



TALES FROM THE Ninth World

by Monte Cook & Shanna Germain

Tales from the Ninth World



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Tales from the Ninth World

Monte Cook

The Ninth World is filled with amazing stimuli. It holds sights, sounds, and even odors and tastes that we can only just begin to imagine. It is our world, but so very different.

Likewise, the Ninth World is filled with stories. The sorts of people who live there are as varied, if not more so, than those around us today. Some are likable heroes. Some are despicable villains. The vast majority fall somewhere in the middle.

We're happy to give you a glimpse into the Ninth World with three brand-new tales. In these stories, you'll see into the lives of isolated nobles, urban thieves, and a band of adventurers unlike any you've encountered before. You will get a whiff, a taste, and perhaps even an earful of life in the world of Numenera.





The Smell of Lightning

Monte Cook

Faber awoke to the sounds of the castle growing again. He lay in his bed, listening to the creaking and moaning of metal and glass and materials he didn't have a name for. The air grew colder, and he detected that strange odor again—like the smell of lightning, if there was such a thing. Pulling the blankets closer around himself, he closed his eyes tightly and tried to force himself back to sleep.

At breakfast the next morning, Faber sat at the grand table of polished culat, which glistened like gold. Moretta always kept it looking like the day it had arrived from the craftsmen in Westwood. His mother, Ladra, and his father, Naranial, had already finished their meal. His father glared at him from over the stack of books in front of him, but only for a moment. The scowl, the shaggy sideburns, and the wide, bald pate made his father look almost like an abhuman. An abhuman with a jeweled eyepatch. His father turned his attention back to the book he'd been reading. Still, a moment of his father's one good eye studying him and finding nothing of approval was enough to make the young man's heart sink.

His mother didn't look up.

Faber picked at the breakfast of eggs and cheese sagebread that Moretta placed in front of him. Faber liked it when she made him a breakfast of real food, as opposed to what the castle provided, but he struggled to find an appetite. He looked around at the dining room. Despite the table's great size, the room stretched out, around, and above them, large enough for six such tables.

Faber was told that the dining hall of Castle Sarrat had once been only half this size.

His mother's dogs stormed into the room like chaos given form. His father scowled but did not look up. Faber's mother doted on all her dogs, but she did not even seem to recognize the presence of the servant who brought them in from their morning exercise in the yard. What was his name? Kirl. He was new and the family's staff was ever-growing, so Faber struggled to keep all their names in his head. The Horges family wealth grew steadily each year, and Naranial's acumen served them well.

"The castle grew again last night," Faber said quietly.

His mother didn't seem to notice, but he had expected that. Over the barking, yipping, and movement of the dogs, Faber barely heard his father's grunt in agreement.

Faber pushed his plate away. "I'm going to go find what's new."

His father looked up at that, and he stared at his son for a moment. His finger brushed against his eyepatch, and then he looked away, as if caught up in a divergent thought. Which led him back to his book.

Faber rose from the table, sensing Kirl's gaze upon him. When Moretta gave Kirl a scolding look, he turned his attention back to tending the dogs. Faber didn't know what

to make of that particular little scene, but he figured he could ask the serving woman about it later.

~

Exploring the castle that the Horges family had lived in for seventy years took longer than it had when Faber was still young. He started in the middle levels and worked his way up. A glowglobe floated over his shoulder as he made his way down corridor after corridor, empty room after empty room. As large as the Horges family's staff became, the castle was still far, far more space than they needed. While the rooms were not furnished, some of them full of interesting décor that Faber couldn't identify. Metal devices depended from the ceiling or jutted from the wall. Doors bore symbols that Faber couldn't understand.

His father had many ideas regarding what these might be, Faber knew, but he never took the time to explain his theories to his son. However, Faber once heard his father describe the new rooms to a visiting dignitary as "temples to gods we don't yet know." He rolled that phrase over and over in his head as he wandered the silent halls.

Faber spent the entire day exploring his home, looking for places even more unfamiliar than the others.

~

"I found some new rooms," Faber told his father later.

Again the man scrutinized his son with one eye. "Anything of interest?"

They're positioned in a strange pattern, three chambers around a central circular hub. There's a design on the floor of the hub that looks a little like flowers made of fire. When I stepped into the chambers, there was a clicking sound, and the whole set of rooms rotated 120 degrees. The temperature in the rooms was noticeably warmer than the rest of the castle. And a strange device hangs on the wall of one of the rooms, whispering words I cannot understand.

“Not really.”

Naranial Horges went back to reading.

~

Faber slept late the next morning, and by the time he came down for breakfast, his parents were nowhere to be seen. While he ate, Moretta sat with him and chatted. The woman was tall and sturdy, with a squarish face. He had known her all his life, and now that he was seventeen years old, he was old enough to truly appreciate the woman's attention and care. She didn't have to treat him with such kindness, he understood. She had demanding household duties placed upon her by his mother that could keep her busy from sunup to sundown. And the influx of new servants meant more work for her, not less. Moretta was the unofficial head of the household staff. All other servants were under her watch and care.

But still she took scraps of time here and there to spend with Faber, and he welcomed it.

“You know I don't like hearing tales of this house,” she told him.

“You used to tell me it was because when the house grew new rooms, it meant you just had more places to clean.”

Moretta looked at him askance.

“Now I know the truth. You just don’t like the castle,” he joked.

Moretta’s face hardened. “Don’t say that,” she whispered. “I like it just fine,” she said louder. “This house is like an old friend.”

“Are you talking to the castle?”

“All kinds of things have ears, my boy. Not to mention eyes. Even houses. Especially this house. Things in this world have many ways to watch and observe.”

“What do you mean?” If Moretta believed, as his father did, that the castle had some kind of spiritual nature, Faber wanted to know.

“Oh, I don’t know what I mean. No one understands this place. But it’s wise to show something larger than you and older than you a little more respect.”

“I wonder sometimes how old the castle really is.” Faber pushed away his empty plate and gazed up at the dining hall ceiling.

“Old, I think. Very old.”

“From one of the prior worlds?”

“How could it not be?”

Faber agreed with her. The family had moved into this castle before his own father was even born, when Faber’s great-grandfather Delliaran Horges was the head of the family. It was an abandoned ruin. Ancient even then. It didn’t start to grow and change until well after the family had settled in. At least, that’s what everyone assumed.

In Faber's childhood imagination the castle of metal, glass, and synth had started as something very small, in the same way the mightiest tree in the Westwood had started from a tiny seed. It grew on its own, like a living thing. He hadn't thought of that in years, but Moretta's talk of listening ears brought it back.

"Do you think it's alive?"

Moretta didn't answer at first. She held his gaze and eventually whispered something he didn't hear.

"What did you say?" At the sound of his father's voice, Faber turned. Naranial Horges stood not six paces away from where they sat.

Moretta stood and began gathering plates from the table.

"I asked you what you said," Naranial stated, taking a few steps closer.

"The young master and me were just talking silly nonsense." Moretta looked at the ground when she spoke. "Just fun."

Faber could not find his voice.

Naranial didn't look at him. He looked only at the family's most trusted servant, a woman who must be about his own age, Faber thought, and spoke to her as he would a child. "Tell me what you said."

The dishes in her hands rattled. Naranial stepped closer still.

"I won't ask again."

Moretta's voice was tiny. "I just said that the house might be alive in a way like we don't understand." She glanced up and then back down at the floor. "Just fun. Nonsense. To pass the time."

Naranial turned to Faber as if Moretta had ceased to exist. “I won’t have you filling your head with nonsense. If I thought you could grasp it, I’d let you read for yourself the truth about this structure.”

Faber perked up.

“But I know you cannot. What no one understands is that this structure is of great occult power and significance. It is the product of something surpassing the understanding of anyone, let alone someone who mops floors all day long. We dwell within an edifice slowly moving out of a spiritual realm into the substantial mortal realm, bringing with it the very secrets of creation’s forge. It’s going to be this family’s path to greatness, once I master it.” Naranial’s eye bulged, and the veins in his neck throbbed.

That was the most he had said to Faber in months. The most he had spoken of his beliefs about the castle ever, at least to his son. Occasionally, strange men and women in robes would visit and tour the castle, speaking in guarded whispers with Naranial, but Faber was never included.

This was why the rattled, surprisingly angry rantings didn’t frighten Faber. They intrigued him.

Naranial hadn’t said that much aloud in Faber’s presence since Nariss left.

~

Four months ago, Faber had come home from a day in the woods to find the household in chaos. Servants and soldiers raced about. No one paid him any attention. He finally found his mother in a sitting room, with a dog on her lap and another at her feet.

She stared out a window at the countryside. When Faber asked what was going on, all she would say is, “Nariss is gone.”

It took him hours to find out more. Unsurprisingly, the details came from Moretta. His sister, Nariss, had disappeared. Something strange had happened that morning in one of the upper chambers, although no one would tell Faber what. He had worried that she had been hurt or killed in one of the castle’s growth spurts, but he eventually learned that servants had seen her leaving the castle, a bundle of belongings in a bag slung over her shoulder. She was, apparently, terrified.

Faber wished that she had told him what had happened. What had she seen? Since that time, he had combed through the empty upper portions of the castle to perhaps find where whatever had happened, happened. But he never did.

Neither Faber nor anyone else in House Horges had seen Nariss since that day.

His father had never appeared affected, but those first few nights after Nariss left, Faber could tell his mother had been crying. Would she cry if he disappeared? Would she notice? He didn’t like to think about that.

He thought about Nariss the evening of his father’s angry words. He sat in the cool grass in the yard beyond the east entrance to watch the moon rise and conjured strange thoughts about what his father’s books might say about something terrible in the castle that would terrify his sister so. Faber and Nariss were not close, but she hadn’t even said good-bye. And if there was indeed something so terrifying in the castle, why wouldn’t she warn him?

A man approached out of the gloaming—tall, sharp featured, and small eyed. Faber didn’t recognize him until he was close.

“Hello, Kirl,” he said.

“Faber... uh, Master Faber.” Kirl lowered his head.

When Kirl didn’t say more, Faber spoke. “Is something wrong?”

“No,” he replied hesitantly. “But I wondered if I could ask a question.”

“All right.”

“I know that you like to walk the halls of the castle,” Kirl said slowly.

“Yes. It’s interesting to me. Is it interesting to you?”

Kirl looked up, a splash of relief on his face. “Yes, very much.”

As a servant told to spend most of his time caring for Ladra’s dogs, what would Kirl even know of the castle’s uninhabited expanses? He would never have cause to go into them.

“Why?”

Instead of answering, Kirl asked, “Do you think that perhaps I could accompany you sometime? When you explore? I could be of use to you.”

Faber had always gone alone. The novelty of having someone interested in going with him gave him almost as much of a thrill as the idea that his father might let him read one of his books.

“Let’s go tomorrow.”

~

Kirl bore a glowglobe on the end of a long staff that he used like a walking stick, and he wore a leather bag with a firm clasp slung over his shoulder. Faber climbed a winding stair a few steps behind him, feeling, for the first time on one of his expeditions, underprepared.

They wound through corridors and oddly shaped chambers. When Faber explained what he had found on prior explorations, the servant, to the young man's disappointment, seemed only occasionally interested.

"Let's try this way," Kirl said, pointing down a narrow hallway with a metal floor and walls of opaque greenish glass. Faber noticed that Kirl's staff not only had a light at the top, it also had a metal device affixed near the midpoint that had a glass screen with moving symbols. Kirl glanced down at it from time to time.

"Who are you?" Faber asked quietly as they walked.

Kirl smiled. "I'm your mother's servant, of course." He laughed a little. "I take care of her dogs. You know that."

Faber shook his head. Servants didn't have peculiar staves and fine leather bags like Kirl did. Kirl didn't always remember to speak to family members with deference and humility. Faber didn't get to talk to many people, living in the isolated castle, but those he did spend time among were mostly servants. "I mean, who are you really?"

Kirl stopped and looked at Faber as though examining him for flaws. "I don't mean anyone any harm. I study the numenera."

"Like my father!"

Kirl bit his lower lip. "Faber, I don't know if you are prepared to hear this or not, but your father is a very dangerous man."

The very adult words fell upon the young man. They engulfed him. But he stood firm. He was unsure if he was more shocked that someone would say such a thing, or that someone would say it to him.

Kirl continued. “He looks at things slightly differently than I would. Uses different terminology, but he understands enough. Enough to pose a real danger.”

“Are... are you an enemy?” His father very occasionally spoke of the family’s mysterious enemies.

“I don’t have to be your enemy, Faber. I’m certainly not here to do harm to anyone or anything. Not even your father. I’m worried about what he might do in the future, but for now I am more interested in this structure.”

