

# NUMENÉRA

## MORE TALES FROM THE NINTH WORLD



BY MONTE COOK & SHANNA GERMAIN



# More Tales from the Ninth World

**by Monte Cook and Shanna Germain**



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## Credits

### **Writers**

Monte Cook and Shanna Germain

### **Editors**

Shanna Germain and Torah Cottrill

### **Proofreader**

Ray Vallese

### **Cover Artist**

Guido Kuip

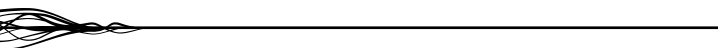
### **Graphic Designer**

Bear Weiter



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## The Catechism of Lore

*All glory to the originators of truth and understanding.*

*Praise to the innovators of steel and synth.*

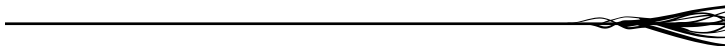
*Praise to the shapers of flesh, of bone, and of mind.*

*Glory to those who re-sculpted the sustaining earth and the life-giving sun.*

*Praise to the senders of signals, who even now whisper into machine ears and give life to the inanimate.*

*Praise to those who traveled to the stars, and the realms beyond the stars.*

*All glory to the originators of truth and understanding.*

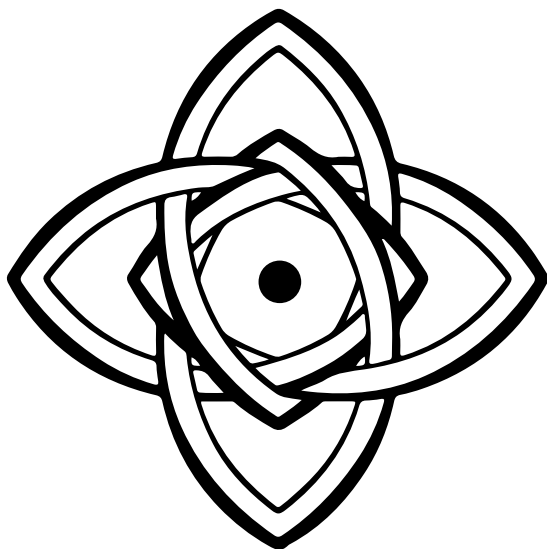
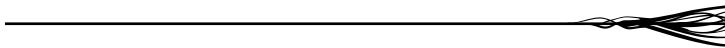




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## The Limits of the Possible

When Monte and I explain the core concept of Numenera to people, we often employ Arthur C. Clarke's famous quote, "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." That, at its heart, is the essence of Numenera.

To truly capture the essence of the Ninth World, however, I often think of another quote from Clarke: "The limits of the possible can only be defined by going beyond them into the impossible." Because in the Ninth World, the impossible often becomes possible. And that, to me, is one of the most delightful—and dangerous—elements of it.

The things that we "know" are impossible now—life after death, time travel, teleportation—these are things that aren't just possible in the Ninth World, but probable. It doesn't matter whether you're a noble, a thief, a tinkerer, or a serial killer, when you come face to face with impossibilities becoming realities, you must make



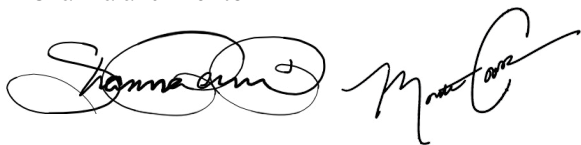
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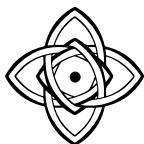
hard choices. In these three stories, even the smartest, fiercest characters find themselves challenged when they go beyond the limits of the possible.

In the Ninth World, nothing is impossible. We hope that inspires you a lot. And scares you just a little.

~iadace~

Shanna and Monte

Handwritten signatures of Shanna and Monte. Shanna's signature is on the left, featuring a large, stylized 'S' and 'h'. Monte's signature is on the right, featuring a stylized 'M' and 'C'.



# The Sight of Her Face by Shanna Germain

## *In Which She Runs Some More*

Ellnoica Black used to keep a list. Blood red ink. Thick blue paper. She enjoyed the way the names trailed down in long lines like tiny blood vessels connecting into arteries. Each page, she finger-drew a thick arrow at the bottom, a place where all names flowed to, pulsed from onto the next page, and on and on.

The eternal circular pump of time, like a heart. She liked that. Liked making it on paper. Breaking it everywhere else.

But that was before she'd gotten her own little passel of hunter-trackers, hot on her trail, shining their lights into her dark shadows. Sometimes she heard them even in her sleep. The offkilter whirl of their wings, a feeling as much as a sound, the way the hot air turned the hair of her arms into electric needles, tightening on their points.

Lyrara. Beautiful names for monstrous things. The

bounty hunters are just the kind of thing she *should* like. Perfectly designed bodies patterned with ornate lightshows and intricate etchings, their metal wings opening with precision, each fake feather an artist's perfection. All that beauty hiding hollow hearts, vessels for minds capable of nothing but tracking and killing.

Ellnoica is often gut-snagged by the juxtaposition of poison and pleasure. The thin black line of ants covered in sweetcakes and spatter. She likes pretty packages that carry plagues, plagues that cause their victims to burst open into guttery pink and yellow flowers.

So she should love the lyrara.

Instead, she wants to punch them in their metallic noses, pop their sensors right out of their perfect faces. Crack the feathered metal of their wings with her bare hands. Pull out a hollow heart and crush it under her heel. Ideally while laughing. Laughing until her own nose gushed, blood on her teeth, snot on her knuckles.

That only led one place, though. A place she has been to before. Broken finger bones. Hers. A new set of trackers. Also hers, sort of. More light in what should have been hers-only dark places.

She is stubborn and fast to fist, but she isn't stupid.

So she's on the move. Shade travel, she calls it. Her movements thin and black, slippery. No more journals. No more pens or lists or finger hearts. No cyphers. They all weigh her down, so they went into the depths of the Sere two weeks ago, when she saw the first trace of the lyrara's nanotrackers tattooed into her skin. Metallic featherprints imprinted in the cracks of her elbows, battered into the edges of her knees. Long-distance tagging. She knew them for what they were—like *deja vu*, except she'd actually been there before—so she wrapped

her joints in leather bands coated with callerrail ointment. The ointment screwed up the electric pulses from the wing tips somehow, made it harder for the lyrara to track her. Not impossible, but harder.

The first time the lyrara had hunted her, she thinks it was years ago now, she'd had to go all the way to Navarene to find a nano who could cut their tags from her; the lyrara had imbedded her with so much tracking metal that the man hadn't even asked for payment. He'd just secreted the bits of them, her skin and sinew still clinging, into a small box. Closed the lid. Sent her off. He might as well have been rubbing his hands together in anticipation.

By then, her back had ached, broken raw with his lasers, and the edges of her wrists looked bitten away. She'd thought about going back, closing all of her doors, so to speak, but in the end she let him keep the bits of her he'd taken with such glee. She understood need. Respected it even. She'd given him that gift but she won't go back to him. She wants to believe that everything in her only goes one way, forward. Not like a heart at all.

She keeps the list in her head now, recites it as she moves in the cracks of the world toward this new-old city. There is a man named Dantan Sen there, and she must bring about his death.

### *The List*

Her list is not alphabetical, but in the order of first to last, as the deaths occurred, as they were written. Time is a bendable, forgettable thing, and if she doesn't keep the list, she finds it hard to remember where she was when. Who she killed how.

Each morning, when she wakes from the needle-sting of the lyrara's wingsound, she starts reciting the list in the place she left off the day before. Today, she is in the middle of her life from two years ago. She has been at this for two weeks, since she watched her journal begin to disperse into the salt liquid, softening, turning to mush.

She would have watched the journal all the way to its watery demise, but she could feel the wings throbbing in her skin, knew the beautiful bitches were winging closer.

