



NUMENÉRA

TALES BEYOND THE NINTH WORLD

BY MONTE COOK,
BRUCE R. CORDELL & SHANNA GERMAIN



Tales Beyond the Ninth World

by Monte Cook, Bruce R. Cordell, and Shanna Germain



Credits

Writers

Monte Cook, Bruce R. Cordell, and Shanna Germain

Managing Editor

Dennis Detwiller

Proofreader

Ray Vallese

Cover Artist

Ben Wootten

Graphic Designer

Bear Weiter



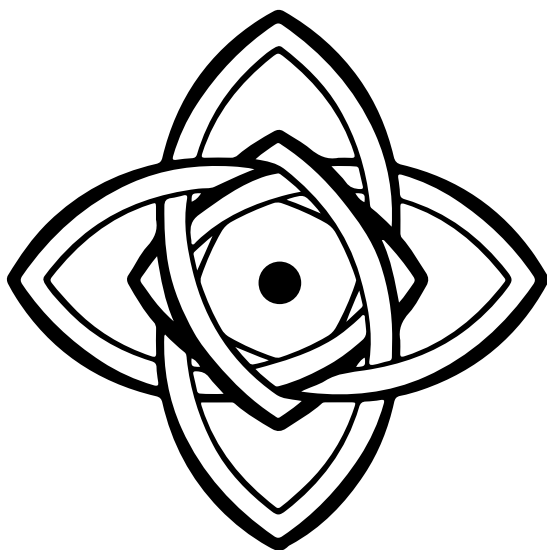
© 2016 Monte Cook Games, LLC

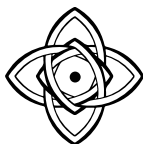
NUMENERA and its logo are trademarks of Monte Cook Games, LLC in the U.S.A. and other countries. All Monte Cook Games characters and character names, and the distinctive likenesses thereof, are trademarks of Monte Cook Games, LLC.



Table of Contents

The Edge of Emptiness	5
Monte Cook	
When the Night Stole Her	21
Bruce R. Cordell	
Words That Rhyme With Reef	37
Shanna Germain	





The Edge of Emptiness

Monte Cook

Lifetimes had come and gone since any of them had touched earth. That is to say, real earth—not the stuff Hirulis kept in his locker and spread on the half deck of the barquentine on Saint Yuril's Day to kneel upon as he prayed. No one had the heart to tell him that no soil back on the birthworld ever had quite that color or that smell. Nells figured Hirulis probably had purchased it from a merchant claiming to have traveled there and back again. Such traders came to them occasionally, but rarely did they bring the truth with them when they did. He must have forgotten what the soil he walked upon as a young man was originally like. Stretched time will do that.

The barquentine skimmed the edge of the great void, trawling for dust that the Captain sold to traders. The Captain ran a tight ship. The conscripted crew didn't know what the dust was or what it was for, but they didn't care much either. Though originally taken aboard against

their will, eventually they were well rewarded for their work by the barquentine.

The day the sigil-skinned demon appeared to them, Nells was deep below decks, feeding ursong into the greedy green fires at the vessel's heart. Lights flashed violet and turquoise, conduits thrummed, and tiny vents spat a residue the crew called 'voidance. You didn't want to get much on you if you could help it.

She lifted her visor when she heard the strange sound. Whispering a few necessary words and fingering studs on the hose's handle, she brought the gurgling of the ursong to a stop. She heard it again. A voice, singing.

She ascended through the various levels of the ship's spine, pausing for brief moments to listen for the song. She could hear it—beautiful and ringing, like fingers along wet crystal—getting louder as she climbed the steep metal stairs.

She found the source of the sound at the ramp up to the fantail. There, Orl and Jomi stood transfixed before it. The creature stood a head taller than either of the crew members, shimmering like a polished diamond in the bright light. Each glimmer seemed to be alive, forming what could very well have been letters or words. Nells didn't know for certain, because she didn't know any letters. She'd seen the Captain writing in his book, though, so she had their shape in mind as the shimmering thing glistened and sang. She probably would have joined Orl and Jomi in their reverie except just at that moment Dessoc ran up behind her and slapped her on the small of her back.

"What's this, then?"

The sound of his shout drew her attention away from the being. Dessoc had a stern set to his jaw, and intensity

in his dark eyes. Nells stared at her friend for a moment and managed, "I've no idea."

Hirulis was just two steps behind Dessoc, as usual. "Saints help us!" he spat. "A demon!"

Nells looked at the sparkling thing. A demon? The term didn't seem to fit it.

Dessoc wasted no time. He had a bottle of trimun ale in his hand—also, as usual—and he hurled it at the singing being. "Away with you!"

"Back to whatever dark hell you seeped in from," Hirulis added.

The bottle just missed the creature's. . . well, they would later agree that it would have most likely been its head. The bottle smashed against the bulkhead behind it. The singing stopped. In a burst of color Nells had no name for, the creature disappeared, and all of them stood staring at the smear of liquid on the metal wall, and the shattered glass on the synth deck.

Orl and Jomi stumbled as if waking from a deep sleep. Both Nells and Dessoc reacted quickly as they lurched, catching them before they actually fell.

"This is terrible," Hirulis said, pacing.

"Where's the Captain?" Nells asked.

Jomi found her feet, and gently pushed Nells away. Orl softly muttered something about beauty and leaned against Dessoc.

"I know what that was," Hirulis said. "I know all about it."

"What are you going on about?" Dessoc demanded.

"The demon. That was the sigil-skinned demon, they call it."

"Who calls it?"

"Midnighters like us."

Nells called out for the Captain and made her way to the nearest ship's bell.

"What are you on about?" Dessoc was still supporting Omi.

Hirulis's eyes were wide and he ran a hand through his long, greying hair. "I heard of it, I'm telling you. The demon. It's bad."

Nells rang the bell and didn't hear the rest of the exchange between the two. By the time she'd rung it three times, she heard feet on the deck below. In the blue glow of the shiplight, she saw three more of the crew coming up the steep stairs, led by the Captain.

The Captain was tall and thin, and he had skin the color of expensive wine. An angular fin of taut skin crested his head. They all referred to him as a "he" but Nells wasn't at all certain that "he" or "she" really applied. Or maybe they both did. It didn't matter, though. He was, to all the crew, the Captain, and that was enough. He had been the Captain when Nells and her friends first came aboard, and perhaps had been for lifetimes before that.

"Nells, what's going on up here?" The Captain's voice was deceptively gentle.

"Captain," Hirulis called out behind her, "thank the Saints you're here."

The Captain continued to stare at Nells.

"I was stoking the fire below, Captain. But something up here was singing. Something I'd not heard in all my ship-granted years. I came up here quick as a bird, and it had Orl and Jomi in some kind of trance. It sparkled and the sparkles were . . . words, maybe? I don't know such things. But Dessoc chased it off by throwing a bottle at it. I think we're all fine, now."

"Oh, we ain't fine," Hirulis said.

The Captain quickly assessed the shattered bottle, Orl and Jomi, and finally Dessoc and Hirulis. Dessoc held Orl on his feet, but mostly kept his gaze on the deck. More than anyone else in the crew, Dessoc was intimidated by the Captain, although Nells didn't really know why. Hirulis, however, approached, a bit of spittle on the side of his mouth. "Captain, I never thought we'd see this horror."

"Hirulis, you seem to believe you know something."

"Yes, Captain, I do. I heard of this thing in terrible tales told to me by some other Midnighters. You know the ones. They were passing through in that craft that we all thought looked a bit like a yellow bug. You remember, Dessoc."

Dessoc didn't look up.

"Go on," the Captain said.

"They told me about various demons in the void. The ones that live right out there in the Night, with no world to call home. Birthed in the darkest pits between each star. Well, this one's called the sigil-skinned demon, because the light that is his skin is also words and symbols of a kind. Now, we drove it off, to be sure, Captain, but that ain't no good. No good at all. You see, it comes back. If it ain't fed what it wants to eat, it comes back three times. Each time it takes what it wants, and the third time it takes everything, if you get my meaning. It takes everyone. It feeds on men's souls."

Nells listened to Hirulis's tale, but only parts of it rang true. She didn't have much luck looking at creation in terms of saints and demons and souls like Hirulis, but at the same time she knew that the universe was a big place. Much, much bigger than she'd been taught as a girl. The ship had certainly taught her that. Like the rest

of the crew, she'd seen all manner of creature and beast, and their ways were strange and varied.

"I see," the Captain said. Nells wondered if he already knew the story Hirulis told. Or possibly more. If he did, however, he offered to share none of it. Rather, he turned to the crew member behind him, First Mate Dellisach. "I want every member of the crew on alert, looking for some kind of intruder. Get the gunnery team ready to blast anything they see approaching the ship that doesn't have a friendly hail."