“So you became a servant just to get into the castle?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Faber, you’ve lived here all your life. Does this place seem like anything else you’ve ever seen?”

Faber had been to the nearby villages a few times, and once, about ten years ago, he had traveled with his family to Beoth, a holy city of almost fourteen thousand people. “I’ve never really seen much else.”

Kirl rubbed at his eyes. “I’m sorry. That was a bad choice of words. You can take my word for it, then. Castle Sarrat is a unique relic of the prior worlds.”

“Why does it grow?”

“I have some theories, but I really don’t know. That’s why I’m interested to look around for myself.”

Faber’s excitement at talking about the castle to someone who actually seemed to know something about it was heightened, rather than diminished, by the fact that Kirl was here surreptitiously, and that Faber knew the man’s secret while his parents did not.

“Let’s go, then.”

Kirl smiled and then looked at the device on his staff. Not taking his eyes off the small glass panel, he walked slowly down the corridor. “Have you been down this way before?”

“I think so,” Faber said. It seemed familiar, but he had no direct memory of this hallway. “Is there something special about it?”

“Let’s find out.”

Eventually they descended a short staircase and crossed an oval-shaped room. Kirl paused and examined a raised dais near the center of the room. He seemed dissatisfied with what he found. The two of them paused and ate some food from Kirl’s bag.

“How much does Moretta know about the castle?” Faber asked.

Kirl appeared genuinely confused. “I don’t know. How would I know that?”

Faber held up the wrapped pickles. “I would always know a lunch that Moretta packed.”

Moretta knew that they were here. She very likely knew Kirl’s secret, too. Faber was now a part of an entire conspiracy. And he liked it.

Kirl sighed. “She thinks there are ghosts here. She thinks maybe I can get rid of them.”

“Ghosts? There are ghosts here?”

“I’m not sure I agree with her. But maybe I would just use another term.” Kirl seemed to drift away on his own thoughts for a moment, before he finally just shrugged. “There might be something.”

Faber had never seen a ghost in the castle—or anywhere, for that matter. But maybe Nariss had. Maybe that’s why she left.

The two of them continued to explore the castle for the rest of the afternoon. Strange transparent tubes ran along the walls of one room, carrying reddish and blue light. In another, an asymmetrical, multifaceted metal... thing spun about, spinning faster the closer they approached. But Kirl seemed to be looking for something specific, and these things were not it.

~

Faber and Kirl spent many such days together over the next two weeks, investigating and exploring the uncharted regions of the castle. On some trips, they spent an exhausting morning ascending flight after flight of stairs to reach the upper levels in the afternoon. These expeditions in particular changed the way that Faber looked at the castle. He realized that although he spent much of his life wandering these corridors alone, he had explored only a small fraction of the vast structure. In the past, when he searched for the new rooms produced by the castle’s growing pains, he may have just discovered older chambers and corridors that he hadn’t happened to come upon yet. How could he know?

Faber spent a lot of time staring at the broad back of his new friend as he followed him up stairs, down stairs, and along great corridors. All the while, Kirl followed his staff and the strange symbols and sigils on its tiny glass panel. When they stopped to rest, however, they talked about the numenera, and Kirl described some of the wonders he had

seen and studied. He told stories of men walking through solid walls, regenerating lost limbs, and flying through the air. He described machines that saw through time and transmuted the structure of objects.

Then one day, on one of their forays, Kirl suddenly grew very excited while looking at the staff. “This way!” Faber could barely keep up. Kirl ran down corridors of metal grids with blue glass beyond. Just when Faber felt as though his legs—or perhaps his lungs—would give out, they stopped suddenly in a small but high-ceilinged chamber.

Their rush had brought them to a wall of faintly tinted blue glass that looked out into open air. Exterior chambers with windows were rare, but Faber had seen them before. It was amazing to suddenly become aware of how high they stood. Looking out, he could see for leagues. They faced south, he thought.

However, as he pondered, he saw a strange sliver of light through the glass. It disappeared.

“What was—”

It appeared again but in a different spot. At first he thought it distant, but then Faber realized that it was just outside the window. It didn’t disappear this time but instead flickered almost like a candle flame. Then another appeared, and another. They joined together like water droplets on glass. Looking into the silvery surface they created was like looking into a mirror, but a mirror that was both reflective and transparent at once.

“Look at that,” Kirl whispered.

More slivers appeared and joined with the larger mass, flickering like light under a doorway in a dark room, but it was the middle of the day. The sun shone brightly in the clear sky, yet in comparison, it was utter darkness. As if the silvery shimmer was a

different kind of light altogether. As if light could have different flavors as distinct as salty and sweet.

And then the growing mass of light yawned wide, and Faber felt drawn in, as though he fell sideways, through the window and into the new light. All around him, light blared like sound, and his ears were filled with a torrent of tactile noise. Nothing made sense. His mind screamed at the cacophony of sensation. It was horrific in its alienness.

Faber was yanked out of this ocean of wrong and fell backward onto the floor of the high-ceilinged chamber that he had never left. Kirl lay next to him. He felt thunder and smelled lightning. The floor and walls lurched beneath him. The room itself thrust forward with rumbles, groans, and screams. Glass and metal shrieked like living things, and Faber felt, just for a moment, like a man standing in front of a dam as it breaks. But rather than water rushing around him, it was space.

It wasn't just the castle that was growing—it was the entire world. Concepts like distance and volume suddenly took on new meaning as he realized that space itself was stretching and growing.

And then suddenly it stopped.

Faber looked around. The room was three times as long as it had been. The window was smaller and tinted darker blue. A structure that looked very much like a tiered fountain—without water—projected vertically from the right-hand wall.

The two stared at each other as moments ticked by. When Kirl began to laugh, Faber quickly followed suit. Vigor pumped through his veins at the joy of being alive, out of that terrible silver whatever it was, and perhaps most of all, after all these years, to have actually been in a portion of the castle while it grew.

Kirl picked up the staff that he had dropped. Faber knew the man would be studying it for a while, so he stood and walked to the wall that had once been perhaps ten paces long but now was at least thirty or forty. He gingerly touched its surface, expecting it to be hot, or maybe cold. It was neither. Nothing about it showed that anything remarkable had happened. He moved to the window slowly—carefully—afraid of the silvery hole or mouth or tear that had been there. He saw only clear sky and distant landscape.

“It’s gone.”

“It is, but you’re looking in the wrong place,” Kirl said from behind him. Faber turned.

Standing in the middle of the now-large room, Kirl held up the staff. “The breach was right here. But now it’s gone. The castle closed it.”

Faber’s mouth hung open a bit. He had no idea what to say to that.

“But it’s more than that,” Kirl continued excitedly. “The universe just got a little bigger. The structure doesn’t just expand, it expands physical reality with it. Or maybe it’s the other way around. I may have the cause and effect mixed up there.”

Faber shook his head. “I don’t understand.”

“Honestly, I really don’t, either.”

“What was that... ‘breach’?” He used Kirl’s word to help make himself understood.

“A hole in the universe. A rent in the fabric of reality. When we looked through it, we saw into some other space beyond ours. Outside ours.” He threw up a hand dramatically and paced a bit. “We don’t even have the right words for it.”

“Why? What caused it? The castle?”

“I don’t know for certain, but I don’t think the castle caused it. I think the castle repaired it. Maybe something happened here long ago that... I don’t know, *broke* space. Like a crack in a ceramic vase. I don’t know. Maybe the castle is the means to fix it. Like a bandage over a wound, perhaps? Or a plug in a leak? I don’t know.”

Faber hadn’t heard Kirl say “I don’t know” so many times before.

“But there might be more to it than that. We need to keep investigating. We’re discovering something truly amazing here, Faber.”

Faber’s chest swelled, and he never even considered hiding his enormous grin. He felt proud and excited and honored all at once to be a part of it all.

~

The next morning, Kirl was gone.

When his friend didn’t show up after breakfast to join him at the stairs, Faber waited. After a half hour, he began to worry. What if the castle had done something to him? What if the silvery hole had opened up again? What if... Faber didn’t even truly understand enough to speculate.

He searched the common areas of the castle, finally found Moretta in the kitchen, and learned that the explanation was far more mundane.

“Your father sent him away,” she said in a low tone. “Dismissed him from service.”

“When? Why?”

She just shook her head and went back to her work.

Faber then did something he'd never done before. He stalked off toward his father's study to demand an answer. Faber never demanded anything, certainly not from his father.

Naranial Horges sat behind a massive wooden desk covered in books and handwritten notes. Around him, like an aura, were books on shelves, and strange devices and papers with diagrams and symbols hanging on the walls. The man glanced up from his studies and scowled.

"Why—" Faber's voice caught.

His father worked his jaw as if chewing something unpleasant. He didn't allow Faber to finish the rest of his question. "You and your dog-tending friend will no longer be making visitations into the upper portions of the house. And you are forbidden from wandering off on your own. There's more trouble to get into up there than you could ever be prepared for. Now run along. Help your mother."

He waved dismissively and looked back down to his book. "She can't deal with all those dogs on her own."

Faber walked away slowly, cheeks red with anger and embarrassment. Kirl's words echoed in his head: "Your father is a very dangerous man."

~

The hour was very late. The castle was quiet except for Faber's soft footfalls in the hallway that led to his father's study. The door was closed, as he knew it would be.

He produced the small prybar from the leather bag he slung over his shoulder. Naranial would know that someone had forced his way in, but that didn't matter now.

After three tries, Faber broke the lock. He pushed open the door.

He half expected some flash of occult power. Some kind of sorcerous alarm or defense or curse, but nothing like that happened. He entered the room, his bare feet making almost no sound on the tile. He approached the desk and in the light of a dimmed glowglobe glanced at some of the books on it. He quickly encountered strange theories and religious explanations for all sorts of phenomena in the world, the so-called Ninth World. Little of it made any sense to Faber. He turned to what he felt was more important: the handwritten notes in various books and sheafs. He saw his father's almost frantic scrawl on page after page. He found notes about rites, spells, and omens. Among them were descriptions of matters that seemed not entirely unlike things that Kirl had mentioned from time to time, but they utilized an entirely different vocabulary than his friend would have used. A heavy cloak of ritual obfuscated everything.

He spent hours at his task, but deciphering and processing it all would take weeks or months. At last Faber began to chuckle. He pushed away the papers and closed the notebooks in relief. In all his study, his father understood less about the castle and its properties than Faber did. Certainly less than Kirl. His father might be dangerous in intention, but he did not comprehend as much as Faber had always believed. Nurtured within Faber's fear of his father had been a great deal of respect. This respect, however, had not been earned. It came from assumption. And now Faber saw that those assumptions were not entirely justified. For the first time, he saw his father not as an omnipotent terror but as a pathetic schemer.

That night in the study, Faber swore to remain in Castle Sarrat, now the hereditary home of House Horges, and watch over his father's continued schemes. His father, who dismissed him and ignored him, would never realize that his own son was going to ensure that he never tampered with the house in any meaningful way. He would never suspect that it was Faber who kept him from somehow utilizing the formidable, incalculable power of the castle for his own selfish gain. House Horges would not abuse the home it had. Faber had seen into that space beyond the universe, and he wanted to ensure that if the castle was indeed repairing or preventing such rents, it would be allowed to continue.

And if the castle was in fact doing something else, he would discover that as well. If it was haunted, as Nariss believed, well, he did not fear those ghosts. In fact, he wanted to meet them. He would be the watcher: the silent observer of Castle Sarrat. Moretta had said that things in this world have many ways to watch and observe. Now he would be an additional set of eyes and ears.

He would watch. He would maintain. And he would learn.





The Taste of Memory

Shanna Germain

Marseyl waited in an old byway, desperately trying to keep the stink of sea sweat and dying fish from assaulting her nose. It was hotter here than it should be this time of year, the sun's slant making her sweat through her last wearable shirt. She side-stepped into the shade of the building, letting the temporary cool wash over her until she shivered.

A man dressed in the faded crimson of the Redfleets strode by her without giving any indication that he'd seen her, carrying a dripping sack that reeked of the deeps. Water splattered against the stones near her feet. Sighing, she shadowslipped sideways, but too late, the liquid marking the toes of her worn boots.

She hated Kaparin, with its pseudo-grandeur and its unrequited love of everything sea-faring, with its huge expanse of docks and its false history and its way of getting under every bit of her skin, sinking in like a bad tap. She hated it, but she needed it, too.