Goodbyes are important. She hasn't said hers yet and that makes her blood feel hot in the backs of her eyes.

The list goes: full name, cypher of death. She always uses cyphers. It's their uncertainty that she loves; that moment when life and death are both possibilities. When the future and the past meld, waiting to choose.

*Kinsayet Thrar, flash detonation*

*Ortia Gyllwi, shocker*

*Cyrin Falen, metal death*

The list goes on. She worries that she might begin to lose some of them. Her memory has always been good. Exceptional, really. But all of the names—there are so many—in the proper order, with the proper cypher, it might be too much. If she can't get the lyrara off her back in time to make a new journal and get the list out of her head back into the body of the pages, she worries that she will have to give up something. The order. The cyphers. Last names.

Pieces of her past shaved off. How to choose what's important, what to carve out, what parts to leave clinging to her core?

Maybe, she thinks, the answer is to remember more, not less. What does she remember about *Cyrin Falen, metal death*?

The datasphere said, *Go and kill him*, and so she had gone.

He was big, twice her width, with the shoulders of a man who felt bereft without a weight to put upon them. One eye gone rheumy, the length of his lid puckered with scar. She'd expected him to fight her, fierce and wild. When he'd just lowered himself to his knees and bowed his head, spoken to her in a quiet, accented form of the Truth, she'd gone watery. She stood there for a long time. Rain spat upon them, turning the indents of his knees into tiny lakes, running down her back. The cypher clacking softly in her hand, impatient.

What spurred her, finally, to her action? A gesture? A word? The datasphere?

No. Her own need. Always that. Her need for what she has come to think of as *the stretch*, that long moment of forgetting, that place where time curves around her like water and she can let go.

It's been months since the datasphere guided her to a new target. The loss of the stretch makes her fingers itch. A lesser person would kill just to kill. But she has standards. If the datasphere doesn't send her, she doesn't go.

*Asrub Kasl, clamp trap*

*Malbio Resrien, stealthy serpent*

The list goes round and round, and Ellnoica Black goes with it.

### *The Boring Part*

Moving through the world as a shadow, even as a shadow being chased by death machines, is boring. Dull as the dulllest dull Ellnoica has ever known. Three times she has

forgotten the name she is saying even as she is in the middle of saying it. Her lists are getting wobbly, slowly bleeding off letters like pierced veins. Dripping Ps and Ls onto the ground, the thumbprints of overlooked vowels splattered against the rocks and trees along her path.

Worse, while the callerrail ointment on her elbows and knees makes it hard for the lyrara to hear her, it also makes it hard for *her* to hear the datasphere. *Hear* is the wrong word. The datasphere doesn't speak to her. It fills her. On a good day, with a good connection, it becomes her. Or she becomes it. It doesn't matter. That's the kind of distinction that people seem to think is important, but she knows it isn't. Like good or bad. Saying a prayer or pushing a button. Yesterday or tomorrow. In the end, the result is the same.

All that quiet in her brain. A silence not even her list can fill.

The boredom drives her on as much as her need in front of her, as much as the lyrara behind her.

She searches for a new glimpse of Dantan Sen—sometimes when she goes back over the vision something has been added, another brief glimpse, one more second of movement—but this time there is what the datasphere has already shown her: a tall man, thinned hair stark white against the dark of his scalp. He walks, hunched against a visible whirl of wind, hands riffling through a synth pouch. A yellow shimmer around him. The first few times, Ellnoica thought the halo was real, but now she knows it's a relic of the datasphere. She still doesn't know how she gets their names; they're just there, in her brain. Like the way the lyrara's wings show up in her body.

She lets the datasphere lead her and the datasphere is never wrong. It's her force, her guide. She would never

say god. She knows it for what it is—monsters guiding monsters toward monsters.

*Push on.* The lyrara will kill her if she stops moving forward. They are the same kind of monster that she is.

Only beautiful. If she lets herself think about it, she will be overwhelmed by the tragedy of it, that her monstrous insides are not wrapped in the beautiful box they deserve. It is another reason to hate the lyrara. They are what she should be.

As if she has called them by the very thought of their names, the shadows shift overland. The metal in her joints trembles. Lyrara are not fast, but they are dogged and ever-coming. Sniffing out her very thoughts.

She ducks beneath the shadow of a floating half-structure. It's four times as tall as she, the top sheared off by enemies or time or the enemies of time. High enough off the ground that she can stand beneath it and not hit her head unless she stretches her spine. Which she does, hearing it snap and crackle. Then she kneels, letting the cool earth seep into her knees, her shins.

Callerrail ointment smells like you would expect—guts and blood and the singed-hair stink of digested energy—and yet it still takes her by surprise, its pungency. Not bad, in her nose, but strong. She leans in, inhales. It smells of safety too. Comfort. This bottle came from the same nano who took out her tags. There's not much left. She has never killed a callerrail; she doesn't kill creatures, not ever if she can help it.

Lyrara don't count. She would kill one of them, all of them, if she could.

She unwraps the leather from her elbows, where there is the most metal, and begins to coat her skin and the bands with the last of the ointment.



“Smells atrocious.”

The last time she'd heard a word spoken was *Ris Storteld, fast hail*. He'd said, “Please don't.”

The voice behind her is vaguely feminine. She turns, as fast as one can without standing. A long dark shadow stretches along the ground. The shadow might have a head. It's hard to tell.

“Stay there,” the shadow says.

She stays, the near-empty jar still in her hand. It is the closest thing to a weapon that she has right now.

No one ever sees her first, no one ever outshadows her. For a moment, she doesn't know what to do.

The shadow sits up, faster than Ellnoica can think to move.

There is a crackle of energy, a sound like a piece of fabric tearing and from somewhere deep inside. Ellnoica understands that wasn't fabric but some part of herself, cleaving. Her body arcs so hard her forehead hits the bottom of the structure, shatters something. Everything is slippery grey, ungraspable.

“Ellnoica Black,” the shadow says.

*Not boring now*, she thinks.

### *She Knows This Much Is True*

Her name isn't really Ellnoica Black. It's something softer, sweeter, a music lost to the ravages of time. She's forgotten it, or tells herself she has. She's been Ellnoica Black since the very first death, since *Claet Sireg, light drop lutin*. Back when the datasphere showed her who she really was, *what* she really was.

She used to have a different name. She used to have a

head, hands, two feet, a mouth that moved, eyeballs that worked. Then she woke to a dull nothingness that tasted like acid spit and burning fungi. It was dark or her eyes were broken.

Here's what she knows now:

One. She can hear the datasphere, sudden and fierce. Louder than it's been in a long time. The message is broken, utterly unintelligible, but there.

Two. She has somehow been outshaded. She leaves this one to think about, to muse over, at a later date. How such a thing might be possible.

Three. She is not supposed to be alive. She knows her death cyphers. Intimately. The shadow hit her with an electricity detonation. It should have killed her.

Maybe she isn't alive at all. Maybe this grey shimmer is what comes after.

Her chest moves up and down. The roughweave fabric of her shirt scrubs her skin. Her lips hurt at the corners, like they've been split with a blade. Her fingernails ache at their moons, her fingertips pulse with jolts of electricity that make her shudder. She feels the wing tips in her elbows pull and tighten. The cypher's electricity must have sizzled through the callerrail ointment, left the metal exposed to the lyrara's trackers.

So she is alive, in the end.

Four. If she doesn't find a plan, that will no longer be true.

Ellnoica's eyes want to see again, and she tries to help them, mentally pushing at the throbs of pain behind her forehead until spots appear, flashes of white. The white fades to something more complex, colors and textures.

Off to her left, the sound of someone breathing. She moves her head, one small increment, waits for the

nausea to wash over her. Moves it a bit more. Nausea. Move. Repeat until she can see the outline of the shadow next to her.

