

The Scorpion Game

Age of Transcendence: Book One

Daniel Jeffries

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The Big Dive

*2458 Orthodox Western Calendar
5156 Universal Chinese Calendar, Year of the Dragon
New Diamond City, Snowstorm Clan Roving Starship Settlement*

“Ain’t much left when you fall from that high,” said Sergeant Quinlin to a drenched, angry Lieutenant Durante Hoskin, who’d just bulled his way through the thick crowd and into the energy bubble that cut off the crime scene from the storm. Outside the bubble, the rain came down in hard, slashing sheets.

“Why didn’t someone stop the rain?” said Hoskin. “Washed half the fuckin’ evidence away.”

“Got here too late. She picked a bad time to jump,” said Quinlin.

“As opposed to a good time?”

Hoskin stood over the body, hands curled into fists, eyes flashing, his mustache etched into his sharp features, his salt and pepper hair slicked. Under a beaten black leather jacket his fierce red shirt stood out against his dark skin.

Hoskin looked down at the covered body. The rain had already done its damage. Bits of the girl’s flesh floated lazily in blood-streaked pools. Who knew what clues the rain had already carried away?

“We live in a place where they schedule the rain and nobody can get their heads outta their asses long enough to call the fuckin’ Weather Center?” said Hoskin.

“Right. You ever call over there? Like pissin’ into the wind,” said Detective Danuba “Sugarhouse” Quinlin. Quinlin, a tall black man with a thick ‘fro, wore a hand-stitched, cream summer suit in a time when mites could cough one up custom in a few minutes. After an hour of rain, his suit didn’t have a drop on it. He must have waited until they had the energy bubble up over the crime scene before even getting out of his car. Hoskin looked at him and shook his head.

“Nice of you to get outta the car,” said Hoskin.

Quinlin mimed brushing lint from his lapel, with a grin.

“Well, whadda we got? Whadda we know?” said Hoskin.

“Jumper. Young girl, ligature marks on the neck. Hit legs first. Wisps caught the fall, called it in.”

“Jumped? Or pushed?”

“Guess we’ll find out.”

“Where’d she fall from?”

“Up there. Sixty-sixth floor.”

Hoskin followed Quinlin’s finger up the side of an organic starscraper, stretching thousands of stories into the sky, its top hidden in the swirling mists of the troposphere, its flesh filled with bright little beads that twinkled, its diamond windows glittering like a trillion eyes. Squinting, he could barely see the smashed cathedral-style window, sixty-six floors up.

“We got a John Doe upstairs. Team’s up there now. Story is she killed him and took a header,” said Quinlin.

“Who’s ‘she’?”

“Whore. But no embedded IDs, so she’s Jane Doe for now. Probably brought in on an entertainment visa. DNA’s not in the records. Machines are asking around.”

Quinlin pulled back the sheet slightly and Hoskin saw the tiny, telltale blood tear tattoo of the Flower Smoke Girls, a group of high-class New Diamond City whores.

“We got the playback?” asked Hoskin.

“Yeah,” said Quinlin. A holographic film of a girl falling flared over his palm like a hovering flame. Microscopic wisp cameras, floating around the city like wind-blown dust, had caught the fall in excruciating detail and blasted a distress call to police, a patrolling suicide umbrella and an ambulance through the q-nets.

The umbrella got there too late, hurtling towards the tumbling girl, unfolding like an origami mushroom, but just missing. The girl caught the edge of the umbrella and it spun her wickedly. Zoomed in, Hoskin could see the animal terror in her eyes as she screamed like her face had ripped open. In disgust, he waved the film away and it disappeared.

Hoskin looked down at the lump under the white sheet. The sheet was cruelly short, barely covering the bulk of her shattered body, but exposing the hundred thousand bits of smashed flesh splashed like vomit on the ferroconcrete street. He could see the nanothreaded pavement had sensed her hit and softened, but from that height it didn’t matter.

“All right, let’s see the whole body. Where’s the tech?” said Hoskin.

“Shook up. Sitting over there. Saw something she wasn’t ready for,” said Quinlin.

On the sidewalk’s edge a chunk of shadow sat hulking, clutching a med-scanner and an old-fashioned digital caliper used to measure bruises. It was the new girl, Zara, a rookie crime scene tech. She had six arms, a hard black shell and a face featureless except for a mouth. Hoskin couldn’t remember if the shell was common to her Phyle. Posthumanity had fractured into thousands of daughter species and he’d long since given up keeping track of all them.

“You all right?” said Hoskin.

Zara shook her head.