Which was why she'd come back, why she was now skulking in a half alley getting codspray in her hair and fishwater on her feet. She had jobs to do elsewhere, in parts of the world where they didn't know about her, where she was just another tattooed

thief who got her hands dirty so that theirs were always clean. But always Kaparin drew her back. Her need drew her back.

The sea. What did people see in it? Unsteady, shifty, full of things that killed you or, worse, hurt you without killing you. And the stench. It made her mouth taste like she'd been licking the sweat off dead things. Memories of being young here, diving down and down. The way that everything echoed and distorted. Like love that way, so fresh and new, and then it tried to kill you.

From the waterside, she could hear the squeals of children, the splash of laughter that was fraught with both nerves and excitement. In Kaparin, the little street rats were everywhere—dropped off into the city's uncaring arms while their mothers went back asea for months, years, sometimes their whole lives. Like vermin, they knew all the ins and outs of the city. Marseyl was more than happy to throw them a little cheese in exchange for what she needed, as long as none of them followed her home. Thankfully, home was a malleable place, so that was unlikely.

"Marseyl!" A cloaked girl with salt-yellow hair came around the corner full-bore and way too loud. Marseyl had no idea why she was making herself mostly unseen in the alley if the girl was just going to announce her presence to the entire city. Even she couldn't shadowskulk when a child like Hedia was calling her out. Without stopping, without even slowing, the girl opened her arms, flashed a mouth full of green-stained teeth—and then ran face-first into Marseyl's stomach.

Marseyl oofed silently, suddenly glad she hadn't found time for breakfast. The girl's eyes were clear through the whites, but those green teeth... that seemed like a bad sign. The girl couldn't be more than, what? Six? Eight? Either way, too young to be—

“Twelve,” Hedia muttered, her face still pressed against Marseyl’s stomach. “I’m twelve.”

“You’re awfully short for twelve,” Marseyl said. “You’re also breaking our rule.” Carefully, Marseyl extricated herself from the girl’s unrelenting grasp. Where Hedia’s face had been, there was a bit of green slobber in the shape of a smushed grin.

Hedia shook her head and sought Marseyl’s hand with her own. Marseyl let her, sighing at the damp, sticky grip. “You said I can’t hear unless someone wants me to hear,” Hedia said. “And if I heard you, it means you wanted me to.”

“That’s not exactly what I said. And, besides, why are you listening to me, anyway? Don’t you have someone to get better advice from? What about your mother?”

Hedia’s expression—one brown eye squinting closed and the corners of her lips curling down—was response enough. Marseyl fell silent. Of course Hedia hadn’t talked to her mother about this. Nima would have experimented on the kid. All the times Nima had berated Marseyl for her various addictions, she’d never been able to look at her own. Always the newest thing, always some unexplored piece of the numenera to catch her attention.

Marseyl sighed, letting Hedia’s hand tighten around hers. If the best the girl could come up with as someone to look up to was a cantankerous ink addict, she was hard up indeed.

“Well, don’t do it anymore unless you ask,” Marseyl said, and waited until the girl made a face of acquiescence before she went on. “Also, you should probably call me something else if you’re going to shout a name every time you see me.”

“Like what?” the girl asked.

“I don’t know. Come up with something.” After a moment she added, “It’s good to see you,” and the sharp truth of that made her throat itch and pulse.

“How’s Alka?” the girl asked.

“He’s fine,” Marseyl said, surprised she’d remembered. It had been years, at least half the girl’s life, since Hedia had last seen Alka.

“Listen, Hedia, I don’t have much time or I’d stay.” Marseyl said this every time. She said it so often that the girl didn’t even ask any more if she would.

“I brought you what you wanted,” Hedia said. Her excitement was waning, as though she’d come around the corner expecting one person and had found another entirely. Which, Marseyl supposed, she had. The Marseyl of Hedia’s memories was long dead, a memory that no longer had a taste. Or if it did, it was sour instead of sweet.

“Let’s see,” Marseyl said.

From beneath her yellow cloak, Hedia brought out a clear synth box. It was wrapped in a ribbon of braided vines, and the intricate locking mechanism across the top was broken, although Marseyl didn’t know if that was Hedia’s work or if she’d found it like that. Inside, an assortment of colored inks, each in its own teardrop vial.

At the sight of them, at their rainbow of hues all lined up in perfect order, Marseyl’s mouth went fuzzy. She could taste each color beneath her skin with such vividness that she had to bring her hand to her lips to make sure she wasn’t drooling. The purple’s hazy flavors of smoke and salt. The orange, with its woody, seedy properties. The red, the yellow, the black. Each of them was a burst of the sensory, of memories and emotions, that came and went on her tongue so fast she could barely grasp them. At the end, the only thing left was the taste of want. An acrid bloom of dead things.

She swallowed, forcing her mouth past its want into words.

“This is a good one, Hedia. I won’t ask where you found it.”

“You never do,” the girl said, and Marseyl had a sudden sense of dangerous time passing, slipping by her like a cragworm in the dark. Could the girl really be twelve? Almost an adult, at least in this town. All those years gone. *And what have you done in all that time, Marseyl Sylvari?* That was a good question, and one that Marseyl didn’t have any interest in answering right now.

Hedia held the synth box out. Marseyl took it—it was lighter than she expected, it always was—and tucked it into her bag. She dug around until her hand closed on the egg-shaped bauble at the bottom. The mechanism was the temperature of her own skin and vibrated slightly, giving Marseyl a sense of discomfort every time she touched it. She didn’t know what it did: contain some creature within its metallic shell? Unlock the secrets of a dying star? Create a duplicate of a loved one? To her, it was something she wanted to get rid of, a means to an end, a form of currency that was likely worth far more than what she got in return.

“Here,” she said. The girl reached out a hand and in a second, the bauble had disappeared, already ensconced deep in the folds of her bright cloak. Marseyl was glad to be rid of it. She rubbed her hands together, trying to erase the sensation that her fingers were still vibrating lightly.

The box of inks bounced against Marseyl’s hip, the colors already talking to her, sending their flavors to her tongue, her brain, the other parts of her. The tastes of purple and red mixed together, blooming into something salty and meaty, a bloody bruise.

Later. First, something else. Something important.

Swallowing her need deep into the back of her throat, once and then again to make sure it was truly caged, Marseyl reached out toward the girl, capturing her chin in both hands, forcing her lips open. Green in there, the pigment on each tooth not new. Layer upon layer deepening the stain.

Hedia flinched at the touch. Something else new about the girl, that shuddered movement of fear.

“Now,” Marseyl said. “Let’s talk about those teeth.”

~

Hedia had denied everything. Of course she had. But the green coating and the stink of her breath—grass and dung, the snap of first-day twigs—had given her away. Some new technique that Marseyl didn’t know about? Leave it to the street rats to come up with some worse way to break your life. Were they eating the inks? Drinking them? Marseyl, even in her need, couldn’t imagine actually putting those watery colors into her mouth, having the pain of that on your tongue, the burned ache to the roots of your teeth. Marseyl didn’t even know it was possible, such a thing.

But what did you expect, a girl on the street making deals all day—that she wouldn’t try the merchandise herself? And who had given her that first deal so long ago, that first trade from the back room of her mother’s house? Marseyl knew the answer to that all too well.

So now rather than answering the croon of the inks in her pack, Marseyl was perched on the roof of the tallest building in Kaparin. If the girl wasn't going to come clean, Marseyl would find out where she was getting her supply and shut them down.

And what if the supplier was the same as her own? Would she still be so eager to close them down?

She'd deal with that when she came to it. For now, it was enough that the inks were calling her, beckoning to her, crying to her like a lost child, and she was reaching instead for the mehabird deep in her pack.

She tugged him out gently, his feathers ruffled, his head cocked at an odd angle. Probably the only mechanical thing she ever liked. And that because she thought of him as more alive than not. Did the mehabird sleep, she wondered, when he was turned off, or did he just go into some type of death? She didn't know, but she always felt a little bad as she twisted the series of knobs in his wings, setting him to life. He fluttered in her palm, then shook himself fully alert.

"Hi, Alka," she said. "Hedia asked about you." The bird didn't talk, but sometimes she talked to him. Once, she hadn't been so alone. Once she'd been the kind of person who received gifts like Alka from those she loved. Once was a life she'd left behind, an ink-kick in the gut of black, and she let it knock her back for a moment with all the power it deserved. But only for a moment.

After the mehabird had ruffled his feathers into a pattern that seemed to settle him, she positioned him on the edge of the wall, looking down over the city, then slid a pair of lenses over her eyes. The lenses allowed her to see through Alka's eyes, and it always took a bit of readjusting to align herself to the bird's vision. Everything was

zoomed in, and yet she saw with a wider range. Once, as a child, she'd seen a screen high above a city; then, it had seemed wider than the world itself, and yet it showed only one thing. Now it was as though she had backed up from the world, and yet was closer, too.

Through the lenses, she found a brick building that she knew and, blinking, let her vision settle on it. She swept her gaze along the streets she'd just left until she found Hedia in her bright yellow cloak. The girl was standing, head cocked as if listening to something. She would head toward the water, of course. Where else did one get illegal inks but from the Redfleet ships coming to shore? The sentient cephalopods—they had a name for themselves, but Marseyl could never remember it—traded their inks with the Redfleets for bits of the numenera. When she thought of where the inks came from sometimes, a living thing with beaks and suckers, a monstrosity of the watery depths, it was nearly enough to make her want to quit. So mostly she didn't think of it.

Through the lenses, Marseyl watched as Hedia adjusted her cloak and turned away from the water, her head down, her pace steady and sure. Going inland. Odd.

Marseyl followed her movements, losing her now and then among the shadows or bends of buildings, but always picking her up. The girl made her way to the east, the farthest stretch of inland town, to a spot where there was nothing but a heap of rubble and an old archway, a leftover from something before the city grew up around it.

Through the lenses, Marseyl watched as the girl stopped and looked around. To anyone else, the gesture would have seemed casual, but Marseyl knew it for what it was—too perfect, too well-honed. The girl was scouting the area, making sure no one saw her.

The thief part of Marseyl, that selfish thing, hoped the girl wouldn't spot her. The other part of her, the part she didn't have a name for, hoped the girl saw every danger, including the one high above her holding a pair of bird lenses.

She didn't. Hedia knelt in front of the arch and did something fast and quick, a gesture that Marseyl couldn't make out. Then Hedia stood, took a step through the archway and disappeared.

At first Marseyl thought that she'd failed to wind Alka enough, that the bird had fallen back asleep, his eyes closing to the sights before him. But no. She could see everything still as it had been. Everything except the girl.

What do you see, Marseyl? A voice from long ago.

In answer, Marseyl adjusted her lenses, searched for a hole, a door, the mark the girl had made in the dirt. What she saw was nothing.

~

Marseyl's plan had been to do what she always did: take her inks and get out of town. Run off to some place where no one knew her, hole up in an inn, tap her way into a week's worth of false memories.

But Hedia's green teeth, her disappearing act, those were things even Marseyl couldn't ignore. Hedia could slide herself into other people's minds, but as far as Marseyl knew, she didn't have the ability to slip into the shadows. That was something reserved for the thieving, slinking addicts in Hedia's life. Reserved for Marseyl.

She would go after her, make sure she was safe.

She turned to leave the roof, to follow the girl. In the turn, the inks—no, *her* inks now—sloshed in their vials, calling. Urging. Reminding her of the lick of dark nights and the sweated line of tongue on skin. The heady blue-black swell of wind across the Black Riage, how it tasted like charcoal and long-ago snow. The memory of music in a tavern and the girl who'd never kissed her there, carrying the flavors of alcohol and dreams. Marseyl's vision narrowed, left the world behind, became a pinwheel, a pinprick, a colored promise.

She would go after her. She would. Soon.

~

Tucking herself into the corner of the roof, leaving Alka where he was so he could wind down in his own time, Marseyl pulled her tapping tools and the inks from her pack. Her mouth watered at the sight of the inks, their colors shined and wet in the lowering light, and without thinking, she ran the back of her hand across her lips, the skin coming away wet.

Maybe more than anything else in the world, Marseyl loved the ritual of tapping, loved the tools. Not numenera. Nothing so complicated or so burdensome. No, she loved these tools the way she loved her simple razor rings, her forearm blades. Straightforward. What you saw was what you felt coming. It was all in the user, not in the mechanics.

Her tapping tools were simple, too. Metal and wood rolled in a strip of thick leather. A flat hammering rock that you held in your palm, hers worn from years of use to

fit the shape of her grip. A hollow metal needle, sharpened to a point. That, and an inch of unmarked skin, was all she needed.