Nells interrupted before she could stop herself. "Don't think it will approach, Captain. When it left, it just disappeared in a flash. No coming and going like a normal creature." Maybe he didn't know everything after all.

The Captain didn't face her, but she could see his angular back stiffen at the sound of her interruption.

Jomi made it worse by adding, "That's right, Captain. I saw it just appear here by the fantail. Didn't come from anywhere. It was just here all of a sudden."

Now he turned toward Nells and the rest. "And I want all of you down in berth deck until further notice." His voice was tense. "Put together a more detailed report and present it to Dellisach in half an hour. She'll come down to you expecting clear information. And make sure Orl and Jomi don't have any lasting ill effects."



Berth deck's smooth white deck and bulkheads were made of some other kind of synth than those found on other levels. There was something about the way shiplight reflected off of them that made it very easy to sleep, and wake rested. Maybe the original shipbuilders used it

for a berth deck themselves, Nells mused at times. She would never know, of course. They were long gone even when she first came on board. Not long gone as in many lifetimes, but as in many stars' lifetimes. At least, that's what the Captain told the crew once.

No conduits or controls here. Just restful surfaces and the crews' slung hammocks and assembled lockers.

Dellisach had come and gone, but they didn't have much additional information for her.

Dessoc reclined in his hammock, his long legs spilling over the sides. A new bottle of trimun ale had found its way into his hand. Orl and Jomi sat on the deck with their backs against the bulkhead, quietly talking. Hirulis paced. Nells searched through her locker to find something to eat. When that failed, she climbed into her own hammock.

That was right about the moment when she had the idea.

"Say," she said, "what do we know about this thing, Hirulis? You say it makes its meal of souls or somesuch. What else does it want?"

Hirulis paused in his constant pacing. "Oh yes, it feeds upon your very soul. To be certain."

"But what else?"

"Well," Hirulis put his fingers through his hair. "I seem to remember them saying something about someone killing one of these demons once. Skinning it. Making something special out of that weird glimmering whatever-it-is."

Nells swung back out of her hammock, nodding.

"What're you getting at, Nells?"

"We're thinking of this all wrong," she told them. "This isn't a doom. It's an opportunity."

"No," Hirulis shook his head.

"Yes. We kill the bastard before it can kill us. Who would just sit here and wait for it to return and kill? Not I. We make ready to kill it first. Then, like you said, we sell its sparkly hide to the next group of traders we come across. If the stories you heard are true, we know it's coming back. And it stands to reason we can figure out when."

"How?" Dessoc got out of his own hammock.

"A thing so regular and so predictable as to always come back three times likely returns in a pattern of sorts. We figure that out, and we can get ready for it."

Now Jomi came forward. "You want to destroy it?"

Nells nodded.

"But it's so beautiful."

Hirulis shook his head so violently his long locks flailed about his head. "No, no, no. You got caught up in its sorcery. That's what it does. You were charmed."

Now Orl joined Jomi's side. "We were listening to its beautiful song."

Nells held up her hand. "I saw the look on your faces when it left. It did have some sort of spell on you or something. A mind thing. A whammy, as my mother used to say."

In truth, most of her memories of her mother were long gone, and they all knew it. It was just the sort of thing they still said.

She added, "Say, we'll have to come up with some kind of protection against that if we're going to face it."

Orl shook his head. Orl wasn't, strictly speaking, human. His skin had a yellowish pallor and his ears were large and pointed. The rest of his features were slightly off as well, but overall, he possessed two eyes, a nose, a

mouth, and so on, just like everyone else. He could pass for a particularly strange or ugly human. But his people were from some world other than the birthworld, and he'd been added to the crew much more recently. Fifty, sixty years, maybe.

Time was so difficult to judge when it was always one long night.

Dessoc moved uncomfortably close to him. "You saying you won't lend a hand to this plan?"

Before Orl could answer, Hirulis interjected, "So you're a part of this?"

"I think whatever that thing is, if someone before us hunted one down and sold its hide, we can too. That was some weird stuff—just the kind of thing traders like. We'll be as rich as Navarene merchants," Dessoc said. Nells knew that she once knew what "Navarene" meant, but too much time had passed. The meaning had long ago slipped away like a discarded old shoe.

"You in?" Nells looked at Hirulis.

Hirulis threw his hands dramatically into the air. "Saints help me. Fine. Better than just waiting to die. So now we're demon hunters."



The first of the three appearances came about six hours later. Most of the crew slept. But a bosun's mate named Yeath had been trying to finish the patches in a conduit spraying more 'voidance than the Captain could tolerate. No one saw or even heard the demon. No one that lived, at least. But one of the crew members found Yeath dead and—worse—dismembered in a bloody mess. It was fairly easy to determine that not much time had passed,

as the bloody bits of the man still slid slowly down the bulkhead.

"I was right," Hirulis said when the news of the attack woke them all. The Captain was on the berth deck telling the crew to sleep in shifts, with some keeping watch while the others rested.

"I didn't realize you doubted your story," Dessoc replied.

"I didn't. But I know some did. I'm just saying. Now we all know. It's the demon I said it was."

"But we're no closer to figuring out how to hunt the thing," Dessoc said.

"It's been six hours," Nells said. "We've learned that much. We need to be ready six hours from now."

"But where? This is a big ship."

"It seems to be keeping to the upper decks. We'll wait for it on the weather deck. We'll listen for the song."

"We attacked it first," Jomi said quietly.

"True enough," Nells told her, "but we're going to give what we started an ending as well."

Beginnings. Endings. They had little enough of either on board the barquentine.

As if he read her thoughts, Dessoc asked so that only she could hear, "You doing this to save lives, to get its hide, or just because you're very, very bored?"

"The best questions have more than one answer, don't you think? Shiptime. . . however it is that it does what it does. It's a lot of time to fill."

Dessoc just shook his head and smiled.



The second appearance occurred about three hours later. They all heard the ship's bells ringing and came running, but they weren't ready.

"I thought we had more time," Dessoc shouted.

The demon had appeared on one of the side decks. By all accounts, three crew members had fallen under the spell of its song. Two were now dead, and the third unconscious, saved only because the Captain himself came upon the attack and drove the demon off with a handheld needlethrower. For the first time in what was likely years, the crew heard the Captain raise his voice. He ordered every hand to redouble their efforts to stay alert and that every one of them carry some wax or cloth or some such thing to plug their ears.

Its two new victims were as shredded as the first.

"It's not eating them, though," Dessoc said.

"It's eating their souls," Hirulis said. "I told you all that."

Nells pursed her lips tight, but said nothing.

Dessoc shook his head. "We should have been ready for it. Could have saved these lost to us now."

"But it came early," Hirulis said.

"We were just guessing the intervals would be the same," Nells replied. "It doesn't have to be the same to be a regular pattern. So now we have more information. It cut the time between its appearances down by half. I think we can expect it to do the same again. That means we've got about an hour and a half."

Dessoc nodded. "We can be ready in that time."

"We should tell the Captain," Hirulis said. "Everyone should be prepared."

Nells and Dessoc exchanged glances. She didn't want to admit it, but she was afraid to talk to the Captain about



it. More afraid than she was of the demon itself. And Nells was certain that Dessoc wouldn't go to him either.

"What if these attacks weren't its original intent?" Orl asked. "What if it came here just to sing its song?"

"And share its beauty?" Jomi added.

Dessoc shrugged. "The point is as moot as can be," he said. "It's on the attack now. Good mates are dead. We can't stand for that."

Orl worked his jaw and then shrugged.



Dessoc heard the song first. The third appearance of the sigil-skinned demon did indeed come about an hour and a half after the second, just as Nells had surmised. They all hustled down a corridor and up a companionway that brought them to the aft portion of the main deck.

In addition to the plugs for their ears, Nells and Dessoc had armed themselves with cobbled sprayers loaded with 'voidance, which served as the most common weapon among the crew. Hirulis, of course, clung tightly to an ancient synth something-or-other that he claimed was a ray emitter. None of them had ever seen it actually work, but he'd paid traders nearly a year's pay more than a decade ago for it. Orl and Jomi each had a makeshift cudgel and lagged behind the others a few paces. Their reluctance was clear to Nells, but five seemed a better number than three no matter how you did the math, so she was happy they were present.

The demon stood alone on the deck.

It had appeared in front of a large curved synth screen that showed the great void behind it. The edge of the starfield gave way to just the empty blackness beyond.

Its luminescent flesh—or what passed for flesh—shimmered in the darkness. It was humanlike in shape, generally. Beautiful. Delicate like spun glass.

Nells could hear its muffled song, and could feel its captivating pull, despite the earplugs. She decided she couldn't afford to hesitate and pointed her weapon at it. With a squeeze of its handle, the sprayer issued forth a stream of concentrated 'voidance at the demon. A heartbeat later, Dessoc did the same.