“Just stay down until you’re ready. You’ll get used to it,” said Hoskin. “Takes time.” He put a hand on her shoulder. “You’re fine. It’s someone who feels nothin’ that I worry about.”

Hoskin left Zara and walked back to the jumper’s body.

“Not sure even you’re ready for this one,” said Quinlin.

A crowd had formed at the edge of the energy barriers and white-uniformed, white-gloved police on biomechanical stallions kept the curious at bay. Hoskin could see the sinewy muscles of the silver steeds pulsing and rippling, their flaring nostrils checking for nanocontaminants and poisons in the air, their backbrains quantum-linked to massive storehouses of chemical and forensic data. Security drones hovered in circles over the crowd, pushing reporter drones back. A lot of the crowd had come from the nearby protests of the perpetually unemployed. Their holographic signs still glowed brilliantly in the slashing rain, “Death To The Kleptocrats,” “Machines Will Steal YOUR Job Too.” They’d come just to gawk. The callousness of the crowd infuriated Hoskin.

“Show me what we’re talking about here,” said Hoskin.

Suddenly a gaggle of reporter drones outfoxed security and blazed forward, ripping off quick pictures. Hoskin seized one of them and smashed it on the street. It burst, its

guts black and oozing. Security pods blasted the others with a freezing gel that made them boulder-heavy and they tumbled to the ground. The pods scooped the rigid bodies up and dumped them into a hovering timeloop porta-prison.

“Everyone back, now,” shouted Hoskin, “Push all these idiots back. This is a person, not some fuckin’ sideshow for your amusement.”

The cops cranked up their personal energy shields and shoved the crowd, who fell back raggedly, sizzling and screaming when the current smacked their soaked bodies.

“All right, show me the body,” said Hoskin.

Quinlin bent down, took a deep breath and peeled back the sheet. “You asked for it.”

It took a second for what Hoskin was seeing to make sense. The image wouldn’t stick. That’s how the mind protected you, he knew: like when there’s a horrible wreck and everyone looks but nobody remembers what they saw. You had to look longer if you wanted to see, push past the shock until the scene started to piece itself together like a puzzle.

A young girl lay on the street, twisted half to her left, as if she’d turned over during a nap. Her autumn burned-black hair, dashed with red fiber optic rivets, spread out around her face, which was half-smashed like a splattered pumpkin, her teeth crushed to dust. Her red and black spidersilk kimono had fallen open obscenely. Her legs and torso looked like an overturned bowl of spaghetti, the flesh utterly shredded. Hoskin had seen worse gore since he’d transferred to the New Diamond City force twenty years ago, and in his hundred and fifty plus years as a cop, but what got to him was on her nearly-intact torso: hundreds of eyes, some of them caught in a frozen blink, some of them burst like busted eggs, yolks leaking. She had six small breasts, and on her stomach were three stretched vaginas, arranged in a triangular pattern, looking like they’d just thrown up.

“What the fuck am I looking at here, Sugar?” said Hoskin.

“Don’t know. Worst I ever seen. Some kind of fetish. Gets worse.”

“How?”

“Rape kit showed semen in two of the—”

“Remind me never to ask that again,” said Hoskin, looking down.

Millions of tiny brushed-on specks of diamonds clung to the girl’s exquisite, bioluminous skin like a snug dress, a signature of the city’s nearly three million prostitutes.

A deep-welled sadness swept through him. Beneath the spliced-in fetish mutations there was still a young girl: one who’d suffered.

“She’s too young,” said Hoskin. “Can’t be legal.”

He waved his hand over her like a magician, but the scan picked up no embedded IDs, just like Quinlin had said. Definitely illegal. Could have been brought in from any planet. Lots of whores didn’t register. They called it branding. Official estimates put the number of unregistered hookers at just under a million. That was New Diamond City alone and it was only one small part of a massive, continent sized, roving, organic and exotic energy starship called the Snowstorm Clan. The ship was one of fifteen in the universe, with whole civilizations churning inside of them, complete environments stuffed with an artificial microsun and an atmosphere that mimicked an ideal Earth in a

bottle. Snowstorm started as a freewheeling, floating pleasure-palace for the rich, where anything went, so it had more whores per capita than some large planets.

Outside the bubble the rain battered the street. The artificial moon drifted slowly through rips in the cloud cover.

“She got no blackbox. They can’t relife her,” said Quinlin.

“So what? Would you wanna come back to this?” said Hoskin, like he was spitting out insects. “Probably doesn’t have relife insurance anyway. Cover ‘er up.”

He looked down at her again. “I’ll make whoever did this to ya suffer, girl. I promise you that.”