The shadow holds a triangular light in its lap. The yellow glow turns the shadow into the shape of a human. Female, she thinks.

Ellnoica blinks. Her vision swims and settles. They're in the dark. Still under the structure. The near-empty jar of callerrail ointment is broken beneath her, sharp edges jutting into her hip, but that's the least of her pain and she ignores it.

"I can't figure out why you didn't die," the shadowwoman says. "That has never happened before." She seems amused. "Also, you have the winged beasts after you. What are those called?"

The lyrara.

"My pets," Ellnoica says. It's the first thing that comes to her. "Protectors."

The shadowwoman considers her over the yellow light; it's hard to see anything of her face in the odd shadows.

"That is not what the datasphere showed me," the woman says.

Ellnoica feels gut-punched, a final throw after an already too-long fight, and there is nothing left for her to do but retch, the broken-glass bile searing her throat.

She thought she was the only one.

"You..." Ellnoica coughs. "You were also sent to kill Dantan Sen?"

The shadowwoman looks startled for a moment, and then she laughs. It sounds like Ellnoica's teeth feel, cracked and garbled. It makes her want to crawl under the belly of a beast to die.

“Of course not,” the shadowwoman says. “I was sent to kill you.”

*Ellnoica Black Goes Back*

The datasphere has betrayed her. This is all that she can think about. She can't remember a single name off her list. Not a single cypher. She can't even remember who the datasphere sent her to kill.

All she can think is, *Ellnoica Black, electricity detonation.*

All she can think is, *I have to kill this woman before she kills me.*

She has never, ever had that thought before.

So many, hundreds and hundreds, have died at her hand, always following the datasphere's wishes, its needs, its guidance. And now her guide has betrayed her. Her guide has sent someone to *kill* her.

The staticky strength of the datasphere is still in her head, but she can't make sense of the broken, snarled images. She has no idea how to shut it off, has never wanted to before, and so it runs through her brain, a growling barrier to her attempts to think, to plan. There is something there, in the back corners of her brain, little metal feathers of understanding that flitter away into the grey.

She asks her muscles to help her rise. They tighten, briefly, then falter.

“Why me?” she asks.

The shadowwoman shrugs. She has put the light on the floor between them and is pulling things from her pack. An egg-shaped device that Ellnoica almost recognizes. A thick journal bound in leather. A long piece of metal that sparks when she flicks it with her fingers.

"Why anyone?" the shadowwoman says. "Did you ask that about the others?"

No, she never had.

"Do you get that..." Ellnoica isn't sure if *stretch* is the right word. Thinking of it, trying to find a word for it in her brain, sets her whole body on a path of red longing, of unfulfilled need. She works around it, around the broken datasphere, around the pain in her head. "...release? From the datasphere? When you kill someone?"

"You still think that comes from the datasphere? That any of this comes from the datasphere?" Ellnoica is afraid she'll laugh again, and winces.

The shadowwoman lifts the device. It has a long head, like a snake, and she strokes it, like one might stroke a lover or a child. Liquid roils in Ellnoica's stomach. It's a serpent bloom, a detonation filled with electrified wireworms. She's used such a thing herself, watched with pleasure the death it wrought.

The shadowwoman goes on. "I've never had the chance to try and kill someone twice before, though. This is quite an opportunity. But first I need you to tell me why the winged ones are after you."

"The datasphere didn't tell you?" Ellnoica feels a stab of hope. False, she knows, but she clings tight to that bitter pain. She uses it to ask her fingers to tighten into fists. They refuse, instead making a gesture that looks more like a wave than a weapon.

"It tells me what it needs to," the shadowwoman says. It sounds so much like something Ellnoica would have said—if she'd had anyone to say it to—that her fist clenches involuntarily.

It takes her a second to realize what just happened. She clenches her fist again, purposefully. First one fist,

then the other, answers her call.

“What do they want?” the woman asks again. It’s easy to tell it’s the last time she’ll ask it. Both of them know she doesn’t have to spell it out.

“I’m a killer,” Ellnoica says. “Same as you. Something’s always hunting us.” She doesn’t know who she killed to call the lyrara down upon her, this time or the last. Someone’s father. Brother. Daughter. King. Lover. She never looks deeper into someone than what the datasphere tells her and what she can see with her own eyes.

Why is she still alive? That’s the question she would like to ask. If she could figure that out...

Her elbows jump. The lyrara can taste her thoughts now that the cypher has burned the ointment away. The creatures are calling to their own, and their own are answering.

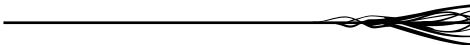
The ointment.

Gasping, Ellnoica slides her hands beneath herself. The edge of the broken container slices her thumb. She holds her breath against the sound, slides her hands through the ointment, coating them up past the jagged scars of her wrists. Layering whatever she can find over her elbows. She hopes it’s enough.

The datasphere goes silent. The wings buried in her skin flutter to rest.

“What is your name?” she asks the shadowwoman. Killing time, yes, but she also wants to know. She is beginning to think she might make it out of this and if she does, she will start a new list, and this woman’s name will be at the top.

The shadowwoman strokes a single finger along Ellnoica’s cheek. It is soft, the way bones are soft when they are boiled just long enough.



"I wish we could sit and talk a while," she says. Ellnoica thinks she means it. "I would like to spend time with you."

The shadowwoman whistles a soft, slow tune that should be haunting, mournful, but is instead somehow exhilarated, darkly joyous. "Ellnoica Black, electricity detonation and serpent bloom," she says.

She sets the bloom on the ground just out of Ellnoica's reach, and lights the fuse. The fuse flares, sharp and hot, blinding Ellnoica momentarily. When she blinks, it is just her and the short wick of a burning explosion.

Gritted teeth. A pain that goes from her ankles to her finger joints. Something broken in her eardrum that sends the world spinning sideways. She forces her body to *movemovemove, you slying son of a seskii, move.*

She wraps her slathered hands around the bloom, cradling it like an egg. Rises. Begins to run...

### *In Which Everything Begins Again*

...just as the wick touches home.

She can't hold it. The pressure of it blows her hands wide open, explodes her shoulders into a gaping yawn that makes her joints double back. Electricity slides through her, an experience so recent in her memory that her body seems unable to comprehend that it's happening again. It knocks her back and down, the dirt rising up hard to meet her bruised skin, her lungs unable to stay open against the impact.

The wireworms wriggle against her palms, demanding to be let in. She closes her fists over the vibrations, trapping them in the callerrail ointment.

Before her body can tell her that she can't get up, she rises. Dirt and electricity and blood and callerail and wireworms are imbedded deep within her and she will never get it all out, but that's for another day. Another time.

The dark coolness of the structure slips from her when she steps out into the open. Overhead, three lyrara whirr, their stark beauty exploiting her eye before she can turn away.

The shadowwoman is no longer a shadow, but just a woman, like herself. She is turning toward Ellnoica in a way that is almost like falling, and for a second, Ellnoica thinks she has won, that the explosion has somehow reached the woman, that even now wireworms are working their way into her skin, electrocuting her veins.

No. The woman is merely turning to look at what has come after her.

When she sees Ellnoica, her expression is both surprised and darkly delighted. She dips her chin slightly, a sign that Ellnoica recognizes as veneration, although she has never in her life made that gesture.

As she lifts her chin, Ellnoica sees her clearly. The woman wears Ellnoica's face.

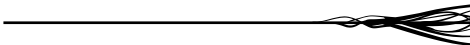
"No," Ellnoica says, just as the first lyrara lands in front of her.

Her elbows tug and twitch. The whirl of wings needles the hair on her now-bare arms. The metal wing bits in her knees pull toward their master, ripping her skin, shuddering her bone to bone.

She thinks, *This is it. This is how it ends. I am the last of this list.*

The lyrara doesn't come. It doesn't even look at her. It turns instead toward the shadowwoman.