"Kill it," he shouted.

The 'voidance disappeared in a puff of mist before it struck the creature.

"Oh no," Nells whispered.

"Hirulis," Dessoc barked, "use that weapon of yours and pray to your Saints it actually works."

Hirulis moved forward, synth device in both hands, holding it in front of him like a talisman. He was speaking a prayer, or perhaps an incantation associated with the device.

"You don't understand the beauty," Jomi cried from behind Nells. Nells turned, but not before a sharp crack against the back of her skull sent her stumbling forward. Everything went white. "It fills the emptiness with beauty," she heard as she tumbled to the ground and rolled awkwardly, but it was a different voice. Orl, most likely.

Nells lay on her back. She wondered if she'd lost consciousness. Seemed likely. How much time had passed, she wondered as she struggled to get her eyes to focus. She lifted her head to see Jomi and Orl standing before the demon, staring intently. One of her earplugs had fallen out, but the creature wasn't singing. Instead, she heard a terrible tearing sound. She sat up to see that

the demon was bent over a bloody mess at its feet, and shredding it with claws she had never noticed before. The long tresses of grey and black hair suggested that the bloody mess was Hirulis.

Dessoc lay not far from her, stirring but not fully conscious. Jomi and Orl's work as well? She imagined that one of the two of them was next in line for the demon's foul work. She ran through her options. She was too far from a ship's bell to summon help, and it would come too late in any event. Her weapon was nowhere in sight, but it was of little use anyway.

With no other ideas, she struggled to her feet. Neither the creature nor its two transfixed allies seemed to notice. From behind Orl, Nells launched herself awkwardly at him. She slammed into his back and sent him stumbling forward, crashing into the demon. There was a flash of nameless color, but the creature didn't disappear as it had before. Orl gasped what would have been a scream, most likely, if he'd had the chance to draw more of a breath. His body blackened and crumbled as he came into contact with the demon's shimmering skin. Like the brittle bits of charcoal you found in the remnants of a dying fire, Orl broke apart and became little more than a swirl of ash.

Nells was still on her feet, although not steady. Pain throbbed in the back of her head. Jomi didn't react to Orl's astonishing demise, but the demon did. It had no eyes Nells could perceive, but she felt its gaze upon her. Or perhaps just its awareness. Either way, she knew she was as dead as Hirulis now. She had hoped to drive it away with her brash attack, but it remained. Not the best idea of her life, but it still might just hang from a peg higher than the idea to hunt this thing down in the first place.

“Get down,” she heard behind her. Dessoc lay on his side, but Hirulis’s ray emitter was somehow in his hand. She found it ridiculously easy to fall to the ground. On her stomach now, she slid in a wet mess that she realized a few moments later was part Hirulis and part Orl.

Dessoc activated the weapon and a stream of wild, fluctuating light and sound roared from the wider end. This cavalcade of energy struck the demon like ursong from the hose into the ship’s heart, and just as the volatile fuel burst in those fires, so too did the light from the emitter explode on contact with the creature’s sigil skin. Light and heat shot in every direction, as if the thing had absorbed the ray and spit it back out in a hundredfold random directions. Symbols etched themselves in Nells’s mind, but they carried no meaning.

The conflagration was too much for the demon, as the energy consumed it from within. Within seconds, it was gone.

Nells remained flat on the deck for a few breaths. Her skin felt stiff and tender, as if she had a terrible sunburn. Dessoc appeared scorched as well, but perhaps not as badly. Jomi was nothing but a blackened corpse on the deck.

“It’s over,” she said.

“There’s nothing left,” Dessoc said in a quiet voice. “No hide.”

“Who cares?”

“It was your idea.”

“And it was a terrible one. Don’t listen to me again.”

Dessoc gave a quiet laugh.

The Captain and First Mate arrived in what seemed like a heartbeat after that. Nells and Dessoc had barely made it to their feet.

"Captain," Nells began.

The Captain silenced her with a gesture and knelt by the dead.

"The creature?" Dellisach asked.

"Gone," Nells said. "For good, I think."

The Captain stood. His large, inhuman eyes rarely blinked, but they did so now as he scrutinized both Nells and Dessoc.

"The creature is destroyed. Six of my crew are dead. Is there anything else to report?"

Dessoc shook his head and looked at the deck. Somehow, a bottle of ale was in his hand. Nells had no idea how he did that. She considered the question, but truthfully, that did sum it up. "No, Captain."

"Then you're dismissed."

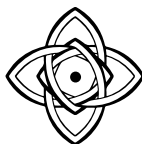
Dessoc made his way back down the companionway. Nells followed.

But then she stopped. She turned back. "Captain," she said slowly, "you've read many books, and you've plied the Night out here for longer than any among us. Orl and Jomi died convinced that what Hirulis called a demon was only interested in singing and spreading beauty. At least at first. What do you think?"

The Captain's long fingers stroked his hairless jaw. "The Night is vast. The ship's unique relationship with the clock has given us all long life, but even in eternity, can we see it all? Learn it all? I do not think so."

"Sometimes," she replied, "I think I'd still like to give it a try."

The Captain nodded.



When the Night Stole Her
Bruce R. Cordell

Kalice's daughter Neela used to sleep on the terrace on warm nights, the small girl's hands and head poking out of the blanket. Seven years old, Neela hadn't yet learned to be afraid of the dark. She loved the stars. Kalice used to point out constellations to her daughter, making up names for the ones she didn't know. Kalice had loved the stars, too, until the night Neela was killed.

Kalice started awake from a dream of a black sun and smoking furrows extending long, tumbling scratches across the sky. Grey-haired Lthermo was across the room, bent over his scintillating device of synth and kinked wires that he'd assembled in her foyer.

Why was he—? Oh. Sleep lifted its cloak of un-remembering. Her daughter was gone. The emptiness of her loss seemed to widen as she rediscovered its depths, like an actual pit in her chest carved through her ribs and heart. Kalice gasped in real pain.

Lthermo heard her. He stiffened at her sound of anguish. Seeing that she was awake, he gestured at his mechanism. "It's fixed. I'm sure of it this time. The power source was weak. I've replaced it." He opened his mouth again, then closed it, leaving something unsaid. He did that sometimes.

Kalice didn't have the emotional space to wonder what he wasn't saying, because anguish filled her. She massaged her neck. He presumably had a whole house of secrets. To her, it was sorcery. Before Neela had gone missing, Kalice didn't wonder about the magic of the ancients. Now, it was the only route to her salvation. She had to find her daughter. She *had* to! Nothing else mattered. Not even the fact that her daughter was dead.

Dead here, but not dead everywhere.

Standing, she grabbed her travel pack and the staff Lthermo had given her. Tiny glowing projections decorated its haft. "You're sure this will open the way to Neela? Last time, she wasn't there. After I crossed the Sideslip Fields, I found an empty world, a hungry sun, and a sky burning with falling stars." She shuddered. She didn't mention the other thing she'd seen. A hazy, vaguely humanoid shimmer in the air that had turned to look at her with a single eye in a crooked head the color of milk.

Lthermo coughed. "It's a process. We must narrow in on success. You'll find her, if not this time, then the next. A version of her, anyway . . . If not, use the discriminator. It'll bring you back, and we'll try again." It seemed as if he was going to add something else, but he bit his lip instead.

The discriminator was what Lthermo called the staff. He'd instructed her on how to manipulate tiny contacts along its length to "reel" her back home if she

found a world where her daughter lived. It'd worked last time, yanking her away from the reaching hands of the frightening creature with the malformed head, back to her empty home.

Empty of everything but Lthermo. The man had come to her a few days after Neela's death and offered his help. She didn't know what had prompted the man's overture. That didn't matter, either. Once he explained his strange offer, of how he could help her find her daughter in a "parallel universe" and bring Neela back here, she didn't worry about the why or how.

"The gate is almost ready to open again," said Lthermo, who had obviously been working for hours while she dozed. "First to the Sideslip Fields, and from there to a target dimension that meets our criteria."

"I'm ready." She didn't really understand all the fine points, but that was all right. She just had to follow Lthermo's instructions. Doing so was the only way to get Neela back.

He looked at her, and his eyes narrowed. "But first, I think you need some food?" His rising tones turned the statement into a cautious question.

Kalice glanced at the azure steel mirror hanging on the wall, and didn't like what she saw in the reflection. Her dark eyes were ringed with red veins, frizzled hair wreathed her head, and her cheeks were sunken. She *hadn't* been eating enough. She knew it. But Kalice hadn't been hungry since the day Neela died.

