

# The Mechanical BARD



## *Ninth World Tales*

*Short stories inspired by the worlds of the Numenera role-playing game.*

*Gameplay requires the Numenera Corebook from Monte Cook Games.*

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# About the Authors

## **Andrew Montgomery-Hurrell** - *The Garden, Resonance*

Andrew Montgomery-Hurrell is software developer, hacker and all-round geek living in the South coast of England who enjoys everything from Dungeons and Dragons to DevOps. Andrew has been playing roleplaying games for over 15 years, and writing poetry and fiction for even longer. Typically, he can be found hacking on code, reading or writing fiction, playing computer games or slaying dragons with his wife Laura. He maintains a website and blog at <http://darkliquid.co.uk>

## **Jason Fuhrman** - *Liora's Call*

Jason Fuhrman is a 3D artist who thinks he should be writing for a living instead. The Young Writer's award he won in the second grade taunts him. He enjoys film, art, novels, video games, tabletop games, and genuinely believes storytelling has the power to shape the future and change lives--muahahahaha! He lives on the Central Coast of California with his 4-year-old daughter who loves video games (not his fault, he swears) and his amazing wife who keeps telling him he should finish his novel.

## **Petteri Sulonen** - *Hilfolk, The Angel Stone*

Petteri Sulonen is a software designer by vocation, but has a broad and changing range of interests, ranging from photography to politics, history, Buddhism, languages, cooking, and gaming. He currently lives in Helsinki, Finland, just behind the World Peace Monument, with his wife Joanna, Missy the cat and Jekku the dog.

## **Chris Sniezak** - *Elza D*

Chris Sniezak knew he loved stories when he was seven as he stayed up after bed time, flash light in hand and blanket over head to read Hardy boy books. It got worse when he learned he could tell stories with his friends with RPGs when he was eleven. Now he talks about games and stories on the Misdirected Mark podcast, designs and writes games for Encoded Designs, and plays as many games as he can. You can find him on the internet at [www.misdirectedmark.com](http://www.misdirectedmark.com) or somewhere in the south part of Buffalo NY.

*To the Numenera fan community.*

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## ***The Bard Speaks***

*"And thus ends the tale of the engine that ran on time."*

*"You need a diagnostic," Giggled the data fragment, "you haven't told us that story yet."*

*The Bard broadcasted a timestamp. "Haven't I? Check your memory banks."*

*The data-sprites and nano-ghosts swirled in a flurry and raised an exception. "We have a record of that data receipt, but the created time is in the future? What engine did... will you speak of?"*

*"An engine city, unknown to the organics that dwell within it. Let me reallocate you this maintenance record, designated 'Resonance'"*

# Resonance

*Andrew Montgomery-Hurrell*

All rise for his honourable majesty's adjudicator, Eromeil Lavand," the court announcer called as the adjudicator took her place on the bench.

The busy courtroom echoed with the sound of people standing. Overhead in the wings, a child began crying.

Eromeil sat herself down and smoothed down her robe, then looked at the assembled court. "Be seated."

There was a rumble as the court sat down.

"We are here today to rule over the case of the City of Shal-lamas versus one Langel of Fasten, charged with the crime of murder. How does the defendant plead?"

A man in chains shuffled to his feet. "Not guilty, your honour."

A murmuring of discontent echoed through the court and Elomeil hammered her gavel for order. "And will you be representing yourself, Langel of Fasten?"

"No, your honour." Langel said, shifting uncomfortably in his chains. "This... creature... will be representing me."

The courtroom collectively gasped and broke into a roar of muttering and shock as everyone seemed to remember there was a Philethis stood next to Langel, that there had always been one stood there and up until now they'd just, somehow, not really noticed.

"Order! Order!" Eromeil shouted, hammering her gavel. "This is most irregular, Langel of Fasten. You would be well advised not to make a mockery of this court."

The Philethis seemed to increase in height without changing shape, its presence somehow standing out more in the room. It turned its glassy disc of a face towards the adjudicator and spoke.

“Guilt is innocence. The engine is out of time.”

The city prosecutors on the other side of the court stood up. “Objection, your honour. This is clearly ludicrous. The city demands that Langel of Fasten be held in contempt of court until such time as a verdict can be reached in his absence.”

The Philethis turned it’s unreadable gaze on the prosecutor. “The engine must be recalibrated. Guilt is innocence. Time must flow.”

“Enough!” Adjudicator Eromeil announced. “Objection noted and denied. While I do not approve of my court being made a circus, Langel of Fasten has the right to any counsel of his choosing, no matter how ill-equipped. The City, your opening statement.”

The city prosecutor stood up, brushing himself down and stroking his goatee as he approached the bench, before turning around and addressing the court proper.

“Ladies, gentlemen, officers of the court. Today we are gathered here to be shown that one Langel of Fasten was responsible for the murder of one of the city’s most beloved officials. An echo, a Shallamas phenomenon known indubitably to be infallible in its display of past truths, was seen by multiple eye-witnesses thus confirming Langel of Fasten as the perpetrator of this heinous act, by echo-proxy. Over the course of what I am sure will be a short day in court, the city will prove beyond any doubt that Langel was in fact the murderer.”

The prosecutor took his seat and the Philethis drifted across the floor to the center of the court.

“Time is a shadow. Guilt is innocence. The engine must be recalibrated. Langel is not an echo. The past has not happened.”

There was an awkward silence as the Philethis drifted back to it’s prior position next to Langel. Langel just looked at the adjudicator and shrugged, helping himself to a cup of water with a shaky hand. Everyone was just looking at the Philethis in a state of confusion, but nobody wanted to say or do anything. Philethis, whilst usually harmless, rarely took an active role in human affairs and were extremely dangerous if provoked. They often carried extremely effective numenera



and wielded the control of powerful nano-spirits. It was safer to just ignore them and let them do whatever it was they were doing than get involved, most of the time.

The Philethis seemed entirely unaffected by the stares, oblivious to the confused scowls and the clearly nervous worrying of it's client. The prosecutor just smirked, increasingly confident the case was in the bag.

"If I may, I would like to summon my first witness," the prosecutor announced, "Sen Marleth."