All Ellnoica can think is, *No. She is mine.*

As if to remind her of her true purpose, to set her back on course, the datasphere snarls into her brain. Says here, have this: a tall man, thin white hair, taking another step, pulling something from deep inside a synth pouch.

*Dantan Sen, no cypher*, she thinks.

She brushes the vision aside. A bothersome insect.

She runs at the lyrara. She can feel the impact that is going to happen, knows it will break the bones of her face, probably something else, but she keeps running. Her muscles are telling her this is her one chance; when she stops, they will stop too and there will be no more getting up. Not this time.

She brings her fists up, opens her palms. The wireworms wriggle, sparking, and when they meet the lyrara's metallic nose, they come fully alive. The air fills with the scent of burning circuits and metallic ash.

The impact breaks at least one finger, maybe more. It jars something else in her that has already been broken today, and the pain is a grinding jolt. But the lyrara is down, wings silent.

The last two lyrara descend upon her. She feels them coming in the cracks of her skin.

Ellnoica sticks her hand deep into the belly of the still-sparking beast and yanks out its hollow, mechanical heart. Fluid sprays her, and she laughs, a broken, gritty sound that she recognizes from the other woman's mouth.

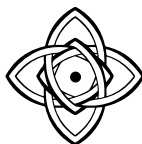
"Not so beautiful now," she says.

She scoops the still-wriggling wireworms and stuffs them inside the hollow heart. They sizzle, anxious to escape, anxious to do the thing they were made to do. Their one true purpose.

The filled heart lobs through the air, a beautiful, dangerous arc. Its explosion, too, is beautiful. The lyrara glow purple as their bodies stretch and break. She would clap her hands if she could stand the pain. She would run after the shadowwoman and kill her if she could run. But that's for another day. Another time.

Her knees buckle and she falls to the ground. The sky is a color she has never seen before. It washes over her like a blank page, waiting to be filled with the names of those she has killed, that she will kill.

The first name will be her own.



## To Touch Perfection by Monte Cook

The last time I tried this, I watched my best friend disincorporate into vapor. I've taken precautions this time, obviously, but with the numenera, you never know.

Well, the people of the past probably knew. They certainly understood these devices better than I could. They built them, after all; I'm just trying to make them work. So I guess I should say, with the numenera, *I* never know.

Scintal and I check the connections one last time. Some of the wires I'm using are old and kinked, but they're the best I have. The machine I've got as a power source was once an agitator that I put in a barrel to swirl clothes around in soapy water—at least, that's what I used it for. It was likely originally designed for some other purpose. Probably something I can't even imagine, or understand if it were explained to me.

Please don't get the wrong impression. I'm not normally the self-deprecating sort. By the Aeons, I'm

probably the foremost expert on the numenera in Ledon! But no one alive today—well, no human anyway—understands the science of the ancients. It's not like the science you can see: water flows downhill, the sun sets in the west, insects like flowering plants. The numenera is not really science at all.

It's sorcery.

Scintal's light is a pale orange, so I take that as a good sign.

I get behind the steel-reinforced blast shield I've erected by the door. It's as far as I can get from the process and still activate it. If I crouch, the shield hides my entire body, and Scintal as well. It's a precaution—the best I can devise at the moment—but at the same time, I know it's laughable. I've seen sorcery cut through steel more easily than you can wave your hand through the air. But in the end, this is what I ask myself: If I'm going to activate this process again, would I rather have a piece of steel between it and me, or not?

I go with *Yes*.

I've got a small synth device in my hands with a large, flat button on it. When I press it, it triggers the power source, and the process will begin. I take a deep breath.

The ancients performed miracles as a matter of course. They could reshape matter. They moved instantaneously from place to place. (An Aeon Priest once told me that her word for that was "teleportation," but I bet the people of the past just called it "movement" or "getting from here to there." You see what I mean? To them, it wasn't a thing that needed a name. It was just how they traveled, as easily as we might walk across the room.) Sometimes I wonder if they could even travel in time, but then, if they could, why aren't they here now? Of course, maybe they

are, because certainly if they didn't want to be seen, they wouldn't be.

Still, the whole concept clashes with the very fact that their structures and installations are all abandoned and ruined now. I'm not quite sure how to work that one out in my mind. The point is, however, that it's not like water flowing downhill. It's not even like the ability to make water flow uphill, although I'm sure they could do that, too. No, the numenera can take water and turn it into a castle, or a bird, and that's not science. You've got to admit, that's magic.

I blink away the sweat that runs from my forehead into my eyes. It's hot, true, and I've been working hard, but I won't lie to you: I'm nervous. I crouch down farther and hold the activator device tightly but carefully. I take another deep breath. Scintal's light is still pale orange, but she flutters to the floor. If she had hands, I imagine she'd put them over the head she also doesn't have. She's a disk the size of my outstretched hand. She has a long, flexible synth stalk with a single light atop it that she seems to use as an eye, the colors of which I've learned mean different things. Pale orange means that she thinks things are safe. As far as she knows. At least, that's what I've come to assume. Her not actually being able to talk is a drawback.

I push the button.

If you've ever worked with the numenera, you know that frequently there are blazing displays of light, discharges of heat, and thunderclaps. I once blew up half a stone building working with a device that was supposed to create an invisible wall of impenetrable energy. But that's not the case this time. This time there is a sizzling sound and a faint smell of smoke and then...nothing.

I wait.

I wish that I was a nano sorcerer and could conjure some kind of ward to protect me or cast a spell that allows me to see through the steel shield, but I'm not. My relationship with the numenera is only with its more tangible expressions: artifacts left behind by the people of the prior ages.

Scintal's light is now white, which I think means she doesn't know what's going on. Not enough information. But she's no braver than I—she remains behind the shield.

After a few minutes pass with nothing happening, I swallow hard and peer very slowly around the shield. Meandering rivulets of smoke snake through the air, but I can see through them easily enough. Enough to see him.

Crouched on the floor next to the device is the most beautiful man I have ever seen in my life. His flesh looks like smooth stone carefully shaped by a skilled artist. A very skilled artist.

The man's eyes look as though he's just woken from a deep sleep. He looks around my laboratory, taking things in slowly.

Needless to say, this isn't what I thought would happen when I activated the device.

"Hello?" My voice cracks.

He looks at me, startled. Brown eyes open wide. My eyes, I'm sure, look just as shocked, but not as gorgeous.

The man holds up arms in a defensive pose and rises to his full height, which must be just under six feet. He says something that I can't understand, but it sounds quite terse.

I step out from behind the shield, Scintal floating in my wake. Her light is an inquisitive but wary blue. "Uh, it's all right," I say to this stranger. "You're not in any

danger.” I wonder if that’s true after I say it. The process somehow brought him here—that’s the only explanation. But how? And from where?

I start to ask him who he is but he interrupts me with more words I can’t understand. I never studied any languages other than the Truth, dammit. He’s clearly angry, though. Or frightened. Or both.

“I am afraid you were brought here by that,” I say, pointing at the elaborate cobbled-together device. “It was supposed to create a doorway to somewhere else.” Which perhaps it did. Maybe he just stumbled through it? But why is he naked?

So very naked.

“Can you get back to where you’re from?” I motion sort of behind him. He looks behind himself and then at me and gives me an angry but questioning look. It’s probably unlikely that he could get back, anyway. I set the device—or so I thought—to open the doorway to the other side of the city. But he isn’t from around here. That’s pretty clear.

“My name is Mave,” I say, touching my chest.

He glares, and then looks down at himself. He suddenly covers himself with his hands. By the Aeons, did he just now realize he’s naked?

I move to my workbench and grab my coat. He watches me warily, but when I offer it to him, he takes it and puts it on. He’s broader than I am, however, so it doesn’t really fit. Instead, he takes it off again and drapes it around his midsection like a kilt, tying the sleeves together. I look away as he figures out how to make it work. Scintal’s light still shows blue, but it’s fading more to white.