She'd found the yellow bench on the terrace knocked over, spattered with blood. A bloody child-sized handprint stained the floor, mute but as excruciating as a scream. A mismatched chorus of broken hounds, wailing at the dawn, finished the tale. As unbelievable as it seemed, her

daughter had been snatched by a pack of beak-muzzled carrion eaters. They never found the remains. Broken hounds were known for consuming everything they caught, clothes and all.

And where'd Kalice been? At the healing house in the village of Essearnin, tending to the ills of travelers. People who she didn't know and would likely never see again. Ills that could've waited on the morning. But on seeing their pain, she'd invited them to the healing house for ministrations, even though that meant leaving her daughter alone a few extra hours . . .

"I'm not hungry," she told Lthermo.

He frowned. "The door I'm opening leads to realms beyond our own, where events unfolded differently. Realms where Neela is still alive. But as I've explained, using the staff is an art. If I misunderstand something, you could end up in a place far *worse* than last time."

"Then I'll use my knife, or the green switch on the staff," she said. "To defend myself, or retreat like before."

"You need to listen to me, Kalice, in *all* things if you want to ensure success. Will you?"

Without his help, she'd have nothing but a lonely house. Grief hit her like a punch to the sternum. So she bit back the renunciations that trembled on her lips, and nodded.

"The inhabitants of the prior worlds fashioned gates to other universes, including to realities that we can barely comprehend. Sometimes, they went to places where everyday sense has no meaning. If you end up in a place like that, you'll need all your strength and wits. The discriminator is only as effective as its user. And you look famished."



Kalice's mouth twisted. "Fine." She rummaged in her pack and pulled out a tiny loaf of double-baked bread. It was supposed to be soaked in wine before eating to soften it. She just stuffed it in her mouth and started chewing. A mistake. Chewing boot soles would've been easier.

Lthermo, not understanding, smiled to see her eat. When he finally turned to activate the device, Kalice covertly spit out the bread and kicked the remnants behind a shelf. Wiping her mouth, she saw that the door to elsewhere was open.

As before, meandering rivulets of smoke snaked through the air around a spherical hole in space. The head of her staff erupted with a prismatic sparkle in answer. It was time to depart.

She pushed aside images of falling stars, black suns, and enigmatic watchers, and thought of her daughter, of her own little star.

Kalice stepped through the hole in reality.

Avast plain of dark stone under a sky smothered in low, racing silver clouds was on the other side. She stumbled. The cold air made her breath steam. Wheeling, she saw cavities pocking the plain as if set up for an infinite game of pegs for unseen gods. Just like the last time she came here. Lthermo named the place the Sideslip Fields. This time, she didn't lose control of her breathing and ability to move. She followed the direction of the pulsing light on her staff that twined ahead of her through the air.

The glowing thread led across the plain, winding between the cavities, which she knew were actually gates. She was careful not to tread too close to any of those. They weren't empty. Purple mist filled one. Lightning rolled up the side of another. The sound of waves crashing on a beach echoed from a third, along with the cries of

sea birds. A smell like cooking sausage and spice drifted from another.

What if she tossed away the staff, and just jumped into the next cavity she found? She gasped at the thought, covering her mouth with one hand. Where'd that insane impulse come from?

Though it had a certain appeal. Abandoning her constant grief and the fear of playing with the magic of the ancients she would never comprehend was alluring.

Kalice blew out her breath. Insanity. She wrenched her mind back to—

The hazy thing she'd encountered in the black sun world was ahead of her. She gasped. Her guide light passed directly through it and continued on the other side as if the creature wasn't really there.

Kalice stopped. "Get out of my way," she commanded, her voice cracking. "I don't want to hurt you, whoever you are." Or whatever. Not that she was sure she *could* hurt it. She had her knife, but what could a blade do against something that looked only half real?

The creature plucked at the illuminated cord with an immaterial metallic claw. The guide light dimmed and her staff shook in her hands.

"Hey!" she screamed. The thing's gaze snapped up to meet hers, then slid down to focus on her staff. Its misshapen mouth whispered something unintelligible. It drifted toward her like a ghost.

"You want this?" she yelled, unexpected anger demolishing her fear. She triggered the green switch, the one Lthermo had told her to use to defend herself while she walked the dimensions.

A crackling bolt of lightning cut the air, connecting the end of the discriminator with the creature, the glowing

thread serving as a conduit. The blast hurled it backward, blackening its skin. Maybe it cried out, but Kalice was deafened by the sound the bolt made tearing through the air. The creature spun and went down, becoming even hazier and more shadowy than before. All except for its single eyelike orifice that fixed on her like a promise.

Kalice jogged forward, dodging around the thing as it struggled to regain its feet. She dashed after the ever-extending strand of light from her staff. The illuminated tendril had dimmed almost to extinction, as if when the thing touched it, a portion of its energy had been absorbed. Eaten.

She stumbled to a stop when she lost sight of the dulled guide light. This isn't working, she thought. Sorrow cut at her, narrowing her options as her eyes scanned.

There! The strand winked and guttered, but wasn't totally gone. She hustled after the failing guide across the otherworldly plain, her breath coming in hot gasps. She didn't glance back. She both wanted and dreaded to know if the thing was following. Dread won.

The guide tendril reached its terminus in the depths of a cavity similar to the others. She peered down, the toes of her boots overhanging the edge. It was dark as a well down there, except for small glints of light twinkling at the bottom. It was almost as if she was peering not down, but up into a sky littered with stars.

"Neela?" she called.

Metallic claws grabbed her shoulder and jerked her around. Kalice screamed, backpedaling. The beast's breath was an acrid, vinegary stink. It pawed for her staff. A claw clipped the haft, producing a shower of red sparks. The discriminator sounded a series of uneven mechanical clicks. She wrenched backward and fell into



the hole. Bits of burning metal raked from the staff's length rained down with her.

When she hit bottom, the world whirled around as if she was perched on the head of a spinning toy. Blinking and dizzy, she waited a few moments for her head to clear.

Wood flooring clunked beneath her heels. The chill of the plain departed. She was . . .

She was in her parlor.

Only a single night-lantern burned in its scone. Lthermo was gone, and his contraption, too. Her shelf filled with stronglass sculptures was back in place as if it'd never been moved to make room for the mechanism.

With a thrill of wonder she realized that she'd made the transition. In this "parallel plane," the shelf never *had* been moved. The man's sorcery had worked. And if the shelf was here, Neela would be, too!

She rushed to the door. When she tried to grab the door handle, she missed. Thinking she'd merely misjudged the distance in the parlor's dim light, she stooped forward and tried again. Her hand passed through it as if it was air.

More attempts, each more frantic than the last, had similar results.

The same happened when she reached for the chair next to the door. Just as it did through the small table next to it, and through the mirror on the wall—

She studied herself in the faint light. A familiar gaunt face stared back, except she seemed weirdly out of focus. The image reminded her uncomfortably of the creature that'd attacked her.

Had she become a ghost? Patting herself and her clothing with shaking hands, she was reassured to discover that she felt solid. Pinching the skin of her

forearm produced a reliably sharp pain. She wasn't dead, and probably not even dreaming. So why was everything around her out of phase and intangible?

Maybe it wasn't everything else. Maybe it was *her*. She raised the staff and peered at it, her mouth drawing down in a frown. Half the glowing points that'd shone from it when she set off were dark. The ragged clicks still stuttered faintly from it, too.

Crail! It was broken, leaving her stuck out of phase. The same fear of failure that'd tried to paralyze her in the Sideslip Fields on her first visit returned, redoubled. How was she going to save Neela if she couldn't touch her?

A tiny voice, the same insane one that'd suggested jumping into a random parallel dimension on the misted plain was a good idea, wondered if she would soon begin sinking through the floor, down and down, until she smothered in a tomb of solid earth.

Kalice closed her eyes and shook her head so hard she saw sparks. Then she forced herself to move, to ignore the voice of doubt. She walked, trying not to think about how she could have traction if she was without form, to the terrace door. She swept through it without pausing. A sensation of intense pressure on every centimeter of her skin made her shiver but she pressed ahead, and came out the other side. She was on the terrace, none the worse. The tiny voice of insanity lapsed back into silence.

It wasn't a cold night, but the temperature of the day had waned. Neela lay on the bench, cuddled under a thick quilt, breathing deeply with eyes closed. The bench was blue, not yellow, but the child was unmistakably her daughter.

A pure white blast of love and relief shot through her like sunlight. She wanted to laugh, cry, and sing at the



same time. The shake in her hands intensified, but not from fear. The world blurred as tears welled in her eyes. Everything Lthermo had promised was right there. She could save her daughter from harm, keep the broken hounds away, and take this child back home with her using the discriminator.

Brushing away the moisture, Kalice approached. She tried to cradle Neela. It was like trying to hug moonbeams. Her daughter's hair slipped between her fingers like water.