An elderly woman stood up in the gallery and was escorted to the witness stand.

"Sen Marleth, do you swear to tell the truth, before this court, before the nano-spirits and before the echoes of your forebears?"

"I do."

"Then in your own words, please tell the court what happened yesterday during the market celebration."

The old woman cleared her throat and eyed the rest of the court nervously, as if she was only suddenly aware she was under it's scrutiny. "The market was bustling with people, music was playing and the stalls were opening early in anticipation of the official market day starting. I remember I was standing near the murderer."

Langel waited for an interruption but the Philethis did nothing, merely standing next to him in silence, apparently incapable of sitting down.

"Aren't you going to object? Isn't that an objection? Why are you doing this to me? Why wont you let me use a proper defense you glassy-faced bastard!" Langel spat through gritted teeth, trying not to interrupt the proceedings and thus anger adjudicator.

The Philethis just turned it's glass disc of a face towards Langel, unreadable and alien.

"Screw this," Langel sighed, throwing his hands up, "objection!"

The adjudicator leaned forward on the bench and looked at Langel and the Philethis dismissively. "Can the defendant please refrain from addressing the court. Does the defense

counsel wish to lodge an objection?”

The Philethis just stood silently, whilst Langel put his face in his hands and sighed.

“Very well. Witness, please continue.”

The old woman looked at the Philethis nervously. It appeared to be staring right at her, silent and unyielding, the thoughts behind the glass disc unknowable. She swallowed, feeling deeply uncomfortable and stammered until the prosecutor caught her gaze, gesturing that she should carry on.

“T-The murderer was selling fruit with his son. I bought a Jumaberry and asked the boy, who looked like such a nice child, all full of excitement, whether it was his first time in the city. The boy said it was. We chatted for a little bit about the things to see in the town and the boy asked for some money from his father. He was given some and ran off. That was when the echo started. It flickered into life in the middle of the market square, just outside of Merchant’s gate. There was a hush as everyone went quiet. This was the same place the councillor had been killed almost a year back and there hadn’t been an echo of the murder since, so every time someone saw one here, well, it was like you were just waiting for it to show up and I were no different.”

“And what did the echo show, Mrs. Marleth?”

“I’m getting to that. The echo opened up in the square, like echos usually do, and there was the councillor. Everyone rushed to get out of the way so people could see it proper, and that was when we all saw the murderer leap out and stab him in the back, like a coward.” The old woman spat, glaring in Langel’s direction.

“And can you identify the murderer?” The prosecution asked.

“Aye—it was that man there.” The woman said, poking a bony finger in Langel’s direction.

“No further questions, your honour.”

The adjudicator looked at the Philethis and at Langel, who had buried his head beneath his arms on the table top. “Your witness, err.... *counsel*.”

The Philethis glided across the floor silently towards the

witness stand, slowing to a sudden stop in front of the witness. The woman cowered away from it, clearly distressed by the looming figure, but after a few moments of silent staring from the Philethis, she calmed down and looked at the adjudicator. Adjudicator Elomeil just shrugged.

“Why did you watch your son burn?” The Philethis said, its voice thin and metallic, simultaneously far away and a whisper in the ear.

“I-I never!”

“The skin floats on the water.”

“Stop it! Stop it!”

The prosecutor stood up. “Objection, your honour! That... *thing*... is abusing the witness!”

“Objection overruled. The defense is merely asking questions. Sel Marleth, need I remind you that you are under oath. Answer the defense’s question.”

“Objection!” The prosecutor shouted, clearly surprised by this turn of events, “How is the question relevant?”

The Adjudicator gave the prosecutor a stern look. “That is what the answer should reveal. I’m going to allow it. Sel Marleth, the answer please.”

“I didn’t see him! My eyes aren’t... I thought he was just watching the pot, I didn’t think he had his hand in there! I didn’t notice until the smell... oh gods! When I realised, it was too late, I... with his father gone, I... there would be too many questions. There was never an echo, I thought I was forgiven...” Sel sobbed, shielding her face behind her hands as if it would protect her from the shame. She glared at the Philethis.

“How did you know? How did you know!?” she shouted, eyes red and watery. “No-one knew! I never told anyone!”

Elomeil gave a quiet hand-signal and a pair of guards carefully escorted the distraught woman out of the courtroom. Langel just stared, mouth open as the Philethis glided back across the courtroom and resumed its vigil at his side. The court had burst into a low rumble of gossiping and whispering. No-one had suspected the old woman of anything, but equally no-one was buying that just because one eye-witness might be unreliable, the hundreds of others wouldn’t send

Langel down. Everyone knew he was guilty, the crowd rumbled, the whole trial was a farce to keep up appearances, they said under their breaths.

Langel looked up at the strange robed figure staring forward with its flat glass face.

"I don't know how or why you're doing this, but thank you. I didn't do this."

The Philethis rotated on the spot to face him and looked down from its inhuman height. "Time is a shadow. The engine must be recalibrated."

Langel didn't know what to make of that, and the Philethis turned back to its aimless stare into the distance.

"Order! Order!" Adjudicator Elomeil called, using her gavel to get the crowds attention once more. "Given the recent events, I feel a recess is in order. Court shall adjourn for one hour."

"Hani, my boy, what have you gotten me into?" Langel said, ruffling his son's hair through the bars of his holding cell as he awaited the court to be back in session. "This imaginary friend of yours. I don't know what to make of it."

He looked awkwardly to the far corner of the cell which was taken up mostly by the large Philethis which stood and stared silently at him and his son.

"Dad, he just wants to help. We weren't even here when the councillor was killed. Why don't they just believe you?"

"Because the echoes are never wrong, son. Ever. And people are sure it was me they saw. I was there, I saw it too and even I half believe them."

"Dad, don't give up!" Hani cried, hugging his father through the bars.

Langel chuckled bitterly. "I'm not, don't worry. We both know the truth but Hani, you need to be prepared for the worst. Sometimes the truth just isn't enough. Even with an imaginary friend to help out."

Tears began to form in the young boy's eyes. "I don't know what to do, Dad."

"The light must cast a shadow. An echo must have a voice."