Passing her fingers over the twined vines that wound the box, she flipped the lid and lifted the latch. The ease of it made her stomach ache a little; wasn't it supposed to be harder, hadn't that, once, been part of the appeal? The need for danger, for difficulty? No matter now. What mattered was the inks, the ritual, the result.

What color to start with? She wanted them all, each one in turn, but also all of them at once, flavors mixing into a pool of everything and nothing. No. She had some pride, some restraint. Her fingers shaking, she pulled the blue vial from its spot and popped the lid.

The flavor of apples and sugarlicks, of winter berries and fiery drinks, burned her nose, promised her tongue a memory, a new experience, maybe a little of both.

She pulled her shirt up, the green stain turning into a frown as she folded the fabric. A memory of Hedia wrapping her arms around her, her face against Marseyl's stomach. Marseyl folded the fabric again until she could no longer see a hint of color, making some words of apology or promise to Hedia that she couldn't remember even as she said them.

She looked at her stomach. Marked and marked again, every color imaginable in loops and swirls and dots. They were lightly raised, enough so that she could run her fingers over them in the dark and count the years, the hits. But she didn't do that anymore. Had stopped doing that when she could no longer remember the individual times. When the number of times she'd tapped exceeded the number of memories she could hold in her head.

Filling the needle with the ink, she leaned back. “Here’s to nothing, Alka,” she said. And then she began.

~

Tapping was never about leaving this world behind for another. It was about leaving your past for another, overlaying it with the colored wash of unlived memories. False memories. Possibly someone else’s memories. Being in a past you never had, as bright and perfect as you might wish for, but never leaving the real world. Like dreaming when you knew it was a dream. Part of the appeal was that she could keep one eye out, be safe, always be slightly aware, even as she was immersed in the false flavors of memory.

This time wasn’t like that. This time, the inks sank deep and she was gone. She actually tasted it happen. The real world, the roof, the mechabird, her concern for the girl, she felt them all slide away, one by one, until they were invisible and then she didn’t even remember to look for them anymore.

~

Something touched her leg. Marseyl tried to say something, but there was nothing in her throat but hollow clicks, the itch of memory leaving that made her need to cough and cough. Each one wracked her, threw her ribs hard against the drugged lubdub song of her heart.

And still she felt a hand reach out, fingers grasping, trying to take something from her.

“Leave it,” she said, her own hand responding in kind to catch a moving wrist without opening her eyes. The wrist stilled in her grip and she tried to think. How long had she been here, exposed, without? Why did she taste memories, real memories, her memories, on the edges of her tongue? The feel of Nima’s hip came to the tips of her fingers, the daydream of a life lived before things broke.

Without letting go of the wrist in her grasp, she opened her eyes.

A man stared down at her. No, not at her. He was staring at the inks by her side. The whites of his eyes swirled with colors, constellations built from years of tapping, an echo of her own.

“Leave it,” she said again. Voice stronger, fingers still tight on his wrist. His eyes flicked to her, then away.

“What do you know about them?” she said. The memory of sliding away, of leaving this world for something unknown was fading, but she could still taste it on the back of her tongue, bitter and full of acrid bite.

He shook his head. The curved edge of his ear was lined with mech, but it was old, the wires frayed and cracked. He’d been on the streets longer than she.

“Look at me,” she said, tightening her fingers on the man’s wrist until she felt the bones roll together inside his skin. Even then, it wasn’t easy for him to give her his speckled gaze.

The next thing pained her to say, all the way up her throat. “I’ll give you one, if you tell me something useful,” she said.

“Two,” he said.

She nearly laughed out loud. Kaparin. You gave it an oyster when it was dying and it spat the shell back in your face. She let go of his wrist, touching the bladed rings on her hip when he made a move.

“Let’s not,” she said. “I’ve got one of those headaches. I think you know the kind. They make all the world taste a little red. So don’t push me.”

He did know the kind. She could see it in the way his face went still for a moment, eyes falling half closed.

“They’re new,” he said.

“That’s hardly worth a drop,” she said. She brought the box around and tucked it between her knees, let him look at it. “What else?”

“That seal, that’s how you know it’s the new stuff,” he said.

Marseyl ran a finger over the broken locking mechanism. It looked like a word, but she couldn’t make it out. New stuff. That’s why her tap had been so weird. So *real*.

“New how?” she asked.

“You didn’t feel it?” he asked. “How it made you go away, how it made the memories, real memories, true memories? My wife, my wife comes back to me in them.”

“The inks are false memories, someone else’s life, they always have been.”

“Not these,” he said. “They’re from a different kind of creature or experiments. Maybe something far away, from another dimension.”

“Hmph.” Marseyl had heard of other dimensions, of portals and escape routes and avenues to other worlds, but she didn’t believe in them. An ink addict sure wasn’t going to make her change her mind.

“I need to know—” She started.

Midsentence, he grabbed for the box, faster than she would have expected. It was the movement of someone who needed something so badly it was all he could think about. She’d seen it before, she’d *done* it before. Still, he nearly caught her off guard, had his hand on the box before she could flick her wrists and open her forearm blades.

She caught one blade against the side of his neck, the vein that pulsed hard beneath the dark grime of his skin. The other she slid beneath his reaching wrist. That one opened the skin, more by accident than by purpose, but he clearly thought otherwise, and she let him.

Despite loving her weapons, she didn’t like to fight. The closeness of it, the proximity to another’s blood and sadness, the realness and redness of it—she didn’t like any of it. She’d rather steal and stepside, slide away before anyone knew what had gone missing.

“Now,” she said. “Why don’t you back yourself up to a decent distance and we can try that again?”

But his hand on the box, that close to the inks, made him lose all reason. He leaned in and tried to grab it with both hands, even though her blades didn’t lose their places. She understood that need more than she wanted to admit. Part of her felt for the guy, but most of her was seeing the world through a crimson headthrob of pain and the green worry about Hedia, and that overrode whatever compassion she may have had.

Turning her hand away from his neck, she brought the metal bracelet of the forearm weapon against his cheek, catching his face with the tail end of the blade. The shock of the hit made him sit down hard on the roof.

Marseyl scrambled up, grabbing the box of inks and stuffing them deep into her pack.

“Up,” she said. “Slow and careful. No more stupid, or you can say goodbye to the promise of inks and say hello to a gentle nudge off the roof.”

She wouldn’t, of course. She didn’t kill as a matter of course, but he didn’t know that. He rose. He was a good half-foot taller than her and wider, too. There were at least two weapons sheathed at his waist, maybe more. But it had clearly been a long time since he’d fought for anything other than his next tap, and he was soft in too many places. He seemed to know it, and Marseyl breathed a sigh of relief when he nodded.

“Why don’t you just wait here until I need you?” she said. It sounded like an invitation, except for the steel sound in the back of her words, the steel point at the back of his neck.

~

It took a long time. She alternated her gaze between the man near her and the vision lenses. The bird, perhaps surprised at being wound up twice in the same day, was fluttering on his perch at the edge of the roof. The man, whose name she would never ask, sat quietly a little distance away. He hadn’t reached for the inks again.

Through the lenses, she saw nothing of interest. She hated waiting, hating the way the sun’s movement ticked off time in longhand, hated how every time the wind shifted, she got another stench off the ocean. First it was seabird shit. Then dead things, always with the dead things. Then that tangy brine of sun-bleached seaweed.

The longer she waited, the more the inks talked to her. It was the blue now, even through the material of her bag, promising depths of memories that it shouldn't be able to give, promising to bring back the taste of the woman she'd loved, the sound of voices from her real past.

She wouldn't miss anything if she just took a break, took a small taste...

Licking her lips, she forced herself to stay for another minute. Then another.

And finally someone came to the arch.

~

It was a woman, her face hidden in the depths of a dark blue cloak. She looked around her and then knelt before the arch, much as Hedia had before her. Marseyl zoomed the lenses in as tight as they would go, ignoring the headache that pounded at her temples, until she could see the woman's fingers. A ring, silver and red, sat on the woman's thumb. Marseyl tasted laughter in that colored bend of metal, and felt the lilled curve of a woman's hip. False memory, she told herself. Ink-false.

Focus. What do you see, Marseyl?

What she saw was the woman's fingers making a path over the archway's panel. She bit her lip, watching. The first four movements were easy, but after that, she felt her brain grow weary.

"Remember this," she said.

And then she told the man the second half of the pattern as she watched it.

She stayed just long enough to make sure that the woman really did go through the archway, the portal, the whatever-it-was.

“Let’s go,” she said.

~

They made their way to the place where first Hedia and then the cloaked woman had disappeared, a ragtag team of three. Marseyl with her blades, Alka tucked under her arm, and the man. Closer now, she could see the archway in all its detail, old and crumbling, but still standing strong, the keystones made of something that shined metallic in the evening sun.

Was it really possible that through this arch was some type of portal? That the child was traveling through it, bringing back inks from unknown outskirts of the world? She supposed it was.

More unbelievably, was it possible that Marseyl was standing on the threshold of just such a place, actually thinking about going through? All for a girl she’d left behind so many years ago?

Turned out, that was also possible.

Marseyl dug the box of inks from her bag, removed the blue one. The itch at the sides of her tongue had lessened, the tide of want slowed down to a soft wash.

“Here,” she said, but she held onto it a moment longer, even as the man’s fingers reached for it. “But promise me,” she said. “Promise me that you’ll never buy from a

little girl, about yea high, salt-yellow hair. Actually, just don't buy from any of the street rats. Yes?"

She waited for the best agreement she was going to get—his slow nod—and then dropped the ink into his palm.

He looked at the bottle, and then back at her, surprise all over his face. She guessed you didn't need to say much when all of your emotions were evident in your expression. She didn't know what that was like.

"I'm a liar and a thief," she said. "And an addict. Don't forget that one. Despite that, I do keep my promises."

She knelt and did the half of the pattern she remembered over the panel. He watched her intently. She had no idea if she was doing it right. If this would open the portal. Or kill her. Or, worst of all worsts, trap her here, in Kaparin, forever.

"Now you," she said.

"I could go with you," he said.

For a startled second, she almost thought that sounded like a good idea. Then the breeze shifted and she caught the stink of dead fish in her nose.

"Just do the pattern," she said.

He did. Nothing happened, but she'd expected that. This didn't seem like the kind of thing you'd want to announce with noise or a flash of light or anything like that.

"I'm Rusk," he said.

"Enjoy your wife," she said. Then she stepped through the portal.

~

Except she didn't. She just took a step forward.

Everything was the same.

"It didn't work," she said, turning to the man behind her. Rusk.

He didn't respond.

"Hey," she said. "It didn't—"

He was peering through the archway, touching the space where she'd walked through. It was clear from his expression that he could neither hear nor see her. She waited to see if he was pulling some trick, but no. He seemed to be trying to figure it out as much as she was.

Turning back, she revised her initial appraisal. Everything was *almost* the same. Where there had once been a pile of rubble, there was now a round building. Squat but large, it looked newer than the buildings around it, and nothing at all like the typical rectangular buildings of the city.

"Do you see that, Alka?" she asked the bird under her arm.

Of course, he didn't answer. The mechabird's eyes were good, but camouflaged buildings seemed like they might be beyond his skill set.

There were no shadows in this strange spot, no place for her to lose herself. She didn't know what would happen if she strayed out of the archway's boundaries, so she walked forward in a straight line, her skin prickling at the prospect of being so visible.

And yet her new friend hadn't seen her.

She thought that had to do with him being on the outside of whatever this was. If there was anyone inside—say, looking out of the single window in the building in front

of her—they could see every bit of her, right down to Alka’s ruffled feathers and her own shaking hands.

Get your sorry ass inside, Marseyl. This isn’t about you.

That was the refrain that kept her moving forward. If Hedia was in there, she needed to know. If Hedia was messing around with these new inks, no one was going to put a stop to that except Marseyl. Even the girl’s mother wasn’t likely to notice. For all the times Nima had said Marseyl didn’t have her feet on the ground...

Marseyl wouldn’t go there. That was one memory she couldn’t handle right now. Or, really, ever.

Instead, she raised her hand to the narrow door latch and lifted.

To her surprise, it opened easily, granting her access. The thief in her was always torn at moments like that; on one hand, it made her job ridiculously easy. On the other, she always thought she should have gone into selling locks instead of breaking them; perhaps her life would have turned into something else entirely.

Inside was cavernous and dimly lit. After the slant light of the day, shadows were all that Marseyl could see. The air smelled strongly of the sea, but not the sea that Marseyl knew. There was fear in the scent of it, but not death, not the ragged decomposition that she usually equated with water. She caught a whiff of something chemical, a blue burn that seared her nose and made her eyes water.