When the stranger’s done covering himself, I try again, patting my chest and stating my name.

He says something, and then points to his own broad, bare chest and says what sounds like “Guy,” with a long *u*. Maybe “Gueye?” That’s what I go with.

I hold out my hand in a formal greeting. “Hello, Gueye.”

Hopefully “Gueye” doesn’t just mean “chest” in his language.

Scintal glows red suddenly and bobs up and down.

“And this is Scintal,” I say.

Gueye follows my gesture and glances at my little companion and backs away, even as Scintal glows a welcoming yellow. But how could he know that?

Anyone could see that he’s still cautious and not a little bewildered. But he takes my hand in his with a firm grip and says “Mave” with a nod. I smile, but he doesn’t. Instead, he begins asking me questions in staccato words that mean nothing to me. He gestures with muscular arms here and there as if to punctuate points that I of course can’t understand, but I’m enjoying listening to him. Eventually, he once again seems to grow angry.

To calm him, I point again at my cobbled-together machine at the heart of the process and say, “I’m afraid that somehow brought you here” in soft tones.

He looks at it briefly, and back to me.

“Numenera,” I say.

I can see in his eyes that this means something to him. He takes a step away from the device. “Numenera,” he whispers. I like how he stresses the first syllable rather than the third, and pronounces the *r* like *th*.

A healthy fear of unknown numenera makes him smart as well as beautiful, I figure. More so than me. On both counts. He points at Scintal and says, “Numenera” in the same endearing way.



I nod, and hope that means something to him.

The way he eyes the device, and eyes Scintal—like creatures that might at any point pounce—suggests that he had no special knowledge of ancient sorcery, however. That's okay.

I point at my device again, and say, "Gueye." Then I sweep my arm dramatically through the air and finally point to the ground and say, "Ledon." Maybe I should say Ghan, the land in which the city of Ledon lies. But that might just be more confusing.

It takes a few more tries, but I think I finally make the point that the device brought him here. He doesn't seem incredulous. Instead, he says something, pointing at my machine and motioning into the air, perhaps indicating someplace far off. He wants to go back, of course.

I suppose it isn't inconceivable. If the device brought him here, it could send him back. Maybe. I had thought it would open a doorway. Maybe it did. And doorways go both ways, I suppose.

It's not like water flowing downhill, a voice in my head reminds me. It probably isn't so logical and simple. That kind of thinking can be dangerous when applied to the numenera. The thing is, I find myself really wanting to do whatever I can to make Gueye happy. An irrational impulse. So I ignore that voice.

"Let's give it a look," I say with a voice of confidence and all the authority I can muster. I step closer to Gueye and the machine. The device still smells of smoke and scorched synth. He smells of perspiration and fresh air and excitement. Or perhaps that last one is me.

I check each of the connections and ports, whispering the charms that I hope will make the power coursing through the device more easily controlled. Like cooing

to an angry animal. Or an angry, naked man who's been displaced into your laboratory. Gueye waits patiently and quietly as I go about my processes. He occasionally shoots a glance at Scintal, who's still happily bouncing around him in yellow. Scintal is as excited as I am. My hands shake a little, but I manage to make myself focus. Everything is still in place. If I activate the device again, it should replicate the process.

I smile at Gueye and nod. I start toward the blast shield, but that certainly seems inappropriate. I can't rightly get behind cover while telling him, "But you stand right here."

So I grab the activator with its single button and force another smile. My chest clenches as it dawns on me that if this works, I'll be sending him away. I haven't been with anyone—thought about anyone—in this way for so long that I almost forgot what it felt like. Gueye interrupts my musing by saying something. He looks wary.

Of course he does. I'd be wary too. Shit, I'm wary and I have—probably—a slightly better understanding of what is going on. Gueye points at the device in my hand and then at the larger machine beside him. I see it through his eyes like I'm looking at it for the first time. Its mass of tubes and wires and lashed-together components makes it look like some deep-sea beast.

I nod and smile and make that "faraway place" gesture with my free hand. Then it occurs to me to ask. "Ledon," I say, pointing at the ground. Then I make the faraway motion again and give an exaggerated, questioning look. "Where are you from?" I ask aloud.

It takes a few more times of asking for him to understand the question, but eventually he says a word that sounds like "Co-ray-o," which means nothing to me.

Of course, maybe he's answering an entirely different question. Or maybe he's just saying, "Let's get on with this and get me home, you twit." I have no way of knowing. I want to reach across this canyon of incomprehension between us, but I have no idea how. I think we're both frustrated by it.

Finally, I once again point at the activator and the main device. "Well, let's give it a try."

Gueye nods.

"Goodbye, beautiful man," I say. I even forget to be afraid that the machine may engulf us both in flame or turn us inside out. I push the button.

The sizzling sound is louder this time, and smoke pours liberally from two of the couplings I'd fused on the right side of the machine. I feel a slight gust of air pushing at me, but Gueye is actually knocked off his feet. He doesn't disappear, but in the spot where I'd first seen him crouching, very close to where he stood a moment ago, something else now moves.

It's long and serpentine, but its head is broad and almost insectoid, with an array of eyes and feelers and things I don't have a name for. Two mandibled mouths hiss angrily.

Gueye shouts something. I drop the activator and back away. If I created a machine that brings things into my lab, I should have stopped while I was ahead.

Scintal flashes red and moves back with me. But Gueye leaps into action with surprising speed. He grabs a metal crossbar from the clutter of my lab and lunges at the beast.

I might have a bit of magic that can come in handy. I yell to Scintal to grab the cypher with the glass panel lying on the back workbench. Scintal gives me an inquisitive blue, but then zips off through the air.

The creature slashes at Gueye again and he's suddenly on the ground. I grab the thing nearest me—I don't care what it is—and hurl it at the insect-serpent thing. Only as it sails through the air do I realize it's the activator.

Oh well.

My aim is surprisingly good and the activator strikes the beast near one of its large eyes. It turns toward me with a hiss. I have no illusions that I actually hurt it, but at least I got its attention.

"Get up," I shout. "Get away!" Of course Gueye can't understand me, but it doesn't matter. He's clearly smart enough to take advantage of my distraction on his own, and he rolls away from the beast, clambering to his feet. But now the creature slithers and scuttles toward me.

Gueye has something in his hands, attacking the creature from its flank before it moves very far, but I can't help but back away a few more steps. Now I'm next to the blast shield I created to protect myself from the machine to begin with. Lot of good it's doing me now.

Then Scintal's next to me. She's produced her tiny metal arms and they're barely holding up the device I asked for. Scintal's glowing green.

"You're brilliant, Scintal!"

I grab the cypher. It's mostly a transparent panel about the size of my head, but there's a single metal cylinder attached to the right-hand side. I press a stud on the cylinder and symbols and lines of light appear on the panel.

Gueye is holding the creature's biting mandibles back with a piece of machinery I don't even recognize. I hold up the device so that I'm looking at the beast through it, and symbols appear around the creature in the glass. I have to be careful not to get Gueye in the glass, so I take a

few steps forward. If I don't hurry, though, this thing will tear him to shreds.

With the creature in the center of the viewscreen, I mutter a spell and press another stud on the side of the cylinder. Gods of the past, let this work.

Portions of the creature suddenly flare with an internal red and then white. Flames erupt from beneath its flesh, burning what appears to be a pattern of magical runes into its scaly skin. It shudders and shrieks. I watch as Gueye's eyes grow wide, but I don't know if I see fear or triumph. The beast collapses to the ground.

Before I can even whoop in happiness, and before Scintal can change color, there's a flash of light where Gueye's crouched next to the beast. He disappears.

It takes a moment for me to realize that he was right where he originally appeared. But why? The creature's smoldering, smoking body is still in the lab, so why isn't Gueye?

The body. I run over to it. "Scintal, help me!"