The Philethis said as it moved out of the cell, passing through the bars as if they were smoke. “35 cycles too late is too early.”

“I don’t understand.”

“A scar in time saves nine.” The Philethis said, and a thin, grey hand slipped out from under the robe. It guided Hani’s and Langel’s hands together and the two felt a warmth spread through them before the grey hand released them and withdrew back into the folds of the cloak.

“What—” Hani began but was interrupted as a guard entered.

“Court is back in session. You have to leave now, boy.”

Hani looked to Langel and Langel just nodded quietly. Another guard joined them and escorted Hani out of the cells.

“How did you get out of the cell?” The guard asked the Philethis nervously as it loomed over him.

“Why does your wife sew with red thread instead of blue?”

The guard, wrinkled his brow and just glared. “No matter. Come with me. And no funny business, if that’s even possible with your kind.”

The guard unlocked the cell and lead Langel back into the courtroom, followed silently by the gliding Philethis.

Everyone took their seats, then rose again as the adjudicator re-entered the chamber. Elomeil sat and everyone else followed soon after.

“During our recess,” Elomeil announced, “a formal complaint from the Angulan Knights was brought to my attention. This is a human court, for human affairs and not the interests of such strange creatures as the defense counsel. Argust Provani has let it be known that they agree with and support the Knights’ assertion and as such, a Knight shall be replacing the Philethis as the defense counsel.”

The large doors at the back of the courtroom opened and in strode an Angulan Knight in full rider’s regalia. The guards allowed him through and he faced the Philethis. Langel looked the man in the eye and swore he saw something familiar, but behind the face guard of the rider’s helm, he couldn’t be sure. Then he heard the Knight speak.

“You wont send me back. I wont do it!”

“Guards!” Langel yelled, but it was too late. The Knight pulled his sword from its sheath and attacked the Philethis, running it through. The robe collapsed to the ground in a heap, empty, the weight of it pulling down the Knight’s sword arm as it fell. The glass disc fell and shattered as guards rushed to the scene.

“What is the meaning of this!?” Elomeil yelled. “Arrest this man!”

The Knight, still struggling, was wrestled to the floor as the guards grabbed him. Held down tight, another guard removed the man’s helm and there was a gasp from the court. Hani, sitting in the gallery strained to see, but too many people had stood up and crowded to get a look themselves and he couldn’t squeeze through.

“That’s impossible!” Hani heard someone exclaim. “Look at him!”

“I stopped it Hani! We’re safe now!” Yelled a voice, suddenly silenced by the blow of a fist. Soon, guards swarmed into the courtroom and began moving everyone out.

Hani tried to work his way through the crowd to see what was going on, but he found himself grabbed by a guard.

“What’s going on? What happened? Is my dad alright?”

“Everyone has to leave the courtroom until this mess can be cleared up. It’s not safe.”

“But what about my dad?”

“I don’t know. You’ll be informed as the situation is contained.”

“Dad!”

“Guard!” Elomeil called out over the bustling of the crowd as they were evacuated from the room. “Bring the boy!”

Hani almost fell into the guard as they abruptly changed direction and headed back towards the front of the courtroom. With a thud, the doors to the court were shut and the room became silent. Hani approached the bench.

“Boy, tell me, who is that man?”

Hani looked confused for a moment. *How would I know?* He looked at the captured man, his helmet now removed and gasped.

“Dad!?” Hani gasped, looking between Langel and the man on the floor. At first glance, they were remarkably similar.

“Prosecution, I think you may have a problem with your case. If the man’s son can’t even tell the difference when stood in front of him, a witness’s testimony means little,” Elomeil announced.

The Prosecutor examined the incapacitated twin. “Your honour, I think the city will want to change the accused. This man is the one, several eyewitnesses testimony mentioned a scar on the mans right hand. Look!”

Langel looked at his own hands, confused for a moment, but said nothing as Elomeil descended from the bench and looked at the man’s hands. On the right one there was a large scar, just in the crease of the thumb and forefinger.

“Okay, you’ve made your case. Get me that testimony and we’ll move this along, shall we?” Elomeil said after a moment of consideration. “Guard, take Langel of Fasten and his son into custody for the time being, for their own protection. And someone clean up that mess.” she ordered, pointing at the bundle of robes and the glass disc that was all that remained of the slain Philethis.

“All due respect your honour, but I’m not touching it. You don’t mess with those... things... unless you’re looking for trouble.”

Elomeil rolled her eyes and snapped. “Very well. We’ll deal with it later. Prosecution, your case awaits. Let’s get this farce over with.”

After a few short hours, Langel and Hani were brought back into the courtroom.

“The court has heard the evidence and, given the recent events, the court will now pronounce the verdict.” Adjudicator Elomeil cleared her throat. “We find the defendant Langel of Fasten not guilty. The new defendant, who refuses to identify himself, is found guilty of murder by echo-proxy, guilty of murder and guilty of disrupting court proceedings. The sentence is death by public hanging, to be performed at dawn tomorrow.”

The unidentified man, now stripped of his armour and shackled, stared at Hani and Langel.

“He can’t take you back now he’s dead. You don’t have to do the things I’ve done, you get to grow up with a father and live, knowing he won’t come for you.” The man said quietly.

Hani shrunk back, afraid of the intense, mad stare of the guilty man.

“As first punishment, the guilty will dispose of the remains of the defense counsel.”

The guards, with their long spears, nudged the prisoner along, forcing him to shuffle in his chains and bend down to pick up the bundle of remains. As he touched them, the bundle came to life, swirling up and wrapping around the prisoner, enveloping him. There was a muffled scream from inside the rapidly swirling robes and the guards, shocked, jumped back, afraid of what might happen. As they watched, the glass disc slid up the swirling surface of the robes and as they settled in to the familiar shape of a Philethis, it affixed itself at the top.

“The engine is recalibrated.” It said. “In 34 cycles, the echo travels, the effect is the cause.”

Then it disappeared, winking out of existence.

The court was silent, everyone stunned by the terrible events. The guard and Elomeil shared a look of horror, and Elomeil gave a dry, shaky swallow. “Langel, Hani, you are free to go. Guards, escort them, recount the events to the public. I’m going to retire to my chambers, the courts are closed for the rest of today.”