Standing still, she let her eyes adjust until she could make out more than shadowed blobs. Shapes of benches and tools, the unsteady click of some piece of numenera. The slosh of water from far off. But not the sea. Not, at least, Kaparin’s sea. The sound was far off, but also somehow closer than that.

Something along the back wall, high up, gave her the sense of movement, but she couldn't see anything distinct. She liked the dark, felt at home in it and made use of it when she could. Stepping forward, she made her way toward the noise, closer and closer until she could make out its source. A single tall tree. No, a watery cage atop a pole.

No, that wasn't right, either.

What do you see, Marseyl?

She stepped closer and looked again. A living trunk growing up from the stone floor, twining up toward the ceiling before opening out to form a sea-filled orb. And inside, two unblinking eyes, a yellowed beak, so many tentacles coiled into the water she couldn't even begin to count them.

She stepped toward them, wishing for Alka's sight, and glad at the same time that the bird was still tucked under her arm. She didn't want to be closer, she didn't want to see those tentacles and know everything that she did: that this was where the inks had come from. A creature held captive, the colors taken from it without its consent. Traded off for—what? Bits and baubles, orbs that may or may not have power?

“Cragworm! You came!” Startled at the yell, Marseyl turned just in time see the girl running out of the darkness, coming at her like a hurricane comes across the plains. This time she got smart and lowered herself so Hedia's wild hug found her shoulders. She allowed herself a moment to feel the girl's heartbeat through her shirt, the warmth of her skin.

“What?” Marseyl asked, confused as much by her own reaction to the girl as by the odd yell.

“You said to call you something else,” Hedia said. “It was the first thing I could think of when I saw you.”

“Oh, great,” Marseyl said.

The girl grinned. Those teeth, enough to break Marseyl’s heart. Time to put her serious voice on.

“Look, Hedia, I need you to tell me what’s going on here. There is a creature in that... cage. And all of this equipment. What’s—”

A whoosh of fabric caught her off guard from behind, and she whirled, too slow and too late.

An arm slipping fast around her waist from behind jostled her, forcing her to lose her tenuous grip on Alka. The bird tumbled to the floor, the silence of his fall broken only by the crash of him landing and something breaking off him, skittering across the floor in the dark.

Marseyl made a sound of despair. Her fault for not being prepared. Her fault for entering not like a thief with ready weapon, but like a child holding tight to a favorite toy. Yet another reason why she hated this town; her younger self was always here, waiting for her, ready to ambush.

The arm left her waist as suddenly as it had appeared.

Marseyl whirled and saw the cloaked woman who’d entered the archway earlier. Now her hood was pulled down to reveal ash-grey hair, black eyes, darkened teeth. She could smell the woman, the dredge of too much time in the dark, the green-grey of rotten murk.

“Marseyl, it’s me.”

Recognition in the voice if not in the face. Marseyl realized the owner of the arm hadn't been trying to kill her, but something far kinder, something far more dangerous.

Her heart beat out a name.

Nima.

"What are you doing here?" Marseyl asked.

"Waiting for you," Nima said. As if, of course. As if it were only yesterday that she'd said she was done with Marseyl forever. As if she'd never called her an addict, a thief, a heartbreaker.

"Why?"

Nima bent down to pick up the fallen bird, smoothing a few of his metal feathers with her hand. "I can't believe you still have him," she said. "I can fix him, I think. And give him some improvements, too."

"No," Marseyl said. She reached and pulled the bird from Nima's grasp, the gesture reminding her of Hedia earlier—had it really been just that morning?—pulling the egg from her own.

"I want to know what's going on." Marseyl's voice, meant to be fierce, came out broken. Damn this town. Damn this sea. Damn this powerlessness against a life-tide constantly determined to drown her.

"This." Nima walked to a large box nearby, ran her fingers over the top of it until it turned blue and then green, and then popped open.

Despite herself, Marseyl looked inside. Vials upon vials of inks, so many colors and tastes she didn't have names for them all. For the first time since she could

remember, the sight of them didn't make her jaw ache with need, didn't make want bloom on her tongue.

"I've worked for years to figure this out," Nima said as she touched first one vial and then another. "Mares, this ink gives us our real memories back, the true ones. Nothing fake. Our own. Hedia and I have been using them to remember you, haven't we, Hedia?"

The girl nodded, grinning. Green upon green in her smile, the sharp-stick stab of it into Marseyl's chest. "It's been fun," the girl said. "That time when mom gave you Alka and we had a party. Oh, and that time we went out on the boat and I almost drowned, but you jumped right into the water and saved me."

"That wasn't me," Marseyl said. But of course it was. Before the inks. Before the fear had dove into her and sank down to the very depths of her and drowned there, rotting and stinking. That fear was coming back now, rising no matter how much Marseyl tried to hold it under.

"You can come with us," Nima said. "We can all go back to then. It was so much better. I've made all these so we never have to come back."

There were so many things wrong that Marseyl couldn't say them all, couldn't even think them all. The captive creature sloshing in the tank. Hedia's stained grin. The woman she'd once loved, the woman who had never, in truth, turned Marseyl away. It was Marseyl who'd left. Marseyl who had run, who always ran. No ink needed for that memory. It washed over her, dark and heavy as dirt.

And now Nima was asking her to come back. Not the now her, but the former her. The one she wasn't anymore. It was almost tempting, that. To be the woman Hedia had described, the woman that Nima had loved.

But Nima wasn't herself anymore. Marseyl could see it in the shake of the woman's hands, the barely contained energy that danced in the edges of her face.

The truth rose up, choking her, and still she let it have its way with her. "The ink isn't real," Marseyl said. "It could never be real."

But Nima wasn't listening. She was gathering vials of inks to her, catching them against her chest as if she were holding a child or a lover. "We'll go back together," she said. "You'll see. It will be perfect."

Turning from Nima, Marseyl put her hands on Hedia's shoulders. "You need to go outside now," she said quietly.

Hedia hesitated, looking between the two women. Damn Nima for getting the girl into this. Damn herself for leaving in the first place.

"It's okay," she said.

But of course it wasn't. Even when Marseyl wasn't lying, the world conspired to make a liar out of her. As the girl turned and stepped toward the door, Marseyl heard the sound of the latch lifting.

~

Marseyl raised her voice to shout, but too late. The man who'd given her his name, the man who'd offered to come with her, walked in.

Hedia did have some of Marseyl in her after all, for the girl was there at the sound and then gone. Marseyl didn't even think the man saw her slip out the door behind him.

The man stood different, taller, wider, his stance that of a man who'd been holding himself small for a purpose.

And Marseyl knew she'd been taken, by his eyes, by his wife, by his story of need. She sidestepped to the shadows, keeping her face out of what little light there was. The man only had eyes for Nima.

"Your friend was kind enough to show me the way in," he said. "Been trying to find this place for months. Been trying to find you, too."

"I won't go back," Nima said simply.

"You will," he said. "We own you and those inks and that creature and your girl." "No," Nima said.

"Don't worry. She did her little disappearing act just now, but we'll catch her. Where's she going to run?"

Instead of answering, Nima popped the top on one of the vials in her arms and upended it into her mouth. Before either the man or Marseyl could move in to stop her, she'd drank it down. Then another.

On the third one, Marseyl moved forward, throwing off her cloak of shadows, but Nima caught her eye and shook her head. She'd always been able to see Marseyl, no matter how deep the dark or how much Marseyl tried to hide.

"No," Nima said quietly. In the near-dark, her eyes were swirls of color, her teeth stained to their core, but that wildness had left her face. Her gaze was true and clear. "Take Hedia."

I can't. I am not the woman you remember.

“Run,” Nima said. Her body folded at the knees and went down, the vials crashing to the floor around her. The man rushed forward, swearing into the bit of mech in his ear.

Still Marseyl hesitated.

What do you see? Nima’s voice in her head, teaching her even now.

What she saw was Nima’s quiet face saying “Run.” She hadn’t been asking for help from the Marseyl of memory, but the Marseyl of now. Marseyl the thief. Marseyl of the inks. Marseyl of the running away.

She couldn’t look back, couldn’t see Nima on the floor, or she would fail. Again.

Quiet and quick, Marseyl slipped through the door. Hedia had made it outside but no farther. The girl was trembling, her eyes wild.

She felt Hedia search her mind, and she opened it to the girl’s questions and fears.

“Run,” she told Hedia as she took her hand. “Run toward the sea.”

And they did.





The Sound of a Beast

Monte Cook & Shanna Germain

Since this morning, when I woke up with a damn caffa grub hanging off my neck, I'd been daydreaming about killing Palmer in his sleep. The only thing stopping me was I couldn't figure out the best way to do it. Sometimes I favored the quick blade across his snoring throat. Other moments, I imagined drugging him and rolling him into the fire. Once in a while, I thought I might just throw him to the next creature that attacked us in the dark. Mostly, though, I dreamed of transforming in the shadow of night and dragging him off to the wilds with my claws in the tender bits of his belly.

Palmer snored like a creature with eleven noses, so I figured that whatever I did to him would be lost in the great cadence of his sleep. No one would hear a thing. In fact, they'd all cheer me in the morning because they'd actually been able to sleep through the night for once.

I was so lost in this daydream that I nearly backtracked us. No one noticed until Norlup said in that quiet way he has, “Are we going down? Aren’t we supposed to be going up by now?”

That’s what they get for putting me in the lead. Norlup’s got the enhanced eyes and ears, but he’s the fallback type. You know, the guy who likes to bring up the rear. Which is okay by me most of the time; if anyone’s going to stand behind me and send streaks of lightning over my head, I want it to be Norlup.

Of course, not getting us lost is supposed to be Palmer’s job. His claim of knowing this area like the face of his own mother is the only thing he’s said so far that’s truth. Turns out, his mother abandoned him or died or some such before he was old enough to talk. Lucky her.

Palmer, who hadn’t noticed our lack of proper direction—for a guy who claims to be good at everything, he’s actually kind of shitty at most things—but acted like he did said, “Where is your mind, Deni? You trying to kill us?”

“Just you, Palmer,” I said. I couldn’t help it; it just slipped out.

From behind us, Norlup gave a snort of laughter in the dark.

“Oh, great beast of wildwoods, coming to eat me,” Palmer quipped. It was too dark to see his face, but you could just tell he was doing the “fake fear” look, all wide-eyed and sarcastic. See why I want to kill him? Anyone would.

This was the last time I took a job with someone whose most glowing recommendation was that he’d once resisted the urge to have sex with a rubar on a dare.

There was another guy with us, too, although both *guy* and *with us* were liberal uses of those words. A varjellen, with a name that was so hard to put on the tongue that

we just called him Ech. He was mostly a—let’s say *captive* rather than *sacrifice*—and he was smart enough not to say much.

They’d hired Palmer on to get us where we needed to go, they’d hired me on to protect Ech from outside dangers, and I was pretty sure they’d hired Norlup to protect Ech from, well, me. Clearly that was all working top-notch.

The tunnels had been Ech’s idea, which would make them seem like a bad choice, him being our captive and all, but in fact they’d turned out well until this morning, with the caffa grub incident. But that was mostly Palmer’s fault.

The tunnels kept us off the plains, which was in the middle of its spring storms. You only have to see one tornado laden with flesh-eating fungus, picking up whole herds of giant camethosaurs and throwing them around, to want to avoid that for the rest of your life. Of course, these hollowed pathways brought their own set of dangers. Like the grubs that had latched onto me this morning, after Palmer insisted that all those holes in the ground were just erosion. Which they were, if erosion meant blood-sucking, face-eating larva wanting to use my body for a new home. Not to mention the chance that we’d get lost and die down here. The tunnels were ancient, half built and half dug, and we’d passed our fair share of the long-dead down here, Palmer palming any spoils that remained...

...and there it was, a glimpse of understanding into why Palmer bugged me so much.

“Hey, Palmer, is that your real name or your occupation name?” Couldn’t believe that had *just* occurred to me. Sometimes I’m slower on the uptake than my countenance would imply.

“Both,” he said, quick and quipped. But you could tell he’d just thought of it, too. Which made me feel a little better, even though I knew he’d be introducing himself as “Palmer the palmer” from now on. Like he’d been the one to think of it. Probably even make a flourishy hand gesture to go with it. *Tada*.

Norlup and Ech were quiet in the back. Not the planning-something or dying-from-something kind of quiet, but the utter silence that comes from being hard on the move for a long time. I call it the plod, that death to sound.

