no quarter." The Emissary flashed those too-white teeth.

"Why bother with an Emissary," Hoodwink said. "Jeremy could just break down these walls and *take* the Dwarf, and the Boxes. His pet, Brute, could probably do it all by itself. Why bother to negotiate?"

The Emissary spread its hands, saying nothing, grinning that toothy grin.

"There's something you're not telling me," Hoodwink said. "What are you about, gol? What the hell are you about?"

And then he understood.

That symbol on its chest, it wasn't a sun with shining rays.

"Bomb!" Hoodwink shouted.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Hoodwink swept the sword in a wide arc and cleanly separated the Emissary's head from its body. Hoodwink caught the head by the hair, tossed it in front of him, and gave it a boot. The thing hurtled skyward.

Hoodwink's big toe throbbed with sudden pain, and he turned about, limping. "Gah! Damn skulls!" He blocked-out the agony in time to watch the airborne head explode.

The shock-wave hurled Hoodwink into the metal bars of the portcullis, which rattled as if from thunder. He fell forward on his knees, and a red-tinged string of snot plunged from his nose, smearing the shoveled cobblestone.

His head swayed drunkenly. He forced himself to rise. First one boot. Then the other. He leaned heavily on the portcullis and pulled himself up.

Movement drew his eye past the drifts of snow that formed the ramparts four paces from the wall. In the adjacent street, Hoodwink saw figures gathering, stacked three ranks deep. A few of them snarled, and he saw those famous finger-long canines Tanner had told him about.

So. The newfangled 'Direwalkers.' He'd wondered how they would turn out.

Hoodwink spun toward the portcullis. "Let me in."

"Belay that," Cap said.

Hoodwink felt his anger rise. He'd just saved this fool's entire Den. "Let me in you ungrateful son of an arse."

"How did you know?" the leader of the Black Faction said.

Hoodwink grasped two of the long metallic bars and pulled. The thick steel bars didn't budge.

Cap glanced over his shoulder and stepped back a pace. He threw his hands forward in a gesture of attack. Denizens thrust past the man, and before Hoodwink knew it he had five pikes reaching through the bars at him, licking his throat.

"Tell me how you knew." Cap said.

Tanner spoke up. "Just let him inside, Cap." Other men immediately spun on Tanner now and lifted their pikes to his neck. Tanner carefully raised his hands and made no further move.

"Don't you have other, more pressing matters to focus on?" Hoodwink tilted his head in the direction of the gathering Direwalker ranks.

Cap raised his voice so that all might hear. "Tell us how you knew Jeremy's Emissary had a bomb, Hoodwink dear friend."

"The symbol on its chest," Hoodwink said. "The rays were all different sizes. Of course it had to be a bomb."

Cap massaged his chin. "That explanation is almost plausible. But, how did you know the bomb was in its head?"

"There's so much you don't know," Hoodwink said. "So so much." And then he added, underbreath, "You pompous peacock."

"What was that?" Cap lifted an eyebrow.

"He called you a pompous peacock, sir!" one of the pike-wielding thugs said. Angry-Scar, actually.

Cap self-consciously tugged the hem of his fur collar. "How unfortunate for him."

"All right." Hoodwink raised his hands in surrender. "All right. How did I know the bomb was in its head? I'm a gol. We can place maps of the city over our vision. We can read someone's face and tell right away if they're lying. And we can see bombs in other gols' damn heads."

Cap rubbed his chin. He glanced at Al. The former user shrugged. "Don't look at me."

"Tanner!" Hoodwink said. "Tell them."

Momentary confusion flitted across Tanner's face, but then he supported the lie. "Hoodwink is right. Gols can do things ordinary humans can't even imagine. I felt the bomb in the Emissary's head too."

"You *felt* the bomb." Cap looked between Tanner and Hoodwink. "One can *see* the bomb, and the other can *feel* the bomb. I don't trust them,

Al. I just don't trust them."

Hoodwink held his gaze. "The feeling is mutual."

"Pikes down!" Cap said at last. "Open the gate. Quickly!"

The pikes left Hoodwink's throat, and the portcullis clanged upward.

Hoodwink didn't wait—when the portcullis had reached knee-high he rolled inside.

"Shut it!" Cap said.

The bars slammed down.

Cap was gazing past Hoodwink. "I almost expected Jeremy's playthings to try running inside with you."

Hoodwink returned the sword to Al, then turned around. The Direwalkers remained where he'd last seen them beyond the rampart, but their numbers continued to grow.

"What are they waiting for?" Cap said.

"Another bomb, maybe?" Hoodwink glanced skyward. The ravens were still there, circling just outside bow range.

Cap followed his gaze. "Can Jeremy put bombs in birds?"

That was an interesting thought. Hoodwink didn't think so. He glanced at Tanner.

"The restraints of the system would prevent it," Tanner said.

"The what?" Cap twisted his lips.

"No bombs in birds," Hoodwink said. "Too small."

"But those Boxes of yours can hold a room far bigger than the chests that house them."

"Those operate under different principles," Tanner said.

"Whatever you say." Cap glanced at Hoodwink. "To hell with your Boxes and your birds and your bombs!" He swiveled on the pikemen. "Shut the inner door!"

The men closed the massive wooden doors that lay behind the portcullis, shutting the Direwalkers from view.

"Who does Jeremy think he is, coming up against us!" Cap said. "We're the Black Faction! Experts at murder and thievery!" Cap paced back and forth, and then he opened a slot in the door and peered outside. His confident demeanor abruptly fell, and Hoodwink saw the raw fear on his face. Cap slammed the slot shut. He'd grown very pale. "They just keep coming and coming." The man's fear was contagious, and Hoodwink noticed that the men nearest their leader were fidgeting nervously now, Al and Jacob included. Cap glanced at Jacob. "If only we had more lightning men."

"We're uncollaring more at this very moment," Jacob said. "But it's slow going. Five minutes per collar."

Lightning men? So they'd already begun uncollaring the Denizens. Hoodwink didn't see anyone uncollared nearby though, save for Jacob.

"We'll help you, Cap," Hoodwink said. "Don't be getting all upset on me. Tanner and I, we got some things that can help you, we do. We'll tilt the odds in your favor, don't you worry." He glanced at Tanner. "Return to the Outside, and send in a couple of those new gifts you told me about. Use my position."

Tanner drew his handmirror and strode away to begin the process of disbelieving reality.

"Been waiting for an attack for years," Cap said. "Watching, and waiting. Wondering if I'd wake up in the night to the shouts and screams of the dying. Time passed. I became complacent. Guess I never actually believed it would ever happen. Should've seen it coming though. Should've better prepared my men. Oh they're veterans of wars against other factions, don't you fret. But that's a different kind of fighting. A fighting set in the shadows, with assassinations in the dark. Not the close-quarters, in-your-face fighting that's coming."

"Tell me there's a secret back way out of here," Hoodwink said.

Cap nodded, and exchanged a knowing glance with Al. "There's a back way, through the sewers. The outlet is by Fen Street. Back of the Den."

"There's a working sewer system in the Den?" *And you made my Cora use a chamber pot?*

Cap frowned. "Never said it was working."

"Ah." Hoodwink should've figured as much. "Well. Working or not, it's an escape. We have to get the women and children out."

Cap ground his teeth. Probably wanted to save his own skin first. Then he glanced at his men, and his face softened. Hoodwink regarded the men now too, and saw the mixed emotions there. Fear, and yet an inexplicable resolve. Hoodwink realized that every man present likely had a wife and child, Cap included. And when your life was a whirlwind of crime, all you really had to anchor you to the world was your family. No matter how tough you were on the outside, without them you'd be left adrift.

Sort of like Hoodwink.

"You're right," Cap said, with a sigh. "You're right. The women and children first. We may be criminals, but we're not heartless. Family is all we have. We'll wait here, hold the ranks off as long as we can. Then we'll join our wives and sons."

"So there's honor among thieves after all," Hoodwink said. "Assuming you keep your part of the bargain. It's usually the women and children who get screwed. Literally."

"I'll keep my part," Cap said. "As will my men. Just bring those gifts of yours."

Hoodwink nodded. "I will. Once I make sure the Dwarf is on the way out." He glanced meaningfully at Jacob.

Jacob nodded. "Let's go. The Dwarf's in the Warehouse, along with the Boxes."

Hoodwink followed Jacob. He was glad the Dwarf was at the Warehouse, because that's where Cora was too.

Cap addressed someone behind Hoodwink. "You there, see that the families begin the evacuation."

Hoodwink hurried away with Jacob. When he was only about five paces from the gate, he heard a shout from behind.

"They're rushing the walls!"

"To arms!" Cap said, and the area around the gate erupted in activity.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Hoodwink almost had trouble keeping pace with Jacob, who moved with surprising speed for an old man. Still, he preferred it that way. *Have to get Cora!*

Tanner appeared at his side. "How *did* you know about the bomb back there, Hood? I've never heard of gols being able to sense bombs. We don't have that ability."

Hoodwink couldn't keep the anger from his voice. "They can't," he snapped.

"Then how—"

"Aren't you supposed to be throwing off this reality? I recall giving you the order to go Outside. Now would be a good time to listen to me, don't you think? Given that we're under attack."

Tanner opened his mouth, but then bit back whatever he was going to say. He lowered his eyes. "You're right. We don't have time for this. The rush on the walls distracted me. I'm sorry." He turned to go, but paused. "Once I inject a few presents, I'll come back in, and help hold the Direwalkers off. Buy you and the women and children some time."

"Dangerous," Hoodwink said.

"It seems like the right thing to do. Ari would have done it."

Hoodwink nodded. Ari. "All right. I can't stop you. Good luck, man. But please, when the fighting starts in earnest, retreat to the sewage outlet."

Tanner nodded. "I'll do my best. Good luck, Hood."

Hoodwink hurried after Jacob.

"Why do they want the Dwarf so badly?" the old man said when Hoodwink reached him.

"I don't know," Hoodwink lied. "Have you revised the Dwarf yet?"

"No."

"Too bad." Though that was probably good.

"We should've listened to you, Hoodwink," Jacob said.

"How so?"

"The Den is perilously undermanned. Even though you warned us not to, Cap sent about two hundred of his best to take over the mayor's house. We'd been uncollaring them all morning. And this is the fallout. I know it is."

Hoodwink frowned. "Uncollared men would have been useful here. But sent to the mayor's house? Likely they're all dead."

"We should have listened to you."

Hoodwink found it hard not to feel smug. Still, he'd never been the I-told-you-so type, so he held his tongue.

When they reached the foyer of the Warehouse, Hoodwink turned

down a side hallway. "I have to get Cora. Where should I meet you?"

Jacob considered this, the furrows in his forehead momentarily deepening. "I'll wait for you in the Control Room. You have three minutes."

"Good enough." Hoodwink hurried off.

After some moments he reached the room that held Cora, and he barged past the two New User guards, Green-cloak and Gray-cloak.

"We're under attack," he told the old men over his shoulder.

He found Briar inside with Cora. *Briar*, of all people.

"You!" Hoodwink stepped forward.

Briar's face turned a bright red and his jowls shook. His lips moved, but no sound came.

That's when Hoodwink realized he'd raised his hand and was choking Briar above the bronze bitch, his fingers buried in the folds of his brother-in-law's neck.

Hoodwink regained control of himself and flung his hand away, a little disgusted at himself. He could've easily killed the man with this gol body.

Still, his fury was white-hot, and he couldn't hold back the words that came next. "You led the gols right to me when I came to your house in peace, looking for Cora. You could have warned me, you sycophantic, castrated toad! I thought we were friends. *Friends!*"

"That was ten years ago!" Briar was leaning against Cora, panting. Hoodwink was surprised Cora could even hold up the man, given his bulk. *It's a simulation,* he reminded himself.

"Ten years?" Hoodwink's fist trembled. "Not so long for me."

"Did you come here to fight with Briar?" Cora said.

Hoodwink clamped down on his rage. It wasn't easy when he got all riled up like that, but he managed. "No. I came to see you out of here. Jeremy's attacking the Den."

"Attacking?" Briar said. "By the whoremongers, what do you mean, *Jeremy's attacking*?"

"My meaning is plain, Briar. And I suppose I'll have to rescue you too, or Cora will never forgive me." Hoodwink forcibly hauled the fat merchant into the hall, and Cora followed behind.

"With us!" Hoodwink told the New Users who had remained loyally at their posts. The two old men hastened alongside Cora, and together the small party made its way through the halls of the Warehouse.

Hoodwink glanced at Green-cloak. "Your job is to guard Cora?"

It was Gray-cloak, the ancient one, who answered. "With our lives!"

"That's what I wanted to hear." Hoodwink turned his attention on Briar next. "When we reach the sewers, I want you to take Cora and her guards to one of your houses."

"My houses aren't safe!" Briar said. "Why do you think I'm here? I'm Jeremy's sworn enemy now. He knows it was me who helped steal the Control Room. Damn ravens saw me kill the sentries outside his mansion. Jeremy *knows*. And I didn't even get paid!" His voice seemed particularly whiny over that last part.

"You'll get paid. Look, you have to take Cora somewhere safe. Away from all the fighting. Can you do that for me?"

"I— I suppose. Is Tanner coming?"

"No, why?"

"I saw him earlier today, walking about as if nothing happened. I—" Briar glanced around, as though uncertain he wanted to say any more. "I was standing at the window of my house when it happened."

"When what happened?"

Briar lowered his voice, as if what he had to say was of the utmost secrecy. Or horror. "He died! He was cut in half. Damn shame. I saw it. He was just..." Briar chopped one hand into the other. "And now he lives. I know he's a gol, but even a gol couldn't survive that. What— what's going on, Hoodwink?"

Hoodwink glanced at Cora. She was listening very attentively. Briar hadn't lowered his voice enough apparently. "Better that you don't know, Briar. Much better."

The group reached the foyer of the Warehouse. "Back in a sec." Hoodwink hurried away through the halls, and came to the Control Room.

It was empty.

"Well I'll be an icicle of shit!" Hoodwink swore. "Jacob didn't wait."

Truth be told, Hoodwink had probably taken longer than three minutes.

Well, nothing for it now. He'd just have to catch up with Jacob and the Dwarf later.

He hurried back to the foyer and led his small group outside.

There were people rushing to and fro. The shouts and clangs of battle could be heard in the distance. Already he could see the smoke plumes.

The air above the snowpack flickered just ahead, and he held out a hand to halt his companions.

A sword belt materialized.

"What in the nine hells..." Gray-cloak said.

Hoodwink scooped the sword belt up and tied it around his waist. He drew the blade. On the steel was etched a fire-spitting raven, its wings trailing cinders. The familiar flow of vitra surged through his veins—life, sex, and everything else besides. But it was more than that. The flow seemed unlimited somehow, just as if he could siphon all the vitra the world contained through that single blade. Tanner hadn't been kidding when he'd

said the sense of power the swords gave you was mind-blowing. Hoodwink felt like doing some mighty rash and reckless things.

He grinned maliciously at Briar. "Want to see some magic?" Hoodwink released a burst of flame.

Strangely, his brother-in-law seemed unimpressed. "I've seen the swords before, Hoodwink." He might be unimpressed, but Briar was still frightened, if the quivering in his jowls was any indication.

But Cora was more than impressed—the look of horror on her face instantly wiped the smile from Hoodwink's lips.

Hoodwink sheathed the blade, wondering if he should say something to her. But then there was another flicker beside him. A pile of ten rings appeared on the snowpack. Hoodwink scooped them up, glad for the distraction. Each ring had a lightning bolt etched in fine detail across the surface. He supposed Tanner had intended him to share these gifts, but Hoodwink felt he was the best qualified to use them, so he distributed the rings across the fingers of both hands. The fit was tight, and except for his pinkies he could only slide the rings on by varying degrees. Even so, he'd probably be needing a big tub of lard to get the things off again.

He reached into all the rings at once with his mind, and he felt vitra literally blast through his being. He staggered. Never had so much lightning flowed in one person—the electricity pulsed through him in a tidal wave of

fury. With these rings, and the sword, he was unstoppable.

I am thunder.

The ground shook, and for a moment Hoodwink thought he himself had caused the tremor, and he almost laughed.

But the screams far to the left told him that he was not the source.

A bomb had breached the walls of the Den.

He pulled up the city map in his head. "This way!"

He led his small group after the panicking crowd of women and children to Fen Street, where the sewer outlet awaited.

The situation was bad at the outlet. The line of refugees had dissolved into a squirming mass of chaotic bodies, with everyone clawing at their neighbor and fighting to be the first inside. There was no sign of Jacob and the Dwarf.

"Please!" one woman said, hugging a crying newborn close to her body with one arm, and gripping the hand of a little girl with the other. "I have two children. Please!" But she couldn't squeeze by.

Without warning a wall of Direwalkers flooded onto the far end of the street and raced straight toward Hoodwink and the refugees.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Hoodwink watched one of the Direwalkers break ahead of the pack and make straight for Cora—

He waved his hand—

The Direwalker went spiraling away in a pinwheel of electricity.

Cora gasped, but he ignored her, the power inside him taking over.

He raised his hand and loosed another jolt of electricity. The blow arced from body to body, and he took down three Direwalkers with the one strike.

He strode forward. Gray-cloak walked on his left, Green-cloak on his right.

Hoodwink spread his arms wide and launched bolts into the onrush. He and the two New Users cut a swath of carnage through the enemy ranks. Merciless carnage. Each of them released their lightning in controlled bursts, careful not to use up their charge unnecessarily, all three of them well-versed in vitra.

Armed Denizens joined them and defended their flanks, dealing death to any Direwalkers that evaded the lightning. Sometimes a freshly uncollared Denizen would appear, thanks to Jacob's blacksmith no doubt, but usually the

inexperienced thug would exhaust his charge in the first or second strike and have to pick up a sword before the Direwalkers ripped him apart.

Motion at the periphery of Hoodwink's vision drew his attention, and he saw a rock plummet from the sky. He watched it crash into a nearby building. More rocks came, at slow, regular intervals, crashing into streets and buildings with no regard to friend or foe. Direwalkers and Denizens alike fell beneath the random strikes.

"Catapults," Hoodwink muttered. "Jeremy's sent catapults."

Hoodwink turned back, leaving the New Users and Denizens to their work. He had to see Cora to safety before he returned to the fray.

He reached his wife and grabbed her by the arm. "Time to go."

"You're a User?" She stared at him in disbelief.

"No," Hoodwink said. "The rings give vitra. They— ah hell, Cora, there's no time."

He led her toward the sewer outlet. Briar tagged along just behind.

The refugees were still fighting each other to get inside. Hoodwink tried to shove his way through, but received a punch to the face for his efforts. A hand caught Cora in the forehead and almost scratched her eye out.

Hoodwink pulled back. "Dammit!"

All he wanted to do was see Cora safely into the sewers, but this milling mass of humanity wouldn't let him.

He drew the fire sword and let vitra flow into the blade. It glowed a bright red. Electricity from the rings sparked up and down the sword's surface, adding to the constrained power.

He pointed the weapon at the refugees and amplified his voice with a gol trick.

"YOU WILL BACK AWAY FROM THE OPENING."

Briar shouted a warning beside him.

Too late.

A Direwalker leaped onto Hoodwink's back and dug its teeth into his shoulder.

Grimacing, Hoodwink got one arm around and tucked it under the Direwalker, shoving the thing to the ground. He plunged the sword into the body and unleashed the pent-up flames.

The Direwalker instantly dissolved into windblown ash. The snowpack below melted right to the cobblestone.

Hoodwink turned back toward the milling crowd. A few were glancing nervously at him, but what he'd done only spurred the remainder to even more frantic pushing and shoving.

"I SAID, YOU WILL BACK AWAY FROM THE OUTLET. I WANT AN ORDERLY LINE, NOW!"

His threat had to seem real for this to work. He aimed the red-hot

weapon at the refugees, letting more and more vitra into the blade until it shook with power. Plumes of smoke billowed from the scorching metal. The handle was growing hot now, too. His fingers started to sizzle.

The refugees screamed, and clawed madly at those in front of them. But not a one moved to obey his command. Not a one.

Hoodwink sighed. This wasn't turning out the way he thought it would.

He started to lower the sword when Cora stepped between him and the refugees. Her eyes were red and her cheeks glistened with tears.

"Cora..." He immediately let the blade wink out.

"Leave them alone, Hoodwink," Cora said. "Just leave them alone, you hear? You'll have to cut me down first!"

"I—" He wanted to tell her that she didn't have to worry, that of course he was never going to harm the refugees, and that he just wanted to impart some order.

But he never had the chance.

Because one of those falling rocks smashed the ground right in front of him.

Hoodwink was sent sprawling, and when he got to his feet again, there was no sign of Cora.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Hoodwink stumbled to the other side of the large rock.

Cora was there, unconscious, her body crushed underneath from the hips down.

She wouldn't have been there if he hadn't aimed his blade at the refugees.

It was his fault.

"A *shard*!" he shouted. "Someone bring a healing shard!" Why hadn't Tanner sent any Inside?

But no shard could heal this.

He fell to his knees beside her. "Cora. My Cora."

He dropped the blade, wrapped his arms around the rock, and hefted for all he was worth. Even with his gol strength he couldn't move the thing.

Maybe he could break apart the boulder with his sword. He retrieved the weapon.

Cora awoke just then.

"Hood." Her voice was little more than a whimper.

"Cora. I'm going to get this rock off you, I will!" He hefted the sword, preparing to jab it into the boulder, hoping against hope that fragments

wouldn't fly into her upper body.

"No," Cora said. "It's too late."

"Cora, I—"

"Stop. Please."

He dropped the sword, and knelt beside her. She was right.

The sights and sounds of the battle faded around him. There was only her. "I'm so sorry."

"I didn't know you were... a User," she said.

Hoodwink forced a smile. "My Cora." He clenched her hand in his own, and held it above his heart. "My Cora."

"You wouldn't have done it, would you, Hoodwink? Killed them?"

"Of course not, Cora. Of course not. I was about to stop. You didn't have to step in front of me. You didn't." Hoodwink couldn't help but sob then. It was his fault. "I'm so sorry."

"I knew... knew you wouldn't do it." She smiled sadly. "I never stopped loving you. Though I hated you, I loved you. It's a strange thing, isn't it? To hate someone yet love them all the same. A strange strange thing." She coughed, and blood smeared her chin.

"I love you too, Cora," Hoodwink said. "I've always loved you. Despite everything. Despite my faults. And what we did. I wish things were different. I wish—" He bowed his head. He was so weak. And ashamed that

she saw his weakness, these tears of his.

Cora smiled briefly. "No Hoodwink, I'm the one who's sorry. I pushed you away when you needed me most." She coughed more blood. "Tell her. Tell Ari, when you bring her back, tell her I'm sorry. It was wrong what we did. So wrong. And remember your promise. Hear me? Destroy the world if you have to. Destroy everything. But you bring her back."

Hoodwink could scarcely see for the stinging in his eyes. "I will. I swear it. By everything I hold dear, I swear it will be so."

"You—" Cora's eyes became fixed, dilated.

And so ended his wife.

Hoodwink shut Cora's eyes with his thumbs. Maybe he could return to the Outside and find her. She wasn't a gol like him, so there was a chance she hadn't died. That she was waking up right now in a pod of goo. But by the time he disbelieved reality, used the terminal to match her DNA and Output Signal to the pod that contained her, and hunted her down, the iron golems would have her. Assuming her pod wasn't in a depressurized section.

No. It truly was too late.

"Goodbye my love." Hoodwink stood. He noticed Briar standing beside him, looking sad, so sad. Briar glanced up, and then backed away. The fat man must have seen Hoodwink's expression.

"I will *not* sell her life cheaply." Hoodwink turned around and stalked

into the melee. Denizens continued to defend against the Direwalkers, though their ranks were quickly thinning. Hoodwink decided to change that.

He fought with lightning. Direwalkers flew away from him like confetti. He used up the power in the rings recklessly, and one by one those metal bands of vitra failed him until they all went blank. But by then he had retreated to the rock where Cora lay in death. Briar was there, and he handed Hoodwink the fire sword.

Direwalkers rushed Hoodwink all at once, thinking he had lost his powers.

They were sorely mistaken.

The gols flew backward in flames.

Hoodwink advanced anew, cutting a fiery swath through the enemy ranks. He let so much vitra flow into that sword that the blade became white, blindingly so. It hurt his own eyes to look at it, this power that was like the sun in his hands. And so he fought, a bearer of ruthless justice, a Direwalker killing machine. If vengeance had a corporeal form, he was it, and he made certain that the Direwalkers rued the day they ever crossed paths with Hoodwink Cooper.

He weaved between the defenders, protecting them, dealing death to the attackers with his blinding sword. Rocks continued to fall from the sky around him. He ignored the deadly barrage. Let the rocks fall. He had killing

to do.

There was no sign of Gray-cloak and Green-cloak. Likely the New Users had used up their charge and died. Either way, it didn't matter all that much to him. Not anymore.

He felt a hand on his shoulder, and he spun around, sword raised high.

Hoodwink restrained himself at the last moment, because it wasn't a Direwalker. Just a cowering old man, hand raised over his head in whimpering defense.

In his fury he had almost struck down Jacob.

Hoodwink lowered the blade.

"Where were you?" Jacob said, shielding his eyes from the bright blade with one hand.

Fury edged Hoodwink's voice. "You weren't in the Control Room."

Jacob recoiled a step. "We *were*. You must have missed us. We picked up the Control Room first, then the Revision Room, then the Dwarf, and we looped back."

Some of the fury ebbed from Hoodwink. If he'd waited just a little longer back at the Warehouse, maybe Cora would be alive right now.

My fault.

In Jacob's other hand, a chain led to the bronze bitch at the Dwarf's neck. Three other New Users acted as escort, and even now fended off

Direwalkers with lightning. Those wrinkled old men wouldn't last long though, not at the rate they were expending their charge. There were some swordsmen with them too at least, and they hewed down those Direwalkers that got too close. Two men in the group acted as pack mules—one held the Control Room Box, the other the Revision Box.

A rock from the sky landed a little close for comfort, and sprayed the group with bricks from a nearby building.

"How's the sewage outlet?" Jacob said above the fighting.

A Direwalker came at Hoodwink, and he sliced off its arms, then its legs, then eviscerated it, then dug out its eyes, then cut out its tongue, and finally chopped off its head.

"That bad, huh?" Jacob said.

All I can do now is save our daughter. That's all that matters.

Hoodwink turned around and wordlessly led Jacob to the outlet.

There were no other Denizen defenders left standing, not in this area, and so without Hoodwink to defend them, the refugees who hadn't yet made it inside the outlet were being picked off one by one by the Direwalkers.

Hoodwink immediately took the battle to the Direwalkers, and the New Users joined him. Together they forced the attackers back, and guarded the refugees.

When the last of the surviving women and children had gone through

the outlet, Hoodwink shouted at Jacob over his shoulder. "Go!"

Hoodwink released a final, large surge of flame and then stumbled into the outlet after the others. He lit the way with his sword, which had cooled now to a gentler yellow. His fingers were moderately burned, but he ignored the pain.

The ceiling was low, the passage tight, made of mudbrick. Some sections of the tunnel wall had collapsed to reveal frozen dirt. The floor was made of dark ice—the frozen excrement of the city's ancestors—though the top layer had been churned to slush. Beyond Jacob and the New Users, Hoodwink could make out the fringes of the milling crowd of humanity that had gone before them.

Jacob ignited a torch. Good. So Hoodwink wouldn't have to light the entire way with his fire sword.

The skittering sound of claws drew Hoodwink's attention behind him.

A Direwalker leaped at Hoodwink—

He slit the Direwalker open with a swing of the blade.

Bad move. Blood sprayed all over Hoodwink's face and body, blinding him. He frantically wiped the stuff from his eyes—blood could really sting.

He blinked away the pain and tears in time to see more Direwalkers racing into the outlet.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Hoodwink fought frantically in that cramped space, bringing down Direwalkers left and right, but they just kept on coming. He was only now just beginning to realize how weak his arms were, and how close he was to losing the mental focus necessary to draw vitra through the sword. Even gol bodies obeyed the laws of the illusory world, for the most part, and while unlimited vitra was one thing, being able to use it was another thing entirely.

He fought mechanically, waiting for someone to come and relieve him.

"Jacob!" Hoodwink cried.

No one came. Soon his handiwork had created a pile of dead bodies. He used the pile like a rampart, and ducked behind it, poking and slashing at any Direwalkers that came near, glad for the momentary respite from full-on fighting.

"Jacob! Some help here!"

The press of Direwalkers proved too great, and the attackers forced that wall of bodies right down.

Hoodwink retreated. *I have to survive. For Ari!*

"Jacob!" Hoodwink said.

He was glad when he finally heard Jacob's voice behind him. "Hoodwink! Can you seal the passage with that sword of yours?"

"What?" Hoodwink parried a claw to the face. "What about Cap and Al? And anyone else who's still out there?" Maybe Tanner.

"It's too late for them!" Jacob said. "Seal the passage! You can't hold them off forever!"

"I just need a break!" Hoodwink split open another Direwalker. "Send one of the others to help me!"

"Hoodwink, the men are exhausted!" Jacob said. "*I'm* exhausted. Seal the passage while you still can!"

Hoodwink refused to give up. It didn't seem right to abandon anyone else who might still be alive in the Den.

"Hoodwink." Jacob's voice was pleading now. "If we fall, the refugees die. You hear me?"

The refugees die.

And if I die, too, Ari's death becomes final.

Hoodwink ducked a swipe. Too slow. It caught him just above the brow, spilling fresh blood into his eye. He blinked frantically, but he knew this couldn't continue.

I have to survive.

"Cover me!" Hoodwink said.

Jacob squeezed beside him and released a half-hearted bolt of lightning.

With one eye open, Hoodwink hacked at the low ceiling in front of him, releasing a surge of flames with each strike. The roof collapsed in an avalanche of bricks that completely sealed off the tunnel and raised a waist-high cloud of dust.

There was quiet for a time, the only sound the trickle of loose dirt from the ceiling.

And then Hoodwink heard a scraping from beyond the rubble, followed by a muffled clink. More scraping, more clinks—the Direwalkers on the other side were already digging.

Hoodwink exchanged a one-eyed glance with Jacob, and the two of them retreated.

"Get back, Jacob. I'm going to cause a little more trouble for our persistent friends." While Jacob withdrew, Hoodwink wiped the blood from his eye and forced the lid open, blinking convulsively through the pain until he could see properly. The flesh-wound in his brow seemed to have congealed at least, so more of that stinging blood wouldn't blind him.

He backed away, repeatedly jabbing his hot sword into the ceiling as he went.

Hoodwink caused a large section of the roof to cave in. Bricks

competed with frozen dirt and mortar to fill up the tunnel. A cloud of dust cloaked the immediate vicinity.

Hoodwink coughed, and he heard similar hacking beside him. He saw the diffuse blur of a torch through the murk, the motes of dust descending in a steady, glittering rain in front of it. Jacob.

"Hoodwink?" As Jacob neared, Hoodwink saw that the old man's face was scabbarded in a layer of grime.

"I'm here, I'm here." Hoodwink stared at the wall of rubble as the dust cleared. "Just wish we could've held out a bit longer. For anyone else out there."

Jacob patted Hoodwink on the back. "If your man Tanner is with them, they'll find a way." He pointed at the refugees crowding out the tunnel. "You saved their lives. That's something to be proud of. And you've ensured the safety of the Dwarf, and the Boxes. You did right. I didn't think much of you when I first saw you. Indeed, I thought you were a stuck-up fool. But I understand now why you're legendary among the New Users. You've more than lived up to your legend. *More*."

Hoodwink forced a smile. He should've been glowing, he supposed. But truth be told, those words bothered him to the core.

Hoodwink and his companions made their way through the sewers behind the packed, stinking mass of humanity. The cries of children broke the

air alongside the weeping of widows and the moans of the injured. Thankfully the tunnel widened so that the refugees could fan out a little.

"Where should we go?" refugees often asked along the way. "We might wander for hours through these sewers."

"Make your way to the other outlets," Jacob would say. "Or the manholes. That's the best advice I can give."

Hoodwink pulled Jacob aside after a few more of these questions, and asked him, "Can't we just take them to the New User headquarters? That's where you're going, isn't it?"

"The headquarters won't hold them all," Jacob said.

"What about a few of them?"

"Hoodwink, believe me when I tell you, the headquarters are small. Tiny. No bigger than this tunnel. It's better if the refugees make their own way out of here."

In time, the sewer branched into four passageways of equal size. Refugees crowded each branch equally, apparently trusting their lives to a random choice. Hoodwink overlaid a map of the sewer system atop his vision, and he saw that there were outlets at the end of each branch, some farther away than others, but outlets nonetheless. As long as the refugees kept to one of the four main passages, they would eventually find an exit. Hopefully they didn't find themselves stepping into the waiting arms of

Direwalkers.

"We take the right branch," Jacob said.

Soon, Jacob's small group came upon a bunch of refugees crowded beside a ladder.

"Make way," Hoodwink said. "Make way."

He shoved through the throng. The ladder led up a cylindrical tunnel to a manhole. Two youths were at the top of the ladder, trying to force the cover open. There'd be a decade's worth of snowpack above the manhole—nothing his sword couldn't handle.

Hoodwink checked his map. This street was in Luckdown District, quite a ways from the Den. Should be safe.

"Come down!" he said, and the two youths slid down the ladder.

Hoodwink climbed to the top and jabbed his fire sword through the bronze manhole, right to the hilt. He made the blade red-hot, and carved a circle. The metal fell in, snowpack and all, and he slid aside, shouting a warning as the cover clanged past.

Bright sunlight poured down.

He peered over the rim of snowpack. The street was deserted. Good enough.

He slid back down. "It's clear!"

The refugees climbed to freedom, one by one.

"We could exit here, too," Hoodwink told Jacob.

Jacob shook his head. "I have to return to the New User Headquarters. But you can go if you like, Hoodwink. You've done your part."

"I think I'll stay a while longer, I will."

Jacob led them on. He knew these sewers well it seemed, and he took the different branches without hesitation, slowly moving away from any outlets.

"I've lived under the city for nearly ten years," Jacob said, by way of explanation. "Since Ari recruited me, back when I was fourteen years old."

"That's a long time to live in a sewer," Hoodwink said.

Jacob shrugged. "No one ever said the life of a New User was luxurious."

Hoodwink opened up a few more manholes for other isolated groups of refugees along the way, and soon only Jacob and his small band remained in this set of tunnels. Briar had attached himself to the group somewhere along the way, Hoodwink noticed. The man had actually stayed through it all, despite the many chances he'd had to flee into the streets above. Hoodwink supposed his brother-in-law felt safe around him. Or maybe he remained out of some ill-placed sense of loyalty. *Unwise, Briar.*

Hoodwink smiled sadly. *Ah Cora, wish you were here. I would have loved to show you Ari again. And at least* you *wouldn't have judged me for*

what I am about to do. You would have understood. Not like these men.

He remembered her last words.

Destroy everything. But bring her back.

He shut his eyes, and when he opened them again he resolutely shoved his way forward to grab the chain that bound the Dwarf to Jacob.

He drew his fire sword.

"Hoodwink!" Jacob said. "What is the meaning of this?"

Hoodwink chopped down with the sword and cleaved the chain in two. He caught the severed end and pulled the Dwarf to his side.

Hoodwink backed away from the others, who were looking at him with surprise. He kept his sword pointed at them all.

"Why?" Jacob said.

That word jabbed worse than any sword could. He could hear the disappointment in the old man's voice, the let-down at having his hero betray him.

"I've my reasons," Hoodwink said. The Dwarf was smirking proudly beside him. "Tell your men not to make any sudden moves. I know you've all used up your charge. But this sword, it never runs out." He flared the blade to prove his point. His eyes fell upon the two swordsmen who were part of the escort, hard men who'd already drawn their own weapons. "Put them down. As you value your lives."

"Do it," Jacob told the swordsmen. "It's not worth it. We don't need the Dwarf anyway."

The swordsmen sheathed their blades. Good enough.

"Don't try to follow me." The entire group remained still while Hoodwink retreated. When he reached the manhole tunnel they'd just passed, he boosted the Dwarf onto the ladder and climbed up after the gol. He kept looking down, expecting Jacob's men to appear at the bottom. No one came, but he released a stream of flame anyway, as a warning shot, and it melted the frozen sewage below into a stinky puddle.

"I suppose I should thank you for rescuing me," the Dwarf said, above him.

Hoodwink didn't answer. At the top, the Dwarf made room, allowing Hoodwink to position himself alongside. He cut through the manhole and the snowpack beyond, let the cover clatter down, then climbed outside and hauled the Dwarf up beside him.

Jeremy's estate loomed at the end of the street. Hoodwink saw the butchered bodies of the two hundred Denizens Cap and Jacob had sent this way. Those uncollared bodies reddened the snowpack, intermingled with the charred and more numerous bodies of Direwalkers.

Beyond a wide gate, Hoodwink saw Jeremy's mansion, and the bomb damage Tanner had told him about. It was like a giant mouth had taken a

nasty bite out of the mansion's facade.

Hoodwink advanced, yanking hard on the chain, forcing the Dwarf to stumble over the bodies after him.

"Wait," the Dwarf said. "Where are we going?"

Hoodwink didn't slow. "We've an appointment with the mayor, we do."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Tanner fought at the heart of the street battle in the Black Den.

He'd sent himself back Inside, and given out twenty lightning rings and four fire swords. The defenders had quickly learned how to use them. He'd kept one fire sword for himself, and given one each to Calico Cap and Al Dooran, who fought beside him. Al was surprisingly adept with the fire blade, and he hacked down Direwalkers and threw flame like one born to it. Cap had a little more trouble controlling the flames, but he was an expert fighter. Maybe as good as Tanner, even. Not that skill mattered much in a fight like this. Hack, stab, release flame, stab again. There was no room for fancy swordplay or deft footwork, just butchery as the ranks bore down upon them.

Those with the rings had long since exhausted their charges. As for the remaining two fire swords, he'd lost sight of the men who had them, and he supposed they were dead.