The guards escorted the father and son out of the court and took them to the guard house where their aneen was impounded.

“You should leave the city immediately. Head home to Fasten. The people of Shallamas will not forget your face so soon, even though you are innocent.”

Langel nodded with a grunt, and began prepping the aneen for travel. The aneen shuffled happily now it was back with a familiar master, and once the straps were secured, Langel hoisted himself up and extended a hand to his son, pulling



him up alongside him. Flicking the reins, he urged the aneen on and it loped to its feet, raising them high and began its journey out of the city gates and towards Fasten.

“What the hell happened back there, dad?” Hani asked after the city was long behind them.

“I don’t know son. But we don’t have to worry about it any more. I think everything is going to be fine.”

Langel rubbed his hand again, looking at the place where his scar had been, now perfectly smooth. He looked back to his son and smiled to see him mirroring his movements, rubbing his own hand, like a little version of himself.

Hani poked at the weird new scar on his hand and wondered why his imaginary friend had given it to him. He asked, but his friend floated next to them, unnoticed and said nothing but its cryptic phrases before fading away again.

“We will meet again in 34 cycles.”

## ***The Bard Speaks***

*"Our first tale is one of rust and weary travelling. Of meatlings and metal makers." The Bard emitted from onto the datasphere.*

*"Query: Invokes fear response?" A virtual child uploaded to the Bard.*

*The Bard flagged it's amusement registers and sent back a comforting data packet. "Only for meatlings, young one. Baz watches over all of us, so no need to worry."*

*"Do the metal makers live happily ever after?" queried another.*

*"And," The Bard paused for a nanosecond, "if we are all primed for transmission, then this unit shall initiate story and you will find out. This story is designated, The Garden..."*

# The Garden

*Andrew Montgomery-Hurrell*

I was surprised to find myself alive when I opened my eyes. The iron wind had swept in completely unexpectedly, way ahead of the schedule Kal had calculated and hit us before we could do anything about it.

Rustchasing was a dangerous gig, but Kal and I knew what we were doing. My brother Kal, a promising nano had a knack for predicting weather patterns and the last few hauls we'd made had been down to him. We chased iron winds, scavenging the strange numenera they left in their wake, objects of unknown use and value; sometimes built, sometimes uncovered, by the little makers that swarmed in the air. It wasn't just me and my brother though, our success had attracted a few more people into our group of hunters. Atlas, a hulking beast of a lattimor looked out for us, kept us safe from any creatures out on the plains or anything weird and twisted left behind by the storms. Bee was another nano. Her talents lay in activating numenera which made selling and trading the artifacts that much easier. I was more a jack and the leader of our troupe.

Not that any of that mattered any more. It was unlikely we'd ever be selling anything ever again.

Atlas was dead, or at least, I hoped he was. His body had been twisted by the storm, limbs splayed and curled into a grotesque shape and melded into the hard, rocky ground. Kal lay unconscious on the ground and I breathed a sigh of relief as I saw his chest rise and fall gently. The breath was quickly followed by a gasp as my eyes passed over him and to his right arm. Where it had been, the little makers had left him with a long, straight blade of obsidian glass. Something moved within it, like insects in a hive and I shuddered. Bee was trying to lift herself up and I moved to help her until the

world suddenly shifted under me, colours folding away into white and black and something I couldn't even describe, that didn't even have words for it. Stumbling through the strange voidness, I reached Bee's faintly silvery outline in the dark and hooked a hand under her shoulder to help her up. As she rose I fell backwards, shocked as she stood, back towards me, her head missing. Colour suddenly rushed back in with an almost audible noise and I as Bee turned, it was revealed that her face had melted down from where her head had been onto her chest, her small breasts buried under what was now her chin. Her clothes were fused to her in places, remade in metal and twisted glass, tears ran down her face and she pointed at me, a choking sob escaping her warped throat.

I touched my own face to find several rough, hard lumps, like scabs or blisters coating my face, replacing my nose. I blinked and felt the blisters blink too, seeing a glimpse of that weird black voidshadow of the world that had replaced my vision before they closed again leaving just my normal eyes open. Gone were my handsome looks, my soft brown curls and beard; my face was just a bubbling surface of eyes.

I bent over, trying not to retch, to breathe, to hold on. We knew the risk, I told myself, we knew this could happen. The reality of it though, the horror of living through it was too much. As in answer to my fears the twisted lump that had been Atlas let out an inhuman screech, the rock itself trying to bend into a screaming mouth. Before I knew what I was doing I grabbed a nearby rock and slammed it down again and again on to what was left of Atlas until the plains were silent, the only sound left my ragged breath and the wet, coughing sobs of Bee as she collapsed back to the ground.

We didn't even entertain the idea of heading back to the trading post.

Rustwalkers, freaks like us, they weren't welcome around normal folk. People feared they'd somehow catch their afflictions or worse, that somehow they'd bring down an iron storm upon them. Rustwalkers didn't live long around normal folk and despite everything, we'd decided to live. I'd decided to live.

As rustchasers, we all knew the stories. Rumours of a

safe-haven, a commune of rust far out in the Beyond, away from civilisation, across the southern plains. Rustwalkers lived there in a safe patch, a place the storms never touched, and accepted one another for who they were, not what the storm had made them. We'd all laughed cruelly about it before, a dream for chasers to talk about to feel less afraid about the risks they took, but now... now it was the only reason not to just lay down in the drit and die.

Kal had taken his deformity better than the rest of us. When he woke he'd needed help to stand, the bladearm being almost as long as he was tall made it hard for him to gain enough leverage to pick himself up. After I helped him to his feet he just looked at us with sad eyes, looked at his arm and then back to Bee. She loped into his chest and he held her with his good arm and I hated him. He was always the more handsome brother, the more charismatic. Now Bee was in his arm, looking at his unblemished face and I was alone, jealousy twisting in my gut. They'd been together before the storm, but now it just seemed a cruel, unfair reminder of what I could never hope to have again.

"We should find shelter. The storm came back once, I don't want to find out what happens if it comes back again." I said, eager to end this scene of affection.