The tunnel took a sudden hard climb for the surface, and I led my ragtag team along it. I knew we were under the plains somewhere, but other than that, it was *knock-synth throw-drit* that we’d come out close to where we needed to be. At worst, I was pretty sure we hadn’t gone backward. At very best, we’d land on the outskirts of the plains, having missed the death tornados, and be well on our way to delivering the goods and parting ways.

Norlup caught up to me. He’s tall and wide in the face the way I like my men to be, and quiet, thank drit, but that whole lightning thing isn’t for me. I’m of the earth, planted like a stone.

“Something behind us,” he said.

“Something like Ech?” That man was the easiest captive I’d ever had. He kept pace, ate what we offered, stayed quiet, and didn’t try to escape. I wished I could trade him places with Palmer.

“Something with more feet,” he said. “Listen.”

But Palmer was talking poor Ech’s ear off behind us, and I couldn’t hear a thing beyond that.

“Crowd?”

“Creature,” he said.

Damn. I’d rather fight a whole army of humans than a single creepy-crawly. The tunnels weren’t very big, but they were wide enough to let Palmer and Ech step by me. Ech cast a glance my way—in the light of Palmer’s glowglobe, bulbous eyes raised a question that I couldn’t answer.

“Palmer, hush for a minute,” I said as they went by.

You could see his face getting ready for a retort, but then we all heard it. That scrape of carapace, the click of approaching pincers. Big pincers. Coming down the tunnel. Norlup had been right about a lot of legs and wrong about his use of the word *creature*, singular.

“Protect Ech,” I said. Which, you know, seemed obvious, but sometimes the best thing you can do to prepare for battle is remind people of their purpose. “And keep pushing forward. I think we’re close.”

I thought no such thing, but they bought it and sometimes that’s all that matters.

I imagined any creature crawling through a tunnel would be slow, but not this one. Pincers first, then its triple-toothed mouth, one pair of red eyes, then another, then a third. I’d forgotten that slicer beetles burrowed.

It was a young one, only slightly taller than me, but it already had its second carapace. There were more behind it. You could hear them, chittering, impatient. Feeding time.

“Go,” I said. Obvious again, but it was the best I could do before the beetle was on me, open mouth and giant front legs working to get a good angle. I’m better with my

verred, but it's too long for a space like this, so you need to adjust. I tugged my punch daggers out of their sheaths and tried to calculate the quickest path to the weak spots.

I like to go for the eyes, but with a slicer beetle, that's three pairs of peepers you've got to put out before it does you a bit of good. What I wanted was a place where our baby hadn't gotten his adult covering yet.

I caught a glimpse of Norlup off to my right, his short blade crackling with energy. He was waiting for me, I think, and I gave him a nod of appreciation for that.

"Let's push him back," I said.

My plan was to back him up into the tunnel, kill him quick, and leave his body there to block his siblings while we made a run for it. Not the best plan I've ever had, but sometimes living through something is a big enough goal.

Norlup and I moved forward together. I kept looking for a weak spot, a thin bit of shell, but he was solid. And not at all disturbed by Norlup's crackling energy in his face. My punch daggers slid over the green-grey of his covering without making a scratch. I had a feeling my plan wasn't as rock-strong as it had seemed at first.

I figured we had three ways about it. One, I could keep shell-punching the thing until it bit my face off. Two, I could send Palmer in as bait. Three, I could—

And that's when everything exploded in my face. Bug guts and eyeballs as big as my fists and bits of shell that rained down on me, slicing as they went. I shoved Norlup out of the way of a falling piece of pincer, hearing him grunt as we hit the tunnel wall. Something long swept down my face, so sharp I wouldn't have known it was opening my flesh if not for the sudden wet heat of my own blood.

Palmer.

I turned, teeth gritted, tasting the horrible blackness of bug parts and the copper of blood.

Palmer stood there, still poking at some device he had strapped to his wrist as though he didn't realize he'd already set it off.

Behind the fragmented bits of beetle, the sound of a swarm let loose. Clicking and skittering.

"Run," I said. "Palmer. Go." I didn't mean to shove him as hard as I did, but sometimes I forget my own strength. He tripped, stumbled, and then righted himself and ran. Ech was nowhere to be seen, but I'd worry about that in a minute.

Behind us, the beetles were keeping pace. They seemed to be having a little trouble fitting through the tunnel, which was narrowing as it rose toward the surface, but only enough to slow them down.

We slammed around a corner, Palmer in the lead, and Norlup's still-crackling blade just in front of me.

"We might have to—" I started. But before I could finish, there was light, off-slant, surface light, making me blink and stop short.

Then Palmer was whooping and hollering and running toward the surface. It got really tight at the end, and he planted his head on the curve of the tunnel, which did not make me laugh, not even one bit. But I noticed that both Norlup and I ducked our heads as we pulled out to the surface.

Ech was already up there, waiting for us. We were officially the worst captors ever.

We were near the edge of the plains, almost perfectly so.

“Impressive,” Norlup said. And he did something with his face that looked like a smile, but I couldn’t be sure. I’d never seen him do that before.

“What is that?” Palmer said.

The good thing about the plains is you can see right across it and you know what’s coming at you. That’s the bad thing about the plains, too.

What was coming at us looked like a wall. A moving, swirling, wing-filled wall. Above it, the clouds hung low and heavy, pregnant with waiting, outlined in a watery purple that shifted and shuddered. You couldn’t look at it too long because it made your brain feel numb. I didn’t think it was tornados, but what it could be, I didn’t know.

“Norlup?” I asked.

He shook his head. Ech did the same before I even asked him.

“Let’s go,” I said. The beetles would have to dig through the tightened tunnel, but it wasn’t going to take them long. And if those clouds were coming our way, I didn’t want to be part of it.

We ran. The clouds swung low after us, silent. The beetles crawled up from the depths. And still we ran.

~

The edge of the storm caught us just as we hit a deep patch of woods surrounding a crumbling synth tower. It was possible to outrun creatures, but not the weather. Not across the flat of the plains.

The tower, moated by trees in the middle of nowhere, shimmered and tugged at the edges of reality.

“Illusion?” Norlup asked.

But I didn’t think so. It seemed real enough. I wanted it to be real enough.

“Do we go in?” he asked.

As if in answer, the rain came down, black and thick, pounding on the cracked earth, breaking holes into the surface. And with it, black jellyfish that floated into our hair, propelled themselves against our skin. If they’d bitten or stung, it would have been bearable. Instead, they sought out wet warmth, their long tentacles waving around my eyes and the corners of my mouth, their bodies pulsing beneath my armor toward my center.

I smashed one against my face and found it oozed something warm and tingly.

“Yes,” I said. “Everyone in.”

Palmer was the first to the door, Ech the last. Palmer fumbled with the lock while the jellies landed, splashing on his hands. I almost felt bad for the guy.

“Let me,” I said.

I put my shoulder to the door, testing it to see where it might give. The lock was solid, but the hinges less so. I levered my two-pronged verred into the hinge side and butted my weight against it. Once, and again. It creaked but didn’t budge.

A feathery tentacle swept the corner of my eye, and I shuddered. “Help me,” I said.

Norlup brought his hands up to the lock side, did something that made everything glow in a momentary flash of colors.

“Try it now,” he said.

I threw my weight against the levered verred and felt the wood and metal start to give way. And then I was inside, tumbling across the threshold.

“That was easy,” I said. But then I realized that we hadn’t cracked the door; someone had opened it from the inside.

That someone was now staring down at me, holding a long, thin rod in his hand.

“If you’re coming in, come in,” he said. “The natblak will eat you alive if you let it. Well, it’ll eat you alive whether you let it or not, to be true.”

Wet, shivering, covered in oily tentacled creatures, we gathered inside the doorstep as he shut the door. He flicked something at the end of his rod so that it vibrated lightly and then waved it over us, a gesture that made Ech cover his ears and cringe. I wondered if it made a sound, something we couldn’t hear, or if he just had a fear of pointy things that vibrated.

Almost instantly, we were dry to the bone, clothes and hair and jellies, the latter crumbling into bits of dust that fell to the stone floor around us. Behind the man, a spiral staircase rose out of sight, curving, loop-de-loops that kind of made you dizzy just looking at them. Other than that, the room was mostly bare.

“Better,” he said with obvious approval. “Clearly, you’re neither from around here nor stormchasers or you’d be better equipped to handle the natblak. So tell me, exactly why are you beating down our door in the middle of the day with neither invitation nor expectation?”

“I’m Deni,” I said. “We’re—”

The man waved a hand at me. Every finger bore at least one ring of glass, glittered colors that sparkled even in the low light. Inside them, creatures—real? created?—caught in whole.

“I don’t actually care, particularly,” he said. “I was just making formalities. You may stay until the storm passes. Then you need to be on your way. Help yourself to anything you like on the main floor, but don’t do anything stupid.

“If you are about to take an action and you have to pause and ask yourself if it’s stupid, the answer is yes.”

You know that moment when you hear someone talk the way that you think? Yeah, I hadn’t either until that very second. Turns out, my thoughts sounded like assholes. But at least they were honest assholes. The only thing this guy didn’t do that I would have done was look pointedly at Palmer when I said stupid. *Every* time I said stupid.

“Your kindness binds us,” Ech said. It was the second time I’d heard him say such; the first was when I’d given him his first meal as our captive. I thought then that he was being sarcastic, but now I could see he’d meant it.

The man started for a second, then laughed, nodding. “I suppose it would if it were kindness in the least. However, it is pure selfishness on my part. Dead bodies on the doorstep are an ache to the whole of the house.

“Come,” our host said. Something about his voice, or maybe it was the device he still carried, continued to bother Ech. The visitant was clearly trying to remain polite, but he hung back, covering one ear and then the other.

We followed our host out of the main room into a small, square room. The furniture was a mishmash of pieces, almost piled on top of each other.

“All I ask is that you stay here, in this room, on this floor,” he said.

He left us shortly after, saying something about seeing to the house in the storm.

Palmer shrugged and pulled an upside-down chair from its perch on a table. The movement revealed a black box beneath it, and Palmer turned his attention toward it.

“Look at all of this stuff,” he said. “Who puts their guests in a store room?”

“Don’t take anything,” I said.

He lifted both his palms at me, grinning. “Of course not, oh great beast of the wild.”

“Palmer,” I said, my voice more growl than I meant it to be. Most people— well, no, not most people—the few people who knew about me believed my change was moon-driven, something of the sky and tide. But that was a fallacy I let exist purely for my own benefit. Surprise is a power all its own, and severely underrated.

Most of the time, I controlled my change. When I was younger, I wanted to understand it more. Where did the creature come from? Was it part of me? Was it even part of this world? But the truth was, the older I got, the less I cared. I understood how to control it, how to break the world open and take what I needed when I needed it, and mostly that was enough. When it slipped in out of nowhere, like it had just now, it meant I was overtired, underfed, and overly fed up.

Palmer stepped back a little, not in fear, but in a single show of smarts. Don’t poke the sleepy, ravenous, cranky creature.

“What do we do now?” he asked.

I waited for someone to answer, and then I realized everyone else was waiting for *me* to answer. Oh, good.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Eat? Sleep? Both?”

Ech had already set himself down on the floor in the corner.

“That plan works for me,” Norlup said. “I’m going to see if I can find food.”

No one said what we were thinking, about how our host had said not to leave the room. He seemed nice enough; what would he do if he found Norlup in the kitchen, sweep him for storm jellies again with his vibrating rod?

Just as he was about to leave the room, Norlup stopped and lifted his blade as high as he could over his head, trying to touch the ceiling. “Look at that,” he said.

Built into the ceiling was a round metallic disk, as big around as the four of us put together. Maybe bigger. It didn’t look like decoration, but like a cap on the end of something, or a door. But who puts a door into their ceiling?

“What is it?” Palmer asked. Either he actually thought that one of us was going to identify the thing we’d just stumbled on for the first time, or he was asking the air. Either of which seemed like they’d give him the exact same response.

“Deni, can you touch it with your verred? It’s longer.”

I did as Norlup asked, pushing the tip of the verred carefully against the very center of the disk. Despite the metallic appearance of the circle, my weapon sunk easily into the material, pushing it upward without breaking it.

“Odd,” Norlup mused.

“Maybe you should stay here.” That’s what I meant to tell him. Never let it be said that I was a coward, but never let it be said that I was stupid, either.

But as soon as I opened my mouth, I realized that Norlup didn't stay in the back because he was timid or because it kept him safe. He stayed in the back so I could explore things that the rest of us missed. And so I kept quiet when he did that thing with his mouth again, almost a smile, and stepped out of the room.