Her relief cooled, becoming ice. She'd breached the walls of the worlds to find her daughter. She'd fought a monster. And here Neela was, still out of reach. Every pace forward seemed to push her an equal distance back.

Why couldn't she interact with physical objects in this parallel world? Was it because the discriminator was damaged?

Kalice examined the staff. If she started pressing on the contacts, who knew what might happen? She didn't understand magic.

But she knew someone who *did*.

She launched herself from the terrace and ran down the starlit path toward Essearnin proper. Essearnin was a village built around a pyramid of purple stone, another relic of the prior worlds. Most of the village residents were already in their homes, probably sleeping. She saw lights twinkling in the healing house, and frowned. *This* world's version of her was there right now. Probably better if they didn't cross paths . . .

Lthermo's home was along the pyramid's southern edge. He spent most of his days studying the odd structure, learning what he could of its connection to the ancients.

Not tonight. She needed his help.

Lights shone from within. Kalice smelled wood smoke and something herbal. Without thinking, she tried the knocker; her hand passed through the door. So she followed it through, like light passing through a crystal.

Lthermo's home wasn't large, but he'd managed to pack it with a prodigious amount of weird detritus. Devices and oddities hung on racks and from the ceiling. A tiny automaton shaped like a series of boxes scuttled and rattled across the floor. A globe of orange light shined from above the mantle, producing musical tones that were not quite words.

She found Lthermo in a side room, preparing tea on a stove set along the edge of a workbench cluttered with oddities. The herbal odor she'd smelled was the tea.

"Lthermo!" she said. "I need your help."

He sloshed most of the tea out of his mug as he whirled. His surprised expression faded when he recognized her. "Kalice? What's wrong? Is there a problem at the healing house?"

This version of Lthermo seemed just like her own, she thought. This one was a sorcerer, too. So she showed him her staff. "I don't have time to explain everything. You need to fix this, and me, at once. Or something terrible will happen."

"Something terrible? Wait, that's—"

His eyes widened as he recognized the staff. He glanced to the workbench, where a duplicate version of the discriminator was clamped. She'd missed it among all the other objects.

"How did you—"

"*Listen* to me," she said, "We have to move fast. I'm . . . um, I'm a dimension walker. I'm Kalice, but I'm from



a parallel plane to this one. I'm here to save Neela from something terrible. But I can't! Something went wrong when I transitioned here. See?"

Kalice waved her hand through the wall, through the workbench, and even through Lthermo's chest. He unconsciously stepped back, his mouth a wide "o."

"I'm not sure . . ." he said, trailing off in confusion. Kalice wanted to grab him by his collar, but that was the whole problem.

"*You* are the one who helped me get here. A version of you, anyhow. You've got to help me see this through. You came to *me* and offered to help, as if you knew I'd need it."

"I did?"

"Yes, and I need your help again. You gave me this staff. You called it the discriminator."

"Amazing," he breathed. "The transdimensional energy I detected from it was no fluke! Because here you are . . ." He grinned, suddenly delighted. "Do you realize what this means? We can access the roads used by the ancients to move between dimensions. Tell me what—"

"Yes," she cut him off. "I'll tell you everything. But you've got to help me save Neela first. In my world, she dies. I don't want that to happen here." She didn't tell him of her intention to take this world's version of her daughter back home with her.

Lthermo nodded, somewhat confused, but still euphoric. "Of course! You're stuck out of phase, I think. How can I . . . ?" His gaze went from the staff she held in her hand to the one on his workbench. He grabbed it.

"Stand here, and hold your discriminator out," he instructed.

They faced each other, each holding a staff as if they would duel. The grey-haired man said, "I'll try to adjust your frequency, to bring you fully into phase."

Lthermo fiddled with the controls on the haft of his staff. Colorful glimmers blinked up and down its length, and musical tones and clicks sounded. She waited, containing her impatience.

After a few minutes, Lthermo looked up and smiled. "Try now."

Kalice slapped her hand against the wall. The sting and tingle on her palm was her answer. "You saved her," she told Lthermo.

"From what? What happened on your world, exactly? What are you going to do?"

Turning and moving swiftly to the door, Kalice only whispered, "I'm going to save her."

Running back home wasn't the dreamy flight that coming to Lthermo's had been. Now that she was in-phase, gravity worked against her. She was exhausted and breathing raggedly after making it only half the distance. She didn't care. She would be with Neela soon. Kalice wasn't elated or despairing—fluctuating between those two extremes seemed to have burned her out. Mostly, she felt an incipient headache throbbing behind her eyes.

When she reached her home, she saw the thing that had arrived before her. It was hazy and vaguely humanoid with a single eye in a lumpy head the color of milk. It leaned over the sleeping child. "No!" she screamed.

The thing spun to face her. Kalice charged it. Or tried to. The single step up to the terrace and her exhaustion conspired to trip her.

She fell face down on the planking. The discriminator fell out of her grip. A child began to cry. Neela!

Blinking, shaking her head, and cursing, Kalice rose to her hands and knees, fighting a body that desperately wanted to lie back down. Her body won, though she managed to flip on to her back.

The monster stood over her, but didn't attack. It was enthralled at the sight of the discriminator that she'd dropped when she fell. It stepped across her and bent, ignoring her, becoming less hazy and more real as its metallic claw stretched toward the staff.

Its stomach was bared to her. Kalice ripped her knife from her belt and plunged it up and into the creature with all her strength.

Blood spurted, red as her own, coppery smelling, and warm as it geysered from the creature and soaked her clothing. It convulsed, uttering a whispery wail. It curled into a ball around its wound, growing hazier and more shadowy until it faded away.

"That's what you get," she muttered, then coughed.

Kalice staggered to her feet and went to Neela. The blue bench had been knocked over. Her daughter hid behind it, shivering. But when she saw Kalice, her head came up. "Mama?"

"I'm here," said Kalice, lifting her arms. Neela ran to her, embracing her mother in a child-tight hug.

Everything would be all right.

Neela finally pulled away. "I had a scary dream."

"It's over now."

"You're soaked, Mama," said Neela, pulling back to examine her own palms, red from the creature's blood. She kneeled, pressing one hand down on the floor. When she lifted her hand, a perfect child-sized palm print remained behind. "Look what I made!" she exclaimed.



Kalice recognized the palm print. It was the very same as the one she'd found on her own terrace. A distant howl of broken hounds sounded and she started. But they were nowhere near.

They never had been, neither here or in her own world.

No, she realized, something else had stolen Neela from her.

She had. Another version of herself.

And here she was, preparing to do the same thing. On how many worlds had it already happened? How many Neelas had been stolen by grieving mothers to replace what was stolen from them?

"What's wrong, Mama? Can you show me more shapes in the sky?"

"Hush, my little star. Later. First we have to go on a little walk."

"Where?" Neela clapped her hands. She loved going out at night.

"I'll show you." Even though what she planned wasn't right, not really. Stealing this Neela from her home would send yet another version of herself stalking across the many worlds. And then again. And again, across the dimensions. It was madness. It was wrong.

But she would do it. What else was there? Holding her daughter was more intoxicating and satisfying than any drug that ever existed. It was beyond words. Now that Kalice had her daughter back, there was no giving her up.

She kissed Neela's forehead, causing Neela to grin. The child's forehead was warm and soft, and she smelled of soap and bread.

They left the house, hand in hand.

The tiny voice had returned, she wasn't sure when. The voice was her own, whispering an audacious

solution. She would see to it that after this, no more children would be snatched from their homes. Kalice merely had to cut the loop, then use the discriminator to return to her home dimension. Which meant someone here had to die.

Was something wrong with her? Shouldn't she feel more empathy for this world's version of herself?

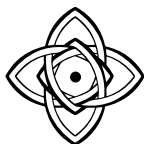
"Where are we going, Mama?"

"Do you remember the man who lives by the purple pyramid?" she asked Neela as they walked, one hand holding her daughter's grip, the other resting on the hilt of her knife.

"No, Mama."

"Don't worry, little star. Mama's going to make it right."

The bright stars overhead lit their way as they strolled back to Lthermo's house.



Words That Rhyme With Reef

Shanna Germain

This is where Nais died.

“Where you *almost* died,” Dycha would say. Except that Dycha *did* die here, and so she doesn’t say anything anymore, does she?

You left me here, Nais thinks as she shimmies down the seaweed-covered tether through the reef. The thought is followed by expletives, but not tears. You can’t cry this deep down in the ocean, she’s discovered. Well, you can. But you shouldn’t. There are some things they don’t tell you about tomb diving, because no one who is still alive knows to say them. Don’t cry. Don’t believe anything you see. Don’t trust the ground beneath you.