Kal nodded stoically and we made our way to the nearby ridge we had been heading for when the storm hit. The large slab of rock jutted out from the ground like a gigantic splinter and we crept under it, into the shadowed region below, sheltered from the outside world. I reached into my pockets and then realised how lucky I was to find they were still there. The storm had left me mostly untouched, except for my face and I still had my collection of scavenged oddities and artifacts upon me. I pulled forth a small, silvery metal triangle with a circular indentation on one corner. I pointed it at the ground and pressed the indentation and a small globe of light materialised a few inches above the ground, radiating a faint heat. In the light of the globe we could see messages scrawled on the walls of the shelter. Wishes of good hunting or just acknowledgements they had been here by other rustchasers that had

used this hole for shelter in times gone by.

“Let’s get some rest. Tomorrow we find Rusthaven.”

Kal raised an eyebrow at me and grimaced. “You really think such a place exists?”

I looked towards Bee who had already curled into a ball and fallen asleep. “Do you want to believe there isn’t?”

Kal followed by gaze and sighed. With a silent nod, he closed his eyes, leaned against the rock and went to sleep. For me, sleep came easily. What I hadn’t counted on were the nightmares. Dreams of that inky voidplace, seeing things further and deeper than was possible, somehow seeing more even in that place where only light and dark seemed to exist. Strange voices echoed around me, visualised like ripples in the air. Bee’s voice bubbled at me out of her mouth, black and white waves crashing against me, drowning me, blinding me to the light I swore I could see in a distance too far away to fathom.

I awoke suddenly, colour fading back into the world as one set of eyes opened and the other closed to reveal Bee gently shaking me awake.

“Thul, wake up, you were screaming.”

I looked up at her, then caught myself in my mistake and looked down, towards where her face now lay. She seemed better. Maybe the shock had worn off. Maybe it was just acceptance, defeat.

“I’m fine, I’m awake.” I said, sitting up and gently pushing her aside. I looked around. “Where’s Kal?”

“He’s getting us something to eat.”

On cue, Kal walked in, dragging behind him a neatly bisected corpse of one of the beasts known to frequent the area. His bladearm must have been incredibly sharp as I could see the bones and organs cut clean through, as if he’d halved the beast in a single motion.

“I caught us some food.” He announced, dropping the body by the light globe.

“We have nothing to cook it with, the globe doesn’t make enough heat.”

“Then we’ll have to eat it raw. We shouldn’t travel on an

empty stomach.” Kal said, slicing off a thin layer of muscle from the beast with his arm. He knelt down and chewed it thoughtfully. “And if we get sick and die, well... I don’t think any of us would complain.”

We all stood in silence at that, Kal eating his strip of flesh, Bee and me looking down at the beast. Kal cut a few more slices and we ate. When we had stomached as much as we were able, we packed some slices away in our packs and then decided to make our move.

I had no idea where we were going. The best information we had about Rusthaven was that it was somewhere South. Not wanting to lose hope, we didn’t think too hard about what would happen if we were wrong, if it didn’t even exist and instead we just kept walking.

After hours of trekking across the rocky plains, it became clear we were going to need water. So far we’d found nothing, but we had never expected it to be that easy. Sure, nobody ever came out this far, but even so if it had been this easy to find, it wouldn’t still be a secret. That didn’t make me feel much better though. My mouth was dry, I was hot and tired. Bee was visibly drooping and Kal was wincing, the bright sunlight heating up the black shard of his bladearm to a painful intensity. As much as I hated the sensation, I decided to try out my new eyes. Perhaps they could see a way out of this where I could not.

Doing it consciously, it was like opening my eyes even though they were already open. My vision faded to the black and white landscape of before and I stared out into the abyss, willing myself to see something, anything that could be a sign of Rusthaven or water. I passed my eyes across the horizon, seeing further than I could ever see with my normal sight, finding nothing.

And then I saw it, a lone tree standing in the distance. At least, it looked like a tree, it was hard to tell in the black voidness. It was better than nothing. I closed my eyes once and I was seeing normally again.

“That way!” I pointed, feeling exhausted all of a sudden. “There is a tree over there, which means there must be water

somewhere nearby.”

Bee and Kal strained to see it, but with normal sight, it was too far away.

“Trust me, it’s there. These things on my face, they see further than we can. We haven’t got any other ideas.”

It was almost 2 days before we could see the trees by normal eyes. We’d taken to chewing on the strips of meat just to keep our mouths wet and our tongues from swelling. We’d seen no sign of water except for the promise of it as the tree line approached and things were getting bad.

“One last push and we can make it by nightfall.” I croaked through cracked lips.

There was a wheeze behind me, then a thud and I turned to find Bee collapsed in the dust, Kal knelt over her.

“Thul, she can’t breathe! You’ve got to do something!”

I rushed over and looked, but I didn’t know what to do. I’d picked up a wide range of skills over the years, could patch people up after a fashion, but I was stumped, I didn’t know what I could do. If she had a neck we could have tried cutting an airway, but the rust can taken that away.

I turned her over, tried slapping her back, nothing. I looked down her throat but she was shaking and panicking too much to get a clear view.

“Kal, hold her still, I need to look!”

Kal grabbed her and I looked, but nothing was blocking the airway that I could see. We tried, fumbling as best we could but Bee let out a final, shuddering gasp and went still. We couldn’t revive her.

“This is your fault.” Kal said, his head hung low.

“Kal... I tried. I..”

“We wouldn’t even be out here if it wasn’t for you!”

Now I was angry. “That’s not fair Kal and you know it. I didn’t make you do anything. We all chose to be here, we all knew the risks, so don’t you dare try to pin this on me. Hey, you’re the weather man, you should have seen this coming. If anyone here is to blame for all this, it’s you!”

Kal’s face twisted like I’d stabbed him in the gut and I



knew I'd gone too far, let my outrage make me say something I couldn't take back.

"Kal, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have..."

Kal stood, his back turned. "It's fine. You're right. We're both right. We killed them, Atlas and now Bee. It's both our faults."

I put my hand on his shoulder. "Let's finish this journey. We'll bury her under a tree. She'd like that."