Palmer was keeping his distance, off in the corner, digging through the piles of furniture and boxes and bits of metal. As long as he didn't steal anything, him keeping his distance was just fine with me. I hadn't forgiven him for the bug spit yet.

Ech was sitting next to a central heatmaker, a small round device that seemed to run on a hidden power source. I'd never seen one so small before, and I wanted it. He gestured me over, and I sat, feeling the heat wash over me.

"Can you build something like that, Ech?" I asked. I don't know why I asked; I already knew the answer. Maybe I just felt bad that he was such an easy captive and I hadn't really talked to him much. Or maybe it was something more sinister. With me, you just never know.

He seemed to take my request seriously, leaning in and pressing his hand to the device, far longer than I could have stood. "Perhaps," he said. "If I had my workspace and my tools."

There was no remorse in what he said, nor any sense of blame, but I felt the loss of his life in that short sentence. This is why I don't like having people around, why I don't want to know anything about anyone; you start talking to them and suddenly snap, they break your heart in the most accidental ways.

The rain and the jellies came down outside, the sound of them splatting, wet and heavy, against the tower all around us. Occasionally, one would propel through some

opening and flutter around for a bit. Palmer started scouting for them, smashing them between the flat of his hands. The smack and squish of his actions were both gross and reassuring. I had no idea what we were going to do while we waited for the storm to pass. Please drit let it end sooner than expected.

Norlup returned from wherever he'd been and settled in next to me, leaning in. "I found a kitchen, but no food. No pantry," he said. "How do they eat?"

"They?" I asked.

"He didn't say anything about anyone else," Palmer said. I hadn't realized he was close enough to hear.

Norlup shook his head, pointing upward. "There is movement up there, more than one person might make. And yet, our host is surprisingly quiet."

He was mulling something. You could tell by the way he pulled his lips in. Whatever it was, I didn't like it. In a short time, I'd come to trust Norlup's instincts more than I liked to admit. Trust and I never did get along that well.

"How can you hear anything over these jellies?" Palmer asked, as he smashed another one. I wondered if I could kill him tonight, just push him out the door into the storm. Or maybe our host would go all creepy-crawly on us, and attach to Palmer's neck like a caffra, and I wouldn't even have to get my hands dirty.

From somewhere above, there was a buzzing sound. Not the storm, but something metallic. The kind of sound that made Ech flinch against it.

Norlup stood up. "I'm going to see what I can find out."

"Want me to go with you?" I asked. *Please say yes.*

But he didn't.

And then he was gone, and Ech and I were left with the sound of Palmer ending the lives of creatures between the slap of his hands.

~

I heard Norlup go up the stairs in the main room and then the storm drowned everything out. It was really coming down, jellies and drops and whatever was caught up in that whirlwind of water and death. Ech looked like he was half asleep, although it was kind of hard to tell with his eyes always partway open. And Palmer was just Palmer.

Our host came back, suddenly in the room. His entrance must have been drowned out by the storm because I didn't hear him until he started talking.

"What did I say?" he asked. "What did I say about stupid?" I thought he was holding something in his hands, but it was just that he was wringing them, fast and hard.

Of course, I looked right at Palmer. "What did you do?" I asked.

He shrugged, all wide-eyed. This time for real. "I've been right here," he said. When he held his hands up, they were covered in black jellyfish goo, running down to his elbows.

"The other," our host said. "He—"

A sound from upstairs, even through the storm, a drag and slash. The circle above us shuddered. For about half a second, I thought it was going to come tumbling out of the ceiling right down on us.

"Where's Norlup?" I said.

Even before I finished, I was heading for the main room and those stairs. Damn people. You fall into line with them, and then they go and do something stupid. Thought I'd made a good choice with Norlup. He seemed smart, he seemed safe.

Our host put his hands out to stop me, but I ran right through them. Not into them, but through them. Barreling toward the stairs.

"Hologram!" Palmer said from behind me. The first smart thing he'd said since I'd known him. Okay, maybe the second smart thing.

Our host wasn't just a normal holo. There was something inside the blank space, a rebuilding network, invisible tendrils that reached and snagged at me as I hit the stairs. A moving web, a strand of which caught my ankle.

"I tried," our host said, not to us, his voice crackling into garbled nonsense. "Not my..."

I jerked free of the tensile grip winding up my leg, pointed at Palmer.

"Keep Ech safe," I said.

A look back told me that Ech didn't need saving. He was standing up, moving toward the barely-there body of our host with a sense of purpose that I hadn't seen in him before. A pair of tools was gripped in his fists. So much for Palmer frisking him.

I turned from them and found my feet again on the stairs. The steps did a funny thing under my feet, but I'd seen something like it before. Designed to keep people from getting up there, they slid down against your climb. I took them two at a time, countered against the downward slope and used my body on the railing. How the hell had Norlup gotten up here? He wasn't as strong as I was.

And then I found out. Something reached out of the air above me and wrapped my waist with all the need and finesse of a lust-filled teenager. It looked like a metal spine, stacked vertebra that went on and on. I was thinking how to get out of it and then it squeezed—something cracked in my back that I hoped was just a bit of armor and not my ribs—and plucked me up.

I could hear footsteps scrambling up the steps beneath me, and I opened my mouth to tell them to stay back, but nothing came. I needed every bit of throat space to let the air back in.

My head washed hard against something and I realized I was upside down. Which is why you'll never catch me in a robe. Not that I care who sees what, except for me. All that damn fabric just gets in the way.

The spine pulled me up and up. It cranked and clattered above me, but you could tell it wasn't totally machine. There were bits of leftover... something... around the metal, like it had been pulled through a body. I hoped that body wasn't Norlup's. I hoped it wasn't about to be mine.

Two grey streaks zipped by me, heading down, and a second later, you could hear the sounds of two bodies getting wrapped up in metal. Right, that was probably Palmer's idea of keeping our captive safe. I should have known.

~

The tower was taller than seemed possible. We went up a long way, floor after floor, spaces of nothing but lights, echoes of voices, shadowed crevices. I couldn't see

most things as well as I wanted, and some I saw too well. Don't take this the wrong way, but in the end, I closed my eyes. I'd say it was vertigo, but mostly it was all those things stuffed into crevices that I didn't need to see.

The drop was almost gentle, finally. A floor beneath my feet—sometimes you take what you can get and some solid footing is better than upside down with my eyes squeezed shut—and a moment later, the sounds of Palmer and Ech landing near me. I knew that sound; we'd heard it from above us before.

In front of us, two bodies hung down from somewhere so far above I couldn't even see where it started. Well, not bodies, really. Half bodies. Human chests, one male, one female, their arms little more than stumps with wires and lights. One giant spine running above and below them. The man's face was wrapped in metal and synth, but the woman's was uncovered. One fake blue eye stared at me. The other, black and square, looked dully into the distance.

They might have been human once, but I didn't think so. I thought they, it, whatever, might have been something entirely alien, and were now a little machine and a little human and a little of whatever they'd originally been.

I felt like a bit of prey who'd been dropped from a mouth just to see if it's willing to run.

I straightened up, held my ground. "What did you do with Norlup?" I asked. Sometimes you have to take the most obvious route toward what you want. There's a law about that or something, but I can't remember what it's called.

There was no answer from the creatures. So much for that law. It was time to start swinging. My verred slipped into my hands the way she always did, ready for anything I asked of her.

“Palmer? Ech?” I didn’t dare take my eyes off the creatures in front of me, but I needed to know they had my back, in whatever ways your captive and your campfire nemesis can have your back.

They both responded.

So did the creatures in front of us. Not speaking, but showing. Sliding a wall back like removing an eyelid, and that kind of painful ache, how bright it was, before it settled into something you could see.

Behind the creatures, rows and rows of pellucid containers, all shapes and sizes. Inside each, something captured. Beast. Man. Food. Weapons. Nothing was spared. The containers were piled on each other, some smashed half open, the thing inside decaying or decayed. The scent, released when the eyelid opened, came over me, cloying, maggoty, rot and mildew, the gut-scent of things long dead.

Collectors.

This whole tower was a trap. Death wrapped in a come-hither promise. I could see the holes in the floors, too, the clear tubes that ran downward, the same size as the circle we’d discovered in the ceiling.

“They’re—” but then I stopped. I couldn’t find the air to say the word. I couldn’t find the air for anything. Because there, in the front, hands up, blade still crackling in his grip, was Norlup, captured. Staring right at me through the container, his mouth open as

if he'd been in the act of saying something when those things caught him. His free hand raised as if to ward off what he'd seen coming.

He wasn't dead, not yet, but he was dying. Whatever those containers were built of, they weren't designed to keep things alive. Just preserved.

I didn't know how the creatures worked, and I didn't have time to think about it. I went in swinging, verred meeting metal and fleshy parts with as much power as I could put behind it.

As soon as the point of my weapon touched the creatures, I knew I was in trouble. The blade didn't sink into them, it didn't even hit. Something—a field? armor?—sent a shock all the way up both arms, shaking me so hard it was all I could do to keep hold of my weapon and not get knocked on my ass.

“Don't touch—” I started, but Palmer interrupted me.

“See to Norlup,” he said. He had bladed disks in his hands and this look on his face I'd never seen before, as if he was trying to figure things out, to find a different way in. It was a side of him that I would have taken the time to appreciate and think about if I had the time, but I didn't.

I made my way to Norlup. My verred did nothing to the container in which he was sealed. In an instant, Ech was beside me, the tips of his tools glowing, one blue, one red. He pointed them toward the corner of the container and the air between the tips of his tools sparked in a purple arc of sound and light. A miniscule crack opened in the container, so small it gave me hope and then took it right back.

“Keep going!” I said, my verred still useless, but unwilling to give up.

I couldn't look at Norlup's face. Could not, even though I knew I should. Even though I was the worst kind of coward. Knowing that if we couldn't break him out, he would die inside that box, looking at me, trying to connect with me. And that I'd refused him that. But if I looked at him, I was going to lose it. I needed every bit of strength I had.

Behind me, Palmer was yelling at the machine, whacking it so hard I swore I could feel the sound of metal on metal against the back of my teeth. So much for thinking he was going to be smart about it.

When Palmer went silent, I didn't even have to look to know that he'd been captured.

The creature snaked out a spiny tendril, wrapping it around Ech's wrist. Ech went still. It was so fast, but you could still see it happen. One second his tools were cutting apart the synth box that held Norlup, and the next he froze, shuddered, and disappeared from sight.

The spine, empty now of prey, came for me. I turned, rushing the creature as fast as I could, verred pointed for the one's chest, as if I might accidentally find a heart in there.

And then. Stillness. Silence. I couldn't hear a thing through the synth that surrounded me, held me captive.

I'd dreamed about this moment my whole life, when everyone and everything became quiet. When the world went silent and I could finally hear myself think.

Now that I had it, I didn't want it. I couldn't see anything, couldn't feel. I could only hear the nothing. And inside that, I could hear the parts of my brain move, could

hear the passage of blood through my veins. Every exhale was a sound as large as an earth shift. Every inhale the thunder of a storm. I could hear death coming for me, and death sounded a lot like myself.

Mostly, I think we spend our lives in a state of suspension. The plod, one step in front of another without thinking, without choosing.

But there are moments when you make a decision. Something true and fierce, something that changes everything.

I closed my eyes. The flutter of my eyelids was the boom of thunder in the night.

Usually the way I become the creature that I am is easy. It's finding a rent in the fabric, widening it until the other can slip through and find me. That entrance of weight and power, the sense that I'm something in addition to myself is welcomed, wanted, ached for.

This time, the way I became the creature that I am was pain. The container crushed my transformation even as it yielded to it. I felt my bones harden against the push, the new width of my back arch into the unforgiving space. The part that joined me felt it, too; its shaking anger at being trapped vibrated down my spine. Nothing would give, not me, not the other, not the container. In the compression, the sound of the change broke into my brain, down my vertebra, ached with sound. I howled, anguish the voice of the living, and my voice echoed back at me, silent.

When the container gave way, it was all at once, so that I was falling to the floor, down on all fours, looking up at Norlup.

He was dead. Most of the time, you look at someone and you're allowed some time pretending to wonder, a moment to hold on to a hope that even then you know doesn't exist. I didn't have that time. I didn't have that hope.

I ran for the conjoined creature on all fours. Ech was, impossibly, already there, his head bowed as he attacked with his tools. As I closed the gap, a spined tendril snaked out toward him.

"Ech!" I yelled, but I'd forgotten my voice, how to turn the snarl into words. The sound was enough, the way it echoed through the space after all that silence. He leaned back to cover an ear, and the tendril missed him, snaking by within an inch.