The long line of defenders had contracted into small, sporadic circles. Tanner belonged to the biggest circle—twenty men with ordinary swords fighting alongside the three with swords of flame. The attack was ceaseless, endless. The Direwalkers kept rushing through the gap in the wall. Rocks

kept plummeting from the sky. And though Tanner's group inflicted terrible damage, the defenders were slowly falling. Twenty men became nineteen. Eighteen. The numbers were simply against them.

The defenders had held out long enough. It was time to retreat for the sewage outlet. The Direwalkers had breached the line long ago, and those refugees who hadn't escaped by now were probably dead.

"Retreat!" Tanner called.

Vitra flowed through his veins, empowering him yet weakening him all the same. He was growing tired. Cap and Al must have felt it even more in their all-too human bodies.

Yet no one moved to break the defensive circle.

An arrow skimmed Tanner's cheek, drawing blood.

He glanced at Cap. The man was snarling, his eyes filled with bloodlust. His furs were no longer calico, but black and matted.

"Retreat!" Tanner repeated above the din.

A particularly large surge of Direwalkers raced through the gaping hole in the wall.

In addition to the fire sword, Tanner had also kept a satchel filled with pipe bombs and other miscellanea such as ropes and tinder sets for himself. He grabbed a pipe bomb from the satchel, bit the igniter, and hurled it into the oncoming surge.

The Direwalkers exploded in a mess of body parts and gristle.

"Retreat!" Cap finally said.

One of the thugs hoisted a black flag into the air.

Tanner didn't wait much longer than that to flee. Cap and Al were at his side, and the remainder of the ever-dwindling defenders crowded down the main street just behind them. They slew any Direwalkers that got in their way.

That is, until Brute dropped down from one of the houses just ahead.

Ari's killer.

Tanner spread his arms wide and slowed, bringing the defenders behind him to a reluctant halt. Cap and Al hurled flames at the Direwalker, but Brute advanced, unscathed. The four-armed Direwalker held a scimitar in each of its hands and wore a wicked grin on its face.

"I got this!" Tanner told his companions. "Go around the Direwalker. Don't get close to the thing or you're dead. Go! I'll meet you in the sewers."

Al patted Tanner on the shoulder. "You're a good man." He and the others moved on, giving the Direwalker a *very* wide berth.

Brute turned to take a swipe at a few of them, but Tanner hurried forward and prodded the big Direwalker. Brute slapped his sword aside with a leer.

Tanner backed off. He flexed his fingers on the hilt of his sword,

drawing vitra, readying himself. He had been dreaming of this day.

Of vengeance.

"No!" Brute abruptly hurled one of its scimitars. Tanner made to deflect the blow, but then he realized that the throw was wide.

The blade skewered another Direwalker beside him. The thing had launched itself unnoticed at Tanner from the side.

The message was clear to any Direwalkers watching.

Tanner was Brute's.

The four-armed Direwalker approached, and the two circled one another. Brute squashed one foot down on the head of the Direwalker it had just killed, grabbed the hilt of the embedded sword, and drew the weapon out in a bloody spurt.

Tanner used the opportunity to attack. He ran forward, coming at the thing from the side, and launched flames into its face. He somersaulted high, bringing the blade down like a guillotine into the back of the Direwalker's neck.

Though temporarily blinded by the flame, somehow Brute anticipated the attack and parried the blade with two of its swords. Its remaining two weapons swiveled upward, and if Tanner hadn't twisted in midair he would've been skewered.

Tanner hit Brute with his shoulder, and rolled off its back. He

instantly stabbed backward with the sword, and felt the blade connect with something hard. The vibrations passed up Tanner's wrists and into his arms.

He glanced behind. The tip of the sword had struck Brute squarely in the ribcage, but hadn't penetrated. It was like he'd struck stone.

Tanner had never fought Brute blade to blade before, but he should've guessed at this outcome. After all, Ari was a better swordsman than him and *she* couldn't defeat it.

Brute's flesh was impervious to any weapon.

The Direwalker pivoted toward him, mouth upturned in anticipation of the kill.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Hoodwink strode with purpose through the halls of Jeremy's manor house, leading the Dwarf on a chain behind him, the sword held close to its throat. He kept the blade cool, deprived of vitra, so as not to scorch the gol's neck.

The Direwalkers in the house gave Hoodwink a wide berth, snarling and clawing at the air as he passed. If any Direwalker came too close, Hoodwink just had to flex his arm and pretend he was going to behead the Dwarf, and the Direwalker would retreat right quick. Still, the Direwalkers shadowed him, and he gathered quite the escort by the time he reached the reception hall.

"Release me while you still have the chance, Hoodwink," the Dwarf said. "And you may yet survive this day."

"Dwarf," Hoodwink said. "Don't know where to begin with you, I don't. You've no inkling of the germ, do you? The size of it all. Of course you can't know. The bitch at your neck cuts you off from everything. But you must have seen it, those days ago, when you were still whole. Seen how much of the world you live in has been lost. You're the one who'll be lucky to survive this day."

"All I've seen is the path of doom," the Dwarf said. "The end of humankind. *We* will live on. The machines. The A.I.s. But the humans, they will be no more. This is what you want, no?"

Hoodwink pressed the sword into the Dwarf's neck. "Don't ever think you know what I want, gol. Don't ever presume. And you'll be quiet now, you hear?"

The Dwarf kept its peace.

Hoodwink crossed the red ermine carpet that spanned the floor of the reception hall. There was something uncanny about that carpet, and he thought he saw parts of it warping and elongating on the outskirts of his vision, but whenever he glanced at those sections head-on, the rug appeared normal. It almost seemed like the carpet was watching him somehow.

He didn't like the feeling.

He proceeded upstairs to Jeremy's bedchamber and marched inside without knocking. The curtains were closed, shutting out most of the daylight, but there was still enough light to discern the features of the room. Tapestries of underwater cities decorated the walls, set between statues of coral reefs and vases etched with sea creatures. The comforter on the bed had an image of a jellyfish painted across it.

Dressed in a black robe with the hood raised, Jeremy was kneeling before a tall mirror. His back was to Hoodwink but his features were visible

in the mirror, though a little obscured in the dim light. There was some gold threadwork on one of his sleeves.

Direwalkers followed Hoodwink inside, keeping a tolerable distance away.

"Leave us," Jeremy said. The Direwalkers obeyed. Before the last one left, Jeremy added, "And shut the door behind you."

The door slammed.

"Greetings, brother," Jeremy said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Tanner couldn't think. There was no time to draw vitra, not with Brute's blades flashing in on him, trying to take his head. He could only exist in the moment. Respond on instinct. Unconsciously regurgitate the swordplay training sessions he'd uploaded to his avatar. His practice opponent had never moved *this fast*.

A scimitar chopped down at his arm. He parried. Another scimitar cut at his chest. He brought his weapon up just in time. Another scimitar was already coming in for his throat. And another behind that. He dodged left, then right, and just had time to bring his blade up for the first scimitar again. The second scimitar came in for his heart. He twisted sideways, and the scimitar skimmed across his flesh, bouncing off one of his ribs. The third scimitar was already coming in. The fourth. Tanner barely deflected the blows.

He was going to lose.

There were screams around him as other Direwalkers stormed the houses and chased out Denizen holdouts. Some of those men and women ran too close, and Brute turned aside to hack them down with a big smile on its face.

Tanner took advantage of Brute's distraction to leap on a barrel, and then up onto a nearby rooftop. He stumbled backward over the roof's snow as he frantically searched his satchel for a pipe bomb. Brute was already climbing up after him.

Tanner found the bomb, and bit the igniter right down—he wanted the fuse as short as possible. "Catch." He tossed the bomb at the Direwalker.

It detonated. The shock-wave propelled Tanner to the neighboring rooftop and he rolled off onto the street beyond. He lay there, stunned. A high-pitched keen filled his hearing, sourced by his own ear drums. His ears felt wet, and when he touched his right lobe his fingers came away red.

He hurt all over, but he dismissed the pain and, calling on all his gol strength, he forced himself up. He overlaid the map of the city over his vision and he stumbled through the mayhem, somehow finding the strength to fight off any Direwalkers that got in his way. He grew stronger with each step, and soon he was almost back to his old self.

Rocks continued to fall from the sky, crushing houses, and sometimes Direwalkers. He glanced back a few times, but didn't see Brute.

Yet.

He reached the sewer outlet. A large group of Direwalkers had gathered there, fifty maybe, fighting the last of the holdouts. Cap and Al were still there, judging from the weak flames he saw arcing above the

Direwalkers' heads. He wondered why the defenders hadn't fled into the sewers yet.

He gathered his strength and then carved his way through the Direwalkers, his sword molten with the heat of bloodlust. Tanner felt no guilt at striking the enemy from behind, because that's exactly how Brute had dispatched *him* the first time they'd met.

He ducked a claw to the face. He booted a Direwalker behind the knee. He released a torrent of flame. Tanner didn't dare stop, because to stop would mean to allow the Direwalkers to surround him.

And then he was through. One moment he was surrounded by death and blood, the next he was face to face with Cap. The two of them very nearly struck each other down in that moment.

Tanner swung to the side, fending off a Direwalker, and took his place beside Cap and Al.

"Where you been?" Cap sounded muffled—Tanner's hearing still hadn't fully recovered.

"Busy!" Tanner released a small spout of flame, enough to sear a Direwalker's face off. Tanner's strength was starting to ebb again, and his weapon felt heavier all the time. He could only imagine how tired the humans must feel. "Why haven't you fled?"

"Outlet's sealed with rubble." Cap hewed the sword down with both

hands, slicing open a Direwalker's neck. The man had definitely slowed. "Fire swords can't make a dent in it."

Ah.

Tanner deflected two blows, then kicked the first Direwalker in the chest and stabbed the second through the eye. "I'll see what I can do."

He hurried to the outlet and stumbled over the mangled bodies just inside the tunnel. He reached an impassible wall of debris. Two defenders knelt before the wall, trying to dig it out.

"Out!" Tanner said.

The men obeyed.

Tanner jabbed his sword into the rubble, right to the hilt. He pressed on the grip, shifting his weight left, right, up and down, but the blade wouldn't move. He released a fiery half-sphere like Ari had done in the chimney of Jeremy's duplicate mansion. The pressure created a momentary gap.

Unfortunately, more debris simply flowed in to fill it.

Trapped.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

"I'm not your brother." Hoodwink said.

"But I think you are. Why else do we look so much alike?" Jeremy clambered upright and turned around. Hoodwink could see his face a bit better. Jeremy had grown out his mustache, and now indeed he looked the spitting image of Hoodwink.

Jeremy's gaze descended to the Dwarf. "You bring gifts?"

"I bring doom. Yours, specifically." Hoodwink kicked the Dwarf behind the knee, and made the gol kneel. He secured the chain to one of the bed posts, welding the links in place with heat from the sword. Then he stalked forward, brandishing the blade casually in hand. "You used Brute to kill Ari."

Jeremy raised his palms. "Now now, Hoodwink. The orders were to eliminate all outside threats. *She* was a threat."

"She was part of my hand-picked team." Hoodwink didn't slow his advance.

Jeremy stepped back, bumping into the mirror. "A team that robbed me of my Control Room, and both my Revision Rooms?"

Hoodwink stopped roughly a pace from Jeremy. Close enough to spit

him with the fire sword. "You were meant to give her the Boxes." His voice was quiet, almost a whisper.

"Those orders were counter to the Great One's commands. I mentioned your order to him, and your interfering daughter, and the Great One specifically countermanded the order."

"You tortured her when she first came," Hoodwink said. "Tried to revise her. Tanner told me everything."

"Oh Hoodwink, why so dramatic? I didn't *torture* her. I tortured her friends, maybe. And sure, I might've tried to revise her, but that's not exactly a new experience for her now is it? We needed to know where the New User headquarters were. As I said, the Great One wanted to eliminate all outside threats."

"That's not how Tanner told it. Said you wanted to find out how she became a gol."

"Oh." Jeremy licked his lips. "Well, okay, that might have been earlier."

"I find that mighty interesting, because you already knew that *I* was a gol. You just wanted any old excuse to revise her, didn't you?"

"Now look, Hoodwink—"

"And as for the New User headquarters, I could have easily told you where to find them. I could have told you everything."

"And yet it is telling that you did not!" Jeremy said.

Hoodwink shook his head. "You're cruel. Sadistic. And for no reason. What you did to Marks, what you did to Ari, it's beyond cause."

Jeremy rounded his lips. "I *am* a bit cruel at times, aren't I? At least I can admit it. But come now, we both know that's why you like me so much. And I'd hardly say I'm cruel for no reason."

Hoodwink raised an expectant eyebrow.

"I am formed by my two greatest vices," Jeremy said. "My love for power, and I my hate for humanity. A world of clean, scentless gols is much preferable to a world of dirty, stinking humans. Humans are such pesky things, always running around to and fro, looking for things to do, moping about, whining about their lot in life. Always dirtying themselves by licking the feet of their betters. But I? I'll never lick any human's feet. I'm more than human. *Super*-human. The *Übermensch*. I know this. I sense it. I'm above every one of them. And as for my aforementioned cruelty, well now, I've always believed in a life without limits. A man in my position can do anything he wants. Anything. Without repercussions."

"There's always repercussions." Hoodwink let vitra flow into the blade so that it became red-hot.

Jeremy scarcely noticed. "Why are you so hard on me, Hoodwink? I did give your sweet little Ari the Control Room in the end. Along with her

just deserts, speaking of repercussions."

"*Just deserts*?" Hoodwink's hand shot out and the sword tip caressed the hollow of Jeremy's neck, beneath the bronze bitch. "I go away for a while, just a little while, and you destroy everything that's dear to me. You bastard, you goddamn bastard."

He heard the sizzle of Jeremy's flesh. "You think me a fool don't you Hoodwink? It's a dangerous game you play, working both sides. Better to commit to one side or the other. You'll be torn apart in the ensuing bloodbath, mark my words."

"Sides? The only side I'm on is my own." Hoodwink watched a small wisp of smoke rise from Jeremy's neck. "The time for games and pleasantries is over. Where's the disk?"

A mocking smile curled those lips. "Ah. Now I understand. The disk. That's why you've come. That's why you bring the Dwarf in parley."

Hoodwink gritted his teeth. "Where's the disk?"

"The disk is with the Great One," Jeremy snapped.

Hoodwink poured more heat into the fire sword. The stench of charred flesh in the room was growing strong. "Let me speak to One then."

Jeremy laughed. A sword burning his throat, and he actually laughed. "You won't kill me, Hoodwink."

"Won't I?" Hoodwink remained motionless. He watched the smoke

hiss from the flesh wound. The blade was so hot that it instantly cauterized the gash, preventing any blood from spilling forth.

But Jeremy was still smiling. "Go ahead. Do it. All your plans shall come to ruin. The Council shall have your head."

"You remember, then?" Hoodwink wondered at the resourcefulness of this man. Had Jeremy known all along?

Then he noticed that Jeremy's eyes were twinkling. Ah. The man had been fishing. He knew nothing of the Council.

"I remember enough," Jeremy spat. "Enough to know that this world isn't real. It never was. It never will be."

Hoodwink nodded to himself. "Repeating the words of others. The Council, and the world you came from, but a half-remembered dream. A memory of a dream." He turned the blade slightly, widening the flesh-wound. "Give me the disk, or give me One. Choose. Or die."

Jeremy's eyes burned with zeal. "The Great One does not appear to just anyone. The Great One—"

Hoodwink lowered the sword, scarcely able to conceal his irritation. He'd have to try a different tack. The truth, perhaps? In addition to getting the disk, he might even be able to plant enough doubt to change the course of events. "You know why One wants the Dwarf so badly, don't you?"

Jeremy bit his lip, and his eyebrows bent toward his nose. "I'm sure

you'll enlighten me."

"With the Dwarf, One can *become* you. For good. There will be no mayor. No Jeremy. Only One."

Jeremy licked his lips nervously. "You lie. The Great One made me a promise. I shall be rewarded for my services."

"Rewarded by becoming his vessel."

"No." Jeremy whispered.

"You know it's true. Tell me, have you noticed blocks of time missing from your day? What did you do this morning? Last night? You can't remember, can you? The time is gone. During those lost moments, One rules your mind and body."

"No."

"What reward did One promise anyway? To bring you to that world you dream of every night?" Hoodwink glanced at the sculpture of a sea creature beside him. "That world of water?"

Jeremy looked at the sculpture, saying nothing.

"*Water*." The word rolled off Hoodwink's tongue with a vile taste. "If you ever go back, you'll get your world of water all right. You'll drink your fill. Just not in the way you'd hoped. That's if your mind can even take the strain. You'll probably return as an empty shell like most of the others. Like I almost did."

Jeremy studied him, those beady eyes moving back and forth, processing, thinking.

"You should be congratulated, I suppose. Of all of us, you were the only one who succeeded. Though you've become insane for it. The mayor with the mind of a psychopath. Maybe it's for the best that One takes over."

Jeremy's face was the model of confusion. "What *are* you talking about, Hoodwink? I succeeded at what?" His voice betrayed a slight tremor.

"You said you knew this world wasn't real. Well, you got that part right. It *is* an illusion, that's very true. The body you see here is merely your avatar, a reflection of your true self. We're actually on a ship. In space. Crashed on a moon. Now here's the tricky part. *One* is the main A.I. of this ship. The master gol, if you want. You created a little germ and fed it to One. Your germ changed One, and that germ started to trickle down to the other A.I.s. The gol mind disease? It's all you. But there were blocks in place that stopped the germ from bringing down this reality entirely. So you changed the germ somehow, and with it you linked your avatar to One so that you could get around some of those blocks.

"The link didn't come without a price, of course. It ate away at your mind, and you slowly became mad. I helped as I could when I reached the Outside and understood what I was. How much of it you remember, who knows, but I guided you, because your madness blinded you. With the

children I'd gathered, I helped you tweak the source of the gols to make the Direwalkers. I helped you create Brute, and the bomber gols. I helped One.

"And now that One has the Dwarf, the A.I. will take you over entirely. Think of it as being revised. Except far, far worse. And it's all your doing."

Jeremy regarded him in silence for a long moment. Then he smiled a false smile, his eyes white with fear. "And I thought *I* was mad. You're crazier than a fox Hoodwink my dear fellow."

Hoodwink exhaled a long breath. He'd told the truth. Would it make a difference in the hours to come?

He spun Jeremy toward the mirror and forced him to his knees. "Summon One."

Jeremy smiled. "I cannot simply—"

"Do it!"

Jeremy glanced at the fireplace. "Oh no."

Hoodwink followed his gaze. There was a clock on the mantle there. Three o'clock.

Jeremy's body flickered.

The chamber seemed to darken. Jeremy's face was now hidden in shadow. The gold threadwork had vanished from his sleeve. His hands were bone-white, and instead of four fingers and a thumb each hand possessed two thick, ridged digits. Electricity sparked from them.

On the robe was written a single number.

One.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Unsure of what to do, Tanner withdrew the sword and stared at the wall of debris that blocked the outlet. He considered using his last pipe bomb to blast his way through the rubble, but he suspected that would only make matters worse.

He pulled up the city map in his head.

This entire area used to be swampland before the system froze the city. He zoomed in on his current location. According to the map, there was another outlet just twenty paces to the north of this one.

He hurried outside.

"To me!" Tanner said. "There's another way out!" He led the defenders along the concrete wall, away from the first outlet. Direwalkers offered resistance every step of the way.

"Where are we going?" Cap cut off a claw aimed at his face. The man's movements seemed to be growing more sluggish all the time.

"Another outlet!" Tanner ignored his own fatigue, and did his best to defend against the constant barrage.

"There *isn't* another outlet!" Cap said.

Tanner stopped beside a part of the wall that was covered in snow

drifts. He swept fire across the area and cleared it. There was indeed an outlet.

Except the entrance was sealed by an ice plug. At least, he hoped it was a plug—if the outlet was frozen all the way through then he and the defenders were in trouble.

Fighting against his weariness, Tanner stabbed his sword into the ice. The blade sank deep, resisting him all the way, but it yielded for the final inch. If the ice was as thick as his blade was long, there was no way he'd be able to remove the plug, even if he carved a circle.

He'd have to melt it.

He summoned all the vitra he could muster and heated the blade.

The ice melted slowly.

Too slowly.

Arrows rained down around him—Direwalker bowmen had taken up positions on the rooftops.

"Help me!" he said.

Cap and Al joined him, and stabbed their own blades into the ice with obvious effort.

"Make your blades as hot as possible," Tanner said.

Behind them, the closest men lifted shields to protect Tanner, Cap and Al from the arrows, while others fought off the Direwalkers.

The ice melted down to his shoulders, enough for Tanner to peer into the tunnel beyond. With relief, he noted that it was empty inside. Thick as the length of his blade, but just a plug after all then.

There was a commotion behind him.

Brute had arrived, and was hacking down the defenders two at a time.

Melting the ice plug wasn't going to cut it anymore.

"Step back," Tanner told Cap and Al.

He slid his sword out and plunged the blade into different parts of the ice again and again. Faster he moved. Faster. Ice fragments struck his face. Cracks formed.

On the twentieth blow he released a sphere of flame at the same time, and the ice plug collapsed inward.

"Go!" Tanner hurried inside, and waited by the entrance as Cap, Al and the other defenders dashed over the icy shards. "Hurry!"

He fetched the last pipe bomb from his satchel. The final defender raced by—

Four scimitars erupted from the man's chest, and he was drawn back toward the entrance.

Brute.

Tanner bit the igniter and tossed the bomb at the four-armed Direwalker.

He raced away down the cramped tunnel, expecting the bomb to go off any second.

It didn't.

Had he bitten away too little of the fuse?

Had Brute found a way to deactivate it?

He was just starting to turn back when the bomb detonated.

The shock-wave flung Tanner down the tunnel. He fell, skidding across the frozen sewage that formed the floor. Flames ripped past him. He felt the intense heat all along his backside.

When it had passed, he scrambled to his feet. The floor had become slushy beneath him. The stench of sewage made him crinkle his nose. Though his fire sword provided light, he could only see a few spans in any direction because of the dust that filled the tunnel. The high-pitched keening in his ears had returned worse than ever. Fresh blood trickled down his lobes.

Because of the dust cloud, he couldn't tell if the bomb had sealed the tunnel entrance or not. Well, he'd just have to assume that it had.

Because he sure as hell wasn't going to wait for the cloud to settle. He and the others had to go.

Now.

He stumbled forward. The dust was slowly clearing, and he found the others resting against the tunnel wall not far ahead. The last defenders of the

Black Faction. Al Dooran. Calico Cap. Seven other hard men.

Cap patted Tanner on the back and said something to him, but Tanner couldn't hear a thing, and just nodded his head.

Face covered in dust like that, Cap's resemblance to Hoodwink in that moment was unsettling. Tanner could've almost believed that it *was* Hoodwink.

Hoodwink.

He wondered how his friend was holding up. He was probably seeing Cora, the Dwarf, and the Boxes to safety at this very moment.

Good old Hoodwink. You could always rely on him.

"Let's go," Tanner said, not hearing his own voice.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Hoodwink backed away until he reached the Dwarf. He fumbled for the chain, not taking his eyes from One, wanting to make sure he had his bargaining chip in hand.

One stood. It didn't turn around, but rather spoke to Hoodwink from its reflection in the mirror. "Excellent, Hoodwink." Those unseen lips spoke in a deep, inhuman baritone. "I am pleased."

Beside Hoodwink, the Dwarf fell to its knees and placed its face in its hands. Loud sobs came from the gol.

"You act as if you're my master," Hoodwink said.

"Aren't I?"

"Why did you have Ari killed?" Hoodwink tried to mask the emotion in his voice. He wasn't sure how successful he was, given the tremble on the word *killed*.

"Ari?"

"She was on my team," Hoodwink said. "A key part of that team, I might add. You knew this."

"Ah yes. Your illusory daughter. Beside the fact she knew the location of certain vital targets, including the Dwarf, and the New Users headquarters,

I ordered her killed with the Mind Extractor because of her relationship to you. She was too close. You cared too much for her. Her proximity to you put the entire plan at risk."

"That was a mistake." Hoodwink yanked on the chain, bringing the cringing Dwarf nearer to him. "Give me the disk you had Brute use on her. Give me the Mind Extractor."

A deep vibration passed through the chamber, an eerie rumble that grew in volume until Hoodwink felt his chest vibrating. He realized it was laughter.

"Touching," One said. "The illusory father-daughter relationship is no more, and yet you still seek the dead one's memories? Redress for some perceived fault on your part?"

Hoodwink was growing impatient. "I have brought you the Dwarf. And you will give me the disk in exchange."

"No."

Hoodwink lifted the edge of the fire sword to the Dwarf's neck, just above the bronze bitch. "Give me the disk."

"Do you see now, Hoodwink? No one on your team can be trusted. Least of all you." The robed figure still hadn't turned around to face him. "You know that I can bring this room down upon you in the time it takes to blink an eye?"

"And risk killing the Dwarf? I don't think so. Besides, you haven't joined with the Dwarf yet. Your power in this world is still limited."

"Is it?" One remained motionless, in tense stand-off on the other side of the room. Electricity continued to spark from its fingers. At Hoodwink's side the Dwarf had grown rigid, none too happy about the blade burning into its neck.

Hoodwink knew time was short. Limited power or not, now that they were in the same proximity, One might be able to locate the Dwarf's entries in the Core, and change whatever flag governed the durability of the Dwarf's skin. Or maybe change Hoodwink's own flags.

"Give me the disk *now*!" Hoodwink let the temperature of the blade soar, and the stench of charred Dwarf flesh filled his nostrils.

A small metallic object dropped from One's hand onto the floor. The disk. It bounced three times, coming to a rest halfway between Hoodwink and One.

Hoodwink removed the blade from the Dwarf's neck, and the relieved gol collapsed.

He tentatively stepped forward. When he reached the disk, Hoodwink bent down and, not taking his eyes from One, he scooped up the object and tucked it into his belt.

"I don't understand why you would want such a thing," One said. "To

relive the memories of another entity, when that entity is dead."

Hoodwink snorted. "That's because you're not human."

"Neither are you."

Hoodwink pointed the sword at One's back. "I'm more human than you'll ever be. Besides, there's more than just memories in this disk, and you know it."

"Is there?" One's head tilted to the side to look at him askance. The light seemed to dim just a little more in the room. "Should I kill you now, Hoodwink?"

Hoodwink flexed his fingers around the sword hilt. "You wouldn't dare lift a hand against me."

"Why?"

"Because," Hoodwink said. "You need me."

"Do I? Are you so certain that you have not outlived your usefulness? I am fully autonomous. My reach extends to the Core, and most parts of the system, Inside and Outside. And now that you have given me the Dwarf, I can complete my program without any further aid."

Hoodwink stared at the A.I. uncertainly for a moment.

Then he spun toward the curtains and hurled himself through the window. He landed in a spray of broken glass and clambered to the edge of the snow-covered balcony. He flung himself over the railing and fell one full

story into the snow drift below. His gol body absorbed the impact well enough. He rolled to his feet and sprinted away across the estate.

He expected the snow to come alive beneath him, or the pine trees that lined the path to bend and scoop him up, or hordes of Direwalkers to come racing after him from the mansion, something, *anything.*

But the estate remained calm.

One had let him go.

Perhaps One had felt some sense of obligation for his gift of the Dwarf. Perhaps it even believed that Hoodwink might still be of use to it. Or maybe it was just in a good mood. A.I.s were unpredictable things.

Hoodwink touched the shiny disk he'd stowed inside his belt. The metal felt cold beneath his fingers, colder than ice.

Halfway there, Ari.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The guttering torches set at intervals in the walls cast disturbing shadows over the macabre scene in the tunnel. The dead lay everywhere, old men and women and their younger apprentices, struck down in attempted flight. Broken planks scattered the frozen floor, the remnants of cubicles that had once partitioned the area. Soot crisscrossed the mudbrick walls where the lightning of the fallen had forked. The sickly sweet smell of char suffused the air.

Tanner recognized very few of the dead men, so mangled were those bodies. Jackson was one of them. A courier of the New Users, cousin to the mayor, recruited over a year ago.

His torso was slit open from groin to chin, his ribs poking up like grisly claws.

"So this is the New User headquarters," Cap said.

Al lifted a plank, revealing a dead Direwalker curled up beside Jackson. "A dirty business, this. A piss-poor dirty business."

"Jacob would've come here," Tanner said. "With the Dwarf. And Hoodwink." His hearing had returned, though sound still seemed muffled, his own voice especially.

"If so," Cap said. "They probably died here."

Tanner didn't believe it. Still, he couldn't say one way or another, not with most of the bodies hacked to pieces.

He glanced inside one of the few offices left standing—the Archives. The place was a burnt-out husk. The cabinets, smeared with soot, had been flung down. The drawers had been opened, the papers they contained reduced to ashes.

"So the other traitor has arrived." Jacob emerged from an alcove beside the office. The New User had seen happier days—he had cuts and bruises all over his face and arms, his thin gray hair was matted, and his rags, already suitable for a pauper, were smeared with mud and sweat. Not so different from Tanner and his own companions.

Three other New Users were with the old man, along with two swordsmen not of the Den. Briar was there too, peering from the alcove.

"Well?" Jacob said. "Nothing to say, traitor?"

Tanner felt his brows draw together. Just who was Jacob talking to?

Cap, Al, and the other Denizens joined Tanner. The swordsmen on both sides of the stand-off fingered their hilts. A small spark of electricity played across Jacob's fingertips.

"Jacob, my old friend," Cap said, apparently trying to diffuse the situation. "Why the uncalled-for talk?"

Jacob ignored him, eyes fixed on Tanner.

That's when Tanner realized Jacob had been addressing him.

"What do you mean, *traitor*?" Tanner said.

"You know exactly what I mean." Jacob advanced a step. "Are you going to take the Revision Box back too now? And the Control Room?"

Tanner touched the hilt of his own scabbarded blade, and let the comfort of vitra flow into him. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

One of the other New Users, the old woman named Helen, glanced at Jacob. "Maybe Hoodwink was acting alone."

Tanner sighed. "What has our good friend Hoodwink done now?"

"He pulled a fast one on us, is what," the old man, Jacob, barked.

And then Tanner realized that the Dwarf was absent.

"That's right," Jacob said. "You see it now. Hoodwink took the Dwarf. Maker knows where, or why."

Tanner was somewhat relieved. "Just the Dwarf?"

"What do you mean, *just the Dwarf*," Jacob said. "You promised that the Dwarf would help us create objects in this place without you having to go to that *Outside* of yours."

Tanner raised his hands placatingly. "I'll go back and ask Hoodwink himself. He's in the same room as me at this very moment. I'm sure he had a good reason for what he did."

There were more than a few confused looks among those present. Only Jacob understood. Jacob, whom Ari and Tanner had confided in.

But Jacob slumped, bearing all the weight of his years, and the spark vanished from his fingers. Just like that, the tension faded from the room. "You know what? I don't care anymore. It's over for us anyway. We can't fight back, not after this. Not against such insane odds. We'll have to go into hiding. All humanity may have to. Permanently."

Tanner chewed his lip. It was a nervous habit he'd picked up from Ari. Damn he missed her. "This isn't over yet, Jacob. Trust me." Tanner reached into his uniform and crossed toward Jacob.

The swordsmen beside the old man drew their blades and forced Tanner to halt.

"Show us what you have in your hand," the leftmost swordsman said.

Tanner extended his palm, showing the tracker he'd just retrieved from his uniform.

"A tracker." Jacob regarded the metal object suspiciously. "Why should I trust you?"

"Because I'm the only link to the Outside you have left."

"The only link." Jacob narrowed his eyes. "What about Ari? Where is she?"

Tanner hesitated. Finally he said, "She's dead."

Jacob stared at him for a long moment. "You're not lying. I can see the pain written all over your face." He waved his men down.

Tanner pressed the tracker into Jacob's hands. "Have patience, and don't lose hope. Set up the Control Room in a different part of the sewers. Wait for me to contact you."

Jacob squeezed his fingers around the tracker, and then he frowned, exaggerating the wrinkles on his face. "Okay, Tanner. Okay."

Tanner glanced at the others. The Users. The Denizens. Cap. Al. Briar. They all looked weary. Broken. After what they'd been through, he didn't blame them. He felt the same way.

He retrieved the handmirror from his cloak and marched down the tunnel. The group fell into hushed conversation, which soon receded behind him.

When he found somewhere quiet he sat against the mudbrick and began the process of disbelieving reality. His mind wandered, and he found it hard to concentrate. The Dwarf. Why would Hoodwink want the Dwarf? It made no sense.

Unless Hoodwink meant to trade the Dwarf for the disk?

When Tanner got back to the Outside, he had a few questions to ask Hoodwink.

More than a few.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Tanner awoke in Zeta Station on the Outside, feeling like he'd returned from a long journey, when in reality only a few minutes had passed since he'd gone Inside.

Hoodwink stood at a nearby desk, still wearing his spacesuit, the helmet and portable energy weapon lying on the counter beside him. He was tethered to the terminal, and apparently communicating with the interface via his mind if his eye movements were of any indication.

Tanner scrambled to his feet.

Hoodwink immediately trained the energy weapon on him.

"Why?" Tanner said.

Hoodwink's face betrayed no emotion. "For Ari. Someday you'll understand."

"You gave the Dwarf to Jeremy?" Though he already knew.

"I did."

"And what does that mean for us, exactly?"

"Where to begin?" Hoodwink's eyes were moving back and forth rapidly—the signs of a data search. Or retrieval. "What that means for us. Well, you know about the germ, right? Jeremy's the person who created it. He

put it into the main A.I. of this ship. Put it into *One*. That should have given him control of everything, but—"

"Wait. *Jeremy* created the germ? How?" Tanner couldn't understand how someone like Jeremy could create a germ capable of infecting the A.I. of a starship. Jeremy had no knowledge of the Outside and the simulation he was in. Jeremy was just some portal-trader turned mayor.

Wasn't he?

"It doesn't matter *how* he did it." Hoodwink said. "You only need to know that *he did it*. But here's the thing. Ordinarily, the main A.I., One, can't touch the simulation directly. Even when infected with the germ. Its orders are buffered by the sub-A.I.s, like the Dwarf, which can decide to obey or disobey on their own. It's sort of a failsafe.

"But Jeremy found a way to let One shape the Inside directly—with the germ, he linked his avatar to One. So that One could appear *right on top* of his avatar. With the link, One could only enter the world now and again, but it was enough to create the Direwalker army. Now that Jeremy has the Dwarf, he also has its source. He'll infect the Dwarf, and link his avatar to it, too. The Dwarf and One will merge with Jeremy's avatar, completely replacing him. One will have full access to the illusion, and will be able to create unlimited Direwalkers. And worse things. He means to destroy the simulated world, and wake everybody up."

Tanner couldn't believe it. "And you *gave* the Dwarf to Jeremy, knowing all that?"

"I needed to get the disk," Hoodwink said. "It seemed a fair trade, in my mind. The ten thousand Direwalkers were already enough to destroy the world anyway."

"Hoodwink, what have you done? If everyone wakes up, you know that we're ruined. We'll die from overcrowding. Starvation. The iron golems here will hunt us down in droves. We have to stop it somehow."

"That's your job now Tanner," Hoodwink said. "I can't help you. I've chosen my side. For good or for bad. And I'm leaving this blasted heap of scrap metal behind."

"Ari wouldn't have wanted this."

Hoodwink looked daggers at him. "Don't you dare drag her good name into this. Don't you dare. You have no idea what she would've wanted."

"But I do," Tanner insisted. "And it wouldn't have been this. Sacrificing the world, for her."

Hoodwink sighed. "As I said, Tanner, the Direwalkers were enough to destroy the Inside anyway. *One* will just be able to do it a little faster, now."

Tanner gauged his distance from Hoodwink. Was that energy weapon still jammed? Did he dare rush him? "Please, Hoodwink. You can't leave now. We can go to the children. We can find a way to stop the germ, and the

Direwalkers, before it's too late. You owe me—"

"I owe you *nothing*!" Hoodwink said. "I trusted you to keep my daughter safe. *Trusted*! And you broke that trust! You let her die."

Tanner shut his eyes. *I let her die.*

No. It wasn't his fault. Tanner knew that. He was through blaming himself. "She made her choice, Hoodwink, up there on the Forever Gate."

Hoodwink didn't answer.

"If not for me," Tanner said. "Then do it for the world. You—"

"I owe the world even less. It had me collared. Its people sent me up the Forever Gate to die. No, I don't owe you or the world. The world *owes me*."

A microchip ejected from a slot in the terminal, and Hoodwink gingerly picked it up.

"I know you don't believe that," Tanner said. "I can see it on your face. I can hear it in your voice. You love us. You always have. This place. The Outside. The Inside. You're in turmoil, Hoodwink. What's going on? Tell me everything. I can help. I know I can."

Hoodwink seemed to hesitate. "It's funny, the Council actually believes it's helping humanity by doing this."

Tanner didn't know what Hoodwink was talking about. "The Council?"

"Never mind," Hoodwink said. "Topside thing."

Ah. That forbidden word again. "This Council, they think they're helping humanity by killing us all?"

"Yes. Every last one of you."

"Sound like a bunch of crazy men to me," Tanner said.

Hoodwink's face was grave. "Goodbye Tanner. And good luck."

"Let me help you Hoodwink."

"No one can help me now." He disconnected himself from the terminal and carefully tucked the microchip into his spacesuit's utility belt. "And for what it's worth, you're right, I do love humanity. I've tried to deny it. Really tried. And I don't honestly know what will happen when I reach Topside. I'll do my best to save Ari, no matter what happens. But I'm relying on you now, you hear? I need you to make sure there's still a world for Ari to come back to. Promise me that you'll do your best to save this place. Promise me."

"How? I don't even know where to start."

"You'll find a way, Tanner. You have to."

"I wish you'd stay and help," Tanner said.