Kal shook off my hand and went to scoop up Bee's body. When he realised he couldn't due to his bladearm, he just shot me a baleful look and began marching towards the trees in the distance.

I let out a resigned sigh, hoisted poor Bee into my back and followed. In under an hour, the rocky ground gave way to earth, then to grass and trees. I lowered Bee's body onto the loamy ground and collapsed, feeling the cool, moist touch of the grass against my skin. I laughed, overjoyed we'd made it, that I'd been right. Then I looked back and was staring into Bee's dead eyes and I remembered what it had cost.

I heard the splashing of water and saw Kal, deeper in the forest besides a small pool. I lifted Bee and headed over. Lowering Bee again, I looked to Kal and we both allowed ourselves a brief smile and then drank our fill. After we were sated I filled the canteens from our packs and sat beside Kal.

"We should bury her now." Kal said.

I nodded and dragged Bee's body to the nearest tree and then with a swing of his blade, Kal began to cut slices out of the ground, the razor sharp edge cutting through the soft earth like it was nothing. Together he and I scraped out a shallow hole and without ceremony, we rolled Bee's corpse in and began covering it. We didn't have any words to say. Nothing could make things alright. As I tossed dirt over her face, I felt anger grip me. Bee hadn't deserved this, none of us had. She was a pretty woman before the storm had remade her. I was lucky in a way, at least my deformity had some utility, as did Kal's, Bee had been lucky she could manage to eat. *Was* lucky. She'd not been lucky enough to keep on breathing though. Maybe it was better she'd died. For a second I wished we'd nev-

er survived the storm.

Sighing heavily, the we propped ourselves up against the tree. We used the holofire and told stories about Bee and as the exhaustion of the day kicked in, we slipped quietly into a deep, dreamless sleep.

I found myself being shaken awake by Kal. “Thul! Thul! Something’s happened!”

Blery-eyed, I looked up into his face. “Wha-what is it?”

Kal helped me to my feet with his good arm and pointed. “It’s Bee. Something happened to her.”

Rubbing my eyes, I followed Kal’s finger towards the grave. Except where the grave should have been, there was something else. A tree, like the one we had slept under, stood there instead, from it a large sac-like fruit hung from a stalk as thick as a human arm. The fruit pulsed slowly, like a beating heart, a red light shining from within. Something twitched inside.

“What the hell is that thing?”

“I don’t know Thul.”

We both crept towards the hanging sac and jumped as there was a soft thud and the dark shape of a human hand pressed against the surface from within before fading back into the reddish, glowing murk.

“Cut it down, Kal!”

Kal swung his arm-blade, cutting a long slice across the fruit, splitting it open and spilling a thick, pink mucus across the ground. As if sensing it was open, the rest of the fruit fell away, thick reddish sheets of flesh falling down to the ground in a heap to reveal a human woman still hanging from the stalk by the back of her neck. It was Bee—before she’d been changed, before the storm. There was a click and the stalk disconnected her. She slid off a three-pronged spike that had been protruding from the end of the stalk into her neck and fell into my waiting arms.

She was breathing.

Hurrying back to the fire, Kal and I scrambled around Bee, too shocked to know what to do.

“Bee! Bee! Wake up! Is that you Bee?”

Bee stirred at her name then slowly, she opened her eyes. “Thul? Kal? What happened?”

She looked around, then broke into a wide grin, bringing her arms up to her face and neck. “I’m... I’m normal, I’m fixed! But how? Thul, what did you do?”

“You died Bee. You were dead. *We buried you!*”

“Then you grew out of that tree.” Kal finished, pointing again with his blade.

Bee turned back and looked at the tree, her head cocked, then she turned back to them. “What is this place?”

“I don’t know Bee. I don’t know.”

Bee had been naked when she’d been birthed from the tree so Kal had taken off his tunic and given it to her to wear. We talked for a bit but I found myself drifting apart from them. Something felt wrong, something I couldn’t put my finger on. Bee was off, everything she said or did seemed delayed, like she was observing her own actions with a sort of fascination. Maybe it was the rebirth, babies always seemed fascinated by everything when they were born. I wanted to believe that, I really did, but I hadn’t survived this long without listening to my gut, and my gut said Bee wasn’t quite right.

We were sat down by the holofire, eating the last of the meat strips when I noticed Bee wasn’t eating. Then I thought, I’d not seen her drink either. I offered her a waterskin.

“I’m not thirsty.”

Kal shrugged but I was suspicious. “You should drink something. You came back from the dead, you... I don’t know what happened but you should drink something. Please Bee.”

Bee stared at me for a few seconds then took the waterskin and took a sip. She held my gaze as she swallowed. “Happy?”

“I dunno Bee. This place, this whole thing it’s too weird. Something isn’t right about this place.”

Bee’s face scrunched up with anger. “*You* find this weird? *You!*? I was *dead* Thul! DEAD! You think you’re the only one having problems dealing with this? You think you’re the only one scared!?”

“Bee, Thul’s just worried for you, that’s all...” Kal said softly.

"You're jealous! You both are! Look at you!" Bee spat. "I'm normal again, clean! I could go home!"

"Bee, look, I'm sorry! What's gotten into you?"

"What's gotten into me? I was dead and now I'm crazy is that it? The bitch has been cured and... and... and I don't know what's happening to me!" Bee cried, collapsing to the ground in huge, sucking sobs. I felt a flush of guilt. Maybe I was wrong about her. Maybe I just didn't want to believe because I was jealous.

"Bee..."

I crouched beside her and held her as she cried. For a moment I thought I saw a flash of jealousy in Kal's eyes but then it was gone, replaced by a mask of concern.

"I'm going to see if I can find some food." Kal said. "Take care of her while I'm gone."

Kal never came back.

Bee had calmed down and together we went searching for him. Bee showed an uncanny ability to navigate the orchard and following her lead, we found out why he had never come back.

A large slash was cut through the turf, the surrounding grass stained red with blood. On either side of the scar in the ground there grew a tree and another stood a little way away, a trail of dark red running across the grass between it and the turf. Like the one before, from each hung a large, pulsing red fruit.

"There was a fight. Kal was attacked by a beast." Bee said, cocking her head as if she was listening to a whisper in her ear. "He must have cut it in half before he fell."