Nais’s weighted boots hit the top of the metal hull with a dull thud that reverberates through her body. As soon as she lands, her right foot floats loose, sending her sideways through the water. She’s still got hold of the tether, by some lucky stupid instinct, and she tightens her grip on it, pulls her foot up to look. The back of her



boot has ejected the weight somehow; there's just an empty square in the heel.

The weight wasn't magnetized—just one shortcut in a series of shortcuts that this company takes—and it's probably rolled all the way to the bottom of the ocean by now, where it's just about to ruin some poor crustacean's day.

Hope you've got one hell of a shell, she thinks. It's not unkind. Just realistic. And maybe a little jealous. Shells are underrated. Shells are good. She thinks she would grow one if she could, one of those whirled ones with all the secret chambers. Instead she's got this skin-thin suit, this skin-thin skin.

Tomb ships, she's found, are all the same. Send other people down in shoddy equipment to do the dangerous work while you sit up top and claim the spoils. If you think about it, it's no surprise that so many tomb divers become thieves, stealing from the very people who employ them.

Not thieves. Recovery specialists, Dycha says in her head. It's an old argument. Nais always loses. Always *lost*.

She doesn't want to tether herself to the hull—there are metaphors inside metaphors in that statement—but the boot thing is a problem. The water around the hull is often roiled and spinning, filled with currents. Dycha would have said it was the ghosts of all the dead Aeon Priests getting retribution. Dycha believed, which was the only thing Nais hated about her.

Nais sighs—her waterbreather pushing out a thin stream of small, fast bubbles that mar her vision for a moment—and then leans down to brush back the long strands of seaweed along the hull until she finds a spike driven deep into the metal. She unspools the cable from her belt and begins to tether herself in.



There's a moment where her fingers refuse to do as she asks of them, refuse to let go of the clamp's swing mechanism. Muscle memory. Muscle fear. Muscle grief.

In the ocean gloom next to her, Ethne's six-eyed jybril appears, and it's enough to force her fingers to do their job and hook her in. The carnivore circles, clacking its sharkmouth, swishing its giant tail. It's a young one, and still nearly twice her length. The chittering sound of its rows and rows of teeth comes through the water, through her waterbreather, through the voicepieces she wears in both ears—one for the ship, one for Ethne.

She clicks her jaw to the right. The movement turns on the voicepiece on that side. "Teach your brehm-brained predator to stay off of my back," she says. "Before I kill it."

"Good luck with that." Crackle. Fade. Return. She bets Ethne's voice is always full of static, even when he's not a thousand feet under the surface. She doesn't like that Ethne's already in the tomb without her; that he is searching for the second half of the amulet while she's not there. "It can swim—" he starts.

She clicks him off again. Why she tries, she doesn't know. Ethne's a child. A child who thinks he's able to control a ten-foot-long ravenous predator with eight rows of teeth just because it hasn't eaten him. It's only been two weeks. Give it time.

A few days ago, Ethne told her he was surprised the jybril—he has a name for the creature, but she can't remember it—hadn't bumped her for a test bite yet, because it was attracted to the color red and her dive suit was red. She'd wanted to bump *Ethne* for a test bite, but had merely turned her suit on dark mode, shining every light that it had right into the lenses of his fisheye goggles. She understands how light refracts, and didn't



deny herself the tiny pulse of happiness she felt when he'd pushed his hands over his eyes and ended the conversation. He isn't a bad kid. But he's definitely a kid.

They replaced you with a brehm-brained child, Dycha. And then the string of swear words that always seem to come after Dycha's name now. Spitting them out like bad seeds. She worries that she's developed a syndrome. She hasn't been topside in eight weeks. She has forgotten the color of air. The smell of the sun. Can no longer remember what her own voice sounds like, beyond the burble and hiss of breath and breather. She spends her waking hours searching a deep sea tomb for an amulet that may not even exist, she lives on a ship halfway between surface and seafloor with the body of her dead partner, and even though she doesn't believe in ghosts, one of them is haunting her.

The jybril comes too close, brushing by her with just a few feet to spare. For a moment, she thinks, *let it come, let it come.*

Then she remembers Dycha saying, "I found the first piece," and holding half of a bright blue scarab out to her. Etched and jeweled, heavier than she'd expected. The whole reason they'd come here. The job: find and retrieve the two halves of the agony scarab from the necks of the tombed Aeon Priests without dying, give it to their employers, get paid, don't ask what they were going to use it for. The real job: find and steal the two halves of the agony scarab from the necks of the tombed Aeon Priests without dying, tell their employers they never found it, get paid more from someone else. Don't ask what they were going to use it for either. Easy, for two experienced tomb-diver thieves. Except that it had all gone wrong. And now she has a new job. A word that she doesn't dare think about, because she can't afford to hear Dycha's response.



She moves, instinctually waving Ethne's monster away. Which is a mistake. It's not some little fish, easily scared off by an odd motion. Its teeth are nearly as big as her hand. Her movement catches its attention as it circles, swishes its tail. She compresses, doesn't wait to see if it comes back around, and drops herself through the hole cut in the side of the tombship.

The drop isn't quite as good or as quick as she'd hoped—with only one boot dragging her down and the slowness with which the cable unspools, it's more like a herky-jerky dance of sink and rise. She has to put her hands against a metal outcrop and push herself the rest of the way down. Ghost crabs scuttle out of the way of her feet, back into the darkened corners of the room. Ethne must have sprayed the area on his way in; there are only a few of their razor-edged webs strung across the living statues that line up two by two and lead the way into the inner recesses. Those nearly invisible lines can cut through your suit as quick as a blink. Her suit is set up to self-repair, but there are some things you just don't mess with. She stamps hard with her weighted foot, making sure the ghost crabs stay in their corners. Laying claim.

The statues that once guarded the entrance to the tomb are clear, like jellyfish, and in the shapes of creatures she's never seen before. It's clear that they long ago forgot their purpose, and are now just . . . living. Sometimes they shift and they look a little bit human, enough that you think, "Oh, there's a face. Or is that an arm?" You can see the veins in there, and a purplish flat square that Dycha told her is their brain. Little pink and orange blobs here and there that she thinks are some kind of organs. She doesn't know. That's not her department. The statues are living. Her department is the dead.



Well, stealing things from the dead. But still, she's never stolen from the living. At least, not that she knows of.

Of course you have. What are you—

She wishes she could click her jaw and shut off Dycha's voice. Instead, she moves between the statues, ducking beneath the webs carefully as she swims between them. A tendril grows longer as if to reach out to her as she passes. Another shrinks back when she approaches. You could almost convince yourself it was the currents shifting them, if you were creeped out by their languid push and ebb. Which she isn't.

Nais wonders what kind of person you have to be to want to be buried this way, in a tomb catacombed inside a ship, purposefully sunk to the bottom of the sea. Layered with traps and detonations and wards. She guesses that's a kind of shell, too. An afterlife shell. Although one that just seems to be asking for someone to break it. She's been doing this work six years, and figures she's broken into at least two dozen deep sea tombs. All with shells, all broken now. Except this one.

Leave it.

She's not sure if the voice in her head is hers or Dycha's, but she says, "Shut up," and keeps moving.

She reaches the last pair, the smallest of the twelve sets, and clicks her jaw to the left. She expects to hear Mun's sing-song voice, clear and airtight from the main ship, so Rumak's clear response of "Go ahead" stills her movement.

"Rumak?" she asks, just to ensure she knows what's what. She is beginning to worry that she's developed a syndro. . . she has already had that, just now, just moments ago. And she remembers that moment and



begins to worry that on top of everything else, she might also be losing her mind down here.

“Nais. Yes.” She wants to ask Rumak what he’s doing there, on the voicepiece. Where is Mun? Has something gone wrong? Do they suspect her? It’s too late to worry on it now; everything’s in motion. An unstoppable tide built of watery grief and hidden turbulence.

She says, “I’m down. Can you slide the portal for me?”

There is silence while Rumak verifies her arrival. That’s not unusual. The unusual part is that he closes her out while he does so. Instead of the sound of Mun breathing in her ear while she calls up the scanner, there is the nothing sound of being turned off.

While Nais waits, she grabs the small can of detonation vapor that hangs on her belt between her toolkit and a magnetic shield cypher. The cypher was Dycha’s, but for reasons Nais can’t figure out, Dycha didn’t use it.

Nais sprays the denotation vapor at the webs. They break into tiny pieces, little lines of shine and death, and begin to sink. The living statues don’t seem to care about the spray, one way or another. They don’t move away or toward. Nothing changes inside their invisible skin.

When she’s finished, the can’s empty. She tucks it back into her belt anyway. Whatever she may or may not do to the resting places of the dead, she doesn’t leave her litter about. There are levels of disrespect, and that is one she has not sunk to.

Yet.

“Shut up.”