"I can't stay. But I may just help, yet." Hoodwink grabbed his helmet and strode to the exit. He kept the weapon trained on Tanner the whole time. "Don't follow me."

The door opened and Hoodwink stepped through.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Tanner counted off the seconds in his mind.

One one thousand.

Two one thousand.

Three one thousand.

He scooped up his helmet, entered the unlock code for the door, and then sprinted into the corridor as fast as he could manage in that bulky suit.

He peered past the rim of the closest pod. There. He caught sight of Hoodwink, rushing down the metallic walkway.

Tanner carefully pursued, staying close to the sleepers' pods that lined the wall. A part of him noted that there were more black pods out here than was usual. Definitely not a good thing.

When Hoodwink glanced over his shoulder, Tanner immediately ducked behind the closest pod. Tanner counted off three seconds again, and when he looked, Hoodwink had already hurried off. Tanner took up the chase.

He followed Hoodwink to the airlock they'd used on the way in, and watched him enter the access code and vanish inside. The hatch closed with a resounding thud.

Tanner ran to the airlock and peered through the glass slot. He'd just missed Hoodwink—the outer hatch sealed shut.

Tanner fumbled with keypad but the mechanism refused to allow him inside until the chamber re-pressurized. Finally the indicator light turned green and he entered the access code. The hatch opened. He hurried to the outer door and gazed through the portal.

Hoodwink was bounding across the icy surface of the moon. Four machines were in hot pursuit. Hoodwink hadn't shot them down—so the energy weapon still wasn't working after all. Tanner watched the machines slowly overtake Hoodwink, and he considered going out there to help his friend, but then he realized he didn't have the access codes to open the outer hatch. Hoodwink had kept them to himself to prevent the children from hurting themselves. Or so he said.

Hoodwink bounded over a particularly craggy area and vanished inside a crater in the ice. Tanner thought it was near the spot where Hoodwink had rescued him earlier.

The machines followed Hoodwink down into the crater, and for long moments Tanner saw only the barren moon and the uncaring stars above.

"Come on, Hood. Come on."

He waited for either Hoodwink or the machines to emerge. But nothing came out.

"Damn it." Tanner slid his helmet on. He was going to find a way to open that hatch, access codes be damned.

Then he saw the machines reemerge from the crater. Alone.

Tanner bowed his head.

It was over.

He glimpsed motion at the corner of his vision, and he peered back through the portal. A small, egg-shaped vessel floated from the crater. Black mist suddenly flowed across its metallic surface, enveloping the vessel so that in moments it was lost to the space backdrop. Tanner knew the thing was still climbing only because of the stars occluded by its passage, and he quickly lost track of it.

"Good luck, Hoodwink," he said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Today was the happiest day of Jeremy's life.

The Direwalkers had been unleashed upon the world, distributed through the portal-hops to wreck havoc upon the cities.

The New Users were crushed.

He had the Dwarf.

Ari was dead.

"Reward reward reward," Jeremy said. Control. Power. It would all be his. The Great One could do things. Amazing things. Jeremy and the master were going to wipe this world and start again from a clean slate. They would turn this into a world of water, and soon Jeremy would no longer have to dream of such a place, but would actually live in it. *Live*. They would create an underwater utopia of unparalleled beauty, populated only by gols. The Great One would be emperor of course, but every ruler needed a second. Jeremy was going to be that loyal, deserving second. He would have the powers of the Dwarf. The ability to create objects at will.

He would be the architect of the new world.

"Reward reward reward."

The Dwarf shifted beside him. "The only reward you'll get—"

"Shut up!" Jeremy tugged on the Dwarf's chain and forced the gol to its knees. The Dwarf stank of alcohol from the wine and spirits Jeremy had poured all over the gol.

"Master, oh great master." Jeremy fell to his knees beside the Dwarf, and stared at his own reflection in the mirror. There was a ghastly red pucker in the hollow of his neck where Hoodwink had burned him with the sword. It throbbed with pain, but it was nothing the Great One couldn't heal. "Master master master. Reward reward reward." He was wearing the black robes the master had given him. Jeremy had embellished the robe with a thread-of-gold tentacle on the sleeve. He did that with all his garments—his way of personalizing them.

As sometimes happened while he stared into that mirror, he began to see random symbols scroll across its surface, and an unfamiliar part of his mind activated. His fingers moved seemingly of their own volition, and rearranged those symbols, exchanging one set for another, sliding some into the gaps formed by others, and so on and so forth. He didn't really know what he was doing, but he was doing *something*, because the world began to shimmer and fade around him.

From the corner of his eye, he saw the reflection of the collared Dwarf looking at him, its mouth agape in either awe or horror. Probably horror. As was appropriate. Jeremy was horrified himself. He shouldn't be

able to do what he was doing, whatever *it* was.

The muscles of the Dwarf's face abruptly grew slack, and its tongue drooped from its mouth.

"Master!" Jeremy shouted.

The symbols vanished, and then he saw it—the dark shape that called itself One, lurking in the mirror, near the bed, its face hidden in the shadow of its hood.

Jeremy sighed with relief and ecstasy. "Master. Welcome back to the world." Jeremy felt insane with fervor today. Just insane with fervor and excitement. "Master master master. I love you."

"Jeremy," the Great One said. It's voice came from behind him, as it always did when the master appeared in the mirror. "I love you too."

Jeremy tingled all over. Tears welled in his eyes. "I'd do anything for you master. I'd kill, I'd rape, I'd mass murder. For *you*!"

"I know you would, Jeremy." Only the master understood him. Others, like Hoodwink, thought him sadistic and cruel, but the master appreciated what he offered, and loved him for it.

"Have you prepared Seven?" That was the Great One's secret name for the Dwarf.

"I have." Jeremy stood, and shoved the Dwarf into the mirror. The alcohol on its face smeared the surface. "Precisely as you asked."

"Send Seven to me, then."

Jeremy scooped up the lit candle from the table and dropped it on the Dwarf.

The gol ignited, screaming.

Jeremy smashed his boot into the Dwarf's backside and the gol plunged through the mirror as if the surface were water.

Inside the mirror the master was standing close now, right where Jeremy's reflection should've been, and it caught the howling Dwarf. The Great One embraced the gol, and together they burned.

"I will get my reward?" Jeremy said as his master went up in flames.

"Your reward comes." The Great One's voice sounded so welcoming, so loving.

"Reward reward reward," Jeremy sung.

Then the flames engulfed Jeremy.

He screamed. How he screamed. He wanted to run around that room, howling in pain, but his body wouldn't respond. He was rooted in place. Burning.

He remembered Hoodwink's words. *Worse than being revised.*

And then as quickly as it had begun, it was over.

The Dwarf vanished.

As did the flames.

There was no Jeremy—on both sides of the mirror, only One remained.

The room darkened.

Looking at its reflection, One flexed the fingers of its right hand. The two ridged digits sparked with electricity.

"May the winds blow till they have wakened death," One said.

The mirror shattered.

EPILOGUE

Hoodwink let the autopilot assume control. On the view screen, the icy surface of Ganymede slowly receded.

He stared at the small metallic rectangle he held. That microchip contained all that Ari was. Her essence. Her psyche. It was the only thing still tethering her consciousness to this reality.

"Have I done the right thing, Ari?" He held the microchip tenderly, afraid of breaking or harming it in any way. "Abandoning the world to save you? Should I just let you go? No. *No*. You've ended too soon. And it's my fault. You still have a place here, with humanity.

"Since you were born, I've always tried to do the right thing, Ari. Even when I gave you up to Jeremy. Cora and I, we were so worried that you'd become a User. So worried that you'd ruin your life. Jeremy was rich. And I didn't know who he was at the time, nor who *I* was. We thought we were giving you a better life. I'm so sorry, my daughter. I'm—" His voice caught, and he took a moment to compose himself. So many losses. His wife. His daughter. He couldn't save Cora. But he could save Ari. "Yes. I've done the right thing here. I see that now. I've done you right. Know I have. The world can wait. *You* take precedence. You always have, though it took your

dying for me to realize it. And maybe, just maybe, I can set things in motion where we're going, and help Tanner save humanity. Just maybe. After I save you." *If I can save you.*

He carefully tucked the microchip away.

The flyer approached the geostationary orbit of the *Vargos*, the mothership. This close, the massive ship filled the view screen, blotting out the stars. The *Vargos* reminded him of a thick saucer pasted above a downward-pointing cone. Rectangular sections protruded along the rim of that saucer, while canals crisscrossed the cone, latticelike. At the bottom of the cone, pipes of varying heights vented black mist.

Hoodwink's flyer made its way toward the saucer's rim, the metallic edge of the mothership growing larger by the second. An opening came into view, and his vessel floated into a long tunnel of dark metal. Landing arms locked into place and the flyer halted.

A rapid series of moans and clicks immediately filled Hoodwink's head. An ordinary man would have been driven insane by it.

But Hoodwink was no ordinary man, and he recognized the meaning behind the cacophony.

You have returned early. Why?

In answer, Hoodwink merely grinned.

PART 5

I HAVE SEEN FOREVER

CHAPTER ONE

Graol stared at the broad spike that would impale his gastric cavity and four brains tonight.

The death-dealing instrument was placed on a pedestal in the steel corridor outside, set there to remind the confinement bay occupants of what their short futures held. It was a simple spike, its sharp point gleaming in brutal anticipation. Scenes of agonized victims and delighted torturers etched its surface. The spike seemed rusted in places, perhaps from years of use—those who disagreed with the will of the Council did not live long, nor did those who even *thought* of disagreeing. But the underwater metal didn't rust, so those dark brown marks had to be something else. Maybe stains from the impaled dead who'd shit themselves.

The light globes flickered and a cold current kissed Graol's epidermis. The touch brought his focus closer, to the energy bars that sealed him inside the cell, and to the murky water that gave him buoyancy.

Around him, everything was silent.

Silent as death.

CHAPTER TWO

Earlier...

Tanner hurried along the claustrophobic corridors of the Outside, making his way toward Omega Station, where the children awaited. The pods of the sleepers lined the way. About one in ten of those pods were black inside, the occupants dead.

He kept an eye out for the machines. He didn't think the A.I.s could decrypt messages sent from the Inside to the children, but he wasn't sure. So far, he hadn't encountered a single machine. He supposed they were occupied throughout the ship, cleaning up the dead and newly awakened—the aftermath of the rise in violent deaths on the Inside.

Most of the ceiling lights were broken or flickering in this section, and in the dim light Tanner almost ran into a form sprawled on the floor.

It was a man clothed in slime. Still connected to his belly, his umbilical ran to a placenta that was wrenched from a pod and lying on the floor behind him. His arms and legs were bone-thin beneath the slime, his torso all ribs, his eyes sunken.

"Hepppp," the man said. *Help*.

Tanner secured the helmet of his spacesuit to his utility belt, then he

scooped up the placenta, wrapped the umbilical around the man's waist, and hauled the man over his shoulder. Tanner staggered forward, wondering if he'd be able to make it to Omega Station under the added weight. Already he was encumbered by the bulky spacesuit, which weighed 150 lbs. The man was at least another 90 lbs.

After three paces, it became apparent that Tanner wouldn't be able to handle the man and the spacesuit both. He set down the man, who seemed to be worried that Tanner was going to abandon him.

"No..." The man flopped his arms toward Tanner.

"Just taking off my suit, friend." Tanner quickly stripped away the spacesuit, leaving himself dressed in the tight blue uniform with the calf-high black boots underneath—one of the standard uniforms of the crew who'd manned this ship over two hundred years ago.

He glanced at the discarded spacesuit, which retained its bulky shape and reminded Tanner of a fat man who'd just come back from the guillotine. He sincerely hoped he wouldn't regret abandoning that suit. If there was a hull breach from an attack then he was in serious trouble, and an attack was definitely long overdue. It seemed a little odd to Tanner that the ship in orbit seemed to be leaving them alone lately. He wasn't sure if that was good or bad.

Tanner scooped the man up and started the advance again. There, that

was much better.

The man abruptly squirmed, and pushed his fingers seizure-like against Tanner's chest.

"What is it?" Tanner said. "Calm down, friend. I'm just taking you to __"

"Gol," the man said. "Gol. Gol."

Tanner followed the man's frantic gaze. He saw nothing but empty corridor ahead.

But then one of the overhead lights flickered on and Tanner immediately understood what had spooked the man.

CHAPTER THREE

A machine blocked the corridor. One of the larger ones. Its body was a steel barrel on treads, its head a sword hilt with three glass disks for eyes, its arms wiry tubes capped by pincers. It gripped three writhing humans.

Tanner wished the machine were one of the smaller models, because then he could slit open the blackened pod of a dead sleeper and lay the slime-covered body across the corridor. It was unpleasant work, but it had saved his life in the past. The smaller maintenance machines had shorter arms and couldn't reach obstacles on the floor, and would drive right over anything in their paths. The goo would get into their treads and short them out. But this larger machine would just slide the dead body aside or gather it up. The steel treads on this model were too closely-packed for the organic sludge to do any damage anyway.

All of that flashed through Tanner's mind in the time it took the machine's head to swivel toward him. A red beam of light revolved with that head, tracing a path along the pods until it flashed into Tanner's eyes.

He held the gaunt man close, turned around, and ran.

There was a down-floor ladder here somewhere along the way. Tanner had passed it earlier. He kept his eyes on the floor, expecting the

ladder to appear on the leftmost side any second now, but the dim, flickering light made it difficult to see. Tanner's back was beginning to ache from the man's weight, and his legs burned. He forced himself onward.

The heavy moments passed, and still he hadn't reached the ladder, though it should have appeared by now.

With a sick feeling in the pit of his gut, Tanner realized he'd missed it somewhere along the way.

He glanced over his shoulder. Although the machine was burdened by the three bodies, it was closing. There wasn't time to go back.

Tanner would just have to move on to the next down-floor ladder.

A bulge appeared in one of the pods just ahead. A hand broke through the membrane, and Tanner was startled despite himself. An arm followed the hand, and finally a naked woman slid out in a gush of slime. She was bald—the umbilicals released a chemical amalgamate that stunted hair and nail growth, sometimes stalling it altogether—and her chest was flat from emaciation. The only reason he could tell she was a woman at all was because of her lower genitalia.

She lay there on the floor, hacking up goo from her lungs.

The machine was quickly bearing down on his position while Tanner stood there watching. But there was something he had to decide.

He had a chance to save either the man or the woman, but not both.

And whoever he left behind might potentially buy him much needed time.

The man, or the woman.

The withered figure in his arms sensed his indecision. "Please..."

Choose, Tanner.

He'd left Ari behind. She had died for him. A woman for a man.

Tanner lowered the man. "I'm sorry."

"No," the man said, and he reached up, extending his bony fingers. "No."

Tanner couldn't keep the emotion from his voice. "You're saving us both, friend." A man for a woman. It was small recompense for the price Ari had paid, and a recompense given by another at that. But it would have to do for now.

Tanner wrenched the coughing woman's placenta from the pod and then hauled her into his arms, resting her head over his right shoulder and the crook of her knees over his left forearm. He balanced the placenta on her belly. She was smaller, and felt much lighter than the man. She was either way younger or way older—he couldn't tell because of the organic slime that covered her.

Tanner hurried forward, ignoring the incoherent screams from the man behind him, screams that quickly became a gurgle as the machine collected him. The woman hacked constantly in his arms.

Two pods turned black as he rushed by. A third pod spat out another man. Tanner wanted to stop and help him, but he couldn't carry anyone else. He felt helpless, yet a part of him was glad, the darker, more selfish part, because that second man would buy Tanner and the woman a little more time.

Finally he reached the next down-floor ladder, and he lowered the woman so that he could remove the floor grill covering it. The woman had stopped hacking at least, a sign that she was breathing normally. He draped her flaccid body over one shoulder and then struggled down the ladder, replacing the grill above him with difficulty along the way.

At the bottom he patted the woman on the back. "Everything's going to be all right."

She didn't give any sign that she heard him—no movement, not even a grunt of understanding. Worried, he gently lowered the woman to the floor.

Her head lolled at an impossible angle and he realized her neck was broken. He'd seen it before, the muscles of the pod-born atrophied to the point where their necks couldn't even support the weight of their heads. Still, the sight stunned him, and he felt that familiar sense of disappointment and grief that came when you did your best to help someone, and failed.

The machine rolled past just above, now carrying five humans pressed to its chest. They were all dead, as far as Tanner could tell. Destined for the

meat grinder. Just like this woman. He was glad now that he couldn't make out her age or anything else about her.

He abandoned the dead body and hurried on to Omega Station. He went by several black pods along the way, and paused to carry another man he found sprawled on the floor grill. By the time he reached the door to Omega Station that man too was dead. Not from a broken neck—his heart had simply given out.

Tanner set the dead man down. It was all so useless. Why did he even bother to try anymore?

Because that's what people did for one another. That's what it was to be human. People helped other people. It was the right thing to do.

Still, he grieved for the man. Could he save no one?

He was reminded of the helplessness he felt when Ari had fallen from the Forever Gate. He didn't blame himself for her death, but what truly ate away at him, and plagued him in the quiet moments, was this: If it had been him who had trailed Ari on the Forever Gate, with Brute behind, would he have been able to die for her?

He hoped, when the time came, that he would have the selfless courage to act as she did.

Exhausted, Tanner signaled his presence at the door to Omega Station.

"Tanner!" Stanson's familiar voice echoed from the control pad.

Tanner merely nodded in reply.

The door slid open and he walked inside, shoulders bowed by a world of grief.

CHAPTER FOUR

Tanner entered Omega Station, a room that contained five rows of desks lit by long ceiling lights. A window on the far wall offered a view of the Ganymede surface. The children sat at terminals on those desks, and they were all looking at him.

Caylin's heart-shaped face lit up when he met her eye, and the little girl hurried over, nearly tripping on her gown. "Tanner! It really is you!"

He knelt to give her a hug. His bone-weary despair instantly vanished, and he held her close, like a man reunited with his daughter. Three other children ran over and he readily hugged each of them in turn. He felt invigorated, the grief temporarily forgotten.

The other children just watched him from their terminals. Ari had called them little ghosts. That was an apt description. With their white gowns, pale skin and haunted eyes, they'd fit right in beside any phantasm. And yet when he looked in their eyes, really looked, he saw sadness there too. The eyes of those who had seen too much, at too young an age.

He did a quick head count, and to his relief, noted all the children had survived.

"Where have you been?" Caylin said.

"Oh you know." Tanner ruffled her hair. "Off saving the world."

"Where's Ari?"

Tanner's breath caught. He looked away, feeling a burning in the back of his throat. Caylin had only said two little words, but it was enough to send him back to the pit of despair. "She's coming."

"When?"

He stood. "Later." He hoped she didn't notice the tremble in his voice.

"What about Hoodwink?" Caylin pressed.

Ari and Hoodwink.

It always came back to them, didn't it?

Could Hoodwink really save her?

And had the price been worth it?

Tanner told himself that if the choice had been his, he wouldn't have given the Dwarf to Jeremy for a mere chance at saving Ari, not if doing so potentially doomed the world. Tanner told himself that he wasn't selfish like that.

But to be honest, he wasn't entirely sure. Because Ari truly meant the world to him. *The world.*

"Tanner?" Caylin said.

He dismissed his grief and self-doubt, and focused on the present.

There was a world to save.

Tanner looked down at the little girl and ruffled her hair. "Caylin."

Stanson came forward. "I missed your ugly face around here." Unlike the others, he was wearing the same blue uniform as Tanner, and gave a nod when Tanner met his eye.

Tanner slipped past the children and clasped Stanson's hand. "And I missed your pretty one."

Stanson had a face like a woman, his features bizarrely pixieish—prominent cheekbones, a button nose, wide eyes. He'd grown his hair long in a cut that reminded Tanner of a pageboy. Still, despite his looks, he had the deepest voice of anyone Tanner had ever known. He was the second oldest among the children after Tanner, at seventeen years old.

"That girl Ari you've been stranded with is far prettier than I," Stanson said. "Even if she is all skin and bones. I bet she looks amazing on the Inside."

Tanner averted his eyes. "Yeah..."

"So you never answered little Caylin here. What about Hoodwink? Is he coming too?"

"He is. They both are." Tanner didn't know what else to say. "Hoodwink and Ari had to take care of some business first."

"Some business..." Stanson left the question unasked, pausing to give Tanner time to elaborate. When he didn't, Stanson frowned. "You know I like

to be kept in the loop."

"That's all I can tell you for now."

Stanson shrugged, smiling. "Well then, I'm looking forward to hearing about everything else that's happened since we lost you guys. I'm sure you've got a few exciting stories to share. We've had our own adventures—a couple of us have gone Inside, here and there."

"I'd love to swap stories, but later. We've work to do." Tanner glanced uncertainly at the children, and considered guarding his tongue in their presence, but he figured if they didn't know what was going on now they'd find out soon enough anyway. "It's bad out there, Stanson. In the corridors people are waking up and dying. A lot of people. Have you been in contact with the New Users yet? What's the situation like Inside?"

"We have, and the situation isn't good." Stanson had become all businesslike, which was exactly what Tanner wanted. There wasn't time for small talk. "The New Users have set up the Control Room in a different part of the sewers, and we've been talking back and forth."

The Control Room allowed communication between the simulated world of the Inside and the real-world of the Outside, as well as the ability to track gols, among other things. Basically it allowed the children to bypass the sandbox that blocked access to most of the system operations out here, a sandbox that was set up by the sub-A.I.s beneath One.

"Talking back and forth?" Tanner wondered how much Stanson and the others knew about what had happened. "Did they mention anything about Ari and Hoodwink?"

"No, why?"

"We'll get to that."

"Okay..." Stanson seemed a tad confused, but he smoothed it over with another smile. "Anyway, with the New Users' help, we've been tracking One's army on the Inside. The Direwalkers have spread worldwide using the portal hops, and they're ripping a path of mayhem through the cities, killing anything that moves. Worse, more Direwalkers are appearing by the second —One seems to have full access to the simulation now. At this rate, there will be more Direwalkers than humans in a few hours, Outside time."

"Damn it. So how can we stop this? I need options Stanson."

Stanson led Tanner to one of the free terminals. The young man bent over the terminal display and pulled up some kind of tracking document. "Well, we've helped the New Users capture a few gols with the mind disease, both Direwalkers and ordinary gols, and we're moving forward with experiments to change them. We're hoping to tweak the germ so that it's harmless to ordinary gols but deadly and more contagious to Direwalkers."

Tanner patted Stanson on the back. "Good work, Stanson. That's exactly what we need. Make it happen."

Stanson raised an eyebrow. Tanner realized that Stanson was used to being in charge these past few days, what with himself and Hoodwink gone. Well, Stanson would have to get used to playing second fiddle again. There wasn't time to argue over pecking order.

Stanson finally lowered his gaze. "Right. We're on it, Tanner. By the way, we have some other developments you might be interested in. Now that we have a way to test our changes, we've been trying some other tweaks to the Inside. There's some wild news you might be interested in. Caylin?"

The heart-faced little girl spoke up excitedly. "I found a way to fix the weather! I went Inside and placed a tracker, then I came back out, had the New Users make my change, then I went back in. All the snow was melted around the tracker, and I could feel the sun on my face! Now I just have to learn how to widen the hot spots. And, and..."

Tanner patted her on the shoulder distractedly. He was trying to figure out how to word what he wanted to say without offending or discouraging her and the others. "Great work Caylin. Really great. But I don't want you going Inside anymore. The same goes for all of you. It's not safe. Plus, I really need everyone focused on the Direwalker problem first. As soon as we've dealt with the Direwalkers, you can tweak the simulation's weather all day if you want." He turned to Stanson. "Are we clear?"

Stanson's eyes glinted defiantly, but once again the youth lowered his

gaze. "Pellucid."

"Good." There was something else Tanner needed to address, something he'd suspected Hoodwink had done all along, involving only a select few of the children.

Tanner looked from face to face. "Hoodwink is a trip. And I know you all miss him, and can't wait for him to return. But he did some things he shouldn't have. Some bad things. I need to know which of you helped him create the Direwalkers, specifically, a certain invulnerable Direwalker with four arms."

CHAPTER FIVE

Tanner watched the children exchange shocked, confused glances. He was looking for signs of complicity, but either those involved were good at faking surprise, or Tanner had been wrong.

"None of us helped create the Direwalkers!" Caylin said. "We wouldn't!"

Tanner glanced at Stanson. His friend's brows had drawn down tight. "You know, don't you Stanson?" Why had Hoodwink confided in Stanson and not him? Ah, of course. Stanson was firmly in Hoodwink's pocket. But Tanner, he dared to disagree with Hoodwink now and then.

One child, a frail boy named Andes whose hair had never grown in, stepped forward. He was one of the smartest among the children, frighteningly so—he worked the source like a machine. His eyes were always slightly distant, as if he were looking at something beyond you. With his bald head and white gown, he always reminded Tanner of a boy monk.

"I helped Hoodwink create the Direwalkers," Andes said.

Caylin's eyes widened. "Andes, you what?"

Andes slumped, and he couldn't look at her. Probably had a bit of a crush on Caylin. "It's true. I didn't want to. But Hoodwink said it was for the

good of the world. Said we'd use the Direwalkers to help everyone. We worked with the gols in Jeremy's Control Room, and experimented until we got it right. When One stole the changes, Hoodwink said it wasn't my fault. He said there was nothing I could've done to stop the A.I. from taking it."

Tanner doubted that One *stole* the changes. He had a feeling Hoodwink willingly gave the changes to One, for whatever reason. Maybe Hoodwink was obeying that shadowy Council he'd spoken of.

"I need you to tell me how to kill the four-armed Direwalker," Tanner said. Brute always seemed to show up eventually whenever Tanner went Inside, and he was sick of always having to run from the thing.

"You can't kill it," Andes said. "Brute's invincible. That's how we designed it."

"There has to be something." Tanner rubbed the back of his neck. "Can you review the source? Maybe there's something you overlooked."

"I don't have to review the source," Andes said. "I know it by heart. Brute's skin has the *stone* flag set. Nothing can harm it. Not fire. Not steel. Not lightning. Although..." Andes trailed off, his eyes becoming even more distant, if that was possible. "Only its skin has the stone flag set. I guess, well, if you jammed something in its mouth, or its eyes, you could harm Brute."

Of course. The eyes. He remembered Brute had a bloody eye after Ari

had fought it. That was the only wound he'd ever seen the gol take. If Tanner could gouge both eyes, that might be good enough to disable the otherwise invincible Direwalker, at least temporarily.

"Good enough," Tanner said. "What about One? Is there a way to kill its avatar and cut off its access to the simulation?"

It was Stanson who answered. "One's avatar is even more invulnerable than Brute's." His deep voice seemed so wrong coming from that pixie face.

"There has to be a way." Tanner tapped his lips with one finger. "I don't know how much you've been able to learn out here, or how much the New Users have told you, but Jeremy's linked his avatar to both One and the Dwarf—Seven—and that's how One's getting full access to the simulation. It's a permanent link, and One has completely replaced Jeremy's avatar."

Stanson's eyes widened. So he didn't know that part, then.

After a moment, Stanson spoke. "If we could kill Jeremy or disconnect him from the Inside, that should cut his link to One, and the main A.I. would lose its direct access to the simulation."

And when that was done, the checks and balances of the sub-A.I.s would come back into play, and One would be shoehorned into the role of observer again.

But Tanner had to be sure of something. "With One out of the

simulation, more Direwalkers can't be created, right?"

"That's our guess." Stanson glanced at the children for confirmation. Some of them nodded, Andes among them. "Once that's done, we can work on removing the germ from One's source. That's still going to take months."

Months. Well at least the simulation would be safe during that time. "How are A.I.s Two through Seven?"

"Seven's gone of course," Stanson said. "Its source just vanished from the system. Which makes sense, now that you've told us Seven merged with One. Two through Six are up and running, and still uninfected by the germ. We're seeing messages in the system from One instructing the other A.I.s to either cut off the food supply to the pods, or to open them all up. Thankfully the sub-A.I.s have ignored the instructions so far."

"Which is why the germ-infected One is waking us up by killing everyone on the Inside instead." Tanner rubbed his eyes. "Is there a way we can turn off the automated clean-up going on out here? Stop the machines from hunting down humans ejected from the pods?"

"Why would you want to?" Stanson said. "Already the food supply is stretched to the limit, and that's just for a bunch of sleepers. Imagine how much food it'd take to feed thousands of *active* people. We can't feed and care for them all, and there's no room for them. Most people who come out of the pods are too far gone anyway. We'd only drag out their suffering."

It was cold reasoning, but unfortunately Stanson was right. But that didn't mean Tanner had to like it.

He exhaled for a long moment. "Fine. So we focus on the Inside. Jeremy. He's the key to all this. You said disconnecting Jeremy from the Inside would break his link to One... how easy is that? I remember Hoodwink asked you to track down Jeremy's body on the Outside a few weeks ago. Any luck?"

Stanson shook his head. "We tried using Jeremy's DNA and Output Signal to find him, like we did for Ari, but there's no entry for him in the records. We did a system-wide search for people *not* in the records, and found thirty-eight living matches. Wildly enough, the DNA of every single one of those people is exactly the same."

Tanner felt his brows knit together. "Clones?"

"Yeah."

"What in the hell are clones doing in the system? And outside the birth records at that."

None of the children had an answer.

Tanner shrugged. "Fine. So we track down and open all thirty-eight pods? One of them has to be Jeremy."

Stanson shook his head. "The Output Signals of the clones are being masked somehow, so we have no idea where the thirty-eight actually are."

Damn. Of course that would've been too easy.

"All right." Tanner rubbed his chin. "Options for killing Jeremy on the Inside then, to break his link to One?"

Stanson crossed his arms. "Well, if One has overwritten and replaced Jeremy's avatar like you say, then to kill Jeremy we basically have to kill One's avatar. Which is impossible, like we talked. One probably gave its avatar every add-on out there. It's the main A.I. for freak's sake. Lightning. Master swordsmanship. Invulnerability. Shit, it can probably fly."

Tanner pondered the problem. "I don't suppose we could take out One's eyes?"

Stanson smiled ironically. "One doesn't *have* eyes, Tanner. Its avatar is just an empty robe covering darkness, with two hands poking out its sleeves. No, you can't take out its eyes. And you can't kill One."

"There has to be a way. Come on Stanson, think! Powerful as it is, One's avatar has to obey the laws of the simulation."

Stanson and the children remained silent.

The laws of the simulation.

Tanner felt the inkling of an idea forming. "What if we could force One's avatar beyond the limits of the simulation? The same way Hoodwink first passed from Inside to Outside?"

"You mean out past the Forever Gate? And past the system

boundaries in the desert?"

Tanner nodded. "Exactly."

Stanson thrummed his fingers against the desk. "That would work." Any avatar that passed the outermost boundaries of the simulation instantly died, because when you crossed the boundaries you didn't exist as far as the simulation was concerned. "But first you'd have to get One out there."

"We could slap a trackable bronze bitch on its avatar. I'll show you how to make them. Then once we collar One, we'll send its avatar beyond the limits directly."

"No," Stanson said. "We could only move the avatar up against the glass boundary. It'd be up to you to force One through it."

Tanner clapped his hands together. "Then we have a plan!"

He was going to bitch One and send it across the Forever Gate.

The tricky part was getting close enough to collar its avatar in the first place.

Tanner would have to get some help on the Inside.

CHAPTER SIX

The Control Room of the Inside was a place of iron desks and paneled terminals similar to those found in Omega Station on the Outside, but instead of a wide viewport to the moon at the front, the Control Room had three display screens. The leftmost screen danced with numbers, the middle showed a map of all the cities on the Inside, and the rightmost graphed an exponential curve that represented the spread of the gol mind disease.

Ordinarily there should have been twenty-five terminals in total on those iron desks, but because the Control Room wasn't big enough to fit the confines of the sewage tunnel, Tanner counted only twelve. The desks ran right up against the walls, where they ended abruptly, seeming to pass through the mudbrick.

Two grizzled old men—New Users—and three younger men—refugees?—manned five of the available terminals. One of the old men looked up, and Tanner recognized him as one of Cora's former guards. He was an ancient man, his face so ravaged from the years of vitra use that Tanner thought his tight skin might crack open from the slightest movement. He wore a gray cloak.

"You're expected." Gray-cloak nodded toward the exit.

"Thank you." Tanner made his way to the front of the room. He glanced back. "By the way, what happened to Cora?" He never had a chance to ask Hoodwink in the confusion that followed the fighting at the Black Den.

Gray-cloak blinked rapidly a few times. "Didn't make it."

Tanner stared numbly at the man, then turned away. He wasn't sure how he felt about Cora's death. He'd worn the woman's face when he and Ari had stolen the Control Room. He hadn't really known Ari's mother, but she seemed decent enough, a little crabby maybe. Ari would probably take the news hard when she came back.

If she came back.

Tanner tried not to think about Ari or Cora as he left the Control Room and entered the connecting tunnels. It proved easy enough because there were a lot of things to distract a troubled mind out here.

Refugees from the fighting rested against the walls, seated on the icy floor formed by the frozen sewage. That floor was a bit slushy from the traffic, and the place smelled terrible. Tall iron candelabras set at intervals provided light.

As he passed the seated men and women, he realized that they weren't refugees per se, but *recruits.* Every last one of them was uncollared. He'd seen that drained look they all wore before, that look of men and women who'd expended their vitra and were waiting to recharge. A few of them

stared at their fingers wistfully, trying to summon vitra, managing to spark only bare wisps of electricity from hand to hand. Some nursed wounds that dripped blue blood, more evidence that their charge had run out.

He passed a sort of training ground where a New User in a green-cloak—he recognized the man as another of Cora's former guards—addressed a score of uncollared students of all ages. Green-cloak was standing before a target dummy, and saying something about being careful to conserve your charge when you threw vitra.

"Here, let me show you what I mean." Green-cloaked turned toward the target dummy and loosed a quick bolt of lightning. The target's head disintegrated. "You'll see that I let fly only a small amount of electricity, for the merest fraction of a second, but it was enough to take out my target's head. Because of my restraint, I still have the charge for twenty more such blows."

Tanner moved on.

He passed a queue of collared people lined up beside an executioner. At least, Tanner thought the man was an executioner because he oversaw a guillotine. The man wasn't wearing a hood though, or any clothing typical to executioners. He looked more like a blacksmith with those big, scarred arms.

A collared man was sealed away inside the headblock of the guillotine, and he trembled uncontrollably. Tanner watched in morbid

fascination as the blade descended. When it struck, the steel only penetrated a quarter of the way through the top edge of the bronze bitch around his neck. The blacksmith raised the blade with the pulley system and tied it off.

"See, nothing to worry about!" The blacksmith told the pale man as he opened the headblock, though his words seemed more for the waiting queue behind. "The blade is dulled just enough so that it won't pass through." The blacksmith set his palm on the relieved man's bronze bitch, and sent a tiny burst of electricity into the newly-formed cracks. The collar broke away entirely. "Quick and painless, and completely safe."

Tanner noticed a red stain in the slush beneath the headblock, and he suspected the method wasn't always as painless and safe as the blacksmith let on.

Tanner soon came upon a series of partitions that divided the sewers into offices of sorts. It seemed to be the command center of the New Users, judging from the bustle of activity. Scouts relayed reports to older men and women. Messengers were dispatched. Others distributed swords and rations. The rations weren't really needed, since this was a simulation and everyone got their actual nutrients from the umbilicals on the Outside, but no one present knew that of course.

There were a few ordinary gols among the supply workers, Tanner noted with surprise. He wasn't quite sure what to make of that. They seemed

amiable enough as they distributed items to the humans, though many of the recipients treated the gols with obvious contempt. Interesting.

A cloth map of the city caught Tanner's attention. Covered in red and green pegs, it was pinned to the mudbrick wall beside him.

Tanner flagged down a passing New User, and indicated the map. "What do the pegs mean?"

The elderly man shrugged. "Red represents intense fighting. Green the Safe Houses."

There were far more red pegs on the map than green, and most of those reds were congregated around the greens.

Tanner wondered why the New Users didn't just use the Control Room to handle their administrative activities, but he supposed the technology was still new to them. People in power were often distrustful of new technology. Though it was probably a good idea not to become too reliant on the Control Room anyway—who could say how far One's reach had become?

He found Jacob and Helen huddled around a table with Cap, Al and Briar. Jacob and Helen were the defacto leaders of the New Users in Ari's absence, and made a grizzled pair. Cap was the former leader of the Black Faction, the band that had ruled the Black Den before it fell to the Direwalkers, and Al was his second. Al also had the dubious distinction of

being a former User, though he'd recollared himself ten years ago to escape the gols. Al was the one who had first introduced Hoodwink to the Users, and his daughter.

Then there was Briar. Ari's uncle. How the former merchant had inveigled his way into this group's confidence was anyone's guess. He was good at fawning and flattery, like most merchants, and that probably played a large part in it. Tanner hadn't liked him at first, but the sly little bastard had grown on him.

Cap and Al were no longer collared. Nor was Briar.

"Tanner," Jacob said. The old man was grim. "About time you returned."

Tanner leaned over the table. There was a map spread across the tabletop, this one of the rich neighborhood known as Highbrow District. Jeremy's mansion was circled. He realized why Briar was here. Other than Tanner, Briar was the only one with intimate knowledge of Jeremy's mansion.

"Planning an assault?" Tanner said.

"You know we are." Jacob seemed to be the one in charge now. In the Black Den, Jacob had always deferred to Cap. Well, Tanner supposed that with the Den gone, and most of the Denizens killed, Cap didn't really exert as much sway as he used to.

Tanner dropped his gaze to the map. "How many men do you have?"

"Not enough," Jacob said. "Though more come to us with each passing hour. The Resistance started with the trickle of refugees we found in the sewers. We uncollared them and sent them to the streets with instructions to round up those they could find—not the easiest task with Direwalkers rampaging everywhere, though it helps that our side has lightning. Only problem we're having is the time it takes to recharge. Anyway, we've setup Safe Houses all over the city, some underground, like this one." Jacob always was good at dancing around questions he didn't want to answer.