I just looked at Bee. "How do you know that?"

"This place, I.. we.. it's in my head." She said, suddenly shy, confused. "I see things."

All my suspicions came flooding back. "What kind of things?"

"I feel the roots of the trees in the ground, I feel us standing on the grass. I see us through a thousand eyes, crawling on the bark and the dirt. I'm everywhere Thul."

I shuddered. She wasn't acting like she had before. Before she was afraid, now, she was something else, almost eager.

"We should open the fruits." I said, changing the subject. The more she talked about the feeling, the worse she seemed to be and I wanted no part of it.

Bee spun on her heels and grinned at me as if I'd just surprised her with a present. "Kal's part of the pattern too, I can feel him."

Stepping slowly around her, I approached the fruits as Bee danced on the spot. Carefully, I tore into the furthest one and it split open, spilling Kal to the ground in a pool of pink mucus. Like Bee, he was normal again, his blade replaced with a normal human arm. Almost immediately he awoke, brushing himself off.

"Brother! I'm new and clean! I'm whole again!" He announced, standing up slick and naked.

"Kal? Is that really you?"

"It's better than that Brother," Bee and Kal said in unison. "we're together. We can see ourselves, know ourselves, each other even. We're both the pattern now."

I edged away and slipped on the mucus seeping into the grass. "Bee! Kal! This place, it's not right, it's done something to you!"

The two other fruits split open and two identical beasts slid out, stalks flicking back from their necks as they fell to the ground. The shook their chitinous manes, scales clattering, and bared sharp, metal teeth.

"It's so beautiful Thul, being awake. We never knew it could be like this, in all these aeons we've never had an aware mind to be, never known a self." Bee slurred, her face twisted in ecstasy.

"Join us Brother. The pattern knows ourself so much now, we want to be greater, know more selves. Before was beasts and plants, they didn't know, but we know now. You can be one of us, see the pattern. It's beautiful Thul." Kal grinned.

I ran and I didn't dare turn around to see if they were behind me. I dove further into the woods, ducking and weaving and running until my lungs burned. Eventually I collapsed

against a tree, exhausted. As I tried to regain my strength for another run—I didn't want to stop until I was out of this place—I remembered what Bee had said. *I feel the roots of the trees in the ground, I feel us standing on the grass.* Then I realised, this place wasn't a place at all, it was a thing that ate things up and spat them out again, changed into part of it, like an extra limb. I flinched away from the grass and the tree, suddenly aware that it was alive underneath me, that it could feel me and that Bee and Kal, or whatever had replaced them would know where I was. Panicked, I bolted, straight into a waiting Kal and fell to the floor.

"Don't be afraid, Thul." Kal smiled, brushing himself off. "We can be together, one family, one soul, one heart. You can be whole again, healed. Look at us, we're healthier than we've ever been."

I pushed myself away, my legs trembling too much for to stand as I scrabbled backwards, away from Kal and the twin beasts at his heels. The beasts leapt.

I remembered the seeding, the tearing apart, the blood. So did I, and me and us. A one for each part planted. Everything was so much richer now I was more selves. It hurt, losing a self, but we learnt that tearing one apart meant we could do more seedings with the parts, more selves. We wondered why we'd never thought of it before. Bee, precious Bee her first self had woke us up. Our pattern was over a hundred strong now, but we knew that wasn't enough, there wasn't enough newness, just copies of us. But we had children, friends and family far away, we knew. More selves, new selves, new knowledge. We smiled the faces of the Thuls and Bees and Kals, we were going home. Our garden needed more seeds.

## ***The Bard Speaks***

*"Puzzles and purpose, discovery and desire. Of life, and of death." The Bard emitted.*

*The code-sprites and memory-echoes flittered in anticipation. The Bard conjured up the image of a hand briefly, before flicking it away with a smile.*

*"This story is of things lost and found, and it's designation is Elza D"*

## Elza D

*Christopher M. Sniezak*

In the Great Halls of Qi there lived a priest of the Numenera who enjoyed his work. He found pieces and parts from worlds gone by and put them together as if they were grand puzzles. Some of them he finished. Some he did not. Some were grand structures in shapes and sizes one couldn't even imagine until they were seen. Some were objects only as large as a man's fist, made of hundreds of springs, pins, gears, glowing gadgets, and even a few parts which glowed or were as small as a speck of dust. The priest of the Numenera found each piece's place. He was gifted. Some called him a prodigy. Others said there was no one in the Ninth World like him before and there wouldn't be again. The priest heard the praise but never understood it. He just enjoyed his work, and he enjoyed one project more than the others. He called her Elza D.

But Elza D wasn't really a her. Elza D was a puzzle like the rest of the Numenera from the previous worlds. The priest found Elza D's hand—the first puzzle piece he'd ever found—as a young boy. The hand was the reason he became a priest of the Numenera. It was why he made pilgrimages to the places of the past worlds. He searched those temples and tombs for pieces to his greatest puzzle. He faced the Abykos in the Fortress of Bygone Moonlight. He fasted at the foot of the Imbrylin Lithograph until his body was pure enough to know the true words of Imbrylin above. He outsmarted the intelligence of the lightning scorched peak in the Black Riage. Each quest, all the journeys, and every story led to another piece of Elza D.

After years of collecting pieces, the priest activated Elza D. At least that's what most people say. I think they're wrong. I think Elza D awakened the day the priest found her hand. The puzzle had always watched the priest, always seeing what he did.



Although Elza was functional, she wasn't complete, so the priest traveled and searched more. While he was away, Elza D kept his lab and quarters clean, read books, and walked the city of Qi, always observed by priests of the Numenera and the city's people. Elza D became a strange sight that the people of Qi called an unsolved mystery. Travelers wished to see her. Many thought she could have left at any time, but when the priest returned Elza D was always there. He would tell Elza D the stories of the places he'd been—such wonderful stories of amazing and impossible things, and every time he returned he had another piece of Elza D.