Rumak clicks back in at that moment, because of course. He either doesn’t hear her or ignores her. “You’re not showing at floor.” He’s as clear as if he’s speaking in her ear. Which she supposes he is, despite being a thousand feet above her.



“My boot malfunctioned.” She regrets that as soon as she says it. If they think she’s malfunctioning, they might order her topside. Unlikely—they’re already behind schedule and losing her would cost them more time than they can afford. But she can’t risk letting Ethne be the one to discover the amulet. Her sleight of hand is good, but not good enough to steal it after he’s already seen it.

She puts on her calm voice and lowers herself into a squat, touching the closest statue with her elbow to help guide her. The statue wavers at her touch, pulls back, and then solidifies long enough for her to push down firmly with both feet. “But it’s working fine now. How does that read?”

“Not great,” he says. “Do you need to come up?”

And she’s suddenly grateful that for whatever reason Rumak is answering the calls today, because if it was Mun, she would have already called the equipment malfunction—*another quipmal*, as Mun likes to say, her voice taking on that overly bright, slightly panicked tone of “Isn’t it just wonderful that you are costing us time and money?”

As if Nais wanted quipmals, as if it wasn’t Mun’s fault for skimping on the equipment in the first place. It was the same tone Mun had used when Nais had called to say that Dycha was dead. If she and Dycha hadn’t already had a plan to steal the scarab out from under Mun’s nose, that response would have made her make one.

“No.” Nais chooses her next words carefully. To say *I* is a danger; it’s a reminder that you’re down here alone. Almost alone. They’re always juggling the time versus money versus safety equation topside. Sometimes you have to help push the answer that you know you want. “Everything’s under control.”



“Fair enough,” Rumak says. His voice grows light, casually curious. “Think you’ll find it today?”

“Maybe,” she says.

No, she thinks and is surprised to hear Dycha echo her.

She’s tempted to reach into her belt and touch the half scarab, to be surprised anew by its gravity. But she lets it be.

Rumak clicks off. The portal begins to slide open, a series of green plates irising open from the center. The door doesn’t work of its own accord anymore and every time they open it, it protests. Groaning and shuddering. She’s pretty sure it’s because they’re doing it wrong. Just because something will open from its center outward, doesn’t mean that it’s supposed to. Still, it opens all the way without faltering, and she is still able to swim through without it closing on some part of her body, so she’s not about to question the method too deeply.

Nais unclips the cable from her belt, lets it retract back through the guardians and the ghost crabs to the spike outside. It barely makes it out before the green plates slam back closed. She’ll pick it up on the way back.

Here, the beginning of the tomb. The resting place of the dead. Normally, she likes these kinds of places. Now, she feels trapped here, the pressure pushing in.

She weaves her way through the maze, remembering the first day she and Dycha were here. Over the years, they’d developed a system for tomb diving—always go left, until they were out of lefts. Then straight. Then right. But this place was all curves, ups and downs, zigzag turns. Dycha had come up with a handful of signals that day, marks she’d scraped on the wall with her knife. The next day, the symbols were gone as if they’d never existed.



Damn saltwater, Nais had said. Damn ghosts, Dycha had said.

Finally, they'd found something the water or ghosts or whatever didn't destroy in a day—bioluminescent seastones. They were sticky and stationary, easy to find along the reef. Two seastones meant "already excavated." One meant "this is the path we are working on." None meant a place they hadn't explored yet.

Now, Nais doesn't pass a single path, hole, or doorway without a seastone. Most have two. They've been over this place and over this place. She's beginning to think that the second aeon twin isn't buried here after all. But that isn't a thought she allows for very long. He *must* be here, and the second half of the agony scarab *must* be with him. Otherwise, all of this, everything, is for nothing. Less than nothing.

She clicks her jaw to the right. "I'm in. Coming to you."

"About time," Ethne says. "I've got—"

She clicks him off out of what's becoming habit and anger. For a moment, she wants to rip his smug little face off and feed it to the jybril. Her anger flashes hot, enough to make her cheeks flush, steam up her mask. She is aware, even as she vows to turn him into jybril food, that none of this ire is Ethne's fault. She hasn't seen her reflection in six weeks, but she's not unaware. She knows what grief looks like. How it sounds in the middle of the night. What broken promises it makes her hear.

They were a good team, she and Dycha. Dycha found the tombs, worked the shields and doors and traps. Nais dealt with the less tangible, less visible stuff. Nanites and wards and energies that altered gravity or caused hallucinations or warped time and space. The stealing?



They did that part together. “We’re sorry. The item wasn’t on their bodies. Perhaps someone already got to it. Or perhaps it wasn’t ever here.” Not very often. Not enough to cause suspicion.

Dycha was a silent partner, moving on her own, at her pace, allowing Nais the time and quiet to become nothing more than her senses. Eyes. Fingers. Ears. Whatever the sense is that can seek and find the thing it isn’t supposed to. They passed each other like currents, a confluence of forces side by side.

If Dycha was a current, Ethne is a jybril. And not that young thing outside that he thinks he’s tamed either. An adult. All looming threat followed by unpredictable smash and break. She can hear him already, somewhere inside the labyrinthine tomb, breaking things. It’s just another sign that there really is no such thing as ghosts, as curses. If there were, they’d be all over Ethne in a heartbeat. She would, if she was supposed to be haunting someone’s tomb and this bumbling child was knocking down all her walls.

Nais rounds a corner—skips the path with two seastones, turns down the path with one—sees Ethne working on the door and forces a deep breath. Working underwater has taught her to become a shallow breather; recycled air tastes like metal and stone if you go too deep. This breath is big enough that she swears she can feel the grit in her teeth when she exhales.

Okay then.



Ethne is drilling through the door. Double-sealed, three locks, deeply carved with words neither of them can read.



Nothing is able to wash these markings away.

Yesterday, Nais cleared the nanite detonations from the walls, found the tiny shock nodules embedded in the door hinges and removed them with careful and calm hands. Paving the way for this—Ethne's ceaseless destruction.

Unlike the other doors they've opened, this one is fairly unremarkable. She's cleared doors here that were far more complex, far more likely to hold the dead bodies of the twins, of their afterlife treasures, than this one. But they didn't.

This one is an unlikely choice. Of course, there's the possibility that its nondescript nature is a ploy. It wouldn't be the first time she's found an Aeon Priest or a king resting behind a simple entrance. And they're starting to run out of doors.

Nais watches Ethne for a moment, decked in black, crouched. *His* boots are still working; he is sure-footed and steady. For all his apparent carelessness, he stays focused on the job. He doesn't even stop drilling when she approaches. Only adjusts the angle slightly as her presence moves the water around him. The directional speakers on their waterbreathers let them talk through the water this close without their headsets, but there's no way he can hear her over the machine.

She understands the things you can't see—nanotech and the datasphere and invisible wards built from minuscule particles of technology. She doesn't understand the device in Ethne's hands. Coated in some kind of water repellent, four rotating pieces, something that guides them all where he wants them. Dycha's drill, once.

I would have explained it, Dycha says, from deep within her death in Nais's brain. *I offered.*



But she hadn't seen what good, to learn another thing, when they each had their own skills. Now she wishes she'd chosen differently.

After Dycha had died, Nais wanted to bring her body topside. She'd wanted *outoutout*. Or at least *upupup*.

Wait, Dycha had said. And it was the first time Nais heard the voice of a dead person inside her. *You can still steal it, even without me.*

Dycha always believed in Nais, which was the only other thing Nais hated about her.

Still, it was the right thing for her to have said. Nais didn't care about the artifact. Dycha was the one who'd cared about that—the ornate blue scarab split in two and tied in separate parts around the twins' necks, its rumors of delivering anguish. But Nais did care about the stealing, the moment between here and gone, between see it and don't. She cared about the broken spaces that stretched into fault lines the longer she breathed and swam and swore in the murk.

So she'd stayed. Tried to figure out how to get the second piece without Dycha. She hadn't expected them to send down a replacement. At first, she thought she could use him. Get him to open the doors, break down the walls, let her in. But he was smarter than she'd thought, paid attention. The only good part is he doesn't know they already found half of what they are looking for.

Ethne adjusts his device again, then pulls it carefully from the door and looks over at her. Nais can't see his face through his mask, only his eyes, the color of wet sand. She thinks he's shorter than Dycha, but it's always hard to tell underwater. They've never met in a place where they could stand. The small ship they sent Ethne down in after Dycha died is anchored to hers. She thinks it's probably just big enough for a sleeping space and a



place to eat, which doesn't exactly beg for visitors, and she has never invited him to theirs. Hers.

"Your stupid creatu—" she starts, just as Ethne says, "There's something inside these doors."

A shudder works its way up her back, like a cold current under her suit. Dycha's face in that moment after her drill split the steel. The sound of surprise coming from her waterbreather, choking off as she clicked her jaw, becoming a sound that traveled through water.