"So how many?" Tanner pressed.

The old man sighed. "Including the men in the tunnels here, I'd say we have around three hundred scattered across the city. There were more, but two of the Safe Houses fell, and I lost at least a hundred in a failed attack on the portal hops."

Tanner nodded. Three hundred. That should be more than enough for what he planned. Though if things went wrong, he'd need a lot more than that.

Jacob raised his chin proudly. "We've used the Control Room to get in touch with mayors across the world, and told them how to modify their guillotines to remove collars rather than heads. It's as simple as dulling the blade. Humanity is fighting back with lightning across the world. The bitched

are becoming the unbitched, the collared, free."

Tanner frowned. "Free. That's a loaded word. And I'm not sure it applies here. Free to die, maybe. But you've finally achieved your endgame, I guess." The New User agenda—uncollar the world. That would bring a whole new set of problems down the line, not the least of which was premature aging.

"So young," Helen said to Jacob. "Yet he talks like a man with twice the years."

Jacob pretended she hadn't spoken, and he stared at Tanner with those penetrating eyes. "Endgame? Yes, I have achieved it, at that. But I do wish it were under better circumstances."

Tanner tapped his chin. "Three hundred men. What about ordinary gols?" Tanner remembered the supply gols he'd seen.

Jacob sat back. "We have around fifty."

"Can they be trusted?"

"It seems a bit strange, having gols at the headquarters of the Resistance, doesn't it? The thing is, the Direwalkers make no distinction between humans and ordinary gols. Either you're Direwalker, or you're not. Reports came from across the city that the fighting classes, the gol guards and so forth, were the first to fall against the Direwalkers. Defended us humans to the end, to their credit. Most of the gols we have are from the labor classes—

tailor gols, banker gols and whatnot. Not the best fighters, and they can't summon lightning, but they *are* resilient. Good fodder for the front ranks during our attacks. A couple have the gol mind disease. Do you want to meet them?"

"That's all right." Tanner didn't think he'd use them. He just couldn't trust a gol, Direwalker or not. "When do you plan on making the assault on Jeremy's mansion?"

Cap finally spoke up. "Tonight. We're launching every single uncollared man we have at Jeremy's estate." Cap seemed so proud of himself. Tanner remembered how badly he wanted to take over the city while he was still in charge of the Black Den. Did he actually think that dream was attainable now, with Direwalkers rampaging everywhere?

"There's a slight problem," Tanner said. "Jeremy has... well he's changed."

"Changed?" Cap arched an eyebrow. Cap's striking resemblance to Hoodwink was distracting. Tanner thought of what the children had told him about the unregistered clones, and he wondered if Cap and Hoodwink were among that lot—the system formed your representation on the Inside based on the DNA of your body on the Outside, after all. And if Cap and Hoodwink *were* of that lot, what did it mean?

"Well, how has Jeremy changed?" Cap pressed.

"Because of the Dwarf, Jeremy's basically invulnerable," Tanner said, knowing he couldn't tell any of them about One. They'd never understand, not even Jacob, who knew all about the Outside thanks to Ari. "You won't be able to kill him with any of your weapons. Not fire swords. Not pipe bombs. Not lightning."

Cap glanced at Jacob, then Al. "I don't believe a word of that. Just because you come highfaluting in and out of our world don't mean I have to trust everything you say."

Tanner shrugged. "You charge Jeremy's mansion tonight, you die. All of you. If Jeremy doesn't get you, then one of his minions will. The four-armed Direwalker Brute, maybe. Unless that's what you want? You remember Brute, don't you?"

Cap didn't answer.

"That's what I thought. But there's another way to bring Jeremy down. A better way." Tanner paused for effect. "We send in a crack team of twenty men and put a trackable collar on him."

"Trackable collar?" Cap said. "As in, the collar you bitched the Dwarf with?"

"The very same. Once the collar is on, we send Jeremy past the Forever Gate with the help of the children. We push Jeremy across the last barrier, he dies, and I return with the survivors to the city."

Jacob leaned forward, frowning. "You'll never get close enough to collar Jeremy. Not with only twenty men. Jeremy's mansion is patrolled by Direwalkers at all times, and more are coming out his gate every second. Don't expect to use the White Poultice to pretend to be Jeremy or one of his minions either—finding dealers of the illegal face-changer is now impossible because of the fighting."

Tanner grinned. "I have a plan. And it doesn't involve the Poultice."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Breath misting, Tanner, Briar, Cap, and Al walked with purpose along the main street of Highbrow District.

All four of them had ordinary-looking fire swords belted to their waists, and wore capes with flaring collars attached to their long black coats. Centered on each coat was the embroidery of a curved tooth dripping blood. The seamstresses had put extra care and detail into those, basing them on the design found on actual Direwalkers.

Tanner had the children adjust the flags of the four avatars—via the Control Room—so that any Direwalker which scanned him or his companions would detect a fellow Direwalker. The children had also replaced the records of the four of them with false information, to offset any facial pattern recognition. And they'd even lengthened Tanner's canines, a painless procedure that none of the others had agreed to, which meant that if the companions were stopped, Tanner would be the one doing the talking.

He preferred it that way.

Tanner had insisted on personally preparing the way for tonight's raid. Cap and Al had offered to join him, and Briar, well, he had definitely surprised Tanner by volunteering to come along. Tanner had almost refused

Ari's uncle, firstly because there weren't any fat Direwalkers, though he supposed he could explain that away, and secondly because he didn't think Briar had the fortitude for this kind of work. But he'd been wrong about the man before. Briar *had* infiltrated Jeremy's mansion as a Revisor, after all.

For the sake of Ari's memory, Tanner had let him come. They were headed to Briar's second house after all, and the man might prove to be of some use yet.

Beside him now, Briar held his head high and wore an outer mask of calm. He kept his hand on his sword hilt. The act was almost perfect, except for one thing.

"Briar." Tanner said, keeping his voice down. "Briar!"

Briar started as if drawn from some deep internal dialog.

Tanner nodded at his sword belt. "Don't squeeze your hilt so hard."

Briar looked at him blankly. "Mmm?"

Tanner pointed. "Your sword hilt!"

Briar glanced down, and when he realized that his knuckles were white around the sword's haft, he loosened his grip and smiled sheepishly.

Tanner sighed. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to let him come along.

Above, the sky was overcast and threatened a storm. Tanner searched for ravens, but didn't spot any. The gol birds acted as scouts for the enemy,

and were probably being put to use in the attacks against the Safe Houses.

The streets in Highbrow hadn't been shoveled for a while, thanks to gol neglect, though much of it had been reduced to snowpack by the Direwalker foot traffic. Estates flanking the road had their gates knocked open and their doors broken in. Tanner saw the bodies of a dead husband and wife at the threshold of one of the houses, their rich silks blackened with blood. It was telling that no one had robbed the clothes from the bodies—everyone was too busy hiding or dying. Most of the residents had moved out of Highbrow weeks ago anyway, when the Direwalker sightings near Jeremy's estate first began. Though there would always be holdouts no matter where you went.

Holdouts. He'd passed one of the so-called Safe Houses on the way here, a makeshift pile of broken furniture defended by lightning-wielding men. The fighting was so intense that the bodies of the dead, men and Direwalkers alike, had started to form additional barricades. It wasn't a pretty sight. Similar fighting was probably happening at this very moment in cities across the world, and he had to wonder how long the resistance would last when the supply of Direwalkers was infinite.

He saw the origin of that infinite supply just ahead. An endless column of Direwalkers marched from Jeremy's estate. Those Direwalkers followed the street that led to the Line A transit center, where they would

take their choice of portal hops to cities throughout the world. Tanner had considered helping Jacob bomb those transit centers, but he realized the effort was futile because *One* could just repair the destruction.

A tall stone fence hemmed Jeremy's estate, but the wide gate at the front allowed Tanner to see the mansion beyond even from here, fifty paces away. When Tanner and Ari had escaped the mansion with the Control Room, Briar's bomb had decimated the entire front side of the place.

But today the facade was perfectly restored.

"Impossible," he heard Briar mutter beside him.

Tanner kept his men on the far right side of the street, and none of the Direwalkers in the emerging column paid him and his companions much heed other than a few cursory glances.

So far so good.

Tanner led the companions to Briar's second home, a manor just across the street from Jeremy's. The main gates were blown open and the grounds were empty. Tanner crossed without incident to the mansion's front door, which sat askew its hinges. Inside, dead Direwalkers were caught in a trellis of spikes against the foyer's inner wall.

"Any other traps we should know about?" Tanner asked Briar.

The merchant shook his head, and Tanner gingerly stepped inside. He crossed the tiled floor, passing rooms filled with sealskin furniture. He

climbed a staircase that had nymphs carved into its balustrade, and when he reached the second floor he led the companions to a bedchamber overlooking the street.

The spyglass he and Ari had used to observe Jeremy's mansion was still here, though it was knocked over. He'd brought another just in case, but the one on the floor seemed undamaged. With a little effort he remounted the telescope and peered into the eyepiece.

Direwalkers emerged in single file from the front doors of Jeremy's mansion across the street. The Direwalkers marched past the frozen fountain and across the tree-lined path of the estate before passing through the front gates.

The children had reported that there was a shield around the entire estate, an invisible dome that reached all the way to the outer walls. It was generated by One's avatar apparently, so the children couldn't inject anything inside the shield, nor move anyone covered by it, until Tanner clamped the trackable bronze bitch onto One's neck and cut off its powers.

Tanner steered the spyglass to the upper rooms of the mansion. The window to Jeremy's bedchamber was draped in blackness, so Tanner slid the spyglass rightward. He paused at another window nearby, this one uncurtained and offering a view into the hallway just outside Jeremy's room.

A new Direwalker appeared in the corridor every few seconds,

walking away from the bedchamber.

"As I suspected," Tanner said. "The Direwalkers are coming from Jeremy's bedchamber in the upper east."

One had to be in there, too.

Tanner let Cap and Al try the spyglass.

"This is a good lookout," Cap said. "We'll place a scout at this window when the tunnel is ready."

Tanner didn't disagree. He led the others back to the first floor, and then down a second flight to the unfinished basement, which was made of bare limestone walls, all hard angles.

"I'm not surprised you never finished your basement," Tanner told Briar. "After all the money you threw away on the rest of the house."

Briar shrugged. "Insult me all you wish."

"Wasn't meant as an insult. Just a statement of the facts."

Briar sniffed. "Your barbs are like tickling feathers against the impenetrable hide of my self-confidence. And if you must know, I bought the house for the prestige of having parties on Highbrow Row. No one ever goes to a party in the basement."

"Well, here we are, about to attend the biggest party of them all." Tanner set a tracker on the limestone floor and activated it. A flashing blue light appeared at the core of the metallic sphere. The children would use the

signal to tunnel a path to another tracker in the sewers nearby, connecting Briar's house to the underground staging area.

Jacob had wanted to use the preexisting manholes along the streets of Highbrow as the staging area, arguing that there was a tunnel close enough to Jeremy's mansion from the sewers already, and that setting up a new one was an unnecessary risk. But Tanner had overruled him, explaining that a bottleneck like a manhole was no place to launch a sally. The children could've just enlarged it moments before the attack, of course, but Tanner was careful not to point that out. He wanted a safe place to scout and observe before the final attack. And that place was here—you couldn't observe properly from a manhole.

"Time to go," Tanner said. The children wouldn't take long to form the tunnel once they received the signal, but Tanner and the others still had to leave the house through the front door so as not to arouse suspicion.

Tanner was the first to reach the main floor.

A Direwalker was waiting for him at the top of the stairs.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Tanner rested his hand firmly on the hilt of his fire sword.

"You there," the Direwalker said with disdain. "What are you doing?"

Tanner made a point of baring his canine teeth. "We're searching for krub hold-outs of course."

The Direwalker eyed him sceptically. "This house was searched hours ago." The Direwalker gazed past Tanner, and raised an eyebrow when it saw the others on the stairway. "You're *all* unit leaders?"

Tanner let vitra fill him from the sword, and as the power flowed through him he felt invincible. A surge of recklessness gripped his heart, and it took all his restraint not to draw the sword and cut down the Direwalker right there.

"I'm the only unit leader here," Tanner said.

The Direwalker spat some strange, guttural words. It was testing him by speaking a tongue known only to gols, or Direwalkers.

Some of his restraint left him, and Tanner drew his sword and touched it to the Direwalker's neck. He was careful not to let the vitra ignite it—he wanted the sword to seem ordinary for now. "Enough posturing, unit," Tanner said. "We're doing our jobs. You do yours."

Tanner sensed movement at the edge of his vision, and he glanced down the hall to see another Direwalker make a hasty retreat through the front door. The second Direwalker had obviously seen the whole incident, and Tanner was glad now that he hadn't killed this one. That action could've brought the whole army down on the house.

Tanner pulled back the blade, scowled at the Direwalker, and sheathed his weapon.

"You will answer to my unit leader for that," the Direwalker snarled.

Tanner shrugged. He glanced over his shoulder at the others. "With me, units!"

The Direwalker smirked. "You're trying too hard."

Tanner ignored the comment and led the others into the living room, where he sat himself down on one of the sealskin couches and did his best to make himself look comfortable. Cap, Al, and Briar spread out on the remaining couches and chairs. There was a long coffee table in front of Al and Briar, with an intricately detailed silver octopus as its centerpiece. A scalloped-edged area rug covered the floor in front of the table.

The Direwalker had followed them. It leaned against the doorway, crossed its arms, placed one foot over the other, and waited.

A cadre of seven Direwalkers soon came into the room, taking up positions along the walls. They regarded Tanner and his companions with

sneers.

One of them, a Direwalker bigger than the others, moved with an air of command. The unit leader, then. Rectangular-faced, pug-nosed, close-cropped hair, taut features. It carried a large sword strapped to its waist.

"These are the units that threatened you?" the unit leader said to the Direwalker leaning in the doorway.

The other nodded.

The unit leader barked strange guttural words at Tanner and the others, and waited for an answer.

Tanner blinked calmly. He couldn't even begin to understand those throaty words, let alone voice them. "We will talk in the krub tongue."

The unit leader strode to where Tanner reclined on the couch, and bent over. Its face was only a fingerbreadth from Tanner's. It leered. "Why? What are you hiding?" Its breath stank of rotten flesh.

Tanner's fingers twitched toward his sword hilt. If he killed these Direwalkers he'd compromise this location and ruin his carefully laid plans. He had to use wits rather than violence to get out of this.

The Direwalker straightened, backing off to observe Tanner's companions scornfully. "You're an entire company of unit leaders? Tell me, where are your *units*? And why are you in this house?"

Tanner steepled his fingers, trying to puzzle out why the Direwalkers

thought his companions were unit leaders as well. This Direwalker dressed the same as the other units as far as he could tell. Two of the other Direwalkers even had blades, though the remainder were swordless. The children must have missed some setting in the avatars of Cap, Al and Briar.

"We answer only to One," Tanner said.

The unit leader smirked. "I doubt the likes of you would ever get close to the Great One."

Great One. So that's what the Direwalkers called it. Tanner would have to remember that for future encounters.

The unit leader glanced at Briar with disdain. "You. You're not even a proper unit. What are you doing here dressed like that? Speak up, gol."

Briar swallowed nervously, and glanced at Tanner.

"Don't answer him," Tanner said. He remembered what Jacob had told him about the Direwalkers. They treat normal gols the same as humans. There would be no quarter granted if Briar pretended he was an ordinary gol.

The Direwalker took a step toward Briar, who was visibly trembling now. "Answer me, gol! With flesh oozing off your body in rolls like that, you have no right to that uniform." The Direwalker drew its sword and leaned over the coffee table, touching the blade to Briar's belly. "Answer."

CHAPTER NINE

Tanner shifted his fingers closer to his sword hilt.

Briar abruptly stopped trembling. To Tanner's eye, it looked like something had clicked inside Briar's mind, something triggered by the sword pressed against his belly.

Briar slowly gazed up at the Direwalker, and then his features slackened. His tongue slumped from his lips and he drooled. He made a low moaning sound and rolled his eyes, putting on his best impression of a gol infected with the mind disease.

The unit leader lowered its sword uncertainly. "What's this?"

Nicely done, Briar.

Moaning and slobbering, Briar stood up. He stepped around the table, toward the unit leader, swinging his arms from left to right.

Unsure of what to make of this latest development, Tanner glanced at Cap and Al, but the two shrugged, just as confused over Briar's actions as he was.

The unit leader retreated, and flashed a three-fingered hand signal at the others. Three Direwalkers came to its side. "Somehow you've fooled our awareness receptors. You're not even gols, are you?" It glanced at its brethren

and snarled. "Kill the krubs!"

Briar spun toward the coffee table and smashed his hand into the silver centerpiece. One of the octopus' silver tentacles folded open, and the area rug beneath the unit leader and the three Direwalkers fell in, swallowing all four of them.

Four down.

Four to go.

Tanner sprung into motion. He launched himself at the nearest Direwalker, drawing his sword and cutting down so hard that the blade sliced through the collar bone all the way to the hip.

He slid the blade out and cut off the thing's head, then spun toward the others.

Cap and Al had already taken out the second and third Direwalkers via similar beheadings. The fourth dashed out into the hallway.

Tanner pursued. He released a concentrated ball of flame from the sword, and it struck the Direwalker in the back. The thing was sent sprawling to the floor.

Tanner closed the distance as the Direwalker scrambled to its feet, and he severed its head. Blood squirted all over Tanner and the walls as the Direwalker toppled. He and the others had purposely taken the heads of their targets—they didn't want the things getting up again.

Tanner left the ghoulish scene and, covered in blood, he returned to the living room, feeling for all the world like a ghoul himself.

Briar was staring into the pit where the rug used to be. "Well! I thought they'd never stand in the right place!"

Tanner peered down. Four Direwalkers lay contorted in death, their bodies impaled by a grid of razor-sharp spikes tall as a man. The unit leader was perforated by two spikes—the first pierced its bowels, the second poked through the back of its head so that the bloody tip erupted from its mouth.

Tanner turned away, wrinkling his nose at the fecal stench.

So much for using his wits to get out of this. So much for preserving his carefully laid plans.

"Now I know why they call you *Briar*," Tanner said in a frigid tone.

"Indeed!" The fat merchant smiled heartily, just as if Tanner had complemented him. "Now you understand why the debt collectors never came to my house!" He glanced down into the pit. "Briar, Direwalker slayer. Has a nice ring to it wouldn't you say?"

"How many more traps do you have in this house of yours?"

"That was the last." Briar sighed. "To my great regret."

Like Tanner, Cap wasn't too amused. "What are we going to do now? We can't use this place for tonight's attack anymore, that's obvious. Others will come looking for these ones. They'll find our little get-up downstairs."

"Follow me." Tanner left the living room and returned to the unfinished basement. The children had already done their magic here—a tunnel was carved into the floor beside the tracker. Wide marble steps led down to the sewers.

Three New User scouts were just coming up those stairs, fire swords courtesy of the children in hand. They seemed surprised to find Tanner and the others still here.

Helen, the leader of the scouts, stepped forward.

"Problems?" the old woman said.

"More than you know." Tanner approached the opening. "With us, Helen. Bring your scouts. This house is compromised."

He drew his fire sword for light, and started down the perfectly-hewn stairs into the darkness. Al started to pick-up the tracker on the floor beside the staircase, but Tanner made him leave it.

The stairs ended in a wide, rectangular corridor built entirely of marble from floor to ceiling. *Nicely done, children.* Streaks of black swirled within the white. It was definitely an improvement over the mudbrick tunnels floored by frozen shit, though this corridor would lead to those sections of the sewer soon enough.

Tanner pulled up the city map in his head. He walked along the marble passageway, watching as his position changed on the map, and he

halted when he stood beneath the location he sought.

Tanner got Al to give him a boost, and he secured a second tracker to the ceiling.

"We'll have the children seal up the other exit," Tanner said. "And make a new one here. Right under the neighbor's house."

Cap nodded. "Clever boy. But what happens when the Direwalkers decide to search that house too?"

Tanner smiled politely. "We wait until tonight before making the new tunnel, roughly an hour before the attack. Just giving us enough time to set up and scout."

Cap seemed about to contest him, but then shrugged. "Suppose that'll work."

"It will." Tanner confirmed that Helen and her scouts were wearing trackers, and then he instructed her to wait here and guard the tunnel until the children sealed up the other exit. The ambient light from that other exit could be seen from here, forming a dim square in the distance.

Leaving Helen and her scouts behind, Tanner hurried deeper into the sewers with Cap, Al and Briar.

He needed to get those updated orders to the children, and set his plan in motion.

CHAPTER TEN

Graol floated among ten of his brethren. His race was called the Satori, a species of waterborne telepaths that achieved spaceflight while humankind was still in its Late Middle Ages. The best description of a typical Satori, one that a human being might understand, would be to imagine the body of a jellyfish with an overlarge starfish glued underneath, the tentacles of the upper body spilling over the lower appendages like kelp. Visible within the translucent epidermis were the four radial brains, each of which might seem large at first glance, but when measured using the encephalization quotient to compensate for body size, each brain was around the same size as a human's. Four brains, yet only one consciousness.

The coralline cave around Graol was murky, lit only by the glow of the other entities. Tiny particles floated by, waste products from the thousands in hibernation outside the cave.

The ten other Satori present were linked in a circle of tentacles, a formality, because thoughts could be exchanged without contact. Fhavolin, leader of the shipboard Council, addressed the entities, and her words sounded like a rapid series of moans and clicks in Graol's head.

"Graol has returned because the mission is nearly accomplished,"

Fhavolin projected. *"Our victory is nigh. The virus is working its way through the neural net of the alien ship. Javiol, the Twentieth Surrogate, has succeeded. Scans indicate that the aliens are waking up and dying ship-wide. The destruction of the last vestiges of Species-87A is all but assured. I have called this Council to inform its members of the good news, and to choose a reward for the Twentieth Surrogate when he returns."*

Graol felt his gastric cavity nauseate at the mention of Javiol, the Twentieth Surrogate—also known as Jeremy in the human simulation.

"A bit premature, isn't it?" Thason said. He was the Chief Biomimetics Officer. Thason was the one who'd created the human surrogates in the first place. Still smarting after all these years because Fhavolin had been chosen leader of the Council and not him, Thason usually took a position counter to hers. *"Because a reward assumes that Javiol will actually return. Our victory is nigh, you transmit? How many times have we heard such a thing before? We've been on the verge of victory for the past two hundred years, according to you. Until we've actually won, and Javiol sits here among our ranks, any talk of reward is useless, if not downright disingenuous. To be frank, even if the aliens are destroyed and we finally win, the Twentieth Surrogate has so entwined himself in their false reality that I doubt his mind can handle the return. It almost broke Graol, if you recall."*

All minds glanced Graol's way. He kept his thoughts blank.

"Remotely injecting your consciousness into an alien body for a short stint of existential fun and pleasure is one thing," Thason continued. *"But injecting it into a newborn alien, a baby immersed in a virtual reality formed by the A.I.s of an alien starship, and then leaving it to live out its life in that reality? I'm not surprised most of the other surrogates have gone insane."*

Fhavolin's algal glow became a deep red. *"It was necessary."*

Two hundred years ago the hunt had begun. This ship, the *Vargos,* had spent the first six years hounding the human vessel across their home system. The two ships had weaved back and forth, using the gravity wells to slingshot between planets and launch attacks. Finally the human vessel miscalculated and allowed the *Vargos* too close. The Satori launched all three fission payloads against the human ship, but the human defenses destroyed the first two. The last payload struck, and caused the vessel to crash into a moon of the largest gas giant in the system. The *Vargos* took up a position in orbit around that moon, and began energy bombardments against the downed vessel.

The decades passed. The Council had meant to keep the *Vargos* in orbit for a millennium if necessary. Time wasn't thought to be an issue. The Council simply hibernated like the rest of the passengers while the ship's A.I. handled the attack. They checked in on the progress every few years, tweaked

some variables, then went back under.

But things weren't so simple. Eventually it was discovered that the energy bombardments were draining the *Vargos* to the core, and the ship was running low on power. The self-repairing hull of the human vessel was proving to be a problem. So the Council had come up with the virus idea.

To properly infiltrate the human computer system, and to learn how to construct a computer virus that would take down the machines and the humans both, intimate understanding of the human mind was required. The human brain worked differently than the Satori quadmind, as did their computer systems. What better way to understand the aliens and their computers than to become one of them? The long-term Species-87A surrogate project was initiated—the remote projection of Satori consciousness into specially prepared human surrogates. Fifty chosen Satori would live life from start to finish exactly the way the humans themselves lived it, as babies born into that pod world of theirs.

But the human pod world was so real, the illusion so complex, that as time passed, most of the surrogates forgot their Satori upbringing, or dismissed it as a half-remembered dream. Graol himself, his surrogate implanted within the human vessel as a newborn and then injected into the virtual reality, truly recalled nothing of who he was by the time his surrogate finally died.

"Necessary, you say?" Thason flexed his lower appendages. *"I'm not here to argue the necessity of what was done. Though there were other ways to achieve our goals, I must admit this was an appealing experiment. My point is, of the Fifty Surrogates sent to the ship as newborn aliens, Graol is the only one who ever successfully returned. The others are lost to us. You know this. The Twentieth included. And if he does return, he will be madder than a malformed polyp. His only reward will be the spike."*

Graol wasn't sure if he himself hadn't gone mad. When he'd lost his first surrogate body to the meat grinders of the human vessel, Graol had unceremoniously awakened to a form of life so alien to everything he'd ever known that his denial of this reality brought him to the brink. Eventually, by means of the Return therapy, and the help of the *Vargos* A.I. and Fhavolin, he came to accept that he was not human, and never had been.

Still, he remembered everything about what it was like to be human. The sights and sounds. The tastes and smells. The *emotions*. He remembered, and inside this Satori body with its four brains and sixteen tentacles, he *felt* human.

Minds started to turn his way, and he quickly blanked his thoughts.

"You have something to add, Graol?" Thason said.

Graol let his tentacles sway about him. *"Only that I agree. Javiol will not return."* He projected an image of his last encounter with Jeremy inside

the human simulation to demonstrate Javiol's insanity, but the minds had already turned away.

Fhavolin puffed her bell-shaped torso. *"I am disappointed. I had expected good cheer at the news of our imminent victory, and unanimity in the matter of Javiol's subsequent reward. We shall simply put the matter to vote, then."*

For his good work, Fhavolin proposed that Javiol be awarded three small oceans on the third planet of the system, Earth, upon the eventual completion of the mission, along with elevation to the Hivemind. She was outvoted 10-1.

"The Council is unanimous in this?" Fhavolin said.

"As I transmitted before, there can be no discussion of rewards until Javiol returns and victory is achieved," Thason said. *"Until then, we are wasting precious time."*

Fhavolin deflated her torso. *"As you wish. Councilors, the meeting is adjourned. Return to your moorings with your tentacles high, because when next we awaken it will be to celebrate our victory, and to plan our trip home."*

"I surely hope so," Thason said, though his thoughts seemed edged with skepticism.

Like Thason, Graol doubted that the Council would celebrate victory

the next time its members awoke, though he had an entirely different set of reasons for believing so.

Fhavolin turned her eye-stalks toward him.

Graol cleared his mind and returned her gaze innocently.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Graol made his way through the dark, artificial ocean that comprised the inside of the *Vargos*. Static constellations of light dotted the darkness. His own glow was quickly diffused by the murky water, and did little to brighten his way.

He propelled himself through the murk using the combined movements of tail, torso, and cilia. His bell-shaped torso did most of the work, expanding to suck in water, then squeezing it out again in a jet. The tail and cilia were for steering, while his tentacles dragged along behind, meant mostly for stinging potential attackers or manipulating objects—each tentacle was divided at the ends into two feathery fingers.

Despite the Return therapy he had undergone, Graol still felt a sense of disassociation from his body, and as he flung that tail back and forth, and expanded and squeezed that torso like a bellows, he had a hard time believing it was all real. Going from human to Satori would do that to you, he supposed.

The oddest thing of all, the thing that most contributed to his detachment from reality, was his eyes. Like all Satori, Graol had twenty-four eyes distributed across his body in groups of six. The first two sets, the Upper

and Lower Lens Eyes, could sense color and movement, and were suspended on stalks with gyroscopic crystals at the end. The third set, the slit eyes, could perceive shape. The fourth and most primitive set, the pit eyes—basically dark colorations on his epidermis—could sense only intensity. Acting in concert, these twenty-four eyes allowed Graol a 360-degree field of view.

Eyes on the back of your head? Check. Eyes on the top of your head? Check. Eyes that allowed you to peer down at your tail, trailing appendages, and tentacles? Check. Disconcerting? Check. He was constantly looking not only at the outside world, but at himself. Constantly reminded of who he was.

And who he was not.

Detached from reality indeed.

He received a telepathic message of moans, pops and high-pitched squeals. *"What are you doing Graol?"*

It was The Shell—the main A.I., the *Vargos* equivalent of One.

Graol did his best to convey an aura of calm. *"I am proceeding to my mooring for hibernation, as instructed by the Council."* He transmitted in High Satori, to remind The Shell of his lineage, though he doubted the A.I. cared.

The booms and twitters returned by The Shell sounded amused in his mind. *"That is not the way."*

"There is data in the planetary flyer that you might find of interest,"

Graol said.

The Shell took a moment to respond. *"What kind of data?"*

"A history of Species 87-A since the crash of their starship. From the perspective of the alien simulation."

Now was the moment of truth. He'd risked everything on this gamble.

He cleared the thought from his mind instinctively, but unlike the living members of the *Vargos*, The Shell could read only those thoughts Graol chose to project.

The A.I. sent a reply. *"Interesting. I approve. Proceed."*

Graol jetted the water from his torso in relief. The Shell loved its data.

He swam along the face of a great artificial cliff covered in seaweed, reached a tunnel, and navigated inside. The tight corridor opened out into one of the lower-class hibernation areas. The watery vista was full of forms in stasis, glowing Satori moored to long horizontal tracks by the thousands.

Like the human vessel, the *Vargos* was first and foremost a colony ship, as all Satori motherships were, and this ocean was the equivalent of the human pod world, where the Satori colonists lived out their days in a simulation of their home world, pretending to be famous vocalists, or the admirals of great fleets, or aliens from long-extinct races. Graol had vague memories of that simulation—living in a palace of coralline with a harem of tentacled females waiting to fulfill his every desire. To him those memories

were a dream, nothing more. Just as all of this was.

He swam past the hibernating Satori. They were his brethren, his lower-class brothers and sisters, but he felt nothing like them. They were *aliens*.

He knew that the glow inside their translucent torsos was from the colonies of algae in their gastric cavities. He knew that when digested, the algae produced light that allowed for the growth of more algae. He knew it was a perfect balance of symbiosis. He knew that the typical Satori could live a thousand years without any external food supply because of it.

He knew all of that, yet it was from the point of view of an exobiology teacher studying an alien species.

Graol shook off the disassociation and concentrated on his destination. He had promised himself that he wouldn't go mad. Not yet.

He reached another artificial cliff and passed into a second hibernation area. A different species was moored in these waters—the Xeviathi, the great gill-whales.

Part of the slave classes.

Their massive, bull-like bodies were plated with iridescent scales, and their baleen-jawed heads took up a third of their length. Large gills, with fleshy plates similar to the underside of a mushroom, lined either side of their heads. Small fins capped by hooklike claws grew from beneath the gills, and

a large fluked tail concluded their bodies. Fleshy cords moored the Xeviathi in place, but since they couldn't grow their own food in their bellies, each one had a feeding tube forced down its baleen. There were only about fifty of them here, and roughly a thousand in existence across the galaxy.

The Xeviathi had once been sentient, but the survivors of the race had been bio-engineered to have no consciousness, their brains converted to empty shells waiting to act as surrogates for the Satori. The Xeviathi were sometimes used to perform manual labor beyond the capabilities of ordinary Satori, though robots usually fulfilled that role. Mostly it was an existential game for the Satori—they had lobotomized and subjugated an entire race because they wanted to feel what it was like to be a member of that race. The computer simulations could only go so far after all, and nothing compared to actually putting your consciousness into an actual alien brain. That was only part of the reason why the Satori destroyed every sentient species they encountered, but it was the reason that most galled Graol. The mass, forced extinctions were nothing compared to this final humiliation inflicted upon the survivors.

Graol feared the same fate awaited humanity.

He spotted a satoroid on patrol, and instinctively ceased all motion.

With a spinning rotor in place of a tail, an immobile torso, and metallic tentacles, these robot Satori were the *Vargos* equivalent of iron

golems. They patrolled the environment, made sure the moorings were operating correctly, that the ambient water temperature was neither too warm nor too cool, and disposed of any dead Satori or other subjugate races. They were called the Servants of The Shell, because they were the direct embodiment of the central A.I., and allowed The Shell to interact with the shipboard environment.

Unlike the iron golems of the human vessel, these weren't programmed to terminate living Satori found wandering awake in the oceans. Still, out of habit perhaps, or maybe human superstition, Graol didn't move. Only when the satoroid was gone did he resume his advance.

He reached a wall of coral and swam into a small tunnel. The coral soon gave way to harsh, angular metal.

The A.I.s built and designed the starships, and did a good job of hiding the fact that the ocean you existed in was part of a constructed environment. But once you surpassed a certain point, and peeled back the dark underbelly of that false environment, you reached the metallic world of the machines.

Dim orbs lit up as he passed, illuminating the murk. The last time he'd been here those lights were much brighter.

The corridor branched several times. The Shell conveniently projected a three-dimensional map into his head at each fork, so Graol didn't get lost,

and before long he reached Waterlock 21. The Shell had already lowered the outer door of the chamber for him.

Never underestimate an A.I.s eagerness to absorb fresh data.

The landing arms still embraced the planetary flyer, which was a small, egg-shaped vessel of black steel. Striations crisscrossed the surface, and a band of tiny rivets dotted the middle section. There was a wide convex viewport in the front.

Graol went to the external interface—a rectangular panel on the far side of the flyer. A three-dimensional, 360-degree image appeared in his mind, showing him the inside of the flyer and the two robotic arms his mind was now linked to. He steered the arms toward the human body that lay slumped over the controls.

The panel beneath the human had been modified to support touch commands, since humans were not telepathic. Also, a balanced nitrogen-oxygen environment had been jury-rigged inside the flyer, allowing the human body to breathe—the autonomous nervous system of the human body's medulla oblongata was functioning at its fullest extent this very moment, inflating the lungs, beating the heart. But though complete and fully formed in otherwise every respect, the human's mind was just an empty shell.

A surrogate.

A black cube with three prongs had been placed on the floor beside

the body, alongside a test tube containing a sample of human tissue. The cube was one of the interface units the Satori had devised for reading alien technology, and it formed an airtight shell over the human microchip inside. That chip would allow him to restore Ari's psyche. The test tube meanwhile held Ari's brain tissue and a hair sample. Precious cargo all.

Graol very delicately retrieved both the cube and tissue sample with the robotic fingers and deposited them in the flyer's local airlock. He initiated the equalization process. The inner door closed and the airlock began to flood.

He retracted the robotic arms and released the interface, then floated over to the opposite side of the flyer. When the outer door of the airlock spiraled open he gripped the floating black square and the test tube in the feathery fingers of two different tentacles, and then he made his way back through the metallic passageways.

He swam as fast as he could, hoping The Shell hadn't detected the test tube, nor guessed his plan. Those three-dimensional maps still appeared in his head at each branch, so he assumed not.

"You have passed many data access ports already," The Shell transmitted. *"Why?"*

"I know you're eager for your data," Graol sent back. *"But there's something I want to check, first."*

"*What, exactly?*" The Shell sent. When Graol didn't answer, The Shell didn't seem pleased. *"My patience has limits."*

"You'll get your data, Shell."

Graol pressed on, and finally he reached the section of the ship he sought.

The Farm.

Just before he entered, a satoroid came out.

Graol respectfully moved off to one side, and curled his seventh tentacle behind him, hiding the test tube from view.

The satoroid stopped.

"Identify external object," it transmitted.

Graol pretended that the satoroid was asking his name.

"Graol-52-70-32-144, egg donor Laol-12-142-160-924, sperm donors Maol-16-30-42-43 and Fallow-92-1002-4-58, mooring A5." 52 of 70 indicated that 70 polyps had formed from the joining of egg and sperm, and that his polyp was the 52nd. 32 of 144 meant that his polyp had asexually budded 144 times, and that his body had separated from the 32nd bud.

"Do not attempt subterfuge," the Servant of The Shell transmitted. *"What is in your seventh oral tentacle."*

Graol lifted the tentacle that held the black cube. *"The data I promised The Shell."*

"No," the satoroid transmitted. *"The other tentacle. The seventh."*

With a sinking feeling in the pit of his gastric cavity, Graol held up the test tube and the piece of gory matter within.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Graol offered the first excuse that came to mind. *"A tissue sample to extend the biodiversity of Species 87-A in the system."*

It was a weak excuse, and Graol knew it. The Farm had a vast storehouse of human ribonucleics already, enough to prepare an infinite number of genetic permutations. With humanity about to be wiped out, and the human surrogate program concluded, the need for further samples was questionable.

"Give it to me." The satoroid extended a robotic tentacle.

Graol hesitated. If the satoroid harmed the sample, all would be lost. His struggle to save the daughter he loved would end right here, as would his will to fight for humanity.

But if Graol didn't give up the test tube, the robot would force it from him anyway.

"Why?" Graol said, stalling for time.

The satoroid's tail rotor whirred, reminding Graol how easily it could overtake him if he chose to flee. *"You would disobey a Servant of The Shell?"*

Graol had no choice. He squeezed the radial muscle of his torso, then he tentacled the test tube over.

The satoroid lifted the tube and tapped the glass speculatively with a robotic tentacle. A green bar of light shone from the robot's chest casing and scanned the test tube up and down.

The light abruptly cut off.

"Extraneous," the satoroid transmitted.

It crushed the tube.