I leapt, aiming for the creature's chests, not caring what I caught as long as it was something vital. I broke it open. Claw and tooth. Nothing inside but more of the same. Metal bones and flesh wires and the sound of things that weren't living but didn't believe they could ever die. Tendrils whipped by me, or tried to snag me, and I paid them no mind.

Honed in on prey. That is the way of the beast that I am. That is the safety and the danger I carry inside me.

When the creatures were shredded and my claws were broken and my teeth ached, I lay down on the floor and hoped I might die. The beast in me was slipping away, back to wherever it came from. In the going, I could sense its trapped anger, its desire to kill me. One of these days, I was going to slip and it would get the chance, and then I wondered if it would be me going through that rend in the fabric of all things, called into being for another's needs.

Through my pain, I heard a voice.

“They’re gone,” Ech said.

A moment later. “Palmer, too.”

I wanted to ask how Ech had survived, how he’d come to be standing before me, but he put out his hand to help me up, and I saw that he, too, had made a choice. His normally pale fingers and palm were burned to purple, his nails blackened and curled from heat. They would fall off soon, and maybe grow back, but I didn’t think his hands would return to normal any time soon, if ever. He’d used his tools to cut himself free, just as I’d used my own.

After a moment, I took his hand carefully and let him think he was helping me up.

The stairs allowed us to walk down them. The house didn’t stop us from making our way to the front door. I didn’t think it could anymore. Our host didn’t appear. I didn’t think he could that anymore, either.

I stepped into the store room and looked up at the ceiling. The metal disk was still there, but now it hung open, showing what remained of the clear tube above it.

“They wanted us to stay in here,” I said. “Easy prey.”

“Thank drit for Norlup,” Ech said, and I could almost smile at that, partly for this strange creature throwing my own slang back at me, but mostly because it was true.

Thank drit for Norlup. And, I had to admit, for Palmer, too.

I guessed the people who hired us were smarter than they’d seemed. In the end, Palmer had gotten us where we needed to go, I’d protected Ech, and Norlup, well, Norlup had protected us all. The only thing they hadn’t counted on was Ech’s role as survivor.

“What now?” Ech asked, and we both waited a while for someone else to answer.

Outside, the storm had let up, the sky its normal dark that comes only from the night. As we walked away from the tower, I'd say the world was silent around us, but I'll never be able to say that again and mean it.

Everything was full of noise. The crawl of insects beneath the earth, the far-away slide of a trinket across a palm, the way lightning crackled before it flew. Ech's quiet unknowing beside me. Even my own beastly heart, with its constant breaking open.





About the Authors

Monte Cook 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 *Ptolus: Monte Cook's City by the Spire*, as well as some shorter work. As a nonfiction writer, he has published the wry but informative *Skeptic's Guide to Conspiracies*.

His work, however, as a game designer, is likely most notable. Starting in 1988, he has written hundreds of tabletop roleplaying game books and articles and won numerous awards. Monte is likely best known for D&D 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, Monte Cook's World of Darkness, and has worked on the Pathfinder RPG, the Marvel Comics massively multiplayer online game, as well as numerous other games and related projects.

He is the designer of Numenera.

Shanna Germain is the lead editor of *Numenera* and a writer for the upcoming *Torment: Tides of Numenera* computer game. An award-winning writer and editor, her poems, essays, stories, novellas and articles have been widely published. Her most recent books include *The Lure of Dangerous Women* (Wayzgoose Press, 2012), *Geek Love: An Anthology of Full Frontal Nerdity* (Stone Box Press, 2013), and *Leather Bound* (Harper Collins, 2013). An associate fellow at the Attic Institute in Portland, OR, Shanna has garnered a variety of awards for her work, including a Pushcart nomination, the Rauxa Prize for Erotic Poetry and the C. Hamilton Bailey Poetry Fellowship.



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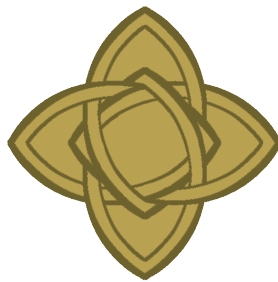
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CHAPTER 1

WELCOME TO THE NINTH WORLD

There have been eight previous worlds. You may refer to them as ages, aeons, epochs, or eras, but it's not wrong to think of each as its own individual world. Each former world stretched across vast millennia of time. Each played host to a race whose civilizations rose to supremacy but eventually died or scattered, disappeared or transcended. During the time that each world flourished, those that ruled it spoke to the stars, reengineered their physical bodies, and mastered form and essence, all in their own unique ways.

Each left behind remnants.

The Ninth World is built on the bones of the previous eight, and in particular the last four. Reach into the dust, and you'll find that each particle has been worked, manufactured, or grown, and then ground back into *drit*—a fine, artificial soil—by the relentless power of time. Look to the horizon—is that a mountain, or part of an impossible monument to the forgotten emperor of a lost people? Feel

that subtle vibration beneath your feet and know that ancient engines—vast machines the size of kingdoms—still operate in the bowels of the earth.

The Ninth World is about discovering the wonders of the worlds that came before it, not for their own sake, but as the means to improve the present and build a future.

Each of the prior eight worlds, in its own way, is too distant, too different, too incomprehensible. Life today is too dangerous to dwell on a past that cannot be understood. The people excavate and study the marvels of the prior epochs just enough to help them survive in the world they have been given. They know that energies and knowledge are suspended invisibly in the air, that reshaped continents of iron

and glass—below, upon, and above the earth—hold vast treasures, and that secret doorways to stars and other dimensions and realms provide power and secrets and death. They sometimes call it magic, and who are we to say that they're wrong?

More often, however, when they find leftovers of the old worlds—the devices, the vast machine complexes, the altered landscapes, the changes wrought upon living creatures by ancient energies, the invisible nano-spirits hovering in the air in clouds called the *Iron Wind*, the information transmitted into the so-called datasphere, and the remnants of visitors from other dimensions and alien planets—they call these things *the numenera*. In the Ninth

World, the numenera is both a boon and a bane. It makes life very different from any other time on Earth.

In a southern part of the vast, singular continent of the Ninth World lies a cluster of settled lands collectively called *the Steadfast*.

Although each of the kingdoms and

principalities of the Steadfast has its own ruler, a leader known as the *Amber Pope* guides the *Order of Truth*, an organization of Aeon Priests that commands a great deal of respect in the region. Thus, the Amber Pope is likely the most powerful ruler in the Steadfast even though he does not govern a single square foot of land. The Order of Truth reveres the people of the past and their knowledge on a quasireligious level of adoration and faith. It is a religion devoted to science.

Deeper in the wilds lies a region called *the Beyond*, where villages and communities are isolated and rare. Here, *Aeon Priests* still study the secrets of the past, but they do so cloistered in remote *claves*. These priests do little more than pay lip service to

Iron Wind, page 135


The numenera, page 275

The Steadfast, page 136

Amber Pope, page 133
Order of Truth, page 222

The Beyond, page 174
Aeon Priest, page 269

Claves—small cloistered groups of Aeon Priests in the *Beyond*—can offer protection and resources for the communities that spring up around them. However, *claves* sometimes become so insular and focused on their work that they end up putting the community at risk with their strange experiments.



The Ninth World is about discovering the wonders of the worlds that came before it, not for their own sake, but as the means to improve the present and build a future.



the Amber Pope, if that, and are not considered part of the Order of Truth. Like the regions in which they live, and the clones in which they work, they are isolated, islands unto themselves.

THE PEOPLE OF THE NINTH WORLD

In the youth of an age, people use the resources they have on hand, coupled with whatever understanding of their world they can master, to carve out a life for themselves. In the Ninth World, the resources are the numenera—the detritus of the prior eras—and the people's understanding of these resources is crude and incomplete. The Aeon Priests possess just enough discernment and knowledge to suggest possible uses for things, but so much remains to be discovered. Even the creatures and plants of the Ninth World are strange by-products of the prior ages; the past left behind flora, fauna, and machines, some designed by lore or nature, others transplanted from distant stars or dimensions.

The people of the Ninth World clothe themselves in newly spun fabrics but weave the artifacts of the past into each garment. They forge armor, weapons, and tools from materials recovered from ancient structures and devices. Some of these materials are metals, but others are (or appear to be) glass, stone, bone, flesh, or substances that defy categorization and understanding.

Those who risk the mysterious dangers to recover

the relics of the past provide a valuable service. Typically these brave souls—warrior glaives, science-wielding nanos, and wily jacks—bring their findings to the Aeon Priests, who use the artifacts to fashion tools, weapons, and other boons for the growing civilization. As time passes, more individuals learn to use the numenera, but it still remains a mystery to most people.

Who, then, are the people of the Ninth World? Most are humans, although not all that call themselves human truly are. There are likewise the **abhumans**: mutants, crossbreeds, genetically engineered, and their offspring. And then there are the **visitants**, who are not native to the earth but who now call the Ninth World home, and who have no more understanding of the past (even their own) than anyone else.

THE NUMENERA

People with knowledge of the relics of older worlds divide them into three types: **artifacts**, **cyphers**, and **oddities**.

ARTIFACTS are large devices that typically can be used more than once to produce the same result. An artifact might be a belt that creates a shield of invisible force to protect the wearer or a flying skiff that carries people and cargo from one place to another. The term is almost always used for an item that has an obvious purpose—a weapon, a defense, a mode of transport, a means of communication or learning new information, a means of obtaining

Abhumans:

Chirog, page 235
Margr, page 244
Murden, page 247
Sathosh, page 256
Yovok, page 267

Visitants:

Lattimors, page 122
Varjellen, page 121

Artifacts, page 298

Cyphers, page 278

Oddities, page 314





Numenera items such as artifacts and cyphers add capabilities to the player character's repertoire but they are the purview of the game master. Very rarely does a player choose these items; they are discovered while exploring ancient ruins or overcoming other challenges of the Ninth World.

For more information on the Ninth World, see Part 4: The Setting (page 129). Gamemasters will want to refer to Chapter 23: Realizing the Ninth World (page 354).

food or other necessities, and so forth. Artifacts make their users more powerful, or they make life easier or better.

CYPHERS are usually small, minor devices that most characters can coax a single effect from before they are depleted and become curiosities or decorations. They might include a quick injection designed to repair physical damage in a living creature or a handheld object that, when manipulated properly, becomes a weapon that explodes with tremendous force. However, cyphers are dangerous when gathered together because they create radiation and harmonic frequencies that are inimical to human life.

ODDITIES are the relics that are neither cyphers nor artifacts. They serve no obvious purpose but have strange functions that are at least curious, if not downright entertaining. Examples include a piece of glass in a metal frame that shows peculiar images or a box with three bells that ring at unpredictable times. Not everything from the prior worlds can be understood. In fact, much of it cannot.

LOOKING AT THE NINTH WORLD FROM THE 21ST CENTURY

The Ninth World is a science-fantasy setting approximately a billion years in the future. The people of the world dwell amid the flotsam of impossible ultratech of eight prior civilizations and call it magic. Unimaginably huge machines lie beneath the earth, and satellites orbit high above, transmitting a web of data and free energy. Nanotech, gravitic technology, genetic engineering, spatial warping, and superdense polymers allowed the inhabitants of the previous worlds to reshape the planet. Mass and energy were theirs to command. In many ways, the Ninth World is a medieval fantasy setting without the historicity. When people who haven't done a lot of homework on the dark ages run a traditional fantasy game, they often insert modern sensibilities or developments such as democracy, hygiene, or matches. But in the Ninth World, these things, and more, make sense. Characters can have rain slickers, ink pens, zippers, and plastic bags, all left over from the prior eras (or fashioned from leavings of the past). They can understand how

illnesses are transmitted or how socialism works. They can know that the earth revolves around the sun and be aware of other "anachronistic" bits of knowledge.

On the other hand, characters in Numenera don't refer to weapons as "guns" or vehicles as "cars." The technology in the Ninth World is too advanced and too alien for such terminology to have endured. Using 21st-century terms for weapons and vehicles is as inappropriate as using medieval terms. The numenera is weird—much of it wasn't created by humans or for humans. It isn't designed or presented in any way that might be familiar to the players or the characters. Only through experimentation, player insight, and character skill can the PCs identify, and possibly use, what they find.

Perhaps even more important, the artifacts, cyphers, and oddities that characters use probably aren't serving their original purpose. The explosive cypher that a character tosses at an enemy might have been the power source for a vehicle. The force field the enemy uses to protect herself from the blast might have been designed to contain the radiation of the fuel rods in a miniature nuclear reactor.

Welcome to the Ninth World, where every discovery might save you—or kill you. But you won't know until you try.