Nais tastes the word before she asks it, burnt oxygen and bent steel. "Detonation?"

"Maybe," he says. "I'm taking it slow. Feeling it out. Needs another test bump."

She wants to say, *Dycha, are you hearing this? Taking it slow. Feeling it out.*

But Dycha is dead and it's too late to *take it slow*, to *feel it out*, so she talks to Ethne through the water instead.

"Do you think this is it?" She didn't mean to ask it, and she sounds like Rumak, hopeful, almost pleading.

Ethne lifts one shoulder inside his suit. It's barely a gesture but easy enough to understand. Ethne doesn't seem to care whether they find the twins or the artifact. She's not even sure he knows exactly what it is they're searching for. She wants to ask him what he does this for. Probably not for Mun and Rumak. Probably not for the money, either. This job pays better than working on ships at the boatyard or slinging drinks somewhere, but not *that* much better. Not enough to spend your life without sunlight or air. Not enough to never stand on solid ground. For what, then?

Her own answer comes back to her, unbidden, like a geas. Like a syndrome. Like spitting seeds onto rotten, bug-torn ground.



Revenge. Revenge. Revenge.

Dycha's lack of response is heavier than water.

Ethne gestures: *move back*.

Nais half walks, half swims to the far end of the room. There's a temptation to switch the remaining weight from one boot to the other, to even up her legs. Instead, she stands one-legged, watching Ethne as he and his drill *feel it out*.

There are three things she's been working on in her mind. She lists them for Dycha. Which she knows is just her own self talking to her own self in her head, but it helps anyway.

One: what if the other half isn't here?

Two: if it *is* here, how is she going to steal it with Ethne in the way?

Three: why the fuck did you have to go and die?

"Almost there," Ethne says into her ear. She barely hears him.



She sees the moment when it all goes wrong. The drill skitters sideways in Ethne's hands, jumps across the metal. The tiny hole in the door would be impossible to see except that whatever's inside is glowing. It comes out, pressurized, pushes away the water in little bursts of neon orange. They stick to Ethne's suit, make him glow.

Even before it detonates, she flinches. Heart in her mouth, thumping in the base of her tongue. Her arm already sweeping up through the water to shield her face. Not because she thinks the blast will wreck her mask, but because she doesn't trust her eyes to close fast enough. She can't bear to watch this happen. Again.

In the explosion, the silence has a sound. A high-pitched whine that matches something . . . what? The movement of her mouth, the press of her tongue to her teeth. She closes her lips, breathes through her nose. Now the silence is true and pure.

She seems okay. She was far enough back, out of the—

Ethne. She opens her eyes. He is standing there, in a single piece. His mouth moves behind his mask. She can't hear him. Which way is she supposed to click her jaw? She can't remember, does both, again and again. Nothing. The only thing she can hear is the water pressing in on her. The sound of weight and no breath and panic's quick close of her throat.

When Ethne takes her hand, she bats him off. He mouths something at her. Touching the side of her helmet over her ear. Pantomimes talking with his fingers. He digs through his belt pack, pulls out a long metal device and snaps it in half.

He's mid-sentence when her hearing comes back.

". . . you hear?"

She shakes her head, but of course she can, because she's answering his question. Her throat opens enough that she can cough, speak.

"Sonic . . . sonic detonation?" she asks. She knows the answer. That utter silence wasn't a side effect of a detonation going off; it *was* the detonation going off. Stripping the sound out of the room.

"I think so," he says. He still has a grip on her arm. She lets him and his weight ground her for a moment.

"You stopped it." She gestures at the cypher he's holding.

That one-shouldered shrug. “I prefer to come prepared.”

She’d had a moment of anger—too fleeting to recognize then—when the drill skipped. Now it tries to flare back up. She pounds it down. Not his fault. He was being careful. She’d seen how the door warped under his tool, how it had almost forced him to make a mistake.

Is that what had happened to Dycha too, before the world exploded?

Dycha says nothing. She doesn’t always have the answers. Not even when she’s dead.

Ethne slowly lets go of her arm and she gives him a nod to show that she’s solid. As solid as she can be.

“Why would they have a sonic ward on a tomb?” he asks as he brushes the orange bits off his suit.

It’s the thing she’s asking herself. It doesn’t make sense. Why care about sound down here? “Malfunction, maybe? Probably it’s supposed to—”

The answer to their question arrives in the form of high-pitched buzzing. She can feel it in her ear bones, half sound, half vibration. And then, through the hole, following the lights, a thin black line appears. It widens as it leaves the constraints of the door, becomes a growing, whirring mass of tiny mechanical creatures. Insects? Fish? Something else? Either way, all sharp fins and long barbs. All it will take is a couple of them touching down and even the self-repairing suits won’t protect them.

Being able to hear the creatures gives the two of them a head start against the swarm. They push back toward the open door at the same moment. As she goes, Nais pulls out the empty can of detonation spray and pulls the trigger toward the nearest of the creatures, hoping.



Nothing.

The buzzing gets louder as they draw near. Nais's equilibrium, already wracked from her boots, stumbles hard inside the noise.

The swarm comes to a point, heads toward Ethne, moving as a single entity. Direct. Fast. As if they know he is the one responsible for their release.

Nais pulls the shield cypher out of her belt. And there's another moment where her fingers refuse to do as she asks of them, refuse to activate the cypher.

Muscle grief. Muscle way out. Muscle fuck you.

The first of the creatures touches down on Ethne's suit. He yells, tries to brush it away. The punctures in his suit happen so fast she swears she can hear them, even over the buzzing. He has used up his only *I prefer to come prepared*.

You could just let him. . . . , Dycha starts. And Nais understands that it isn't really Dycha talking. Of course it's not. There's no such thing as ghosts. No one is haunting her but herself.

She pulls the trigger on the cypher until she can't feel her finger from the pressure. Finally, it clicks, pops. A wave of magnetism pushes out, nanoparticles of defense, taking the metallic creatures with it. The effect of the shield isn't permanent, just long enough for them to get away. But only if they move fast.

"Let's go," she says through the water. She's not sure if he can hear her over the buzzing.

One of the creatures has a barb stuck so deep in the wrist of Ethne's suit that when the cypher pushes it out, it splits in two, back half still stuck in the fabric and wiggling. When the rest of it goes, the barb rends the fabric, a gash as long as her finger. The suit self-sutures



the corners, but in the middle, the edges are too far apart. The seams are lost, floundering to find the other side.

Ethne's eyes are all panic and white edges. Nais clamps her hand over the rip. This close, she can see holes all over his suit. Most of them are already closing. Can't worry about them. The big hole, that's the problem. It's not a breath issue—the waterbreathers are separate. It's temperature and pressure.

The creatures are lined up like a wall, just on the other side of the shield. The shield's intangible, but they're hitting its outer perimeter, ones and twos and then suddenly ramming it as a group. They can go back or forward. Back is out and out and then where? The ships, she supposes. They won't make it. Forward is through the door in front of them.

She clicks her jaw. "Ethne," she says. "Did you get the door open?"

He has no answer for her. She tightens her grip over his arm, feeling the sutures attempting to sink into the flesh of her palm as a backup plan. Anything to close the hole.

"Ethne?"

"Yes," he says after a moment. "Yes. I think so."

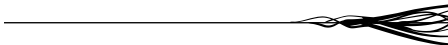
"We're going through it."

"No," he says. He gestures a question. The shield has pushed the creatures between them and the door.

"I'll turn it," she says. "But first we have to fix your suit. Do you have a kit?"

It's clear from his confused response that he hasn't noticed the hole. Either that or he's already having pressure effects. She digs into his belt bag with one hand, not asking, scrambling to find a patch kit among the tools and other bits of junk. He pushes her away.





"You're panicking," she says. "Breathe."

He doesn't listen. He bats at her hands. Still she digs. So many tools, but then she touches something that could be the kit—and pulls it out.

Not the kit.

Bright blue. Ornate. Heavy. Perfectly matched to the one she already has.

On the other side of the shield, creatures buzz and bang.

She lifts her gaze to his. Those wet sand eyes. A new panic rising in them as he understands what she's taken from him. The unconscious shift of his gaze toward the door that tells her everything. He wasn't going to tell her that he'd found it. Maybe to keep it, maybe because Mun doesn't trust her.



"How long?" she asks.

"Help me," he says and his voice is his. And Dycha's. And her own.

Ethne's broken suit digs into her skin, seeking for something, anything, to save it from itself. The heart is a muscle of memory. She can neither let go nor hold on.

Nais inhales deep, tastes stones and agony in the back of her throat. When she exhales into the depths, a giant untamed beast circles, preparing to swallow what's left of the living.