As the glass broke apart, Graol felt his own soul breaking inside him. He watched helplessly as the shards, and the crushed contents, drifted away.

"More tissue samples from Species 87-A are unnecessary," the satoroid said. *"The biodiversity levels in the system are adequate. However, you may upload the aforementioned data regarding the history of Species 87-A. Proceed."*

The satoroid motored off, and the current generated by its propeller sent the debris of the test tube whirling away.

Graol remained motionless. His tentacles floated lifelessly around him.

It was done.

It was over.

He didn't care about anything else anymore.

With the sample lost, everything had been for nothing. The trials and ordeals. The Return.

All for nothing.

But maybe his grief was premature. Maybe the sample didn't matter. He still had the means to restore Ari's psyche in the microchip. She could still come back, maybe just not in the body she expected. She could still live again.

No. It mattered. Graol wasn't human, but he knew enough about humanity to understand that such a change would destroy her. He'd done enough damage to Ari as it was, what with the revising he and Cora had put her through. He couldn't do this. The price was too high. What would be the point of bringing Ari back if it only ended in her madness?

He saw a small piece of organic matter floating amid the shards. The surrounding "water" was corrosive to human tissue, yet the sample had survived so far.

It wasn't over then.

Not yet.

Graol despaired far too easily because of his humanity. He knew this.

He allowed the cold logic of the Satori quadmind to take over, and he jetted to the spreading debris. A tiny portion of the frontal lobe he'd tweezed from Ari's skull remained intact. The specimen was useless without the accompanying hair sample of course, which would be impossible to find in these waters. But he had to try.

He saw something unexpected then.

A single strand remained attached to the gray matter, glued there by coagulated blood.

Graol felt a surge of hope. Finally he had a little of that human abstraction known as "luck."

He gently collected the brain matter in his wispy fingers. The water would eventually unglue the coagulated blood, and he'd lose the essential hair strand if he wasn't careful. Not to mention that the acid in the water was eating away the filament at this very moment. He was glad for once that he had 360-degree vision—the tissue sample would never leave his sight.

Graol jetted inside The Farm and he found himself in a wide, vaulted chamber. Xeviathi in various stages of development were moored to horizontal tracks and kept alive by feeding tubes. The organized ranks reminded Graol a little of the vineyards he'd seen in the human archives. Two satoroids acted as keepers, patrolling the biologicals, paying Graol no heed. On the far end of the room, a sealed iris door allowed direct access to the slave class hibernation ocean, where the fully-grown Xeviathi were eventually deposited.

Graol swam quickly, and the columns of Xeviathi soon gave way to the ranks of humans, whose bodies were tiny in comparison. These were grown specifically for the Species-87A surrogate project. Babies, with

umbilicals linked to their bellies, developing inside self-sustaining membranes that were almost exact matches to the pods of the human starship. Which made sense, given that the Satori engineers had based the pods on the human design so that any surrogates grown here could interface with the alien technology. Graol could see the organic wires which made up that interface in the spines of some of the prenatals.

The bodies advanced in age the further he swam, until he arrived at the final group of pods, which contained fully-grown humans.

Graol hastily floated to the console beside the second-to-last body. The interface detected his presence immediately and he initiated control with his mind.

Graol inserted the black cube into an input slot. The display in his mind filled with the contents of the alien microchip and he began uploading a small subset of the data. He'd promised to give The Shell a history of the humans since the crash, and that's what he did, sending up data stolen from the archives of the crashed vessel.

"Receiving..." The Shell projected.

Graol watched as pages of archival information scrolled past in his mind. The Shell was eagerly slurping up this new knowledge.

While The Shell was distracted by the data, Graol initiated the next step.

A metal drawer opened, and he gingerly placed the brain tissue and hair strand inside. Just in time too—the hair strand seemed ready to detach. The drawer retracted, and on the mind display he pulled up another screen, this one of the nucleotides contained within the tissue sample. He manipulated the double helix pattern of DNA, transferring it to an empty carrier virus whose sole purpose was to re-sequence the proteins of the human host.

He replicated forty-five billion copies of the virus, along with an accelerant, together which formed a total volume of five milliliters. He initiated the inject. The robotic syringe pierced the semipermeable membrane of the pod and emptied the five milliliters into the radial vein of the host body's wrist. There was no immediate effect, but the virus was already at work, judging from the flare-ups Graol saw on the mind display. 300 million human cells die and are replaced every minute, so it would be some hours before the final transformation was complete.

Time for the next step.

The black cube was still interfaced. He cordoned off the data points he wished sent to the host's mind, and initiated the transfer. The bits—the 0s and 1s—that comprised the data activated engrams in the host brain. There were over 10 billion of those 0s and 1s, each associated with a neuron. That was the first step, pre-populating the brain with memory and personality and

instinct. The actual transference of consciousness would take place automatically when the final engrams involving personality were in place.

It was a one-way process. Her consciousness couldn't be tethered in two places at once. As those bits transferred over to the human brain, they were erased from the source chip. He'd already locked out The Shell to prevent any tampering by the A.I., but power was low on the *Vargos*, and Graol hoped there would be no interruptions during this crucial transfer.

He watched the progress bar tensely for a few moments. 80%. 90%. 95%.

And then it was done.

Ari would wake up in the host body a few hours from now when he revived her. Thanks to the accelerated carrier virus, she would appear indistinguishable from her previous self, except maybe better nourished.

Still, a part of him wondered if it would really be the same Ari. Was her psyche still tethered to this world? Or had she moved on to a different place?

In the Satori death experiments, the subjects always reported standing before an infinite gate—a Forever Gate. A thin thread linked them to the world of the living, and when their bodies were revived, that thread yanked them back to life.

If Graol succeeded in bringing her back, would she be ripped from

that place of limbo and brought back to life, or would he merely be creating an elaborate clone of who she once was, replete with her memories and personality? A living construct that existed independently of the real Ari who had died hours ago?

He supposed he'd never know until he crossed the final Gate himself. He'd done his best, and that's all that mattered. He'd done everything possible to save her. Anyone else would have given up long ago. He'd stored her psyche in a microchip, crossed from one level of existence to the next, and cloned her an entire new body. There wasn't much more he could do now except hope.

Hope.

A human emotion, but a good one.

The Shell rudely interrupted his reflection.

"You have blocked my access to the console," The Shell transmitted. *"Why?"*

Graol didn't answer.

"My calculations indicate you have sent only 5% of the data on the alien microchip. Where is the remaining 95%?"

Again Graol didn't answer. The Shell would figure it out soon enough on its own. There were sensors stationed throughout the room, embedded in the walls and in the other consoles.

The A.I. was silent for long moments. And then: *"You have cloned a specimen of Species-87A. An ingenious idea. Unfortunately the Council will likely have the specimen destroyed. I am awakening the appropriate councilors. You will report to confinement bay 12 while I confer with them on this matter."*

Graol turned around.

As expected a satoroid was already there, waiting to take him into custody.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Graol stared at the broad spike that would impale his gastric cavity and four brains tonight.

The death-dealing instrument was placed on a pedestal in the metallic corridor outside, set there to remind the confinement bay occupants of what their short futures held. It was a simple spike, its sharp point gleaming in brutal anticipation. Scenes of agonized victims and delighted torturers etched its surface. The spike seemed rusted in places, perhaps from years of use—those who crossed The Shell, or disagreed with the will of the Council, did not live long, nor did those who even *thought* of disagreeing. But the underwater metal didn't rust, so those dark brown marks had to be something else. Maybe stains from the impaled dead who'd shit themselves.

Though Satori didn't really shit, did they? At least, not in the usual sense. Perhaps the stains were from gastric acid, then.

There were more compassionate methods of execution, naturally. Disintegration used to be one of the favorites. Electrocution and stinging, a close second and third, with spacing a far fourth. But the spike was reserved for crimes of high treason. Anyone who crossed the Council was automatically guilty of that.

The light globes flickered and a frigid current kissed Graol's epidermis. The touch brought his focus closer, to the energy bars that sealed him inside the cell, and to the murky water that gave him buoyancy.

Around him, everything was silent.

Silent as death.

It wouldn't be long now.

The Shell had awakened the councilors, and Graol had appeared before them. Because of his apparent sympathy for the humans, Species-87A, they had probed his mind extensively. He concealed much under the mind torture, but not everything, and the councilors learned of his continued love for his human daughter, and his willingness to sacrifice the world for her. He was a danger to the Satori, the councilors concluded, because of his misplaced sympathies. He was to be executed, and the human clone was scheduled to be lobotomized.

As a precaution, the Council also voted in favor of executing all the other Satori involved in the Species-87A surrogate project upon their return, regardless of their outward disposition and previous rank, including Javiol, the Satori who was Jeremy. Fhavolin hadn't been too happy about that.

The satoroid jailer rotored over to the energy bars. Graol almost expected to see some sort of symbol on its metallic torso, but there wasn't one of course.

"Visitor," the satoroid transmitted.

Graol shifted slightly, trying to peer past the edge of the cell. He was melded to the steel wall behind him via his sucker-capped lower appendages.

Fhavolin, leader of the Council, jetted into view, her pear-shaped torso moving in and out like a pumping bellows, her tail whisking, her cilia rippling. Her lower appendages were folded beneath her, and her stinging tentacles trailed along behind, the feathery fingers slack. Twelve eyes watched him from the visible side of her torso.

Graol didn't want to look at Fhavolin. Didn't want to be reminded of what he was. He wished he could just shut his eyes, or turn around, but his lidless, 360-degree vision allowed him no such luxury.

"What's the matter, Graol?" Fhavolin transmitted. *"Can't stand the sight of your own race anymore?"*

Graol immediately cleared his mind.

Fhavolin's Upper Lens eye-stalks twitched. *"You guard yourself well. Would that you had guarded yourself better during the Questioning."*

"What do you want?" Graol responded.

"The Shell has informed you of the time of your execution?"

"It has."

Fhavolin relaxed her tentacles, and let all twelve float around her like seaweed. *"When I and the other councilors shut out your quadmind and*

debated your fate, I argued against execution. I told them that you had gone through an incredibly stressful experience. That your sympathies were still with the Satori, not Species-87A. Was I wrong?"

Graol shifted his lower appendages, loosening his suckers so that he climbed the wall until he was slightly above her. Looking down on her. *"You all read my mind. Do you doubt your findings? Do you doubt your abilities? You* were *wrong, Fhavolin. I'm more 87A than Satori now."*

"I've never believed that any of the 87A surrogates were beyond saving," Fhavolin said. *"Why do you think I spent so much work on you after you returned that first time? I could have left you to The Shell. I could have returned to hibernation. But I stayed. Though you screamed and ranted, I stayed. It took a full month to decondition your mind and undo the brainwashing of the alien simulation. Did the Return therapy truly fail? Did* I *fail?"*

Graol and Fhavolin had been mates a long time ago. Perhaps she had cared for him once, but not anymore, and if Graol had lips he would have grinned smugly. *"You did fail, Fhavolin. More than you know. It's probably a good thing the councilors voted to execute the others. Especially Javiol. He's madder than I ever was. To think, you actually wanted to* reward *him."*

Fhavolin clenched her lower appendages. *"Do not play this game, Graol. I can still defy the Council. Demonstrate to me that your four-brain is*

with us, and I will let you go. You will be stripped of your name, rank and class, and your psyche transferred to another body in secret. Your current body will be executed, but you will live on. Prove to me that I was successful with you."

At one point Graol had considered doing that very thing—permanently transferring his psyche not into another Satori, but a human. In the end he'd decided against the action. Humanity might still need him up here.

Graol expanded his torso in contempt. *"Prove that you were successful*? *Did you read my thoughts just now? Can't you see what I am inside? There's nothing Satori left."*

"Graol, I just want to—"

"Tell me something," Graol said. *"Let's say I let you defy the Council, and allow you to transfer me to another body without their knowledge, as you ask. What happens to the 87A female?"*

Fhavolin studied him blankly for a few moments, as if not understanding the question. *"She must be de-brained of course."*

"Of course." Graol had expected as much. *"Why are you so bent on saving me? So you can feel justified in sparing Javiol too when all this is over? Is he your new mate? Or are you just trying to clear your conscience so you feel less guilty about destroying the last remnants of another sentient*

race?"

Graol searched her mind, and found unguarded images of her and himself together, images accompanied by a Satori emotion that could best be described as contentment. She was showing him what she wanted him to see.

"I still love *you, Graol."* Fhavolin projected the human word for *love* in his head, because there was no equivalent in the Satori language. There were words for mate, companion, compassion, even pair-bond, but none for love.

"What do you know of love*?"* Graol sent the human word right back at her.

"I have played with the 87A surrogates. I understand their emotions well enough to know what it is I feel for you."

Graol remained absolutely motionless. It was a trick, he knew that. She didn't love him.

Manipulation. It was one of the first skills both humans and Satori ever learned. The races were alike in that respect.

He delved deeper in her mind and, using a sudden psychic-force, he pried open one of the locked doors she kept hidden away inside. Her tentacles jerked in surprise. He saw images of her and Javiol engaged in the Satori mating process, which was a little like frantic jellyfish sex.

"He is *your new mate, then,"* Graol said. *"Or he was. That's why you*

wanted to reward him so badly. Wanted to share in the riches, did you? Well, he won't be getting any reward except the spike now."

Fhavolin's algal glow became an outraged scarlet. *"Leave it alone, Graol."*

"Yes, that's entirely what this is about," Graol said, going for the kill. *"You want to convince yourself that Javiol can be saved, don't you? If you can save me, then you can save him too, even if it means going against the will of the Council and hiding his consciousness in a different body. You'll expect him and I to be forever in your debt of course. Maybe you'll put us in the bodies of the other councilors. Your rivals Thason and Maol, perhaps? I almost want to go along with you, just so that it'll come as a complete surprise when, two months down the line, Javiol's new body stings you to death. No, Fhavolin, you don't love me. You weren't successful with your Return deconditioning. You can't save me because there's nothing left to save. And you can't save Javiol. I'm free of the Council and its machinations. I refuse to be your puppet any longer."*

Fhavolin's scarlet glow became a calm blue once more. She bobbed in place, swiveling so that her rearmost eyes regarded him. *"Good-bye, Graol."*

"Will you attend my execution?" Graol said.

Fhavolin straightened her lower appendages, forming what looked like a long, smooth trunk—the Satori body-language equivalent of "no."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The execution was to take place right there in the confinement bay.

It was to be an automated execution, with no observers but The Shell and its servants.

At the designated time, the energy bars flicked off.

Graol attempted to access the wall panel interface with his mind, wanting to turn the energy bars back on, but he couldn't get past the system firewall.

The two satoroid jailers that were to be his executioners came forward and wrapped their steel tentacles around him, obscuring the central quarter of his 360-degree vision. Graol didn't struggle, knowing it would only make matters hard for him.

The robots floated Graol over to the execution spike set on the pedestal. As he got closer, the carvings in the metal became clearer. He saw pictures of Satori pinned like insects on display, bodies deflated from fluid loss, tentacles dangling lifelessly beneath them. Inscribed beneath the pictures were symbols that represented the compressions and pops of the Satori language, words that brought a tingle to Graol's epidermis: "Through me pass the final Gate."

The robots rotored him up and over the spike, and hovered there, waiting for The Shell's command. The top of his body skimmed the ceiling.

"Any last thoughts?" The Shell projected.

"I have more data for you on the planetary flyer, Shell," Graol replied on a whim. *"Have your Servants escort me there, and I'll give it to you."*

"You have no data at this point that I cannot obtain myself after your death," The Shell answered. *"The Council has authorized a full de-braining."*

"I'm going to enjoy blasting your neural core to smithereens," Graol said.

The Shell issued an incoherent stream of stuttered tweets. The A.I. equivalent of laughter.

"Enjoy your death, Graol," The Shell said. *"I look forward to recording and compartmentalizing all your thoughts and memories. Your life should prove an endless source of interesting datagrams. Not many with your existential quirks exist in this galaxy. I will enjoy reviewing your data for years to come."*

The satoroids began the slow, inexorable spiral of death.

Graol could see the spike clearly beneath him, its tip approaching in deadly greeting. The satoroids had trapped his upper body in their grasps, but left the bottom half of his tentacles, and his lower appendages, free to move. He desperately ran the wispy fingers of his tentacles along the spike's surface,

but he couldn't find purchase, and the descent continued unabated. He splayed his starfish-like lower appendages wide, wanting to delay contact for as long as possible.

When the spike's tip was only an inch away, he slammed his lower appendages closed, and squeezed the metal with all his strength. Only the tip was sharp on that spike, and he got a good grip on the engraved surface below. He managed to halt his descent.

For a few seconds.

The whir increased in pitch as the satoroids boosted the power output to their rotors. The iron tentacles tightened around his body. The descent began anew, and when Graol felt the sharp stab of the tip in his flesh he splayed his appendages wide on reflex, releasing the spike.

He slid downward with a sudden jerk, but the satoroids quickly compensated, reversing their rotors. It wouldn't do for him to die faster than the prescribed torturous speed.

The pain was excruciating as that spike dug deeper into the suckers of his lower appendage. He wanted to thrash about, but the satoroids held him tight, and any movement only worsened the pain. He held back a vocalized scream, not wanting to give The Shell that pleasure.

Through the pain, he felt regret, and he wasn't sure which hurt more, the spike, or failure.

For it to end here, like this, when he'd come so close to saving Ari. So damn close. It was a tragedy.

Pain.

The spike had completely pierced his lower appendages now, and in moments the tip would poke through to his gastric cavity. Once that cavity was pierced, the satoroids would pause to allow his stomach acids time to leech into his torso and burn away his insides. The ultimate torture.

Pain.

He remembered the promise he'd made to his human wife. "Destroy the world if you have to," she'd said. "Destroy everything. But you bring her back."

He remembered his answer. "I will. I swear it."

He slammed his lower appendages around the spike once again, and fresh agony sparked through his body as the tip dug into his shifting muscles. He ignored the urge to let go, and squeezed hard.

I will. I swear it.

He pushed down on the spike through the pain, and rose an inch.

The rotors of the satoroids whirred faster. The steel tentacles tightened around his torso. Both machines were trying to drag him back down.

Graol kept two appendages in place so that he wouldn't plunge, and he

shifted the grip of the remaining appendages higher. He pushed up again, and climbed another inch along that spike. He sucked more water into his torso, countering the tightening vise of iron tentacles.

I SWEAR IT.

The satoroid engines were droning loudly now, and those tentacles dug trenches into his epidermis.

Graol shifted his grip upward and pushed once again. His body shook from the effort. But he pushed.

He rose another inch.

He'd lifted himself entirely off the spike now. He still felt the throbbing pain, but it was no longer intrusive.

Not letting go of the spike, he shifted his body to the left so that he was clear of the tip. He drew the satoroids with him so that the rightmost hovered just above the spike.

Graol abruptly relaxed his grip.

The robots were still rotoring downward at maximum speed. All three of them plunged. The iron tip rammed into the rightmost satoroid's rotors before the thing could compensate.

A muted CLANG-CLANG filled his auditory organ as the rotor tore apart, and Graol felt the vibrations pass through the steel body into his own.

Its engine now dead, that satoroid no longer offered Graol any

resistance. He pulled himself lower down the spike. Sparks flashed in the water as the tip embedded deep inside the satoroid. Its iron tentacles abruptly loosened and the damaged robot dropped away.

The second satoroid squeezed him even harder now.

Graol spun left, then right, trying to shake the thing off. Forget the prescribed death speed, it was crushing him here and now...

Graol jetted out all the water he'd sucked in and whipped his tail, sending himself and the satoroid spinning toward the confinement cell. With his torso deflated, those steel tentacles squeezed precariously close to his quadbrain.

Graol started to black out. His already banded 360-degree vision became an ever shrinking sphere, its edges indistinct.

He neared the cell's verge and immediately accessed the mind interface with his waning consciousness.

The firewall was finally down.

"Override," he projected weakly. *"Graol-52-70-32-144. Reactivate."*

The energy bars turned on. He was close enough for the beams to slam right into the satoroid. Parts of the robot disintegrated instantly.

Its grip weakened, and Graol sloughed the iron tentacles from his body. His vision snapped back in triumph.

The tailored virus he'd uploaded to The Shell alongside the archival

data from the microchip was finally taking effect. It was a little surprise he'd been working on for the past few months. He hadn't been sure he'd actually go through with it even up to the end, when he'd interfaced with the Farm console, but now he was glad that he had.

"What have you done?" The Shell transmitted. *"Services system-wide are failing. Graol, you must undo this."*

"System-wide?" Graol said. *"No, Shell. Only services involving your consciousness are failing. Autonomous ship functions are still running. For now."*

He jetted toward the steel-rimmed exit. Yellow blood seeped from the wound in his lower appendages, while the depression marks in his torso bled black ink. Four of his eyes had been crushed.

But he would live.

A stream of stuttered chirps filled his mind as The Shell laughed.

"I know where you go," The Shell said. *"But you are too late. My servants will be the last of my consciousness to fail. They are de-braining your precious Species-87A female at this very moment."*

Graol ceased all motion.

He'd taken too long.

Ari! Dear maker, no!

He swam through the corridors at full speed.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Graol reached the Farm and barreled inside.

He swept past the hulking bodies of the developing Xeviathi, toward the rearmost section where the humans were grown.

A satoroid hovered over Ari's open pod, surrounded by a red cloud.

Graol felt suddenly sick. He slowed, not wanting to provoke any abrupt actions that could cause Ari irreparable harm.

He entered the red cloud near the satoroid, and his gustatory senses detected the tang of blood.

Ari's head came into view.

There was no further harm that could be done to her.

The entire top-half of her head had been sawed off, the brain included. Probes had been stuffed into the exposed gray matter.

The world would never know her sweet smile again. Nor her infectious laugh, her twinkling eyes, her dauntless spirit.

She was dead.

In a fit of rage, Graol wrapped his stinging tentacles and lower appendages around the satoroid. He squeezed. Pain from his wounds shot through his body, but he ignored it, and he just squeezed and squeezed in his

madness.

And though his body shook with an angry strength he'd never felt before, he couldn't make a dent in the robot's shell.

He released the satoroid when he realized it wasn't fighting back. Its rotor wasn't even spinning.

The robot had ceased functioning some time ago.

Graol flung the metallic shell away and went to Ari's body. He cradled his tentacles around her.

Ari. My daughter.

The Satori would pay for this.

All of them.

He had promised to destroy a world to save her, and he felt that vow metamorphosing to one of vengeance. A world would still be destroyed, there was no doubt about that.

He lowered his tentacles so that he could peer into her face one last time.

I'm so sorry Ari, I did my best. I did everything. I crossed worlds for you. I—

Wait.

This wasn't Ari.

He released the body in shock.

The satoroid was lobotomizing the wrong one?

He floated over to the pod just next to it, and saw that Ari remained alive and untouched inside, the viral transformation of her body essentially complete.

If Graol had possessed legs, he would have collapsed. As it was, he just drifted in place, shocked, relieved beyond comprehension.

My daughter. My dear, dearest daughter.

He wrapped his tentacles around the pod and gently squeezed, the closest he could come to a human hug.

Graol topped up the placenta's oxygen supply and then untethered the pod from the mooring. He carried it in his tentacles, holding the pod a small distance from his body so as not to interfere with the undulations of his torso.

Ari was alive. *Alive*. He could hardly contain his joy. He practically danced through the room, weaving between the other hosts.

But it wasn't over yet.

He left the Farm and emerged into the metallic passageway, making his way back toward Waterlock 21. The Shell was no longer projecting a three-dimensional map into his head at each branch. All Graol received from the A.I. was an incoherent stream of garbage, so he had to proceed from memory.

He passed a satoroid on the way—the thing drifted lifeless in the

waters.

Ahead, the outer door of Waterlock 21 remained open.

Good. Graol eagerly jetted through. He was almost there.

Fhavolin waited inside.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Graol released Ari's pod and positioned himself protectively in front of it. He'd need all his limbs for this confrontation.

"What have you done, Graol?" Fhavolin transmitted.

He sent nothing back. He flexed his stinging tentacles instead, hoping the threat was clear.

Fhavolin seemed unimpressed. *"You will give me the antivirus to the infection you've placed in The Shell."*

"There is no antivirus."

Fhavolin floated forward. *"Then you will give me the virus source, and help me program an antivirus."*

"We don't need The Shell," Graol said. *"The ship is still functional. For now."*

Fhavolin edged closer still. *"For now? The Shell is the embodiment of the Council, and carries out its commands while we sleep. I cannot allow its destruction."*

"I no longer have the virus source," Graol said. *"The autopilot functions independently of The Shell, and can still take us home."*

Fhavolin's tentacles twitched. *"You would betray your own race?"*

"If it is betrayal," Graol said. *"Then why do I feel like a liberator?"*

"I know you have the virus source, Graol," Fhavolin said. *"Just give it to me. If not for your race, then for me. For the* love *we once had. Still have."* Again, the human word for love.

Graol contracted his torso in the Satori equivalent of a sigh. *"You just had me sent for execution. If that's what you call* love, *you have a strange way of showing it Fhavolin."*

Without warning Fhavolin attacked. Graol had only a moment to see the blur of stinging tentacles, and then agony filled his body, worse than anything he had felt from the spike.

Graol swiveled sideways, and unleashed his own barrage of tentacles. It was a satisfying sensation, feeling the slap of his stingers against her epidermis.

Fhavolin flinched, and relaunched her own tentacles.

Graol exhaled the water from his torso, and barely jetted out of range. A few more strikes from those tentacles would leave him adrift—the venom in the nematocysts contained a potent neurotoxin. Her venom was far more powerful that his own, a luxury allowed her because of her position as head of the Council.

His sideways movement proved a mistake, because he'd let Fhavolin get too close to Ari's pod. Before he could stop her, Fhavolin thrust straight

for the membrane. Graol managed to sting her a few times, but he was too late, because Fhavolin wrapped her tentacles around the pod and began to squeeze.

Graol raised his tentacles in a gesture of surrender. *"Please!"*

"Help me or I kill your 87A female," Fhavolin said.

Graol stung her again.

She squeezed tighter. It wouldn't take much to burst Ari's pod. Graol wasn't worried so much about the lack of air—the umbilical would keep her oxygenated—but it was the sudden change in pressure that would kill her.

If he kept stinging Fhavolin, there was a chance he might stop her in time.

There was a greater chance that he would not.

"All right," Graol said. *"Stop. I have the antivirus."*

Fhavolin studied him with her Upper Lens Eyes. *"Give it to me."*

"It's in the flyer. Let me transfer it to the outside."

Fhavolin loosened her hold on the pod slightly. "*No games."*

"None."

Part of his body paralyzed by the attack, Graol floated limply over to the egg-shaped vessel of black steel. He reached the external interface on the far side of the flyer, and initiated access.

The flyer's inner compartment appeared in his head and he steered the

internal robotic arms toward the object he sought, and put it in the airlock. He flooded the airlock and released the interface.

He floated over to the opposite side of the flyer and when the outer door spiraled open he retrieved the object, supporting it with one tentacle and wrapping the fingers of another delicately around it.

"Bring it to me," Fhavolin said.

Graol floated over.

Fhavolin's eye-stalks shifted in alarm when she realized what he held. *That's not a—*

Graol pulled the trigger. An energy bolt tore a hole through Fhavolin's translucent epidermis, cutting through her lowermost radial brain.

Fhavolin remained in place, black liquid oozing from the hole, her tentacles slowly unwrapping from Ari's pod.

Graol himself remained still, too stunned to move. A lucky shot. He'd only meant to warn her off. He had retrieved a spare energy weapon from the flyer's armory, the one designed for the surrogate humans. He hadn't been sure if he'd be able to fire it with his wispy Satori fingers, let alone if the thing would even work underwater.

He was hardly aware as the weapon dropped from his grip. He went to Fhavolin. He still cared for her, despite what he had told her, despite that she was alien to him now.

"I'm so sorry, Fhavolin," he transmitted, even though he knew she couldn't hear him. *"It wasn't supposed to end like this. I only needed to disable The Shell. But you threatened Ari. I had to defend her. You understand, don't you?"*

But Fhavolin didn't answer. The dead couldn't transmit.

Why did Graol have to be tortured so? Losing everyone who had ever been close to him? And why was it always his fault?

He didn't have time to grieve.

He focused his attention on Ari.

At least he still had his daughter.

He carried Ari's pod over to the flyer and activated the extended airlock. A metal alcove descended from the ceiling, and the corrugated rubber edges formed a seal around the flyer's own airlock. He placed Ari's pod inside, closed the hatch, and initiated the pressure matching. Through the portal he saw the water draining out.

Almost there.

He turned around and began the return trip through the metallic corridors and the artificial sea beyond. Half his body was still paralyzed from Fhavolin's attack, and his movements were slow, halting.

He worried that Fhavolin might have awakened some of the other councilors, but he encountered no one else. She must have been watching his

execution from her shipboard den, and would have had to race directly to the flyer to get there before him. She wouldn't have had time to return to the hibernation area, and with The Shell succumbing to the virus there was no way she could have awakened the others remotely.

That was her biggest mistake, he realized—abandoning the others and racing to confront him herself. Then again, she couldn't have known what he planned. Perhaps she thought he had more nefarious ends in mind than merely saving the human daughter he loved. If The Shell had succeeded in lobotomizing his daughter, Fhavolin would have been right.

Finally he reached the upper-class hibernation area and floated among the sleeping Satori. He went to the empty mooring assigned to him, and allowed the fleshy cords to connect.

The three-dimensional interface appeared in his mind, and he began the process of reconnecting to his surrogate.

He paused before completing the final step.

What was he doing? He wasn't human. How could he be human when his real body had tentacles and he breathed acidic water and he communicated with telepathy? The *humans* were the aliens, not the Satori.

He could still go back on all of this.

He could still introduce the antivirus, restore The Shell, and give up Ari.

Give up Ari?

Graol activated the uplink.

***

Hoodwink opened his eyes.

Eyes. He had two eyes again. And two arms, and two legs.

He almost couldn't believe it. He flexed his gloved fingers in front of his face. Fingers, not tentacles.

Damn it was good to be human again.

Except that he was freezing.

And his neck and back ached from being slouched against the controls.

And he had a splitting headache.

He lifted his head. He wasn't sure how much time had passed. Satori sensed time differently than human beings. Slower.

His helmet lay on the console beside him. His breath misted, and there were icicles on his mustache. He must have accidentally changed the temperature when The Shell had disconnected him from his surrogate and sent his head crashing into the control pad.

Hoodwink increased the heat and turned around. The airlock's inner door was open. He rose, and stepped inside the extended chamber with some trepidation.

Ari remained asleep inside her pod.

Hoodwink pressed his gloved fingers into the membrane. The pliable surface bent inward, but didn't break. He shoved with both hands now, harder, straining...

His fingers pierced the membrane, creating a gash that swallowed the arms of his spacesuit to the shoulders. Organic muck spilled forth.

Hoodwink dug Ari out from the pod and lowered her naked body to the metal floor. Her arms flopped beside her. The umbilical was taut, trailing from her belly to the pod's innards. Slime flowed around her.

She wasn't breathing.

That was normal, because the placenta inside the pod still gave her oxygen.

He cleaned the slime from her eyes with a cloth, then he opened her mouth and breathed a mouthful of air inside. He waited a moment, then did it again. Again.

She still wasn't breathing on her own.

Come on Ari.

He felt her pulse. It was there, but weak.

Hoodwink put his mouth to hers, and this time he *inhaled*. Some of that organic ooze went down his throat and he coughed violently.

He recovered, and breathed another mouthful into Ari's lungs.

Come on Ari.

She coughed. Green guck spilled from her lips. She coughed again. More guck.

Her eyes shot open in terror, and her lungs inflated as she inhaled like someone who'd been holding her breath a lifetime.

Which she had been.

And then she coughed.

And coughed.

Organic sludge spurted from her lips, spraying everything nearby, including Hoodwink's face.

He didn't mind.

She was alive.

"Let it out, that's the way." Hoodwink lifted her upper body in his arms, and he held her as she hacked away. He patted her back encouragingly. She blinked rapidly, her eyes obviously burning from the ooze that got into them.

Her coughs came with less and less frequency until she just sat there quietly in his arms, staring straight ahead. She breathed slowly, as if she relished each breathe, as if she couldn't believe she was alive.

And then those eyes tilted toward him. "Hoodwink."

He smiled. "That's me."

Ari just looked at him for a moment, taking him in. "You saved me."

Hoodwink grinned the happiest grin of his life.

"It was nothing," he said.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Why do we exist?

Because of the will of some machine?

Because of a maker in the sky, beyond the heavens that we know and see?

Because of a random combination of chemicals that just so happened to fall together into the right place at the right time to spark that thing of ours called life?

Why do we exist?

To love. To hate.

To laugh. To cry.

To live.

To die.

Do we have some purpose that needs to be fulfilled? Some destiny?

Or are we just some pawns in a game devised by a higher being for its own entertainment?

Life.

Such a simple word for such a complex state of being.

A loaded word.

Life.

You are alive if you have signaling and self-sustaining processes.

You are unalive if you are inanimate.

A tree is alive.

A rock is not.

Or is it?

A laughing child is alive.

A dead man is not.

Or is he?

What about an Artificial Intelligence whose inner workings are complex enough to warrant the quantum state that results in consciousness?

If it thinks, is it alive?

Can it laugh? Can it cry?

Can it know love? Madness?

And if it *is* alive, what happens when the machine dies?

So many questions. Too many.

What is life?

A simulation? A grand video game? Something for the universe to do when it's bored?

The Second Law of Thermodynamics states that the universe constantly tends toward higher entropy or randomness. Life is a violation of

that law. As is the birth of stars and the creation of planets. Order in the chaos. But Laws are made by living beings and thus are meant to be broken.

Life is simply this:

The love a father feels for his daughter.

A love that allows him to cross worlds to save her.

That is life. That is what it is to be human.

Human.

That's what we call ourselves.

But are we human if we simultaneously exist in another form?

Are we human if the body we inhabit is just a shell, or mask, which our real self inhabits, a real self that is somehow displaced from the body and hidden from view?

Some call that displaced self a psyche.

Others, a soul.

***

Hoodwink gazed out the view screen at the rapidly approaching surface of the moon below.

His debt to Ari was finally repaid.

Now he just had to repay his debt to humanity, for teaching him what it was to be human.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Tanner led a score of humans who were garbed in black coats with the curved-tooth needlework of the Direwalkers on their breasts. The children had properly marked the "unit leader" flag of Tanner's avatar alone this time round, setting the avatar flags of the men so that they would appear as ordinary units to the other Direwalkers. The men all wore fully-charged lightning rings on each finger, but only Tanner carried a sword openly—in order to mimic the weaponry of the original squadron they replaced, the others kept their fire swords hidden beneath their coats, alongside the special collars needed to bitch One. Cap, Al, and Briar were among the men, while the rest were uncollared recruits Tanner didn't know.

The group advanced through the city streets, making for Jeremy's estate. It was late evening, but even at this hour a long column of Direwalkers continuously streamed from the manor gates.

"He's keeping busy," Cap muttered, breath clouding in front of him. His ordinary front teeth betrayed his humanity.

"He is." As usual Tanner was the only one in the group with Direwalker canines. He probed one of those teeth with his tongue to assure himself of that fact.

The overcast sky hadn't loosed its threat of snow, though the clouds made the street appear darker than usual at this hour. If there were any ravens out, he couldn't see them in the waning light.

Bracketed torches lit the main gates ahead, and Tanner was reminded of the first time he'd come here. Ari had been at his side then, and the two of them had forced their way inside with swords swinging. It seemed a lifetime ago.

He wished she were here now. He wished she could fight with him to the end. She would have come, despite the danger. She would have led the charge.

But now it was up to him.

He wouldn't let her down.

"Well, here goes nothing," Tanner said.

The iron gate was open to allow the outpour of the endless ranks, and a Direwalker guard was seated cross-legged in the snow beside the emerging column.

The guard rose as Tanner and his group approached.

"Report, unit leader." The guard stood a head taller than Tanner and looked down on him scornfully. Behind the guard, some of the other Direwalkers snarled at Tanner as they passed the gate. He did his best to ignore them.

"Squadron 114 returning from patrol areas 5C and 5D," Tanner said. The New Users had ambushed that squadron earlier, and brought the survivors back to the sewers for interrogation. With the help of the children, they'd determined the precise time the squadron was to return.

"You're late," the Direwalker at the gate said, baring its teeth. "Any problems?"

So much for the precise time. Tanner grinned, making a point of showing his own canines. "Feasted upon a fresh herd of krubs we caught hiding in an abandoned alleyway."

The Direwalker smirked. "I'm sure you're proud of yourself. Proceed to area 6C with your squadron. The unit leaders have requested assistance in delousing a krub Safe House."

"Done," Tanner said. "But first, we have news to report to the Great One."

"News?" The Direwalker narrowed its eyes.

"Yes. Extracted from one of the krubs before he died. News of an uprising."

The Direwalker appraised Tanner a moment. "It doesn't matter. We will quench all uprisings."

"We will," Tanner said. "But this uprising is major. The Great One needs to know."

The guard's lips parted in a rictus, and it caressed one of its long canines with its tongue. "The krubs are such an annoyance. It will be good when this world is cleansed of them." The Direwalker stepped aside. "Delivery your message then. But be quick about it."

Tanner stepped between the guard and the outgoing column of Direwalkers, and passed into the courtyard. He motioned Cap and the rest of the group to follow.

The gate Direwalker blocked the way with its body. "Just you, unit leader. The others wait."

Tanner shook his head. "I don't run my squad like the other unit leaders. My units stick with me at all times. It's a rule I never break."

The Direwalker frowned. "You are short in stature, and your vocal patterning is odd. Are you a new type of unit?"

Tanner crossed his arms. "Maybe I am." When the Direwalker didn't respond, he added, "Look, I won't leave my units stranded outside. If you make me go alone, you'll hear back from the Great One. He'll want to see my units too, trust me. There are individual reports that need to be uploaded directly." Tanner had been present during the interrogation of the captured squadron. That was roughly how the unit leader talked once the children had loosened its avatar up.

