



THE SLEEPER WAKES

At first there was nothing. Then came a spark, a sizzling sound that stirred frayed webs of dream and memory. And then, with a crackle, a roar, a blue-white rush of electricity was surging through him, bursting into the dry passages of his brain like the tide pouring back into a sea cave. His body jerked so taut that for a moment he was balanced only on his heels and the back of his armored skull. He screamed, and awoke to a sleet of static, and a falling feeling.

He remembered dying. He remembered a girl's scarred face gazing down at him as he lay in wet grass. She was someone important, someone he cared about more than any Stalker should care about anything, and there had been something he had wanted to tell her, but he couldn't. Now there was only the after-image of her ruined face.

What was her name? His mouth remembered.

"H . . ."

"It's alive!" said a voice.

"HES . . ."

"Again, please. Quickly."

“Charging . . .”

“HESTER . . .”

“Stand clear!”

And then another lash of electricity scoured away even those last strands of memory, and he knew only that he was the Stalker Grike. One of his eyes started to work again. He saw vague shapes moving through an ice storm of interference, and watched while they slowly congealed into human figures, torchlit against a sky full of scurrying, moonlit clouds. It was raining steadily. Once-born, wearing goggles and uniforms and plastic capes, were gathering around his open grave. Some carried quartz-iodine lanterns; others tended machines with rows of glowing valves and gleaming dials. Cables from the machines trailed down into his body. He sensed that his steel skull-piece had been removed and that the top of his head was open, exposing the Stalker-brain nested inside.

“Mr. Grike? Can you hear me?”

A very young woman was looking down at him. He had a faint, tantalizing memory of a girl, and wondered if this might be her. But no: There had been something broken about the face in his dreams, and this face was perfect; an eastern face with high cheekbones and pale skin, the black eyes framed by heavy black spectacles. Her short hair had been dyed green. Beneath her transparent cape she wore a black uniform, with winged skulls embroidered in silver thread on the high, black collar.

She set a hand on the corroded metal of his chest and said, “Don’t be afraid, Mr. Grike. I know this must be confusing for you. You’ve been dead for more than eighteen years.”

“DEAD,” he said.