Scintal is white and extends all her arms to help me move the hot, wet corpse. It literally comes apart in our grip, its insides black with char. The cypher burned it far more intensely and completely than I ever expected. I sear my hands on its flesh, but I don't care.

Under its body, I find the activator. The creature's fall pressed the button. It opened the doorway in its death.

I look at the machine. It's utterly quiet. Only then do I realize that it's also broken. The power source has been ripped from its coupling.

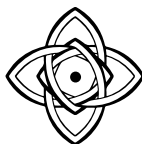
And the power source was the device that Gueye was using as a weapon. He must have grabbed it and pulled it free. Its parts lay scattered across the floor, smashed beyond all hope of repair. There must have been enough

power in the machine itself for a final use.

Well, I was right that the doorway went both ways. Or, I suppose, it went somewhere—I don't know for a fact that Gueye actually went home to Co-ray-whenever. He just went somewhere. And, as I pick up the coat from the floor where he disappeared, I realize wherever he went, he went there naked.

Can I ever get the machine working again? I doubt it, but I'll try all the same.

Scintal glows blue.



## A Sense of Her Death by Shanna Germain

The man in front of her had been dead too long. His insides had split open hours ago, and his skin gave off an acidic stink that stung the back of Anirr's nose.

His brain couldn't be far behind, the lifepaths already beginning to unthread themselves into the bitter scent of broken blood and cells.

She dropped to her knees and put out a hand until she found the man's chest. Under her palm, the fabric of his shirt was stiff and tacky. Not crusty enough to be blood. Something that released a hint of stickweed and burnt ballyberries when she ran a finger over it. A spilled drink at his last supper? Vomit? His death in liquid form? It didn't matter now; what was done was done.

Anirr ran her hand up the man's neck to the bone of his jaw. She barely had to touch a body to connect with it; putting her palm on a corpse's forehead was just an excuse to walk her hands across its face, to catch a tactile glimpse of a too-long nose, a broken tooth, maybe the

indented, waxy reach of a scar. It was her one indulgence, her one indecency.

If you didn't call going into a dead man's brain without asking an indecency.

His face was caved in. Nose almost non-existent, cheekbones concave. Too squishy and broken to be bad genes. More likely a bad end. That's why they were here. When someone died a slow death, they already gave away all their secrets to family members, friends, even enemies. It was the one truism of the slow death, that those who saw it coming needed to confess.

Those who died fast deaths, violent, unexpected, they held tight to what was precious. They were the ones with secrets. They were the ones the Dioshen wanted.

Behind her, Meshar shuffled his feet and leaned in. His shadow fell cold and dark across the bare skin of her back, making her shiver even in the heat of the falling afternoon.

"Well?" Meshar asked. He always was the impatient one between them.

Anirr was tempted to make something up, to say that she'd already tried and gotten nothing, let them move to the next corpse with no time sloughed off her hands. But she didn't do that anymore—lie—even though the instinct was still there. Falsities once came so easily to her, always tastier than the truth. Lies tasted like Cross-eyed Jacks, burning with a sweetness that made her miss her youth. But now they cost her even more than talking to the dead. Meshar had made sure of that with his tweaks to her insides.

"He's been dead a long time, Meshar," she said.

She knew from the click in his throat that he'd like it better if she called him Dio Meshar. But she'd have to



respect him, even just a little, to use his proper title. And they'd given up that charade the moment he'd had his scions open up her skin and turn her insides out.

"I know how long he's been dead." Of course he did. It all would have been in the lattimor's scouting report.

"Then you know he's mostly useless to... you." She almost said "to us." Old habits. One of the rare things that never truly died.

"It's the *mostly* part that intrigues me." Meshar reached to touch her shoulder—also old habit. The heat of his fingers naped the fine hairs on her neck, but she snarled at him, and he pulled back before he connected.

"Calaval's Creation, no need to be so creepy," he said.

She almost laughed. Their covey consisted of the whispering twins, a deathhound lattimor with no name, an arachnafere, a mostly dead girl wrapped in silk, and Meshar. It seemed hard to believe, but she was probably the least creepy member of their little group.

Creepy or not, everyone in the covey had purpose. The lattimor sniffed out the dead, or the about-to-be-dead. The twins acted as treasure-excavators, tinkerers, repairers, false chiurgeons, and other things that Anirr didn't like to think about. Isma stored everything in her silks, holding their memories and deals and plans. Carrying their debt and their deaths. Meshar was the covey's Dio. Liaison to the Dioshen. Leader.

And Anirr's job was to talk to the dead.

"If you want me to do your dirty work here, you should get out before this corpse is completely useless."

"It's not *my*—"

She shushed him, a gesture more body than voice, turning her body from him to fully focus on the dead man on the floor.



When she finally heard Meshtar's footsteps fade, Anirr breathed a slow sigh of relief.

To say she and Meshtar had been lovers once would be overstating their relationship by at least twenty levels of like. Back then, they'd been new recruits to the Dioshen. Working for their shins. Two people who were around death too much, two people who needed to breathe hard, to gasp untrue things about love and want, to feel their bodies come alive just long enough to let their minds go dead.

Maybe it could have gone somewhere, at the end of all that gasping. But then Anirr had died and Meshtar had turned her insides out to bring her back and now the Jaekels could take him, for all she cared.

Sometimes she thought corpsing used up her heart, how it felt smaller every time. But she knew it was something less soft that it took from her, and more vital. As though it hollowed her bones, diluted her blood, parched the soil of her body fallow. She couldn't have children, she knew that much. But she didn't know if that was part of it. Didn't want to know.

She hated everything she'd become. Stealing from the dead. It tasted like burning bone in her mouth every time. She was only still here because she owed a life. Not to Meshtar. Never to him.

Of course, Meshtar owed a life too. Not to her. To the Dioshen. For what he'd done *to* her.

The organization had rules: find the dead, ask the question, get the treasure, bring it to the Dioshen for pay. Do not bury or burn the dead. Do not engage with the dead for any other reason than finding their precious

objects. And do not, under any circumstances, try to make the dead anything other than dead.

Meshar had broken the rules when he brought her back to life. Which meant he owed the Dioshen his own life. They'd given him the role of leader not because he deserved it, but because he didn't. Because he would work for them for free until they released him. Which might be never, knowing the Dioshen.

Not that she cared about Meshar's troubles. She just wanted out. But first, she had to save a life. Pay her debt.

Anirr turned off the metal and synth sightcloak that covered her eyes. It took a breath for the steel static of the blocker to disappear and then she could see. The blue of the dead man's eyes, wide to the sky. The red in the corners, the smash of his dark face. The way his dying fumed from him in curls of yellow and green. The dirtied tatter of his clothes, torn by teeth and time. His pockets, as clear as if she could see into them, bore copper and dust, the broken bits of some device or many, the grey ovals of a few worn shins.

*Iadace*, she said inside that bright and silent place. A greeting for kin.

The dead man didn't respond. She wasn't surprised. He stared. She followed his gaze upward. The sky was a green-blue false ceiling, roiling like upside-down waves above them.

After Meshar had her remade, Anirr had believed she would be able to bring a person back to a real life. Whole and undead. It was Meshar who'd shown her the truth—how the wiring of her body could jump-start someone else's, but only for a moment. And at what cost.

"You have to be careful. It's not a limitless supply," he had said, back when he cared about such things. Back

when he was proud of what he'd turned her into and it was too early for her to hate him for it yet. "Every time, it uses up something from you."

"What?" she'd asked. "What does it use up?"

He'd shaken his head. "I don't know."

And now he didn't care. Now, every time they corpsed—her word, not his, the Dioshen demanded that they call it "collecting"—he happily sent her to her possible death. That was the way of all things, she believed. The thing you cared about most—if it didn't die while you still cared about it, then it became the thing you cared about least. Best armor in the world. Not caring.