The Direwalker pressed its lips together. "There's something not right.

You have all the traits, and all the proper flags are set, yet you exhibit decidedly krub-like behavior. Heightened pulse rate and perspiration. Odd vocal patterning. And your face—"

"Like you said, I'm a new type of unit. We all are. What you see here is the endgame. We're the gols that are going to run this world when the krubs are gone. You'd be wise to treat us well."

The guard didn't move. Other Direwalkers were starting to glare as they passed, and some of them slowed to listen. Tanner could hear the snarls and hisses behind him.

Tanner rested a hand on his sword hilt. "The Great One will not be pleased when—"

The guard glanced at the gathering crowd of Direwalkers and, apparently not wanting any trouble, waved Tanner's companions inside with a sour expression. "Advance advance." It glanced at the other Direwalkers. "Disperse." When none of them moved, the guard drew its sword. "Disperse!" The Direwalkers reluctantly departed through the gate.

The guard positioned itself in the middle of the gate, spreading its arms to physically separate the column of Direwalkers from Tanner's company. Tanner waited as one-by-one his companions passed the gate. So far, the worst his men had to endure were a few insults hurled their way. But Tanner held his breath when Briar's turn came. Briar had allowed the children

to slim his avatar down this time, but he still wasn't as lean as the others and Tanner wasn't sure he'd pass muster. Thankfully the guard barely spared him a glance. The other Direwalkers were more open with their contempt though, and the insults increased. But Briar made it through, and the only wounds he'd obtained were to his pride.

When everyone was inside, Tanner hurried onward.

"That was harder than I thought it would be," Cap said.

Tanner nodded. "Nothing's ever easy."

By crossing the gates, Tanner and the others passed beneath the interference shield that One had raised around this place. Tanner felt no different, yet he knew that he and his men were on their own now. Despite that they all wore hidden trackers, the children couldn't pull them out, move them, or inject items inside to help them.

Still, he'd devised a scheme to communicate with the Outside from here. He carried a pair of two-way diaries on his person. The first of those diaries was linked to another kept by the Control Room operators. Any message he wrote in the diary appeared instantly in the twin. It was his way of passing messages to the children, with the Control Room operators acting as the intermediaries. The second diary he carried was linked to the staging area in the house across the street.

"Why do they call Jeremy the *Great One* anyway?" Cap said.

Tanner shrugged. "Not sure." He felt a tinge of guilt. He really should've told Cap and the others the truth about what they faced, but all they really needed to know was that Jeremy had changed and was invulnerable, and that this would likely prove to be a suicide mission for most of them.

He led the twenty men onto the pine-flanked path toward the mansion. The first time he'd come here with Ari there had been deer wandering beyond those trees.

Today only lifeless snowdrifts filled the grounds.

He glanced up at the pines, wondering if any Direwalkers waited in ambush like before, but he saw no one. He supposed hidden ambushers were unnecessary when endless ranks of the things emerged from the mansion.

The Direwalkers marched in the opposite direction on the path beside him. With the bottleneck of the gates some distance away, the Direwalkers weren't so closely packed, and a few strides separated each gol from the next, allowing Tanner ample opportunity to study them. They were units mass produced from a common codebase, their bodies and features slightly randomized, though they all possessed a square face, angular nose, and of course the needle-length canines. Most of the Direwalkers were well-built, and over six feet tall. Some wore swords at their waists.

Tanner received more than a few contemptuous snarls for his attention, and he quickly diverted his eyes. He still hadn't fully figured out

why the other Direwalkers treated him and the others so coldly. The disrespect his men received he might be able to understand. They were ordinary units after all. But he was *unit leader*, which should have afforded him at least some respect. He supposed the fact that he and the others weren't six feet tall might have something to do with it. He wished he'd had the children improve his physical traits.

Tanner passed the perfectly rebuilt fountain on the terrace in front of the mansion, and he stepped beneath the columns of the restored portico. Even up-close, there was no evidence of the previous bomb damage.

There was a bit of a bottleneck at the main doors, and Tanner hesitated before finally giving the order to shove through the crowd of outgoing Direwalkers. As expected, his group was met with snarls and hisses, and for a moment Tanner worried the fighting would start right then, but luckily none of the exchanges escalated into physical confrontation.

Once everyone was inside, Tanner crossed to an out-of-the-way section of the foyer, then turned to Al and clasped his hand. "Good luck."

Al nodded. "You too."

Al departed down a side corridor with ten men, Briar among them. Al's men were to provide a distraction by planting and detonating thirty pipe bombs in the backyard. Briar went with them because he was the only one who knew the layout of the mansion besides Tanner.

Tanner was about to continue in the other direction when something caught his eye. Candelabras in the foyer illuminated tapestries and paintings of underwater scenes, and his attention was grabbed by one tapestry in particular—an octopus lurking at the heart of a dark cove.

He remembered seeing that tapestry the first time he had come here with Ari.

The two of them were captured shortly thereafter.

"Something wrong?" Cap said quietly.

This was Tanner's plan. Most of these men would probably die. He'd told them that.

They'd come anyway.

They trusted him to get them out of here alive. But he knew that trust was misplaced.

"Nothing," Tanner said. "Nothing's wrong."

He led the men into the corridor on the opposite side of the foyer. His plan was to circle the reception hall and make his way to the kitchens, where he would take the servants' stairs to the second floor and approach Jeremy's bedchamber from what he hoped was the least-guarded route.

The kitchens weren't far now. As expected, the house was empty on this side. Everything was proceeding well.

Ahead, on the right, a short corridor led away to the reception hall. It

was Tanner's bad luck that a Direwalker just so happened to be patrolling that corridor as Tanner and his companions walked by.

The Direwalker strode to intercept him straightaway.

"State your business," the Direwalker said. It fingered the sword at its belt menacingly. "Why are you not pillaging with the others?"

"Squadron 144, bringing tidings for the Great One," Tanner said.

The Direwalker flashed its long teeth in a feral sneer. "Who gave you the authorization, *unit*?"

"We were authorized by the gate guard."

The Direwalker's eyes tightened. "And why are you taking the back way to the Great One?"

Tanner considered this. "We are doing a cautionary sweep of the mansion. For hostiles."

The Direwalker growled, a deep, throaty sound. "There are no hostiles. You will tell me these tidings of yours and I will relay them to the Great One myself if I deem them worthy of his notice. Meanwhile you will return to the city streets and continue your assigned orders."

Tanner looked down the short corridor past the Direwalker, to the reception hall beyond. From here he could see a portion of the main stairs, which had two runs separated by a short platform, the upper runs branching off to two different areas of the second floor. Direwalkers came down the

stairs in a steady stream, separated by three or four paces each.

Jeremy's bedchamber was up those stairs.

So close.

"These tidings are to be delivered personally," Tanner said. "Perhaps you could escort us?"

The Direwalker raised an eyebrow in astonishment. "*Escort* you?"

Tanner had an odd feeling about this Direwalker, and he got the impression he had to be very careful around the thing. He raised a hand. "It's all right. We'll return to the streets as you ask."

Tanner started to retreat when he noticed the symbol on the Direwalker's chest was slightly different from that of any other Direwalker he'd seen. There was a small dagger positioned just above the tooth. Tanner wasn't sure what it meant, but he felt sure this Direwalker was a member of some high ranking unit.

And Tanner had just insulted it.

The Direwalker snarled, and then spoke in that guttural tongue of clicks and hisses. When Tanner didn't respond, the Direwalker remained still for long seconds. Finally it said, "I don't know how you did it, but you're not one of us, *krub*."

The Direwalker drew its sword.

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Jacob, in the staging area beneath the house across the street from Jeremy's estate, wasn't surprised when Helen brought the two-way diary to his side early.

The book was open, and three words were inscribed on the page.

Defend the gates.

Jacob regarded the three hundred uncollared men crowding the marble corridor behind him, and he filled himself with vitra.

"It's time," he said.

Almost as one, the three hundred men unsheathed their fire swords.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Briar felt his gut clench as his turn to cross the hall came.

His gut did that a lot lately.

He was uncollared now. He had vitra in his body, vitra in the rings he wore at his fingers, and vitra in the sword at his belt. Vitra, the power over life and death. He should have courage. He really should.

Yet it was all an act, a pretense, this newfound bravery of his. His sister Cora was dead, and he felt sure she was watching him now at this very moment, judging him. She was the reason he had agreed to come along on this suicide mission in the first place. It was bad enough that he couldn't visit the whorehouses anymore, let alone touch himself, knowing her ghost was watching—though there weren't any whorehouses open anyway now that the world was ending, he supposed—but to be forced to come here out of guilt when he could be under a warm blanket somewhere, hiding through the end of the world? It was just preposterous.

Damn you for dying, Cora!

He wanted to prove to her ghost that he was the man she thought he was.

He supposed he wanted to prove it to himself.

The pipe bombs in the satchel slung over his shoulder seemed to be growing heavier by the moment. Why Al thought he would make a good packmule was beyond Briar. *Al* should be the mule! He certainly had the face for one. Briar already had enough weight to lug around as it was. He patted his starving belly with a sigh. He was leaner, thanks to the magic of Tanner's unseen "children," but it seemed an illusion because Briar felt fatter than ever.

Briar could hear the fighting from the first floor, a din of clashing swords and roaring flame and crackling lightning and splattering blood. And screams. Sickening, gurgling screams. That was the worst part of it.

Tanner had run into some trouble apparently.

When Al had first heard the sounds of battle, he'd immediately ordered his secondary group to the kitchens instead of the backyard. Briar had protested, wanting to stick to the plan. It was a good plan after all, a plan that would have seen them away from most of the action, planting bombs in the backyard while Tanner went upstairs and bitched the mayor. Tally-ho and all that.

But Al had taken Tanner's route for himself. After the kitchens, Al hurried his men up the servant stairs and then, following Briar's reluctant guidance, he led the men the back way toward Jeremy's bedchamber. The group slunk through oddly empty corridors—Tanner's attack was proving to

be an excellent diversion, admittedly—and eventually stopped beside the hallway they sought.

Al peeked round the bend and then instructed the men to cross one-by-one to an alcove he'd spotted midway the hall. Al went first, and the men followed one at a time. Briar wasn't sure why they didn't just cross all at once, but he supposed there was a Direwalker guardsman or some such out there.

Now that his turn had come, Briar peered past the corner for himself. He saw triple-pronged candelabras, paintings of sea creatures, a floor covered in a gold-rimmed red carpet, and the alcove where Al's men crowded between the sculptures on pedestals. Jeremy's bedchamber lurked at the hallway's far end, set in the same wall as the alcove.

He understood now why the group had crossed one by one, because Direwalkers emerged from the bedchamber every few seconds and vanished an instant later, taking the corridor directly opposite, which afforded the quickest route to the main stairs and the battle in the reception hall. None of the Direwalkers even bothered to glance down the hall.

Al and the others beckoned to Briar from the alcove, urging him on.

He was the last one left on this side. It was just a simple crossing. All he had to do was move his feet around the bend and cover five paces or so, timing it so that he avoided being seen by the Direwalkers coming out of

Jeremy's room.

Just five paces.

Yet his legs didn't listen.

"Come on," Al mouthed from the alcove.

Briar watched another Direwalker emerge from the bedchamber and vanish. Three seconds passed. The distant din of fighting rose and fell. Another Direwalker marched across. Three more seconds. Another Direwalker...

"May the whoremongers protect me." The instant the Direwalker disappeared, Briar rounded the corner and huffed and puffed his way across the hallway. He literally dove into the alcove, and nearly knocked over one of the four busts on display. Luckily one of Al's men was paying attention and hugged the sculpture before it toppled. Briar would have thanked the man, but he struggled to keep his breathing in check as it was—not the easiest thing to do given the exertion of racing across a hall with a satchel full of bombs.

Al held out a hand, calling for quiet or motionlessness or whatever he thought the gesture called for. Briar gladly obeyed.

Al peered beyond the alcove's edge.

The fighting seemed even louder from this alcove, and Briar wondered if Tanner was already battling his way up the main stairs.

Al ducked back inside and retrieved the collar from underneath his coat. He withdrew his fire sword. "Are you ready to bitch us a mayor, men?"

"Wait!" Briar said in a hushed voice. "That's not the plan! We're supposed to provide a *distraction*! Blow up the back of the mansion! Not rush Jeremy's bedchamber!"

"Plans need to be flexible," Al said. "Tanner's the distraction now in case you hadn't noticed, and I ain't waiting around while he dies for nothing. We finish this here and now. We do Tanner right. We do our duty."

"But that's not the plan," Briar could only repeat weakly.

"One of us has to succeed," Al said. "That was always the plan."

"You're mad," Briar said. "You've gone mad, ye have."

"Mad?" Al's eyes glinted with a strange light. "I'm the sanest I've been in a long time. Are you with me, soldiers of the Resistance?"

Al gazed from man to man, and Briar watched them nod in turn. Swords were unsheathed. Collars removed from coats.

"Let's bitch us a mayor then!" Al said.

Al and the others abandoned the alcove and rushed the bedchamber.

Briar remained behind. He sank against the wall.

I can't do it. I can't do it.

Here he was, a grown man, and all he felt like doing was crying.

So now you know, sister.

I'm all bluster and huff, little more.

A rich, pampered coward.

A spineless wretch.

Screams of horror came from the bedchamber.

Briar slid to the floor and wept.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Ari followed Hoodwink through the metal halls in a daze.

She had almost crossed over entirely to the other side of existence. She remembered everything of her time in the hereafter vividly. But she hadn't told Hoodwink any of it. She couldn't, not yet. The magnificent Gate. The thin strand tethering her to the world. The beings of light. It had all been so unlike anything she'd ever witnessed before. She wasn't quite sure she could believe it all herself.

But then she'd been yanked back to the world of flesh and blood, where she'd awakened naked on a flyer of some kind. Hoodwink had been there. He'd undocked the flyer from the ship in orbit over Ganymede, the same ship responsible for the surface bombardment, she thought.

The flyer descended rapidly, and hit the moon's surface pretty hard. Some kind of dampeners prevented Hoodwink and her from turning into a pulp on impact. She donned a spare spacesuit—her legs were no longer weak and toothpick-thin, but toned, and she could walk on her own. Together they bounded across the icy surface of the moon to the crashed ship. Hoodwink destroyed two iron golems with some sort of hand-crossbow that shot energy bolts, and she entered the ship with him through an airlock.

She carried the helmet from the spacesuit in one hand as she followed Hoodwink through the corridors of cold metal. Around her, people burst from pods left and right. Half the pods in this section were already empty, or black inside. She wanted to stop and help people, but Hoodwink said there wasn't anything to be done, at least not out here. There was a war going on in the Inside, Hoodwink said. A war that had to end.

In her daze she let Hoodwink lead her on.

Everything passed in a blur. There were iron golems up ahead, scooping people up, and Hoodwink made short work of them with the hand-crossbow. He led her to a sealed door, and keyed a code into the pad beside it.

"Hoodwink!" Stanson's voice echoed from a speaker somewhere.

"Nice to see you too, Stanson," Hoodwink said. "Now open the door."

Only static came in response. Hoodwink glanced at Ari uncertainly. He pressed the transmit button again. "Is there a problem, Stanson?"

Finally the door slid open and Hoodwink and Ari stepped inside.

"Ari!" Caylin rushed forward and, giving Hoodwink a wide berth, hugged Ari's thigh. Still somewhat in a daze, Ari gingerly patted the little girl's head. The other children looked at her blankly from their terminals, their eyes as haunted as ever. Why weren't any of them running over to greet Hoodwink?

"I'm so happy to see you Ari, so happy!" Caylin said.

But you hardly know me. "It's nice to see you, too," Ari said.

"You look so... *healthy* now!" the girl exclaimed.

"I suppose I do."

The little girl squeezed harder. "Really really beautiful."

"Thank you, Caylin." Ari wasn't sure what else to say.

Hoodwink smiled proudly. He knelt and extended his arms toward Caylin as if he also expected a hug.

Caylin buried her face in Ari's spacesuit. "No hugs for Hoodwink. Not after what he did!"

Hoodwink frowned. "What did I do?"

One of the younger boys stepped forward. A frail, bald kid. "I told them about the Direwalkers. And we know about the Dwarf. How you gave it to Jeremy. To One."

"Ah." Hoodwink smiled sadly. "Thank you, Andes." He sat down at one of the empty terminals, and didn't look at anyone. "So now you all know. You must think I'm a monster. And I wouldn't blame you for that, I wouldn't. I *am* a monster."

Andes went to him. "You said making the Direwalkers would help humanity."

Hoodwink sighed. "I did say that. And it *did* help humanity, in a way.

Because it bought me time to figure out what I was going to do. How I was going to stop them."

"Stop who?" the one named Stanson said. "When are you going to tell us what's going on, Hoodwink?" Ari would have thought Stanson a girl if it weren't for his gravely voice.

Hoodwink glanced at Ari. "My daughter knows. Why don't you ask her?"

Ari hesitated. She really didn't know how to put this. Finally she just spat it out. "We came from the ship in orbit."

Stanson's breath caught. "Hoodwink is one of the Enemy?"

Caylin pushed away from her, eyes wide. "Are you one of the Enemy too?"

"I—" Ari found herself at a loss for words. "I don't know."

"She's not." Hoodwink smiled wistfully. "She's human, through and through. But that doesn't make her any less my daughter. Adopted, of course, but still my daughter."

"It's true then, Hoodwink?" Stanson said. "You're the Enemy? One of those who've come to erase humanity?"

Hoodwink nodded sadly. "The Satori, we're called. The Enlightened Ones. We came to Earth because of our mission. It's, uh, hmm. How can I explain this? The Satori believe in a reincarnation of sorts after death."

Ari could believe that too, after what she'd seen.

"There are only a few races left in the galaxy that can hold a psyche," Hoodwink continued. "When a Satori dies and reincarnates, they believe their psyche can be reborn into any one of those races. Species 15-B. Species 98-J. Species 87-A. Human. The Satori hate that. They want to be able to control where they'll reincarnate. They want to return as Satori every time, because all the other races are inferior. Or so they believe.

"It's why they feel they're doing humanity a favor by wiping them out. With no human bodies left, the dead human psyches have a greater chance to come back as 'enlightened' Satori. The final goal is to wipe out all the other races in the galaxy, so that when a Satori dies, his or her psyche can *only* return as a Satori in the grand simulation called life. They're doing a good job so far—humanity is one of the last non-Satori species left in the galaxy."

Ari had thought the Enemy came for Earth's resources. Apparently she'd been wrong.

They had come for their souls.

"After wiping out a conquered race," Hoodwink continued. "The Satori reshape their planet, and turn it into a colony. They go into a kind of mating frenzy. After all, more bodies are needed to hold the rush of new psyches that flood the afterlife when a whole race is snuffed out, otherwise the waiting list gets too long. The oceans of Earth are full of Satori now.

"When the last of humanity is gone the Satori will save the human genetic code for future use, and keep a few bodies around as playthings, empty shells for them to enter and control whenever they want. It's all one big existential game to them. They want humanity to become Satori, and yet they themselves want to play at being human."

Ari rubbed her forehead, and gently shoved Caylin away so that she could sit down. She was just too dazed for all this.

"Why are you telling us this?" Stanson said.

Hoodwink gave him an annoyed look. "Because you asked. And because you deserve to know. Ari. Caylin. All of you." He ran his eyes across the children. "I came back because I couldn't let them wipe out humanity. I'm more human now than Satori, I am. So tell me, has Tanner returned yet? Do we have a plan?"

Tanner. In her daze she'd forgotten about him entirely.

But he was the last person she should have forgotten. The one person more important to her than anyone else, including her father.

While Hoodwink talked to Stanson, she slid her eyes across the terminals. There, someone she'd missed on first glance, hunched with his head down on one of the desks. Someone wearing the same skin-tight blue uniform as Stanson.

She got up, and stumbled to his side.

It was Tanner, unconscious, tethered to a terminal.

She knelt beside him. It was so good to see his face again, even if he wasn't awake. His short, wavy, ruffled hair. His three-days-old stubble. His thick jawline and heavy brows. She held him in her arms and closed her eyes.

"Oh Tanner. Tanner." She had died to save him.

And she'd do it again without hesitation.

It was a funny thing, knowing that.

Is that what love was? She'd never been in love before. Not really. She'd been revised to love Jeremy, and she might've loved him for that one day when she had first married him, before she'd realized his personality didn't match the memories of the revision. So that didn't count.

And she'd never really let anyone get close to her when she was Leader of the New Users. Sure, she'd had her playthings, but sex wasn't love.

Yes, she'd never really been in love before.

Stanson was telling Hoodwink something about Tanner and his plan to stop One.

When Stanson finished, Hoodwink nodded. "That's as good a plan as any."

"And we've successfully tweaked the gol mind disease," Stanson said. "It now infects Direwalkers only. They fall dead the moment it hits them. We've let it loose in the system, and its spreading. Direwalkers across the

world are slowly dropping. All that's left is to shut down the originator of the Direwalkers."

"One," Hoodwink said.

"One," Stanson agreed. "But we can't do that from here, obviously."

Hoodwink glanced at Tanner. "How long has he been under?"

"About an hour," Stanson said.

"A lot can happen on the Inside in an hour." Hoodwink clapped Stanson on the shoulder. "Send me in. I'll do what I can to reverse the damage my race has done."

Stanson opened his mouth, and then promptly closed it again. He glanced at the children.

Hoodwink frowned. "What is it?"

"Well, it's just that..."

Hoodwink raised an eyebrow. "Out with it, Stanson."

"You're one of the Enemy." Stanson blurted. "How can we trust you?"

Hoodwink seemed to consider this. "You might have thought about that *before* you blabbed your mouth off about Tanner's plan and your little tweak to the gol mind disease. But I'm guessing you're too young and naive to know any better. How can you trust me, you ask?

"I could give you some cliched bullshit about how you have no choice. But the thing is, you do have a choice. You can choose not to trust

me. You can out-ant-out refuse to send me Inside. But if you do that, I'll just take my daughter and we'll go on over to a different control station and get access anyway. Of course, you'll be costing us valuable time that could be better used helping Tanner. Time that might mean the difference between a win or a loss. So think good and hard before you decide to send me away, because I'm here to help you, I am, and if you can't see that then you've been living your life dipped headfirst in shit for far too long, unable to recognize a genuine offer of help when it comes your way. Even if that offer comes from one of the Enemy."

Stanson seemed taken aback, and he worked his jaw, but couldn't come up with anything to say.

"Dipped headfirst in shit," Caylin repeated quietly to herself, as if memorizing the insult for later use.

Andes stood. "I'm going with Hoodwink if he leaves."

"Me too." Another child rose. Another. Soon about half the children were on their feet.

Caylin got up and padded over to Ari. "I go where Ari goes."

Ari smiled at her, and held her hand.

Stanson hadn't said anything the whole time. Finally he nodded slowly. "All right, Hood. Get tethered. We'll accept your help dammit."

Hoodwink's face broke into a wide grin. "Thought you'd see it my

way."

Ari kissed Tanner's forehead, and stood. "I'm coming with you, dad."

Hoodwink glanced at her, and there was tenderness in his eyes. "No Ari, I want you to stay here. You've been through a terrible ordeal and you need time to rest up."

Ari crossed her arms. "Dad, I'm going."

Hoodwink sighed. "Tanner was right about you. You've grown rash and stubborn. I forbid you from coming Inside with me, I do."

Ari felt her lips twitch in a half-smile. "Try and stop me. Once you're gone, I'll just send myself Inside after you. And if the children interfere, I'll do the very thing you just threatened, and leave this station behind for a new one. I'll eventually make it Inside no matter what you say or do."

Hoodwink glanced at Tanner. "You love him, don't you." It wasn't a question.

"I do." Oddly Ari wasn't ashamed to admit it. The words were easier to say with Tanner out cold, of course. She'd been used to hiding her feelings all her life. But after where she'd been, what she'd gone through, she knew how important life was, knew that hiding your feelings from people got you nowhere, and that doing so hurt them, actually *hurt* them. "I love Tanner. And I love *you*, dad. Which is why I'm coming with you."

Hoodwink smiled the strangest smile, and he looked away, blinking

rapidly. "I'm so proud of you." His voice sounded choked. "This is why I love humanity. This is why, right here. My daughter. She's the one who's saving humanity, she is. Just by the sheer virtue of being here."

He came over and gave her the biggest bear hug she'd ever had.

Hoodwink sat at a nearby desk and tethered himself to a terminal. He glanced at Stanson. "Well you heard the girl. Send us in!'

Ari tethered herself in beside him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Though Tanner and his group had lightning and flame, the enemy just kept coming. Surrounded and cut off from any support, only seven of Tanner's men were left standing.

It had been a mistake to charge into the reception hall after he took down the guard, but the temptation to make a rush for the main stairs had been too great. The guard sounded the alarm before falling, drawing the other Direwalkers, and as Tanner battled his way forward the bright red carpet transformed into a huge tentacled thing that picked up two of his men and squeezed their entrails out both ends. It then positioned its looming body squarely in front of the stairs, leaving just enough room for fresh Direwalkers to race past.

Tanner and his men were trapped. Direwalkers on one side, the Living Carpet on the other.

So they did what most trapped men do. They fought. None of them meant to barter their lives cheaply. Tanner least of all.

Tanner hacked down a Direwalker and spun in time to catch a tentacle making a grab for him. He scorched the thing with flame. The tentacle thrashed away, but another shot forward to replace it.

Cap chopped down on the new tentacle with his fiery blade. The severed end flailed about.

A Direwalker lunged at Cap from behind.

Tanner launched lightning from one of his rings and sent the Direwalker reeling across the room.

A Direwalker landed on Tanner's back, clawing. Another Direwalker came at him from the side, this one wielding a sword. Not a fire sword, but it would kill Tanner just the same.

He spun to the right, and the incoming Direwalker accidentally sliced into the one that clung to his back. He flung the injured Direwalker away and brought his sword down on the other, taking its head.

There came a scream to his right, and he turned to see a Direwalker tear out a man's eyes. Tanner plunged his blade into the attacker's throat and was covered in a spray of blood. The eyeless man toppled beside the Direwalker.

Tanner had only six men standing with him, now.

He fought on, fending blows from the Living Carpet, hewing down Direwalkers. A rampart of dead bodies and severed tentacles was building in a half-circle around him. He didn't think his small group could hold out for much longer. He hoped Al's team had taken the initiative and used this diversion to make an attempt on One. Because it looked like nobody in

Tanner's group would get the chance now.

He'd warned these men that this would lead to their doom.

This wasn't his fault. It wasn't.

Another man went down.

Five left.

***

The screams coming out of Jeremy's bedchamber were hideous.

Steeped in sweat, Briar was slumped against the wall of the alcove, where he hadn't moved since Al and the others had made their madcap dash. Briar had sat here the whole time, just listening. At least he'd stopped crying.

He peered past the rim of the alcove. No Direwalkers were coming out of the bedchamber anymore. They were busy killing Al and the others, undoubtedly. Briar was certain he could pick out the timbre of Al's voice in those screams.

"The whoremongers always win," Briar said to himself. "The whoremongers always win." The mantra was meant to calm him. It had always worked in the past—he often used it before his haggling sessions with the southern merchants.

It did nothing for him today.

He swallowed hard, and forced himself to stand. His limbs trembled under his own weight, and the weight of the pipe bombs. Not for the first

time he regretted the life he'd chosen for himself, one devoid of most physical activity. The only muscles he'd ever worked were those of his belly. The only marathons he'd ever participated in had names such as all-you-can-eat and buffet.

He wasn't heroic. He wasn't anything even close to a hero. He'd already admitted to himself that he was a spineless coward who should've stayed in the sewers and barricaded himself in a slushy wall of shit.

Cora's ghost was watching him right now, seeing him for the coward he was, and that made everything oh so much worse. He could feel her scornful gaze on him, and he didn't like it.

Go away, Cora!

Damn it. He wished she were still alive.

She had to know that if he went into Jeremy's bedchamber swinging his fire sword that he'd be cut down by the Direwalkers. Sure, he'd practiced a little bit with Al and Jacob. They taught him how to draw vitra through the sword, and how to throw flames. But that wasn't good enough. He wasn't a fighter. He didn't have it in him. His methods of attack were through subterfuge, and subversion.

He just couldn't make himself go into that room.

He glanced around the rim of the alcove and saw a fresh spray of blood issue from Jeremy's bedchamber, matched to another scream.

He ducked behind the alcove's edge.

Definitely couldn't go into that room.

Maybe he'd just cower here all night. Yes. That sounded good.

But if he did that, Cora would never let him live it down. *Cora's dead, you fool.* And even if she *was* watching, so what? It's not like she could do anything to him.

Briar closed his eyes.

If he didn't do something to help, he'd never be able to let *himself* live it down.

He could do this. He could go into that room.

For Cora.

For himself.

He took three deep breathes and drew the heavy blade. Vitra filled him, giving him courage. The sword brightened and the shadows fled before it. A fire-spitting raven etched the steel, and a bunch of tiny cinders trailed from its wings.

The whoremongers always win.

He slipped into the hallway and edged forward, step by hesitant step. He came closer to Jeremy's bedchamber with each moment. The doorway loomed like a great gaping pit into hell.

When he was almost at the entrance, a fresh gush of red fluid poured

out, soaking into the carpet. It was quite literally a gush, as if someone had tipped over a barrel filled to the brim with blood just inside.

Briar immediately spun to the left and proceeded stiffly down the hallway leading directly away from the bedchamber, toward the reception hall. He didn't look back, and he rounded the first bend that presented itself. His legs gave out and he dropped to the floor, falling against the balcony that overlooked the reception hall.

He lay there on the balustrade, panting and sweating, listening to the clamor of battle from the first floor below.

Filled with self-loathing, he set the sword down beside him. He lowered the satchel to the floor.

He didn't deserve to hold these implements of war.

He was just a coward after all.

"On me!" Tanner's voice drifted up from below.

Tanner. The man had been sliced in half by Brute and he'd come back from the dead whole again. There was a hero, if anyone. There was a man who could finish this, if anyone.

Briar peered over the edge of the balcony.

That giant carpet of Jeremy's dominated the scene below. It had transformed into a terrible tentacled monster about the size of a small house. It reminded Briar of the squids that were sewn onto the tapestries of this

place in profusion, though this one was so tall its head nearly reached the balcony. The creature blocked the main stairs and harassed Tanner, Cap and the other two men who were still alive.

Tanner and his men couldn't just retreat, because Direwalkers hemmed them in with swords and claws from behind. The group of four had its hands full, that's for sure.

Tanner grabbed something from the satchel over his shoulder, bit down on that something, and hurled it at the carpet.

A pipe bomb.

The tentacled shape batted the bomb right back at Tanner. The explosive detonated in midair before reaching them, launching Tanner and his men across the room along with some of the Direwalkers. Tanner and Cap stumbled drunkenly to their feet. The other two men remained down.

With a score of Direwalkers at its side, the tentacled creature left its position by the stairs to bear down on Tanner.

All of a sudden Briar realized what it was he had to do with crystal clear clarity.

If he was to perform one act of courage in his life, it was this.

Finally, a chance to redeem himself. Finally, a chance to play his part. Striking from the shadows like he was always meant to do.

He lifted the heavy satchel filled with pipe bombs.

Movement on the far end of the balcony drew his eye, and Briar started.

Apparently he'd been seen, because a Direwalker had rounded the bend and was heading straight for him, its mouth open in a long-toothed snarl.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

"Wait, I'm one of you," Briar said, but then realized he only incriminated himself by talking because he didn't have the needle-length canines.

He dropped the satchel and groped the floor for the fire sword, not taking his eyes from the Direwalker. His mind blanked. He found the sword, but couldn't remember how to draw vitra, not from the blade, nor the rings, nor even from his own uncollared body. He just stared at the approaching Direwalker.

It crouched low, coming at him on all fours like a cat stalking a mouse.

Lightning. I have lightning.

But he couldn't find it.

Briar fumbled inside his coat, mindlessly pulling out a clove of garlic basted in cinnamon he'd stowed there. He held it up, but the Direwalker seemed undeterred.

Briar threw the cinnamon garlic at the Direwalker. The clove struck the thing in the face.

The garlic bounced away, leaving a smoldering scar where it touched.

The Direwalker hissed in pain.

Can't believe that actually worked, Briar thought.

The realization of the Direwalker's mortality snapped him out of his daze, and he found the illusive vitra. The spark was buried deep in the back of his mind, and time seemed to slow as he fanned that spark.

Briar watched in fascination as the muscles of the Direwalker bunched in its neck and arms at a snail's pace. Its legs bobbed backward, then forward again, propelling the Direwalker off the ground in a slow-motion leap.

The spark in Briar's mind expanded, flaring down his neck, through his torso and down his limbs to the extremities of his body. It pulsed through him, running up against the barrier of his flesh, waiting for the floodgates to open.

Briar obliged those floodgates.

Time snapped back with a vengeance as a lightning bolt tore through his upraised palm. The brightness was blinding, the thunderclap deafening.

The recoil sent Briar sprawling.

He clambered to his feet, blinking away the treelike afterimage of the lightning bolt from his eyes. His hearing had dulled, replaced by a high-pitched ringing.

He looked for the Direwalker but found only a large pile of dust on

the floor beside him.

The thing had disintegrated.

Inside Briar, the spark was utterly spent. He'd made an amateur's mistake, wasting all his charge on a single opponent.

Ah well, he still had ten lightning rings, and each of those was fully charged. And he still had the fire sword. He picked up the blade and felt vitra calling to him, ready to obey his every whim.

Now if only the whoremongering weapon were lighter.

He sheathed the ponderous blade and glanced at the Direwalker's dust once more. On an impulse, he ground his heel into the remains.

"That's what you get for messing with Briar the Direwalker slayer." His voice sounded distant because of the ringing in his ears, but he didn't care too much about that. No injury could have lessened the elation he felt.

He wasn't a coward after all.

He would play his part in this.

He would make Cora proud.

He lifted the bomb-laden satchel and brought it to the balcony's rim.

***

Tanner and Cap were the only two still left standing, and they fought for their lives against ten Direwalkers.

The Living Carpet hung back. It wanted to let the Direwalkers soften

him and Cap up, apparently.

A flash and a thunderclap came from one of the balconies upstairs. Tanner hadn't thought anyone else from his group had survived. Maybe it was someone from Al's team. He didn't have time to ponder it now—three sword-wielding Direwalkers came right at him.

Tanner released flames, slashed, diced, stabbed and slashed again. He moved almost mechanically, feeling dead tired. That last explosion had nearly knocked the life from him, and strength was taking a long time to flow back into his veins.

From the corner of his eyes he saw something fall from the balcony just above the Living Carpet. A stream of fire followed.

Tanner realized what was happening too late.

Moving with gol speed, he pulled Cap behind a pillar as the explosion tore through the hall. A wave of flame roared past on either side, and Tanner felt the blistering heat. The blackened bodies of Direwalkers bounced from the far wall. Cap became a dead weight in his arms, dragging Tanner downward.

When the flames subsided he glanced at Cap. The man's eyes were closed, and though he was still breathing, the right half of his face was severely burned. Tanner had been too slow, then. He lowered Cap to the marble and searched Cap's satchel and his own for healing shards. There were

none left. Tanner had given them all away.

He sighed. "Sorry Cap."

The unconscious man gave no sign he heard.

Tanner peered past the pillar.

There was a crater in the floor where the Living Carpet had been. Pieces of the carpet itself were strewn across the reception hall, some of them still burning. Tables and other furniture had been blasted aside and lay piled against the walls alongside blackened bodies.

The Carpet was gone, and there were no more Direwalkers left to fight.

Tanner slumped against the pillar. He'd survived. But he'd lost all his men.

It wasn't supposed to end like this. They were supposed to make it to Jeremy's bedchamber before men started dying. They'd trusted Tanner with their lives, trusted that he wouldn't let them die for nothing. And he'd failed them.

Because now there was no chance to complete the plan. A single man couldn't overpower One alone.

But he wasn't alone.

Tanner glanced at the balcony where the bomb had dropped. To his amazement he saw Briar standing there. The man saluted.

Tanner felt his jaw drop. "Well I'll be hoodwinked..."

Loud, bulky footsteps filled the reception hall. Briar immediately ducked out of sight.

On the rightmost branch of the main stairs, a massive shape lumbered down from the second floor. The marble cracked and chipped beneath its weight.

The towering Direwalker halted on the platform that separated the upper run of stairs from the lower. It flexed its four arms, cracked the muscles of its neck, and then drew its four scimitars all at the same time.

Tanner felt hatred rising from a wellspring deep inside him. Hatred, anger, and outrage. The emotions filled him with a surge of renewed energy.

Ari's killer had arrived.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Ari flickered into existence inside an unfinished basement. In the floor beside her, wide marble steps led away into darkness—to the sewers, judging from the smell. There was a tracker here, the metallic sphere flashing blue beside the stairs. This was the closest Ari and Hoodwink could come to Jeremy's mansion, because *One* had the place shielded, according to the children.

She could hear fighting outside. The clash of steel. The clap of thunder. The roar of flames.

The screams of death.

Hoodwink appeared at her side. He wore his usual Inside outfit—red boots, black pants, a nobleman's green tunic.

"This way!" he said.

She sprinted up the stairs with her father to the front door of the house. She dashed outside, crossed the courtyard, and hurried onto the street.

The night was lit up with flame and lightning. Strung out in front of the gates to Jeremy's mansion, several groups of uncollared men and women fought with fire swords, dealing death to the Direwalkers. The snowpack was trampled to slush, and broken bodies were scattered everywhere, human and

Direwalker alike. The overwhelmed defenders were doing their best to hold off the besiegers, but unfortunately more Direwalkers, clustered in groups of ten to twenty, joined the fray all the time. It seemed that every Direwalker in the city was converging here. Oddly enough, no Direwalkers emerged from Jeremy's estate itself.

Ari and Hoodwink drove a wedge through the enemy ranks from the side, making sure their swords glowed brightly so that the defenders would recognize them. Fire and lightning erupted just ahead, showering Ari in Direwalker gore.

Finally she found herself at the forefront of the defenders, beside three old men, the first clad in a gray cloak, the second a green cloak, and the third in the rags of a pauper.

That last man was Jacob. He held a fire sword in one hand, and the palm of his other was raised with the fingers spread. She realized he was on the verge of striking her down.

But then his features melted in recognition.

"Ari!" Jacob dashed forward, and Gray-cloak and Green-cloak came with him, providing cover. For a moment she thought he was going to try to give her a hug. A difficult task, given that both of them held swords. "Tanner said you were dead!" His breath fogged in the cold.

"As Mark Twain once said, the reports of my death are greatly

exaggerated." She positioned herself beside him so that she had a clear view of the attackers. Doing so allowed Jacob to see Hoodwink.

"You!" Jacob lifted the sword to Hoodwink's belly. Her father raised his hands carefully. "A lot of nerve you have showing up here, after what you did."

Ari's free hand shot out, and she gripped the flat of Jacob's red-hot sword, ignoring the searing pain that shot through her palm. "He's on our side, Jacob. No matter what you think he did."

"He gave the Dwarf to Jeremy," Jacob spat. "Gave the mayor the ability to create new Direwalkers."

Direwalker body parts rained down on her as Gray-cloak let loose a particularly vicious strike.

"Whatever he did," Ari said. "He did for me. *He's on our side*." She pushed the searing blade down. It wasn't an easy task, because Jacob resisted the entire way—though he was an old man, the sword's vitra gave him strength. Smoke began to waft from Ari's seared palm. She ignored the pain using a gol trick. "*Jacob!*"

There was a blur of motion and instantly Jacob's blade smashed down.

Hoodwink had intervened. "You were hurting her." His voice wasn't friendly, and there was a glint in her father's eyes that she hadn't seen before.

Jacob stepped back defensively, withdrawing the blade. "I never told

her to grab the hot steel."

"Dad, it's all right." Ari said. Green-cloak exploded another Direwalker beside them, plastering Hoodwink in blood. Her father made a grim figure standing there in the night, all sheathed in gore, looking daggers at Jacob.

Hoodwink's expression didn't soften as he took his place beside Ari.

"Any word from Tanner?" Ari asked Jacob.

"Other than giving the command to defend the gates, not a thing!" Jacob launched flames and seared a Direwalker that ran right at him. "We're the only ones keeping the Direwalkers from overrunning Jeremy's mansion. They've been coming from across the city. An endless tide of them. Just endless. I don't know what Tanner's doing in there, but he's sure taking his time about it! What are your orders?"

That's right. *She* was Leader. "Hoodwink and I are going in. We'll need ten of your best men. The rest of you hold your position. Don't let those Direwalkers into the estate at all costs. The last thing we need is an attack from behind."

"We will hold." Jacob clasped her shoulder. "Ari, it's good to have you back. Sorry about the hand. Good luck."

She nodded. "You too."

Jacob hurried among his men, touching a select few as he went,

shouting something and pointing at Ari. He touched Gray-cloak. Green-cloak. A younger man.

Ari considered helping the defenders while she waited, but she chose to retreat a safe distance behind the ranks instead. She no longer felt the violent hatred for the gols she once had. How could she, after where she had been, and the lessons she'd learned? She didn't want to cause unnecessary hurt anymore. Not even to gols. Even though she knew the Direwalkers must all eventually die.

Ari noticed something. Some of the Direwalkers dropped dead before ever reaching the front ranks of the defenders, though there were no bowmen among Jacob's men. It wasn't much, definitely not enough to flip the odds in their favor, because there were always more Direwalkers to replace those that fell, but it was something.

Hoodwink noticed the dropping Direwalkers too, and he said, "Looks like the children's changes to the gol mind disease are slowly working through the system. All that's left is for us to cut-out One."

In moments Ari had her ten men. Hoodwink gave Jacob one last evil glance, then he and Ari led the men into the courtyard of Jeremy's estate.

There had been fighting here too. Dead humans and Direwalkers lay on the shoveled path beneath the pines. That meant the defenders had fallen back at some point, but somehow they'd managed to fight their way out past

the front gates once more. Either that, or they'd been attacked from behind by Direwalkers from the mansion, and routed the enemy. *Well done, Jacob.*

She noticed the entire facade of the mansion had been restored, as had the fountain just in front. She wasn't quite sure what to make of that.

She dashed into the marble foyer of the house with her men. The air smelled of burned flesh, spilled blood, and voided bowels. Indoor spaces always amplified stenches, unfortunately.

As she neared the reception hall, charred and maimed bodies began to dot the floor. Direwalkers, mostly. A few humans. Or pieces of them, anyway. They'd been hurled from the hall in a manner that suggested an explosion.

She heard the clang of swords from the reception hall itself. It sounded like several fighters had joined an intense melee.

"Be ready!" Ari called over her shoulder to the men, and she hurried into the reception hall. A massive crater had been blown into the marble floor. The red carpet, or what was left of it, was dispersed in tatters across the hall.

Her gaze was drawn to the far side of the room, to the source of the clanging swords. What she had thought was a whole cadre of fighters proved to be just two.

Her archenemy Brute was fighting someone who seemed small in

comparison. A man about two heads shorter, holding a red-hot sword. A man who could barely defend against the four blades that kept coming in at him.

A man who was losing.

Her heart very nearly stopped.

Tanner!

She broke away from the men.

"Ari no!" Hoodwink said.

But she was already leaping across the crater toward Tanner.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Ari dove in beside Tanner without regard to her own safety and immediately occupied Brute's two rightmost blades. Tanner shot her a glance. Concentrating on the battle, she didn't return his gaze, but from the corner of her eye a part of her was aware as Tanner faltered.

He must have known that he couldn't afford to ease off, not against a foe such as this. Pausing like that almost cost him his life—Brute's swords dove in at his neck.

But Ari was there to parry the blows.

Tanner fell back. The shock of seeing her alive must have been too much. Of course he couldn't fight. She would have reacted the same way.

Ari faced those four scimitars with her sole blade, and it took all her concentration to fend the Direwalker off. It wasn't easy. Not at all. A blade came in at her neck. She parried it and immediately forced her weapon down to block another stab. The third and fourth blades came in simultaneously, from two opposite sides. She blocked one while at the same time sidestepping the other.

The first two blades were coming in again, from the top and bottom like pincers. She had to leap back entirely to avoid those. The leftmost blade

was already making a lunge—

Tanner abruptly reengaged, far sooner than she thought he would. He occupied Brute's left-hand side, saying nothing. Ari didn't say a word, either. She didn't trust that she *could* say anything, not without tears of emotion flaring up to blind her.

Brute snarled, hissing at them from a place of hatred, those long canines stabbing the air.

But it didn't matter. Brute could hiss and snarl all it wanted, because she had Tanner now. The two of them fought in harmony. She realized she didn't have to say anything after all. Their mere presence bolstered each other, and gave them renewed hope in a battle they knew they could not win alone.

There was no one else in the whole world in that moment except her, Tanner, and Brute. It felt almost as if she and Tanner were part of the same body, anticipating and reacting against Brute as a single unit. Without looking at her, Tanner seemed to sense when she wanted to strive for an opening. He would beat back the two swords he handled on Brute's left, and then quickly intercede to parry the blades Ari faced on the right, giving her an opening. And she herself sensed when Tanner wanted to take a shot. She'd parry the swords on her side and then immediately occupy the two Tanner faced.

During these openings, three times they struck Brute in the face, just missing the eyes every time. Those were painful misses, because striking Brute's temple or cheek was like hitting mortar. The blades clanged, and vibrations ran up and down her arms, but she fought on, working through the next blows.

Together she and Tanner forced Brute backward. The Direwalker retreated to the stairs and backed up two steps.

And just like that Brute had the advantage again. Attacking from above in a sword fight was a position of power, and Ari definitely felt the weight in those blows. She no longer could spare any time, or strength, to deflect the blades Tanner was dealing with, and had to focus entirely on defending herself. Tanner was similarly occupied. To compound matters, Brute's head was now just out of reach.

The two sides were at a temporary stalemate, with neither side going on the offensive nor making any advances.

A third blade joined in. Hoodwink. His blade shifted the balance once more to Tanner and Ari, and Brute was forced to retreat up those steps again.

Ari attempted a jump attack twice, aiming for the eyes, but Brute blocked each time. Such jump attacks were dangerous, because if she lost her balance she had the entire flight of stairs to fall down, whereas if Brute lost its balance, the Direwalker would merely fall to the higher steps behind it.

Other swordsmen joined the fray at intervals on the wide stairway, either to launch flame or lightning during an opening, or to strike with the sword, but they quickly learned that Brute was immune to all three. Definitely not an enemy to toy with. Two men died, and a third lost his leg. The men stayed back after that.

When the group reached the platform set midway the two runs of stairs, Tanner tried a jump attack.

His sword struck Brute in the brow—

Tanner gave a shout, and fell backward on the platform, nearly tumbling down the first run of stairs.

From the corner of her eye, she saw blood spurt from the stump where his sword hand used to be.

Two more blades went for Tanner's head.

Ari was there in an instant, spinning in a deadly pirouette. She halted, and caught those blades, swiping her weapon left, right, and up, narrowly shielding Tanner.

She'd been caught off guard. She should've been there earlier. She should've blocked the blow. But she was growing weary, and it had cost Tanner a hand, and very nearly his life.

Hoodwink never let up on the Direwalker's other side, and together she and Hoodwink managed to force the Direwalker away from Tanner, and

up onto the next run of stairs, the leftmost branch of the wide, forked staircase.

Situated two steps higher than Ari and Hoodwink, Brute had achieved the advantage once again. Neither side gave ground, locked as they were in a stalemate of blades.

"Go to him, Ari," Hoodwink said. "I have this."

She wanted to do as Hoodwink asked, wanted to make sure that Tanner was all right, but a part of her realized that if she did that, she probably wouldn't be able to return to this fight, at least not for a while. The sheer emotion of reuniting with Tanner would prove too overwhelming.

Besides, Hoodwink definitely didn't "have this."

The blades of friend and foe moved in a blur.

Someone shouted her name.

She parried two super-fast blows. Beside her, a swordsman distracted Brute long enough for another man to toss her a second fire sword.

Two other men did the same for Hoodwink.

They both fought with two fire swords each now.

"Shit!" Hoodwink said. "Never uploaded two-sword technique to my avatar."

But Ari had. And she pressed forward, constantly breaking through Brute's defenses and striking it in the chest. Her hands were beginning to

numb from the constant vibrations that passed through the blade. Good. She pressed harder. The alacrity of her attack broke the stalemate and forced the Direwalker up the run of stairs once again. She saw Hoodwink's blades darting in and out beside her, and she knew he was providing backup as best as he was able.

At last the Direwalker ran out of stairs, and clambered up onto the level marble of the second floor. Ari and Hoodwink followed right after it.

She could reach Brute's eyes once more.

But though she struck again and again at Brute's weak spot, the Direwalker wouldn't let her blades pass. She was beginning to tire—the focus needed for two swords was even more draining than one. Gols could ignore pain, and they could fight longer than humans, but eventually even they must succumb to the physical laws of the simulation, in the end.

Brute seemed immune to those laws, unfortunately. The four-armed Direwalker showed no signs of letting up, and it could probably keep fighting like this all day.

Ari was going to lose.

She felt Tanner's eyes on her from the platform below and she had a terrible realization.

He was going to watch her die again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The swords blurred around her, and Ari felt her doom encroaching.

She'd come back from the dead, only to die again right away.

It just didn't seem right.

Her father abruptly swiveled in front of her, taking the brunt of three blows.

She hadn't been concentrating.

Those swords would have killed her.

She stepped back, taking a momentary break, and watched Hoodwink fight.

Or rather, watched him struggle to defend himself. A scimitar cut a flesh-wound into his arm. Another cut him a nice gash on the chest. A third split open his leg. It didn't help that his proficiency with two swords was terrible, whereas Brute was a master with four.

If Ari didn't intervene soon, those blades would take him down.

But she was tired.

So tired.

No.

She refused to watch her father die. After everything he had done for

her.

She threw herself into the battle with renewed purpose, an inkling of an idea forming.

She fed vitra into the two blades as she fought, until both weapons glowed orange, then red, and finally white. The brightness of the blades left a trail of afterimages over her vision, but somehow, driven by the necessity of the moment, she tapped into a feature of the gol body she didn't understand, and she managed to negate the afterimages before she was blinded by her own swords.

Hoodwink's voice seemed distant beside her. "Ari..."

She could feel the heat emanating from her steel, could feel it scorching her face and upper torso with each swing. She didn't care. Couldn't. Not now.

Plumes of smoke rose from the weapons, and she focused, concentrating on the duel, anticipating the attacks, placing her sword by instinct when the smoke blocked her vision.

From the rings she wore, she fed lightning into the blades, making the weapons hotter still.

"Ari..." Hoodwink said again, but he stepped back to let her work.

She dug deep, putting everything she had left into this attack. Her hands moved in a blur, faster than a machine, creating a draft that pushed the

smoke plumes aside. She shifted her aim down, and hammered the superheated weapons into the center point of each of Brute's four scimitars in turn. Again and again. CLANG CLANG CLANG CLANG. CLANG CLANG CLANG CLANG. And as her blades rammed into the same spots on the scimitars over and over, those parts of her enemy's weapons began to glow orange. Then red. Then white hot.

She was a blacksmith at the anvil of death, and today she forged her masterwork.

At last one of Brute's scimitars failed beneath the superheated blows and snapped in two. Brute held on to the useless weapon, but focused on the other three, struggling to present different portions of the blades to her attacks. With less scimitars to target she moved faster, and readily compensated for Brute's subtle shifts so that her weapons struck precisely where she desired. CLANG CLANG CLANG. CLANG CLANG CLANG.

Another of its scimitars gave beneath her blows.

Brute now had only two full-length swords.

"Hoodwink!" she said between attacks. "Pipe bomb!"

Hoodwink vanished from her peripheral vision, returning a moment later with the requested item.

"Wait," she said.

CLANG CLANG. CLANG CLANG.

Another scimitar broke in half.

Ari concentrated all her attention on the last unbroken sword, slapping it ruthlessly with both her blades.

"Wait," she said.

CLANG CLANG. CLANG CLANG.

The final scimitar yielded to the merciless forge that was her swords, and snapped.

She immediately launched her two swords at Brute's chin. The Direwalker attempted to block with its half-blades, but Brute couldn't compensate for her superior reach. The tips of her weapons struck the stone-hard flesh and knocked the Direwalker backward.

"Now!" she said through the vibrations that ran up through her arms and into her teeth.

Hoodwink bit the igniter and tossed her the pipe bomb.

She dropped one of the white hot swords—

Caught the pipe bomb—

And threw herself at the Direwalker, swinging the pipe toward Brute's eye.

Brute, still off balance from the chin blow, started to raise its half-swords—

Ari was the faster, and she slammed the hilt of her sword into the

pipe's exposed end, hammering it into Brute's brain.

She launched a spin-kick into that stone-hard chest, sending Brute backward against the balcony. The balustrade gave beneath the Direwalker's weight and Brute tumbled over, vanishing from sight.

The air shook as the pipe bomb exploded. She'd expected a wave of heat, but there was none, and she worried for a moment that the Direwalker had somehow thwarted her.

She glanced warily over the broken balcony.

Brute lay spreadeagled, motionless on the floor one story below in the reception hall. The tiles were cracked in an outward, branching pattern all around the Direwalker. Its eyes were hollow black sockets surrounded by soot, and its mouth lay open, an empty, dark pit. Everything inside that head had been blasted away—there were no teeth, no gums, no eyes.

No brain.

The men let out a cheer.

Ari heaved an immense sigh of relief. She collapsed backward, away from the gap in the balustrade.

Hoodwink caught her, and she dropped the burning sword, from which smoke still rose in plumes. She just wanted to lie down. She felt so dizzy, and her face and hands throbbed painfully, particularly around the rings where the skin had swollen dreadfully. Her fingers were red and

blackened in places, and pieces of skin sloughed off. She wondered how badly her face was burned.

It didn't matter. This was all an illusion anyway. They could just reset her avatar once she returned to the Outside. Still, she hoped she didn't look too disgusting...

"Ari." Hoodwink wrapped his arms around her. "No. No." He was gazing down at her body.

She felt another stab of pain then, right in her belly-button. She glanced down.

One of Brute's half-swords protruded from her abdomen.

Hoodwink wrapped his fingers around the hilt, and pulled the blade out. He pressed her hand over the wound. "Hang on. Stanch the blood with your mind, if you can."

That's right. Gols could stanch bleeding.

She didn't know how.

Hoodwink left for a moment. She thought he heard him arguing with someone, and she caught snippets of hushed conversations. "Not yet Tanner! You'll get your chance. Just a moment longer. Please."

He returned with four healing shards. "Sorry about that. Scrounged these from the men. Last they had." He applied one to her face, two to her hands, and the last to her belly. He released electricity from his rings into the

small creatures, and the shards vanished, absorbing into her skin. The blisters on her hands faded. The bleeding on her abdomen seemed to stop, and the pain faded away. Hoodwink wiped the wound clean. Only a jagged scar remained.

Hoodwink studied the scar, and then held up each of her hands. Finally he looked intently into her face. He nodded to himself and smiled. "All done."

He glanced over her shoulder, and Ari followed his gaze to the battered group of men who'd climbed to the top of the stairs. One man in particular caught her eye.

Tanner.

Her gaze drifted to his stump of a wrist. He hadn't even wrapped it in bandages, but there was no blood.

"What about Tanner's hand?" she said to Hoodwink. "Why did you waste all the shards on me?"

Hoodwink shook his head. "Not a waste. Shards can't restore severed limbs. He'll have to cope until we reset his avatar. But do go to him, Ari. He let me do my duty. He let me heal you. But now it's his turn."

She rose heavily and, supporting her weight with one hand on the balustrade beside her, she went to Tanner.

He stepped forward. "You came back, Teach." Though his chin was

trembling, he managed a weak smile.

Ari threw herself at him and gave him a hug like there was no tomorrow.

She didn't say anything. She couldn't.

She didn't have to.

"I missed you so much, Ari." Tanner's voice was almost lost in a sob. "I thought, I wanted—"

"Shh..." she said. And she just held him.

"I'm so happy you're all right," Tanner managed after a moment. "So damn happy."

"Happy to see you too." She squeezed him tight, her cheek against his hair. She wanted desperately to hold on to him forever, but she couldn't, not here, not when death waited a few chambers away. But maybe that was all the more reason to just hold on and never let go.

She didn't know how much time passed in his arms. A minute, maybe two. Finally Hoodwink's voice interrupted them.

"Ari," Hoodwink said. "We have to go. Ari. We have to finish this."

If she didn't let go now, she never would.

Reluctantly she pulled away.

Tanner smiled sadly.

She hadn't noticed it before, but his canines were as long as a

Direwalker's. She kind of liked how it looked on him, actually.

She clasped his good hand, giving him a last, wistful look, and then loosened her grip. Her fingers lingered a while longer before dropping away.

That hug—that entire moment with him really—had filled her with renewed life and purpose, and the will to go on.

"Let's finish this," she said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Swords in hand, Ari, Tanner and Hoodwink led the group across the eerily deserted second story hallway. The sound of distant fighting floated up from the streets outside, but otherwise Ari heard little else save the jingle of sword belts and the hiss of nervous breathing from her own company.

"There's still something I can't figure out," Tanner said.

Hoodwink glanced at him. "What's that?"

"The Direwalkers were coming down these halls in a never-ending column. But when Brute came, they just stopped."

Ari exchanged a look with Hoodwink. "The tweaked gol mind disease?"

Hoodwink shook his head. "No. *One* knows we're here. It's got something special in mind for us."

They hadn't gone more than a few paces when a sudden cough drew everyone's attention back to the stairs.

A beaten-up man strode onto the second floor. "Feel like I've been run over by a horse-drawn carriage in full flight."

"Calico Cap?" Ari said. She hardly recognized the leader of the Black Faction. His usual calico-colored furs were all matted and grubby, and his

face was half burned. Her heart went out to him, because he looked so much like her father.

"In the flesh," Cap said. "Or partially, anyway." He smiled with half his face, and gave her a bow.

"Dad, are you sure we don't have more healing shards?" she said.

Hoodwink turned to Tanner, who shook his head.

Another man joined the group too then, coming from the shadow of one of the balconies.

"The whoremongers always win," the newcomer said.

"Briar!" Ari would have hugged him if she weren't holding a sword.

Briar forced a grin. "Yes. Unfortunately."

"You've lost weight," she said.

Briar's grin became scornful. "Refer to my previous sentiment."

Hoodwink grimaced, obviously not too pleased to see his brother-in-law. Cap meanwhile was wearing a look that would've flayed Briar if his eyes had been swords. She wondered what reason Cap had to hate the man.

Cap read her thoughts. "He did this to my face."

Ah.

"What happened to the others you were with?" Tanner said. "To Al?"

Briar shook his head. "I don't know. They went into Jeremy's bedchamber. I didn't."

Hoodwink snorted. The implication was clear. *Coward.* "Let's go. We don't have time for idle chitchat."

Hoodwink walked on, and Ari and Tanner joined him. The others fell in behind. Except Briar, who came to her side.

"Why do they hate me so?" Briar kept his voice low. "What did I ever do to deserve such ill-contempt?" He scooped up the small bit of flab that remained of his belly. "Is it because of this? Because I like my debaucheries and my wenching?"

Ari patted him on the shoulder, too worried about what lay ahead to really concentrate on what he was saying. She'd only just been reunited with Tanner. To lose him now would kill her.

Tanner must have felt her gaze, because he glanced back and gave her a reassuring smile.

"Between you and me," Briar said. "That was brilliant work you did back there with that four-armed whoreson. Just brilliant. I'm proud to have you as my niece."

Ari nodded absently. There was so much she still had to say to Tanner. She hoped she got the chance. She really hoped.

"Your mother would've approved," Briar said.

Your mother. Those words brought her attention back to her uncle, and when she looked at him she saw a strange sadness in his eyes.

Cora.

"She's dead, isn't she?" Ari said.

Briar seemed about to tear-up. "Yes. I'm— I wish—" He closed his eyes, unable to continue.

I saw her, she wanted to say. *When I was gone.* But Briar wouldn't have believed it. There was no time for such revelations now anyway, not with the entrance to Jeremy's bedchamber looming just ahead.

The open doorway was eerily silent, and dark.

Hoodwink stopped in front of it and raised a fist, halting the group. The carpet just outside the room was soaked in blood.

"Al went in?" Hoodwink asked Briar quietly.

The man nodded. "He did."

Hoodwink rubbed the edge of his mustache. "Tanner, is it possible that Al collared One? And the children sent the whole lot of them beyond the Forever Gate?"

Tanner frowned. "No. We'd be gone too. I told the children to send along everyone carrying a tracker within a 100-yard radius. And we're all carrying trackers..."

Hoodwink sighed. "Nothing's ever easy is it?"

"No Hood, it isn't."

Hoodwink turned back to the dark hole of the doorway, a hole that

very likely offered a direct path to the realm of the dead. He seemed hesitant. "This isn't good. This isn't good at all. He's practically inviting us in. Daring us to step into his den. But there's nothing for it is there?"

"This is the only chance we'll get to bitch One," Tanner agreed. "You know the plan, right?"

"Of course I do." Hoodwink glanced at Ari. "I can't stop you from coming. I know I can't. But I want you to stay behind me no matter what happens, do you hear?"

"Dad—"

"I said behind me! Understand?"

Ari sighed. She'd always be his little girl, with the emphasis on *little*. "Sure dad."

Hoodwink eyed her a moment, then mumbled to himself, "How can I protect her if she won't listen to me?"

Ari felt some of her old spirit coming back. "I don't need you to—"

Hoodwink turned his back on her and marched into the room.

Before anyone could follow, a block of stone slammed down from the top of the doorframe, sealing her father inside.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Hoodwink stood alone in Jeremy's bedchamber.

It wasn't much different than the last time he'd come here. Curtains shut out much of the light. Underwater-themed tapestries, statues, and vases adorned the living space. On the bed, the jellyfish image still decorated the comforter.

But everything was darker. Much, much darker. The fireplace was lit, but the light struggled to pierce the darkness, and its rays diffused only a few paces in any direction. Black shapes were piled inside, fueling the flames. The remnants of Alan Dooran and his men, most likely. Poor Al. The man deserved better.

The robed figure of One lurked beside the mirror on the far side of the room. Its face was hidden in shadow, and only its pale, two-fingered hands were visible, wreathed in flickering electricity. There were reflective shards of glass on the floor in front of the mirror, yet the mirror itself was whole, and inside it stood a single Direwalker with no real-world counterpart. The Direwalker's image repeated recursively, each copy centered and smaller than the last. It was an almost hypnotic "mirror within a mirror" effect, and as Hoodwink regarded the motionless image, he realized the mirror was likely

the source of the Direwalkers.

"Welcome, Hoodwink," One said.

Hoodwink didn't answer.

"You have come to see my plan through to the end?" One said. "To watch the death throes of humanity?"

Hoodwink still said nothing.

"Maybe you thought to bargain with me for a place in the new order?"

Again Hoodwink met One's words with silence.

"The world is ending, and you have naught to say? No message from your Satori masters?"

Silence.

"You are injured. Here, let me help you." One didn't move, but all the gashes and bruises Hoodwink had received from Brute instantly healed up.

"There is in fact a message," Hoodwink said. He wanted to step forward, but he found that he couldn't lift his feet. And though his lightning rings still had charge, and he carried the fire sword in his hand, he had absolutely no access to vitra. At least he could still talk. "You are to destroy the Direwalker army. Then leave the simulation and never return."

The air vibrated as One laughed that deep, rumbling laugh. "You know that my new programming cannot allow such a thing."

"The Council commands it. Humanity is to be spared."

One tightened its digits in a fist. "Your petty Council means nothing to me."

Hoodwink hardened his voice. "If you don't obey, they will destroy this ship. You will go back to the nothingness you came from."

"Destroy this ship?" One said. "You are referring to the energy attacks against the outer hull? The very same attacks that have failed to cause any significant damage after two hundred years? The attacks that have ceased entirely in the last few days?"

"The attacks stopped because the Council wants to spare humanity," he lied.

But One called his bluff. "I think not. The scanning capabilities of this ship are not so diminished as you might think. You and your kind do not have the power stores left to destroy this ship. Already you will limp home."

"And you don't have the power stores to ever leave this moon," Hoodwink shot back. "You have enough plutonium to last what, maybe another fifty years on the Outside? But you won't even make it that long. We'll return before then, I swear it. You have a decade, maybe two, and when we do return you'll be destroyed." It wasn't a complete lie—the Satori *would* return, that was true, but only if One obeyed Hoodwink and spared humanity. If One destroyed humanity, the ship's A.I. would probably be left to live out its days in peace.

One was silent. Finally it unfolded its fist and spoke. "Even if I wished to, I cannot terminate the Direwalker program. And I cannot leave the simulation. Events have been set in motion. My programming has been updated and cannot change."

"So be it," Hoodwink said.

The rock slab over the doorway exploded inward.

Tanner and the others rushed inside, fire swords and collars in hand. The arms and legs of the men randomly seized-up, and their bodies froze in mid-stride so that they ended up scattered unmoving throughout the room. Tanner came the closest to One, though even his body stiffened in the end.

"Excellent." One hadn't lifted a hand the entire time. Nor did it now—the only motion was the electricity sparking across its fingertips. "Most excellent. You've brought the in-flight entertainment."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The faces of the others were frozen along with their bodies, their features locked in strained expressions, their jaws clenched, the cords standing out in their necks. Hoodwink seemed the only one capable of still moving his head and talking.

"Let them go, One," Hoodwink said.

One moved its body for the first time. The A.I. seemed to float, rather than walk, and the folds in its robes didn't shift whatsoever. It was as if a black statue roved the chamber, the room darkening wherever the statue passed.

"Do you know," One said. "When I merged with Jeremy's avatar, I absorbed a part of his personality? Some of his speech patterns. Some of his madness. His penchant for cruelty." One neared Hoodwink, and the air darkened, crackling with energy. "It is because of him that I will actually feel pleasure killing your friends. Odd, isn't it? An A.I. deriving pleasure from killing.

"In the Core, a million code fragments are terminated every picosecond. And yet there is never any pleasure in that. Just as in the human body, individual cells die by the millions every moment. Again, no joy in

such infinitesimal deaths. But when you put 100 trillion of those cells or code fragments together and form a human being or machine, and the complexities of life, real or artificial, arise, that's when the real joy of killing manifests. Destroying those frail complexities, erasing that fragile thing known as consciousness, that is where the real pleasure lies.

"Can you imagine the joy then of obliterating an entire world of consciousness? 100 quintillion cells. 100,000 conscious minds. Pleasure, sheer and utter. Those in this room should feel honored that I am taking the time to personalize their deaths, something I would have never done before the linkage. Jeremy's gift to me. And to you."

"I'm warning you, One," Hoodwink said. "I have more control on the Inside than you think. If you don't let my men go—"

"You'll strike me down? Then do it now." One waited. "That's what I thought. I've shielded this entire mansion from your meddling children. And my source itself is locked away in layers of multi-level encryption. There is no escape for you and your friends. But I will grant you a boon. For you see, I don't wish to further provoke the Satori by killing one of their most esteemed surrogates. So, Hoodwink Cooper, you will watch your friends die, and when I am finished with them you may go."

"No." That was a fate worse than dying. One must have known this. "Please. I'll do whatever you want."

"But you are already doing whatever I want."

One floated over to a young man, no more than twenty-five. Hoodwink didn't know him, but that wouldn't lessen the pain of seeing him die.

The young man's body flickered, and his skin, hair and clothes were replaced by a corrugated white material covered in small cilia. The corrugations were actually the separations between a thousand individual shapes—the man's body had been replaced by white larva that collapsed into a writhing pile, devouring and mating with one another on the floor.

"Well that was over far too quickly," One said.

The A.I. approached an ancient man. Hoodwink recognized him. Gray-cloak.

A wriggling pile of bullet ants appeared at Gray-cloak's feet and swarmed him.

"Man-eating bullet ants," One said. "One of my specialities. Combines the sheer agony of the bullet ant with the rapacious appetite of the piranha."

One released Gray-cloak's facial muscles so that the ancient man could howl. After several moments that were sheer agony to watch—and, judging from the raving howls, must have been terrible to endure—the bones of the man's chest and lower body were picked clean. The sated ants fell to

the floor before finishing, leaving the lifeless face and neck only partially eaten.

One allowed the skeleton to fall to the floor with a sickening thud.

"That worked out a little better," One said. "Though still a bit quick for my newly acquired tastes."

One turned on another man Hoodwink recognized. Green-cloak.

"No." Hoodwink said. "Stop."

One released his most ghastly work yet. Green-cloak tore apart. On the floor, his maimed pieces sprouted arachnid legs and mandibles, and scurried off to feed upon the two men on either side of him. The A.I. released the facial muscles of those men, and their dying screams filled the room.

Hoodwink couldn't watch anymore. He closed his eyes until the howls of the two men ended.

One approached Tanner. "This man. He sits high in your favor, doesn't he? Tanner. Yes, that's his name. A man pretending to be a gol, somewhat like you, Hoodwink. He even has the Direwalker teeth. A nice touch. I have a most fitting end in mind for him." One positioned its empty hood before Tanner, and addressed him. "You are missing a hand. What do you think it would feel like to have your insides sucked out through the stump? Bones, guts, lungs, brain?"

No. Not Tanner. It would kill Hoodwink to watch his protege die. But

it would kill Ari even more.

"One, please," Hoodwink said. "Anything but this. Anyone but Tanner."

The A.I. turned away from Tanner. "*Anyone*?"

A tingle of dread passed through Hoodwink. He knew who One was going to threaten next.

But then he realized something.

Ari wasn't in the bedchamber.

The glass window shattered inward, and a form thrust through the curtain, landing right behind One.

A bronze bitch clasped around One's throat.

So that's where she was.

The electricity vanished from One's fingers, and Hoodwink and the others were instantly released.

One stepped back, tearing at the collar with its dual-pronged fingers. One's hood was crimped because of the bronze bitch but there was still no sign of a face within the darkness.

"You fools," One said. "You seek to trammel me? Already I can see the source for this collar. I am unraveling it as we speak."

One unexpectedly snatched up a fire sword from one of the fallen.

Tanner was there in an instant and crossed swords with One.

Time was short, Hoodwink knew. One wasn't lying—the A.I. was likely delving the collar's source at this very moment, searching for the flags that would disable it.

But the children would be scanning the Inside too, waiting for the shield to drop so they could transfer the group across the Forever Gate to the outlying desert.

But the clock ticked slower on the Outside. It would take some moments for the children to realize that the shield was down. And longer still for them to react.

The men were taking turns occupying One now, but the A.I. fought with a speed and agility that even Tanner and Ari were hard-pressed to match. And One was still invulnerable—both fire and steel bounced from its robes. One abruptly released a stream of flame from its blade and burned a man down.

Hoodwink joined Ari's side and tossed her an approving nod. She returned the nod a little smugly he thought.

He took a turn at One but the A.I. easily beat him off. *Come on children, get us out of here.*

A Direwalker emerged from the mirror. Now that One's power was collared, whatever block the A.I. had put on the mirror was gone. Direwalkers could spawn anew.

The Direwalker tore open an unready man's throat.

"The mirror!" Hoodwink said, chopping the Direwalker down. "Smash the mirror!"

Two men made for the mirror, but One shifted, taking up a protective stance in front of it.

Another Direwalker came out.

Hoodwink hurled himself forward, exchanging three quick blows with One.

The distraction was enough for Ari to slip past and break the mirror. The sharp fragments fanned across the floor.

A claw swiped at Hoodwink from behind, slicing into his shoulder blade.

Hoodwink jumped backward, barreling into the Direwalker.

He dropped the sword and lost his balance, tumbling to the floor with the Direwalker. The gol, now underneath him, bit into his neck.

Hoodwink reached back and gripped its head with both hands, preventing the Direwalker from tearing his throat open. He tried to push the Direwalker away, but it held on tight. He began to feel lightheaded as the Direwalker drank his blood.

Around him, the sound of battle ebbed and flowed.

Hoodwink reached for vitra through the lightning rings and, still

hanging onto the Direwalker's head, he released a half-bolt from either hand. His palms slapped together as the Direwalker's skull imploded.

He saw Ari coming toward him. "Dad!"

The world blinked.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Hoodwink lay in the hot sand. Though it had just been night, the sun shone from the midpoint of a clear sky. He sat up, and took a moment to reorient himself.

A vast desert surrounded him. The half-concealed skeletons of giant beasts were strewn at random across the dunes. From east to west, the Forever Gate towered into the sky, eating up the distant horizon.

"Dad." Ari rushed to his side.

His neck throbbed with pain, and he stanched the ruptured blood vessels using a gol trick. He let Ari help him upright.

"Damn children sure took their time." He instinctively tried to take off his long-sleeved tunic in the sweltering heat, but the fabric was melded to his skin—the downside of being a gol. The upside was he could readily ignore that heat.

"You all right?" Ari said.

Hoodwink glanced at the sand behind him. The Direwalker's body was gone. It didn't have a tracker, so the children hadn't moved it along with everyone else.

"I'm fine." He looked past Ari. The other members of the party were

here, including the fallen, their blood blackening the dunes.

One was here, too. Still collared, the A.I. fought like a master swordsman, shooting flames at will from the stolen fire sword. Men were burned. Limbs were cut off. A globe of darker air surrounded the A.I. and followed One as it moved, compounding matters.

Tanner led the men in attack. Or rather, defense.

"Tanner needs your help, I believe," Hoodwink said, a little reluctantly. But she was a grown woman now and he had to let her choose her fights.

She kissed him on the forehead and then she ran to Tanner's side.

Hoodwink positioned himself so that he faced directly away from the Forever Gate. He jogged forward. There was nothing ahead of him but empty desert.

Hoodwink collided with an invisible barrier a few seconds later, banging his nose something nasty. He slid a hand over the glass-like surface that defined the boundary of the Inside, his fingers making a distinct squeegee sound.

He summoned vitra from the rings on his fingers, remembering how Seven, the Dwarf, had opened a gap in the boundary when Hoodwink had first come here a lifetime ago.

He released electricity and it pulsed across the surface in waves. He

intensified the barrage, shooting actual bolts. Thunder shook the air. The others must have noticed, and hopefully they herded One this way.

A section of the invisible boundary abruptly flickered out.

Hoodwink ended the barrage. He'd made the necessary gap. The air flickered intermittently in front of him, alternating between an uninterrupted view of the landscape to a triangular shard of darkness large enough to fit a man.

Hoodwink glanced at the others. Tanner and Ari had driven One closer to the gap, but the A.I. still defended itself ceaselessly with the fire sword. There were only two others left standing besides Tanner and Ari—Calico Cap and a man Hoodwink didn't know, both of them clearly exhausted.

Hoodwink approached, pausing to retrieve a sword from a fallen man. He twirled the blade and walked up to One.

Hoodwink came up behind the A.I. as Tanner and Ari kept it occupied. He studied the globe of darkness that surrounded One, and spotted the chain connected to the collar, the bronze links dragging in the sand.

Hoodwink entered the globe, picked up the chain, and yanked.

One whirled toward him.

Hoodwink sidestepped the killing slash aimed at his neck and he returned the strike with one of his own.

One didn't even bother to parry. As Hoodwink's weapon bounced from the impervious robe, One merely struck at him again.

Hoodwink twisted sideways, barely dodging the attack.

Tanner barreled into One from behind, and the A.I. stumbled forward.

Hoodwink pulled hard on the chain, adding to the momentum and forcing One closer to the gap.

One chopped down with its blade, aiming to sever the chain.

Hoodwink hurled the chain aside just in time, and the A.I.'s sword sliced empty air.