*How do I bring someone back from death?*

She wasn't supposed to ask that—the Dioshen's laws were explicit—but she still held out hope that someday, somehow, she would find the key to bringing back life. Not all life. Just one life. One small life.

Nothing.

She asked what the Dioshen required her to ask.

*What is it that you hold most precious in all the world?*

As sudden as lightning, a million jumbled pictures rolled from the dead man, all over each other. A young girl with dark hair, laughing. Long love. Building a house, this field where she kneeled now. Hands and a small sentient machine, beeping.

It blew her back. Not by the images—she'd seen similar things again and again as the dead tried to decide—but by the fact that there was a response at all. She would have bet all her shins, and Meshar's too, that he was too far gone for her skills.

His voice came sudden in her head, soft, garbled from the damage to his face.

*I know you, he said. Dioshen.*

"No." She was startled into speaking aloud. How could he know that? She looked into the dead. They couldn't look into her.

*May you go soft into the dark.* The Dioshen prayerline was edged with a bitterness that Anirr knew too well.

"You were Dioshen?" She was still talking out loud, couldn't figure out how to pull her voice out of her mouth and back into her head.

*I can give you what you seek.*

Suddenly, she didn't want this man to tell her what he loved. Didn't want Meshar to lead them to it, didn't want to take it and get the pittance the Dioshen would give them.

She started to pull her hand back.

*Not that, he said. The other. What you really seek.*

*Bringing someone back from death? Impossible.* But of course it wasn't. Meshar had done it to her, hadn't he?

*Bargain, he said.*

*What bargain?*

Another image: a ruddy tree that she recognized from their arrival, tall and black leaved, the trunk carved with runes. The whole thing flaming, the wood beginning to turn purple as the heat rose, the leaves changing to white, dropping one by one. Against its trunk, a body wrapped face-in, wrists bound, burning. His body.

*I can't, she said. She couldn't. It broke every rule of the Dioshen, tore apart every oath. She'd be as bad as Meshar.*

*Bargain, the dead man said.*

*Agreed, she said. If he'd been alive, they would have*

pressed their wet thumbs to the corners of each other's eyes to seal the bargain. She licked her thumbs, let them rest next to his open eyes for a moment. It would have to do.

There was nothing else. The last of the yellow and green fumes coiled from his body and wafted away.

Her head thrummed, her bones felt hollow inside her skin. An ache like a loss that you'd already forgotten.

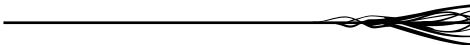
She knobbed her sightcloak on and turned back toward the group. For a few moments, as the device powered up, she could still see.

Evening was darkening the sky. The crew had given up waiting for her and had fallen into their habits of being. The twins with their heads tucked together, murmuring in their incessant language. They wore a single dress, and beneath it, she could see their hands working. One arm popped through a hole in the fabric holding a wriggling mech tail. Another arm popped out, twisted the tail into two pieces, and then both retreated back beneath the fabric. Meshar and the lattimor sat at a cobbled cookstove, holding cups of something that steamed silver into the blueing air.

They all looked tired, gaunt. Even in the best of times, corpsing for the Dioshen was a hard life—spending your time going from death to death, seeking things to steal.

Before her vision faded, she looked for Isma, aching for even the smallest glimpse of the dark braids of her legs, the blackbead eyes, her white-wrapped cargo, but Anirr's vision slipped to white and then steel and then there was nothing but the scent of the lattimor's cooking—fish and some spicy herb she couldn't place—and the call of Meshar, asking her what she'd learned.

A flavor, sweet and spicy, touched the edges of her



tongue. The taste of it so long forgotten that she almost didn't recognize it for the lie it was.

"Nothing," she said.

Her heart hit hard against the plates of her chest, a scared animal running this way and that. She didn't feel anything else this time, although she waited and waited.



Isma's nest smelled of sweet milk and ruskroots. Anirr twanged a thick door thread with the tips of her fingers, waiting until Isma's voice bade her enter.

Anirr never knew what to expect here, the way that Isma sometimes shunned her and sometimes took her in. Isma claimed it was the arachnafere's doing, that hot-and-cold stutter of emotion. Anirr always wanted to believe that. What did she care if the creature side of Isma didn't like her? That wasn't the part she loved. She didn't mind that part—the way that Isma sometimes bit too hard or held Anirr with too many limbs, how sometimes Anirr woke wrapped in silken threads that gagged her as much as comforted her—but she wasn't in love with it either.

In love. Was that how she really felt about Isma, or was it just comfort, more of the same of what she'd had with Meshtar, although softer? A blanket between her and the hot breath of death. Was there any difference, in the end, between love and false comfort?

Tonight, Isma was fully human, wrapping Anirr in human arms, her fingers tangling in Anirr's hair. They didn't talk. The twins and Meshtar talked enough for everyone. And they all know Anirr had to tell the truth when asked, which meant that Isma often didn't ask anything at all.

Not anymore, Anirr thought. Tonight she had lied, and her heart had not ended.

Lying there, wrapped in silence and Isma, Anirr wondered if she was dead, if someone was asking her questions from that other space. Was she answering? Or did she keep her secrets for herself?

Then she remembered that she had already been there. She had already died, in Meshar's arms. He'd been the speaker for the dead then and he'd asked her: *What do you hold most precious?*

She had said, in her pain and fear, *You*.

But she had been a liar then, too.

If she hadn't been, she would have answered the truth—*me, myself*—and Meshar would have buried her and maybe grieved a little, and Anirr would be dead and Meshar's daughter would still be alive.

Instead, he had believed her and brought her to the twins, who'd broken her insides open, cracked her wide and replaced her with ... things... so that she could be alive. So she could be the deathspeaker. So she could ask, again and again, *What do you hold most precious?*

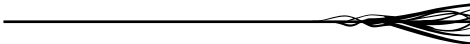
And then help the Dioshen steal that thing, whatever it might be.

"I have to go," Anirr said. The dead man was whispering at the back of her skull. "Isma, can I see her?"

"Meshar..." would kill them both if he found out. But Isma knew Anirr asked only when she could no longer stand it. Anirr could hear threads already being pulled away, unraveled and unraveled. So many for such a small body. Anirr didn't say anything, just listened to the sounds of silk on silk on skin, and then the shuffling of Isma along the curved walls.

"I am above you," Isma said, as she did every time.





“Do not look up.”

Anirr nodded and turned off her sightcloak. She could hear Isma moving across the webbing of the ceiling, but she kept her gaze to the ground, no matter how much she longed to catch a glimpse of her.

Anirr could look only at the dead. That was what Meshar’s doing had brought her. A gaze that killed the living.

The world slowly faded in. At her feet, the tiny body, most of it still wrapped in the white silk strings of the arachnafere’s pod. The girl’s mouth was covered with a metal and synth device, something of the twins’ making. It pumped a fog inside her to prevent decay.

The first time Anirr had seen Lysis preserved in her pod, she had said she was sorry about a hundred times. And then she had tried to reach her. The second and third times, too. But Lysis was somewhere between life and death, in a dark, mazed garden beyond Anirr’s skills.

Death, that rocky garden where only tangled horrors grew, choking them all. She wanted no more of it. Wanted to plant something in the ground, in her own womb, in the world. Something that would never wither, never die.

But that was not her way. She was not the seed, but the strike.

When Anirr had died, releasing her last breath in Meshar’s arms, Meshar had pulled Anirr’s insides out and saved her, given her deathspeak and death sight. He had turned her into this monster.

Anirr had looked at Meshar’s daughter with her new monster eyes and killed her.

Now Lysis waited, preserved, for Anirr to do the impossible, to bring her back from wherever she was.

Anirr kissed the dead girl’s forehead. *Sorry* came to

her mouth and went away again without making itself heard. Instead she said, "I may have found a way." It felt too early to make that promise, and saying it aloud was akin to killing it, but she couldn't help it. There was a hope inside her that hadn't been there in so long.