Tanner pummeled One again from behind. This time, caught off-guard and off-balance, the A.I. toppled. Tanner fell over it.

Hoodwink dropped his sword and piled onto them. Together he and Tanner wrestled One. The darkness was almost complete this close to the black robes. Still, Hoodwink could see well enough to shove his sweaty palms between One's fingers. He released electricity from his rings while simultaneously prying at those clammy fingers, and the combined effort allowed him to wedge the fire sword from One's grip.

He threw the weapon aside.

"One is disarmed!" Hoodwink announced, panting.

One headbutted him damn hard, and Hoodwink nearly lost consciousness. He rolled away into the sand as Tanner and One continued to

wrestle.

At the edge of his vision he saw Ari throw herself into the fray.

Hoodwink crawled to his knees, and shook his groggy head.

The other three were on their feet again. He saw Ari shoving One from behind, while Tanner dragged the A.I. from the front. Tanner had wrapped the chain around his stumped arm, and pulled with his good hand. Together the two of them led One inexorably toward the flickering gap.

Hoodwink found a sword and scrabbled upright.

One shook Ari off, and sent her sprawling with a boot to the chest.

Hoodwink came forward, intending to take her place.

Tanner was almost at the gap. As Hoodwink closed, he had a sudden worry that Tanner meant to pull the A.I. into the gap with him, killing himself and One together.

But Tanner never made it.

A sword pierced him from behind. The blade emerged from Tanner's heart, and he released the chain, falling drunkenly to his knees, sliding off the skewer that was the sword.

It was Calico Cap. The other man who'd been with Cap lay dead on the ground behind him.

Hoodwink merely stared, too shocked for anything else.

He heard Ari scream. She ran across the sand, her fire sword flaring a

blinding white. She sprinted straight for Cap, ignoring One.

But One extended a hand and caught her by the throat. The A.I. moved mechanically and lifted her squirming body toward the gap in the boundary. Her face became a bright red, and she kicked the air helplessly, weakly pounding her sword against One's grip.

Hoodwink beat One to the gap, and hammered his blade into the A.I.'s arm. Again and again he struck, with a strength that surpassed even his gol powers.

How dare One threaten his daughter like that? *How dare it.*

Hoodwink broke One's hold, and Ari fell to the sand, gasping for air.

"Touch my daughter, will you?" Hoodwink grabbed One by the arm. He wrenched the A.I. toward the gap. "You'll pay for that." He could scarcely hear his own voice for the hot rage that pumped through his veins.

One strove to punch Hoodwink in the face, but he dodged each blow. He could feel the gush of air from the near misses—those weren't gentle blows. But neither was Hoodwink in all that gentle of a mood right now.

He reached the gap and was about to throw the A.I. through and finish this, when a burning sword touched his throat.

The pain quenched his rage a tiny bit, and Hoodwink froze. He glanced down. Perspiration sizzled onto the blade.

One's fist crushed into his cheek.

Hoodwink was distantly aware as an arm wrapped around his torso and pulled him backward, away from One. The hot sword stayed close against his throat.

"Can't let you betray your own race, Hoodwink," Cap's voice came in his ear.

Hoodwink blinked away the dizziness from One's blow, and saw Ari rise unsteadily from the dune.

One smashed her in the face with the back of its pale hand. Blood spattered from her mouth and she fell.

"No!" Hoodwink struggled against Cap, but the traitor pressed the blade into his neck and stilled him.

Ari didn't get up again. Her eyes were closed. For a moment Hoodwink feared the worst, but then he saw that her chest still rose and fell.

"Never thought it would come this far," Cap said. "Never thought any of you would get this close to ruining it all."

"I'll kill you," Hoodwink said against the pain of the blade.

"I had wondered," One said. "If any of the others remembered."

"I remember parts," Cap said. "Enough."

Cap released Hoodwink and forced him to kneel in the sand beside Tanner. Hoodwink glanced up, readying a string of curses to further chew out the traitor, but his breath caught. He hadn't realized the severity of Cap's

burns in the dim light of the mansion, but up close beneath the bright sun the terrible extent of Cap's injuries was revealed. The entire right half of his face was burned away, to the bone in places. Bare tendons, muscle and cartilage hung flaccidly. A lone eyeball perched in a blackened socket. Hoodwink almost sicked up.

He looked away. The triangular gap in the system boundary was right beside Hoodwink, flickering from black to desert to black again. He wondered if Cap meant to send him through the gap. Well, Hoodwink wouldn't go without a fight.

He pondered his options.

Ari hadn't moved. She was still unconscious.

Tanner meanwhile seemed out of it beside him. His friend had apparently stanched his heart wound with a gol trick, and forced the punctured organ to pump, but Hoodwink didn't think Tanner could last much longer. No one could, not after a blow like that.

So it was just Hoodwink versus One and the traitor.

Just when he thought things couldn't get any worse, the bronze bitch around One's throat abruptly dissolved.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Hoodwink stared at One helplessly.

There was nothing he could do, not anymore.

One had its full powers restored.

Humanity was lost.

Cap turned toward One. "What are your orders—"

The man exploded in a fountain of blood. Nothing remained of him but a fine red mist.

"I've changed my mind about not killing Satori surrogates," One said.

A squadron of fifty uncollared men appeared behind One, led by Jacob.

Hoodwink hadn't noticed it before, but a two-way diary was open on the sand beside Tanner—somewhere along the way his friend had managed to convey a message to the children for help.

One swiveled toward the newcomers. Before those men could take a step, or flex an arm, or blink an eye, each of them became rooted in place. One had probably already raised a shield to keep the children from further meddling.

Hoodwink hadn't been paralyzed, nor Tanner, who still swayed on his

knees beside him. Were the two of them overlooked? Or merely beneath One's notice?

It didn't matter. There was nothing the two of them could do anyway. They were like ants compared to the power that One wielded.

There had been a few other collars lying in the sand nearby, but they were gone now. Indeed, every item of metal had vanished from the battlefield, including the fire swords and the lightning rings.

Hoodwink had failed humanity.

He had failed Ari.

The world was doomed.

In these final moments as a living man, he experienced a moment of absolute lucidity. For the first time he clearly understood the guilt that had gnawed at him all these years.

He thought he was doing the right thing by letting Jeremy revise Ari, thought he was saving her from a life as a User. But he'd never done anything so wrong. He'd let Ari down, true, but the greater sin was that he'd let himself down. He'd allowed others to dictate his own affairs. He should've stolen her back from Jeremy once he'd realized his mistake, and taken her to another city, the law be damned. He should have done everything in his power to get her back.

Everything.

He suddenly knew what he had to do.

There was a way to save humanity, though it required the ultimate sacrifice.

But humanity was worth it.

She was worth it.

Hoodwink lowered his voice and spoke for Tanner's ears alone. "Tell her I'm sorry."

"Whatever for?" Tanner said.

Hoodwink smiled grimly and then he leaped through the gap.

***

"Hoodwink no!" Tanner tried to grab Hoodwink but his friend was already gone.

Tanner's body froze like the others.

His shout had attracted One's attention. Enough for the A.I. to immobilize him, anyway.

The pain from the sword wound in his heart flared, and he would have grimaced if he was able. But there were worse pains than the physical.

Hoodwink was dead.

Stepping beyond the system boundaries would've killed him instantly.

And since Hoodwink was a gol, that meant he was dead in the real-world too, his mind burned to a crisp by the wires embedded in his neocortex.

He would be in that place called Topside, if anywhere.

Assuming dying as a gol didn't kill him in that place, too.

Tanner struggled against the invisible binds. When that proved unfruitful, he strove for vitra through the lightning rings he wore, but then he realized the rings were no longer there.

One didn't seem too concerned that Hoodwink was gone. Without a word, the A.I. moved among the newcomers. Men exploded in blood wherever it went, just like Cap. Gone was the gloating. Gone were the extravagant deaths. One had decided to just kill these men and be done with it.

It was Tanner's fault. He had summoned these men and condemned them to death. He'd warned all of them before this began that this was a suicide mission. Yet they all volunteered. That didn't stop Tanner from dying a little inside with each man who fell.

Two men exploded at once. Three. Four men at once. Ten.

One had circled the area, and it paused now beside Tanner and Ari.

The A.I. looked down at her sprawled form. Tanner had thought himself emotionally numb at this point, but now that her turn had come, he knew he couldn't watch her die again. He would descend into madness.

One raised it's palm—

I'm so sorry Ari.

Apparently One had decided to prolong her death, because Ari's unconscious body floated into the air.

Tanner wanted to plead for her life, but his lips were frozen. He knew the A.I. wouldn't listen to him anyway.

He floated up from the sand now too, and he drifted forward until he hovered beside Ari.

He had to do something to distract One and somehow buy Ari time. If he could get One to kill him first...

Like his lungs, his eyes could still move, and he focused on the damaged barrier behind One. He was at just the right angle that he could see the subtle reflection of the desert on the transparent surface. He himself possessed no reflection, but he didn't need one. Not for what he intended.

Tanner focused on the reflected dunes and cleared his mind, beginning the process of disbelieving reality.

One followed Tanner's gaze and saw the subtly mirrored landscape. The A.I. swiveled its head back toward him. "Fighting to the very end, Tanner? I propose a race. Let us see if you can disbelieve this reality before I tear out your heart. When Hoodwink's daughter reawakens, I will take hers too so that your hearts may be joined together to the end."

One squeezed its hand.

Tanner felt a pressure building inside his chest, right where the wound

in his heart was. His body began to shake.

Of course he wouldn't be able to disbelieve reality, not now, but he took a small comfort in the fact that he'd distracted One long enough to give Ari a few more moments. It was his turn to die for her, after all. And maybe, just maybe, the children would pull her out in time when they realized his vitals had flatlined alongside Hoodwink's.

It was the last hope he had, the only hope.

It felt like his chest was about to burst.

At least he knew the answer to the question he'd asked himself at the start of all this. Would he have the courage to die for her?

Absolutely.

Goodbye, Ari.

Without warning, the pressure in his chest ceded.

One glanced up sharply. "No."

The invisible binds lifted, and Tanner and Ari dropped to the sand.

One flickered. In its place stood a drunken Jeremy, dressed in a black robe with thread-of-gold tentacles running up one sleeve. Jeremy's eyes rolled up in his head and he toppled, lifeless, to the dune.

Tanner sat upright, hardly able to comprehend what had just happened. It was done then.

They had won.

He lifted Ari weakly in his arms. The wound in his chest throbbed painfully. He wasn't able to block the pain anymore.

Ari opened her eyes.

"Did we do it?" Ari said groggily. Her cheek was swollen purple where One had struck her.

Tanner forced a smile. "We did." His voice was just as groggy as hers, if not more so. He ran a gentle finger across her forehead. Vision was beginning to fail him, and it was all he could do to keep himself upright.

Ari pushed herself up and stared at the fresh blood stains all around her that blackened the dunes. She paused when she saw Jeremy's robed body, his face clearly visible. "Where's Hoodwink?"

"He—" Tanner's voice caught. *Hoodwink threw himself past the system boundaries. Went back to that Topside of his, and somehow saved us all.*

Ari grabbed him by the shoulders. "Tanner, where's Hoodwink?" Her lips were trembling.

Tanner shook his head. He felt faint, so very faint. He really needed to lie down. Darkness was encroaching on his vision. "He said... he said to tell you he was sorry."

"What are you talking about?" Ari released him, and clambered to her feet. "Hoodwink?"

Tanner remained upright for a few seconds longer, but finally his punctured body ceased to obey him and he collapsed.

"No!" Ari's voice seemed distant. She raised him in her arms, but his head flopped back, and she had to cradle his neck with her hand.

The darkness almost consumed his vision now. "Cap got me in the heart with his sword. I stanched... the wound... forced the muscle to pump. It's finally giving out on me. It didn't help that One almost pulled my heart out just now. Should've..." But he lost his train of thought. He felt so cold, and he was shivering though his forehead gleamed with sweat. Blood had started to flow again from the stump of his hand. Just as it had started to gush from the wound in his chest.

Ari tore a handmirror from her cloak. "Stay with me, Tanner. I'll get you out of here."

He smiled weakly. "One last kiss?"

She kissed him without hesitation. He felt tears splash onto his cheeks. His, or hers?

"We've a lobster date to go on," she said, her voice trembling.

"Sounds nice." Tanner closed his eyes.

"Stay with me." She sounded so far away. "Don't you dare close your eyes."

Tanner looked at her groggily. "My turn... to die this time."

"No! Don't you die! Not now. Not after everything!"

But the darkness came, and Tanner was gone.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Drenched in sweat, Ari focused on the handmirror.

She had to get out. Now.

Hoodwink was gone, probably dead. Tanner, the last person she cared about in this world, the last person she had left, was dying. It was up to her to save him. Up to her to return to the Outside and pull him out.

Her face throbbed in pain where One had hit her. Her battered body ached from the intense melee. But she ignored her physical woes, as gols sometimes could, and stared into the reflected world of the handmirror. She had a reflection, these special mirrors made sure of that, and she looked upon her bruised face, remembering what Hoodwink had told her so long ago.

Know, deep inside, that none of this is real. That your heart beats in a far-off place. That your thinking comes and goes in a mind that lives on the Outside. You *are the illusion. The person in the mirror is real.*

That was true in this reality, and the next. After where she had been, what she had seen, she recognized all of this for the fallacy that it was.

Urgency filled her and, sitting there among the dead, in the sand dunes beyond civilization, she did something that she had never done before. Something no one else had ever done.

She disbelieved reality in under thirty seconds.

She blinked her eyes in the real world and immediately sat up.

Her helmet and gloves lay on the table in front of her. She saw Hoodwink slumped, unconscious, against the terminal beside her. She turned around. Tanner hadn't revived yet either. The other children, intent on their own terminals, hadn't seemed to notice that she was awake.

She spun back to her own terminal and initiated the retrieval procedure Tanner had taught her.

Neither Tanner nor Hoodwink awoke.

She tried again. "Come on. Come on!"

"Ari!" Caylin came rushing to her side.

"Wake Tanner up," Ari said. "Someone wake him up! And Hoodwink!"

"I'm trying!" Stanson said from across the room. His face was grim. "I initiated the pullback for both of them. They should be awake by now..."

Ari untethered herself and pushed away from the terminal. She touched Hoodwink's bare wrist. Like her, he'd left the gloves of his suit on the terminal. He had no pulse.

She went to Tanner. No pulse either.

"They're dying!" she said. *They're dead.* "What do we do?"

"Neither of them have brain readings," Andes said. The bald child

stared into his terminal. He sounded shocked. "We could hook them up to the ECMO heart-lung and keep them alive, but... but they're vegetables."

Ari set herself down beside Tanner, and sagged against the desk.

Neither of them have brain readings.

So this was how it would end.

The two people she loved more than anything in the world, both gone.

Ari's head tilted to the side, and her eyes lost focus.

She knew that death was nothing to fear. That Tanner and Hoodwink were in a good place, a better place, where they would know unlimited love, as she had when she was gone. Yet she couldn't help but feel a sense of regret for the life they could've had together.

"Wait a minute," she heard Andes say.

"Hey Teach."

Her head shot up. Tanner was awake beside her.

She buried her lips in his, almost falling off balance, not caring who was watching.

She pulled away. "I thought you were dead. You had no pulse. No brain readings."

"Maybe you checked wrong."

She touched his wrist with her index and middle fingers, just below the sleeve of his skin-tight blue uniform. This time there was a pulse. "No. I

checked right."

Tanner shrugged. "Well, I couldn't die. Had to hold you to our lobster date."

She kissed him one more time, a quick peck, and then went to Hoodwink. She rechecked her father's pulse, hoping for a miracle.

Not this time.

"So you've left me again, dad," she said sadly. "So soon after coming back. Just like you always do."

Tanner was alive at least. Life was often bittersweet, wasn't it?

A brief, brilliant flash came from the window on the far side of the room. The children hurried over to it.

"Guys," Stanson said. "Take a look at this."

Ari and Tanner approached the window together.

When Ari got close, Caylin held her hand.

She stared out the long window into the starfields of the Ganymede sky.

Ari saw the purple ribbons of the aurora borealis. The dancing lights that were one of the greatest spectacles of the universe, the lights that Hoodwink promised she would see one day.

And above those ribbons she saw a spreading cloud of glitter, in a pattern reminiscent of fireworks. She realized it was debris from the ship that

had been in orbit. There were no plumes of smoke, no fireballs, just pieces of metal expanding from a central point in the sky, the tiny metallic edges catching the light of the distant sun.

"Hoodwink," she said. "So he's really gone." Her voice cracked. "He's crossed the final Forever Gate. For us." *For me.*

Tanner rested a comforting hand on her shoulder. "When beggars die, there are no comets seen; but the heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes."

Ari smiled sadly. "He never got to build the utopia he wanted."

"We'll do it for him." Tanner lowered his hand and clasped hers in his.

"He's not dead," Ari said. "Not really. None of us ever dies." She glanced at Tanner. "Did you see it, when you were gone? Just now?"

"See what?" Tanner seemed genuinely puzzled.

"Forever." Ari stared at the twinkling debris. "When I fell from the wall, Brute slammed the disk into my head. I found myself back here, in the Outside, except I was looking down at myself from a corner of the room. There was a wispy cord that connected me to my body. As I watched, that ethereal cord slid over to the terminal beside my body.

"There was a being next to me. I couldn't see him, but he told me not to worry about the cord, or how delicate it looked. There was a tunnel behind me, and I went inside. There were beings of light in the tunnel. I saw

relatives. I saw Cora. But Hoodwink wasn't there.

"I neared the end of the tunnel, and my life played back. My actions weren't judged by anyone except myself. I could see myself, reliving the important events from the point of view of the people I cared about. And I could feel how my mistakes hurt them, because I *was* them. I felt the hurt I caused Hoodwink and Cora. I felt the hurt I caused you. I—"

Tanner interrupted. "You've never hurt me."

"I have. But in that moment, I swore if I ever returned that I'd be a better person. That I'd help others, even gols, and try to be more mindful of how my actions affected them. I emerged from the tunnel into a land of brightness. I felt peace, well-being, love. There was a bridge of white light, spanning a sparkling river. A gold gate, towering to infinity, was set across the middle of the bridge. It was the final Forever Gate that all creatures in the universe must one day pass.

"I looked back, and saw that I still had that thin umbilical connecting me to the world of the living, though it was slighter than ever. I knew if I crossed over that final threshold, if I crossed that final Forever Gate, the cord would break entirely and I could never return. So though I felt peace, forgiveness, and love, I didn't cross. Instead, I waited."

Tanner was silent a moment. "Why? If that place was so good, why would you want to come back to this?"

"Because Hoodwink wasn't there." Ari squeezed his palm, and looked into his eyes. "And because *you* weren't there."

EPILOGUE

A million bits of crumpled metal and ice drifted through space. Ranging in size from specks smaller than dust to fragments larger than mansions, the edges of each individual piece sparkled like icicles under the faraway sun. Some of them rotated. Others broke apart and disintegrated. Many of the metallic fragments were in fact coated in ice, or were chunks of ice themselves. Large swaths of mist—microscopic pellets of frozen water—gradually dissipated in the gaps between fragments, proof of what happens when an exploding ocean flash-cools in space.

A small pod floated amid the glittering wreckage. It carried one roomful of water, one compact energy source, and one bittersweet Satori.

Graol had the pod all to himself. Through the portal, he saw other pods dispersed among the glittering fragments. The nav controls of those escape pods were all preprogrammed to return to the nearest colony, in this case the third planet of the system, Earth. The *Vargos* was gone, but its passengers survived.

Still, he felt little satisfaction over what he had done.

The *Vargos* had possessed some of the same security layers as the human starship. Sub-A.I.s could veto commands from the main A.I., The

Shell. However there was a flaw in the security design—no sub-A.I.s protected the power system. That area of the ship was just a dumb interface under the direct control of The Shell, like the satoroids. Thus the tailored virus Graol had created allowed him to bypass the security measures of the power system and overload the core.

When he initiated the overload, the automated escape procedure kicked into gear. The fleshy umbilicals and placentas slid along the support tracks to the evac chambers, bringing the respective Satori along with them. Eight Satori at a time were packed into the escape pods of the lower-class oceans, while the pods of the upper class held only one. The slave classes were left behind, as none of those races had consciousness anyway. Once the occupants were loaded into the escape pods, the hatches were sealed and the pods jettisoned.

There was enough time before the core exploded for every Satori aboard to be stowed in a pod and ejected. At least that's what Graol hoped. He hadn't wanted to kill any Satori by doing this. That wasn't what this was about.

No. It was about Javiol, and his surrogate Jeremy.

The thirty-eight remaining surrogates would have awakened the instant they were transferred to the escape pods. Forcibly emptying the Satori consciousnesses from the human surrogates was essentially the same as

killing those surrogates. When Javiol awoke, the human that was Jeremy died, ending his link with One.

Destroying an entire ship was a harsh price to pay when Graol only needed to disconnect one surrogate, but Ari and Tanner didn't have the luxury to wait around while he tracked Javiol down.

So he'd destroyed the *Vargos*.

Javiol was floating somewhere out there in the debris field at this very moment, lying awake in a pod. He was upper class, so he would be alone like Graol. Without The Shell to guide his awakening and initiate Return therapy, he'd have no knowledge of who he was, nor of the technology available to him within the escape pod. He would still be Jeremy in his mind. Graol imagined him frantically slamming his tentacles into the metal walls, flailing about like a caged prisoner, trapped not only in a cell of metal and water, but in a body of tentacles and cilia.

It would be a long journey for that one.

Graol tethered himself to the local A.I. of the pod and prepared to enter hibernation. His only regret was that he hadn't had time to permanently transfer his consciousness to a human body before he destroyed the *Vargos*. That would just have to wait another day.

Goodbye Ari.

Before he went under, he reached out, searching for Javiol.

There. A quadmind whose thoughts were a confused bundle of madness and terror. A quadmind that still thought it was human. A quadmind that once believed it could do anything to anyone, no matter how cruel or sadistic, without repercussions.

Graol transmitted a single message.

Welcome to the real world, Jeremy.

He thought he heard Javiol scream.

This is the end.

Thank you for reading The Forever Gate!

If you want to be notified when my next novel is out, click here to sign up for my *New Release* mailing list. This list is *only* for new release announcements--no ads, no blog posts. You can unsubscribe at any time.

Until next time,

Isaac

Postpartum

If you loved this book, please consider leaving a review. Comments and reviews allow readers to discover indie authors, so if you want others to enjoy *The Forever Gate* as you have, please leave a short note.

You can keep in touch with me or my writing through one—or all—of the following means:

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Don't be shy about emails, I love getting them, and try to respond to everyone!

Thanks again for reading *The Forever Gate*.

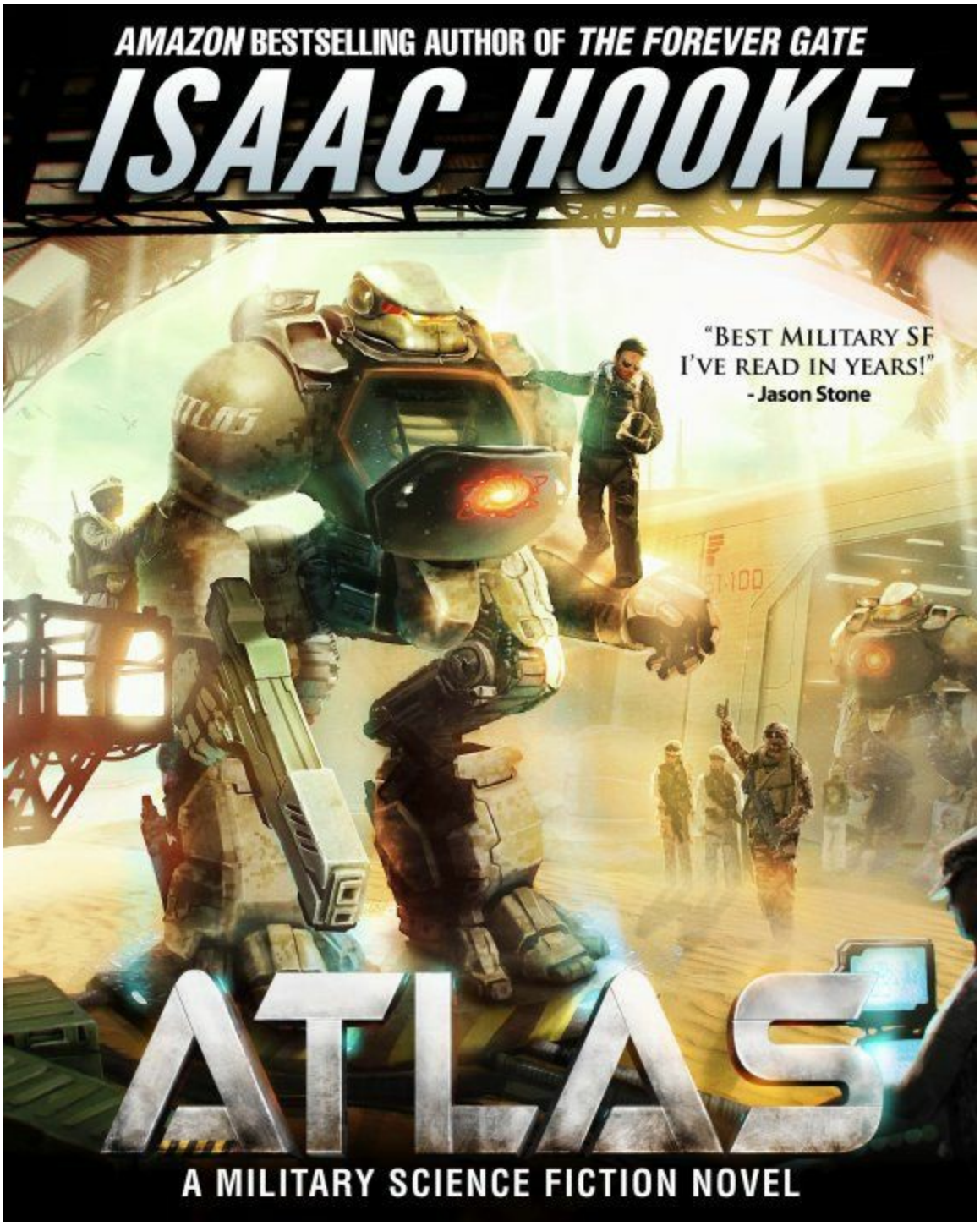
About the Author

Isaac Hooke is the author of the military science fiction novel, *ATLAS*. His experimental genre-bending action novel *THE FOREVER GATE* was an Amazon #1 bestseller in **both** the science fiction and fantasy categories when it was released in May 2013.

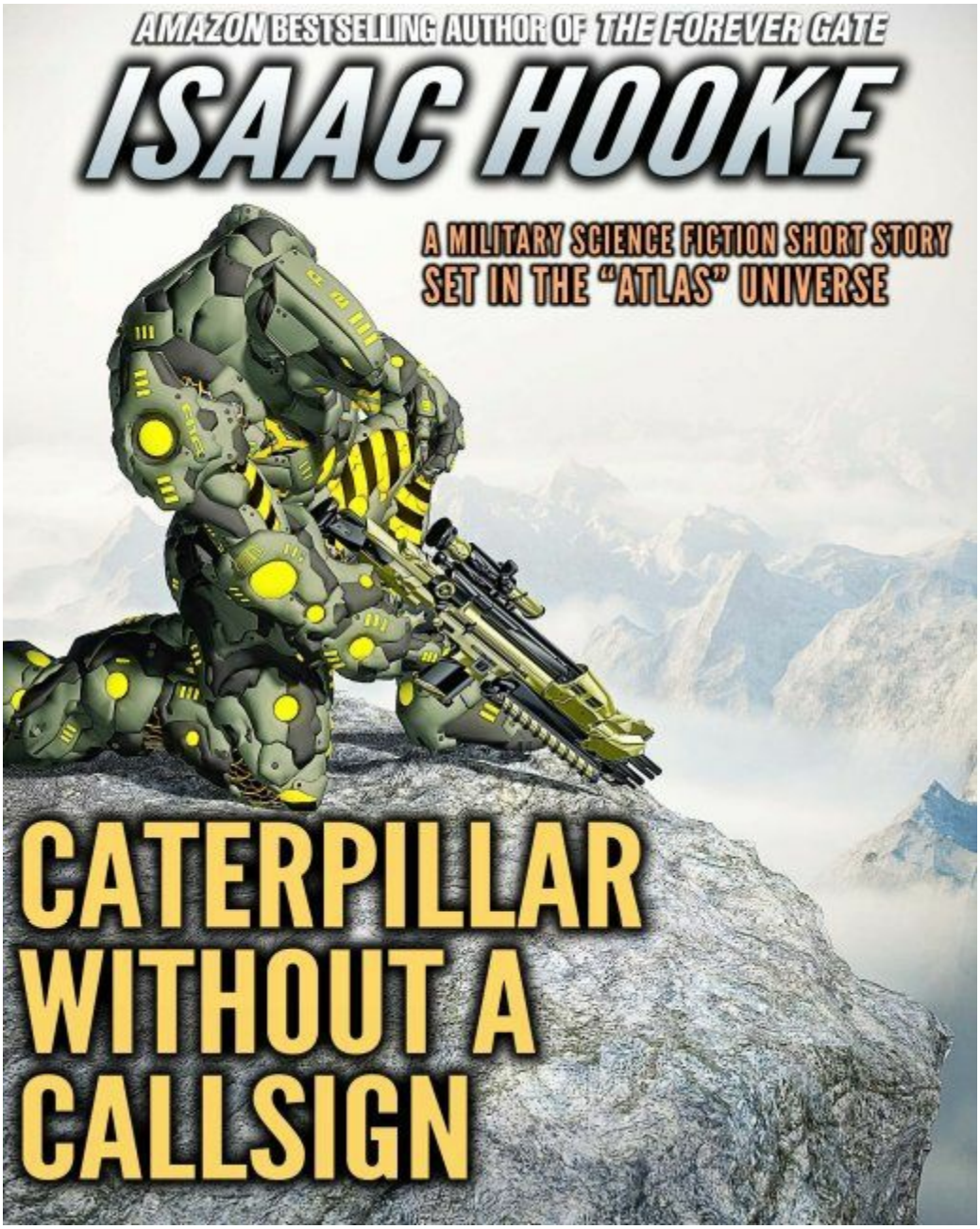
When Isaac isn't writing, publishing, and blogging, he's busy cycling and taking pictures in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

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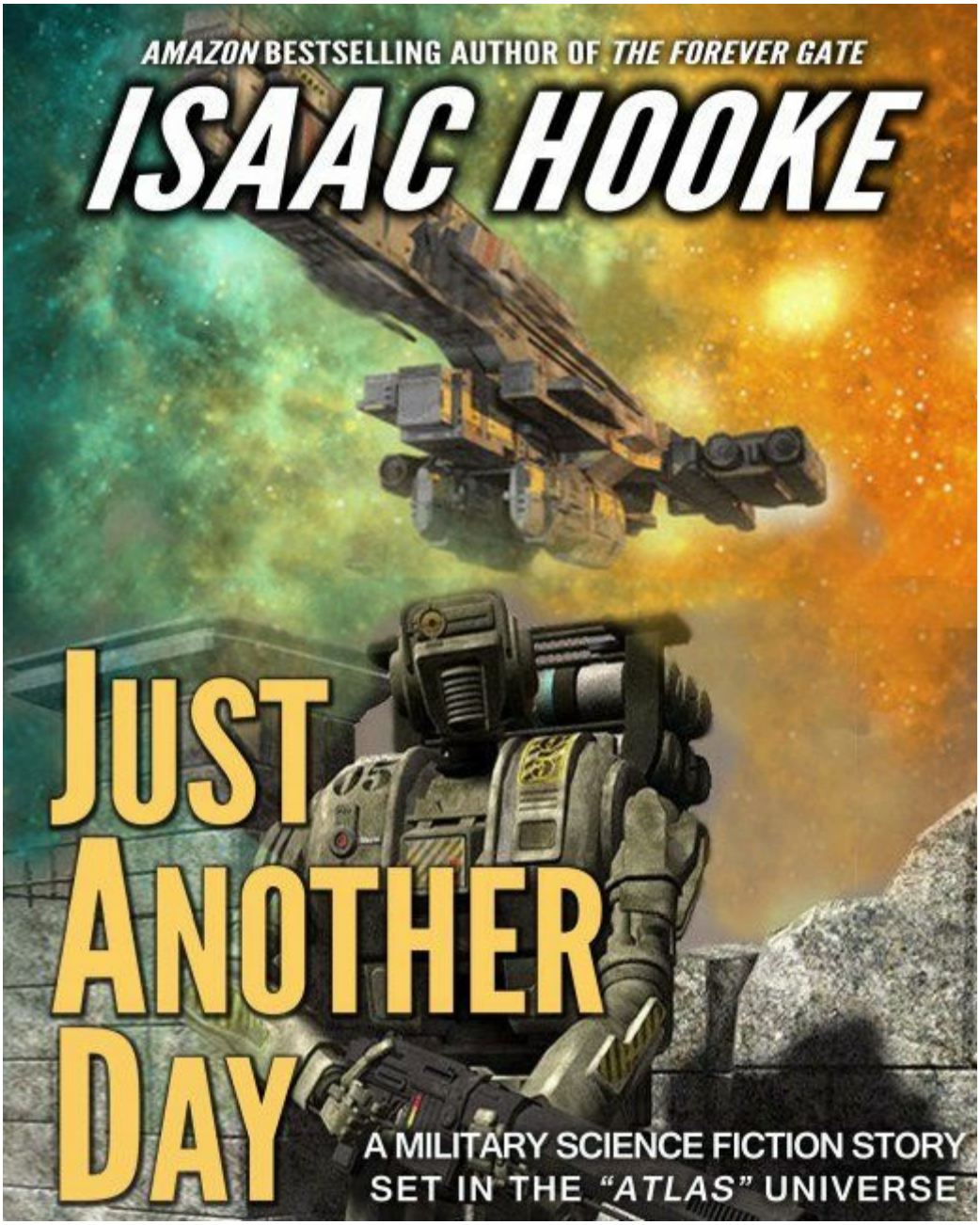
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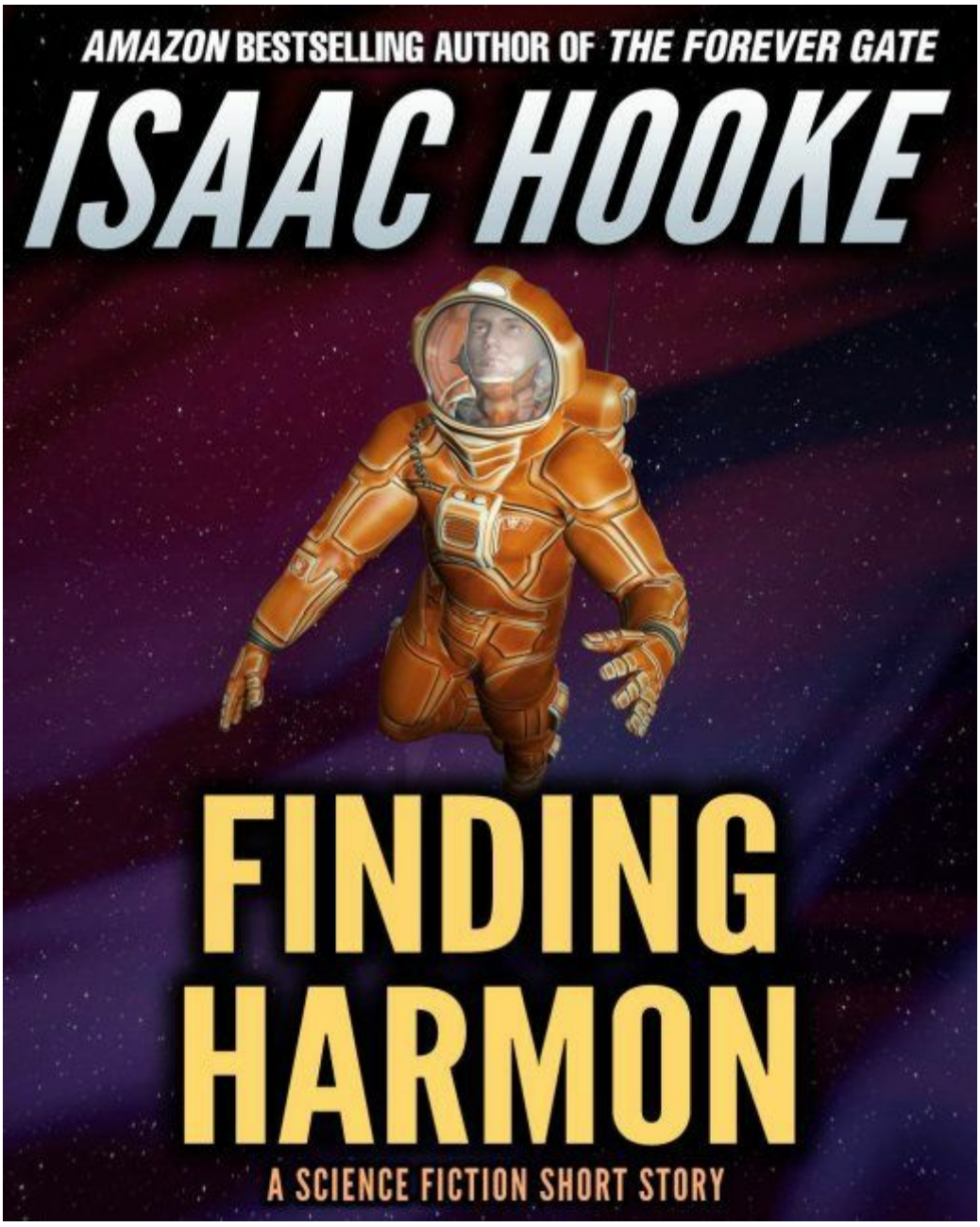
ATLAS



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