Alone in the dark but for the starshine and the glitterbeets across the field, Anirr pushed her sightcloak up to rest on the crown of her head. The small breeze made her exposed eyelids twitch and itch. Or maybe it was the knowledge of what she was about to do. What would it cost her, this lawbreak? She did not know.

The tree was still there, black leaved and rune carved. A part of her had hoped it had disappeared, wafted off into the nowhere the way things sometimes suddenly did, or gotten struck by silent lightning and split to the ground. Anything to ward off what came next.

What came next was her hauling the body of the dead man to the tree. He was heavier in death. Everyone was. Whatever entered you when you died was some kind of solid mass, she thought. Or maybe it was just that your important organs solidified, turned to hearts and lungs of stone.

By the time she got him to the tree, she was sweating and panting. No matter how she leveraged, she couldn't get him into the position she'd seen in the vision. She had to tie his wrists with strips cut from his own shirt just to keep him tight to the trunk. It was all going to burn anyway, so what did it matter?

*This is what you asked of me.*

She waited a moment to see if he had anything to say in response, but he was, not surprisingly, silent. She

pulled a handful of glass flame pellets that she'd slyed from the lattimor's cooking supplies out of her bag, tucked them under the dead man's boots, and backed away.

"May you go soft into the dark," she said.

The pellets went up at once, a flare so hot and bright it blinded her. When she could see again, the tree was already purpling, the runes glowing white through the man's skin. There was nothing subtle about the smell of him now; blackened skin and hair that choked her until she retched and fell on her hands and knees.

She watched, waiting for him to tell her what she needed to know, waiting for him to reveal his secret.

There was only silence from the dead man. His bargain, unsealed. She'd broken the Dioshen law, for what? For nothing. A promise that wasn't coming.

Meshar was the one who came. Anirr was crouched in the dirt, her stomach upside down, heaving and panting. The burn stung her eyes, made tears that streaked down into her mouth.

"Calaval's eyes," he said, so low she could barely hear him under the crackling fire. His tone of anger didn't move her; his tone of awe—or was it fear?—prickled Anirr's shoulders like the flat of an ice axe held to her skin. "Anirr Chald, what have you done?"

"Trying to save Lyis," she said.

She thought Meshar's voice would hold more anger, but there was only confusion, a note of sadness. "Lyis is dead."

"I was dead too," she said. "And you saved me."

"I kept you from death, but I didn't save you," he said. "We both know that."

She wanted, fiercely, to look at him. It had been so

long since she'd truly seen him. There was a time when he might have meant everything to her, and now she couldn't remember a single thing about his face. She pressed her head into the dirt, let it fill her eyes and mouth with the blind taste of nothing, until she heard Meshar walk away.



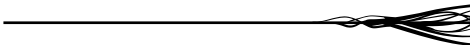
They let the dead man burn. Too late now to stop it. What was done was done.

By the time the last snarl and flicker of flame had died away, the scent of dew layered the air, and the covey was already packing camp in silence. The unraveling of Isma's silk nest was less than a whisper. Even the twins had ceased their murmuring. The only loud thing was Meshar's disapproval. Anirr heard it like a pulse in her brain, thrumming with pain.

Packing up was brief. None of them, except Isma, carried much. Not externally, anyway. Sometimes Anirr thought their guilty organs, their stone hearts, were so heavy they had no free shoulders left. She felt the loss of hope, a weight all its own, lodged somewhere in the pit of her stomach.

The lattimor broke the silence, offering Meshar a murmured outline of a woman who'd died sudden, off to the northeast. A few days' walk.

Anirr looped her small pack around her waist. She traveled with the group by smell and sound, her javelin a walking stick. Sometimes Isma gave her a thread, a silken roadmap that Anirr could follow like a trail, but Isma hadn't said anything at all, and Anirr was too proud to ask.



"May you go soft into the dark." Meshar's voice was closer than she'd expected. At first, she didn't know who he was talking to. She smelled the bitter almond tang of regret on his skin, and she knew.

"No," she said. "You can't..." She'd wanted out of the Dioshen, yes, but only after she'd brought Lyis back, only after she'd fixed everything. Not like this.

"I'm sorry," he said. And she thought that he was. But not sorry enough that he changed his mind. Not sorry enough that he offered to let her see Lyis one more time, or say goodbye to any of them.

Anirr stood and listened to them go. A silken thread whispered across her cheek, a gift from Isma, but she brushed it away, unable to stand its terrible kindness.



When they were out of her hearing, Anirr smashed her sightcloak against a rock, wrenching it with her hands until it broke into more pieces than she could count, dropped her pack and javelin at the edge of the field.

The tree was a charred husk. Body and trunk were melded together into a single memorial of former life.

Already, scavengers were picking away at the blackened skin, sharp beaks and snarling maws tugging and claiming. Anirr shooed them away from the dead man with her bare hands.

A flock of deathcrows attacked her, bombing her face with beaks and claws. She looked at each purple body as it came at her, watched as her deathgaze caught them and they fell, wing-still, around her feet.

She didn't know why she was protecting the dead Dioshen; he had betrayed their bargain—and yet she felt

some shelled thing breaking open inside her. She wanted to see what was in there.

Not far off, she heard a pack of broken hounds howl to each other, a hungry sound that grew closer with each call and response.

“Come,” she said softly to them.

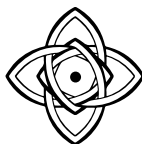
There were five of them, teeth and claws and jaws that ripped the skin from her forearms, but she met them with her gaze, a terrible thing that she owned. She sent each of them to the dark, and her own dark lifted a little each time.

When it was over, she stood surrounded by the dead—birds and beasts, trees and man. The world shone bright, green and purple at her feet, the blued expanse of the morning sky, the crimson of her own blood, flowing free.

She touched the place where her heart lived. It had grown so small, so heavy. A stone of fist and fear. Now it threatened to crack her ribs, to break free of her chest with its sudden rise. She inhaled, let it leave her with a sigh.

*May you go fierce into the dark,* she told it.

She had been dead long enough.



## About the Authors

### Monte Cook

Monte has worked as a professional writer for more than 20 years. As a fiction writer, he has published numerous short stories and two novels. As a comic book writer, he has written a limited series for Marvel Comics called *Monte Cook's Ptolus: City by the Spire*, as well as some shorter work. As a nonfiction writer, he has published the wry but informative *The Skeptic's Guide to Conspiracies*.

His work, however, as a game designer, is likely most notable. Since 1988, he has written hundreds of tabletop roleplaying game books and articles and won numerous awards. Monte is likely best known for *Dungeons & Dragons* 3rd edition, which he co-designed with Jonathan Tweet and Skip Williams. In 2001, he started his own game design studio, Malhavoc Press, and published such notable and award-winning products as *Ptolus*, *Arcana Evolved*, and the *Book of Eldritch Might* series. As a freelance game designer, he designed HeroClix and *Monte Cook's World of Darkness*, and he has worked on the Pathfinder RPG, the Marvel Comics massively multiplayer online game, and numerous other games and related projects.

He is the designer of Numenera.

### **Shanna Germain**

Shanna is the creative director for Numenera and The Strange. An award-winning writer and editor, her poems, essays, stories, novellas, and articles have been widely published in places like *Apex Magazine*, *Best American Erotica*, *Best Bondage Erotica*, *Best Lesbian Romance*, *Lightspeed*, *Salon* and more. She has garnered a variety of awards for her work, including a Pushcart Prize nomination, the Rauxa Prize for Erotic Poetry, and the C. Hamilton Bailey Poetry Fellowship.

Her most recent books include *The Lure of Dangerous Women* (Wayzgoose Press, 2012), *Leather Bound* (Harper Collins, 2013), and *As Kinky As You Wanna Be* (Cleis Press, 2014).