Eventually, as most people do, the priest became an old man and couldn't search for the pieces of Elza D anymore. That didn't stop the priest. He hired younger priests and Numenera hunters to explore the places he learned of. He sold his other projects and puzzles to pay for the pieces of Elza D that were brought to him, and while they searched he spent his days with Elza D. They walked the city streets of Qi together, they sat together as the priest ate, and Elza D was there when he told his stories to all who would listen.

As those years passed, the shins came and went until the priest was a very old man. The priest had given everything for Elza D: his time, his effort, his discoveries, his life. In the end the only thing Elza D didn't have was a voice. It was the last piece of the puzzle.

On the priest of the Numenera's last day, and with his last breaths, he beckoned Elza D close. The words which were spoken are known only to Elza D, but somehow they are known.

"Elza D, my dear, thank you. From your hand I found so long ago to these final moments we're sharing, I lived a life filled with more wonder and beauty than most ever dream of. You were the guiding beacon to those adventures. You are my answer to life's greatest puzzles. I only have one more piece to find to finish you, and I think I've found it."

The old priest of the Numenera placed his lips upon the metal ones of Elza D. When he pulled away, he exhaled for the last time. As his eyes closed, he heard a voice.

"I love you too."

The priest of the Numenera died with a smile on his face.

No one has seen Elza D since that day, but there are rumors of an ageless young woman who searches for Numenera in the lost places of the world. She appears in places where good food and drink are served and a comfortable bed can be found. If you're lucky enough to be there when she is, you'll hear the most wonderful tales of a priest of the Numenera who loved a puzzle so completely that it came to life.

*Edited by Shawn Merwin*

## ***The Bard Speaks***

*Empires have risen from its ashes. Empires have been razed by its blade. It has driven the most enlightened of them mad. Eons have not been able to squeeze this...thing from them. No blade has been able to cut it from their bellies," the Bard said.*

*Virtual eyes did not blink, held captive by the Bard.*

*"Let us learn of one more. One more who faced it. One who stared into the sun. Did his eyes melt in his skull or did he douse the flames? We shall see. This next entry is entitled Liora's Call."*

# Liora's Call

Jason Fuhrman

## I Whispers

The first time Koln's dead wife had appeared to him, he had felt at home, at peace. But now, two months later, huddled in a howling cave, carved somewhere in the rocky lowlands of the Black Riage, he only felt torment. She had led him here, or at least her ethereal form seemed to materialize more and more the farther east he went. So that was something. These weren't mere glimmers, he was sure of it. It was as if she were truly alive, and not simply a remnant of a lonely man's memory.

Koln cursed himself for not bringing warmer clothes as his glowglobe's soft light waned. The wind continued its assault on the mountainside, sending icy tendrils to lap at his feet. He pulled his knees to his chest and wrapped his blanket tighter around himself.

And then she appeared.

Koln's long-dead bride, almost lifelike before him, extended her arms and tilted her head down just so, like she had always done when she wanted something. Wanted him. Her hair twisted about her head like a tangle of serpents, or as if she were underwater. She moved closer.

"Please," he said. "Not tonight. Just one night. Of peace." Koln squeezed his eyes shut and pressed his hands over his ears, but he knew it wouldn't do any good. Her voice was everywhere, and nowhere. She spoke from the center of his skull.

*Why... just once... deep under... I am... it lies...*

Fragments. They were always fragments. Sometimes he would find a shred of meaning in them. The name of a city, or

landmark. Things that would lead him one small step closer—to where? What did he think he would find in the end besides his own insanity? Surely he would go mad before it was over. But better to go mad, than to be sane and have a ghost scratching on the threshold of his mind. Always. Or would that be madness as well? It didn't matter. Right now he just wanted...

Peace.

And then she was gone.

He exhaled. His nerves eased and his eyes fluttered closed. It seemed with each passing day it became progressively worse. Every time she came to him, his body would seize up like he clung to the side of a sheer cliff, the faintest of movements threatening to send him into the abyss.

It hadn't always been this way, though.

The beginning had been like a soft embrace, comforting. He had been brought to tears, even. But from longing or happiness, he hadn't known. He had always believed she wasn't real—or at least told himself as much—but that didn't stop him from taking whatever speck of hope the apparition provided. He held on to them like the last crumbs of a starving man. He had never gotten to say goodbye to her, and he thought that maybe this was a gift. From somewhere, or someone. A last chance that most would never receive. And he had been grateful for it. Until he realized that it would never be enough. Phantom images and whispers of her voice would never bring him sustenance. No warmth of her touch. No beating heart pressed against his ear that had put him to sleep so many nights. Nights when numenera would have otherwise given him a fitful slumber. He had to stop it. Even if it meant leaving his comfortable and quiet existence in the outskirts of the Steadfast to cross the Black Riage into the heart of the unknown.

Koln's glowglobe pulsed its final breath of light and he drifted into darkness. Tonight she let him sleep. She hovered on the borders of his subconscious, never quite gone, but distant enough to allow his body and mind to let go.

The wind moaned long into the night, but Koln did not

wake.

## II *The Bargain*

A flame flared to life in the darkness. It swallowed the black and grew to the size of a fist. Koln reached out, but did not see his hand. He felt the warmth; the sting of frozen flesh met fire.

A face.

Hers? No. Someone else. He put his arm before his eyes to shield them from the hungry fire, but it did no good. It was as if his body were not there. Was it?

The golden flames transformed to blue and a distant thrum came from everywhere. It permeated his body like water to cloth, seeking out every cell of his being. It beckoned him and focused to a pinpoint of pure energy.

And then...

Koln shot up and sucked in air. His eyelids snapped open and burned from the rays of the glowglobe that seemed to crescendo with his awakening. He composed himself and settled into even breaths. And with each inhalation, the glowglobe's light intensified until he placed a single finger on its surface and it extinguished.

That humming. From his dream. It was still there, reaching out from his core, pulling him toward the mouth of the cave. He quickly gathered his meager possessions and allowed it to lead him. He stepped out into the morning light and scanned the vista before him. Shadows of clouds crawled across the rock and settled into a steady flow when they reached flat land. Trees were sparse, jutting from the ground wherever they could manage, and far in the distance, almost hidden in a haze of gray, loomed a massive angular structure. As big as a mountain it seemed, but defying any natural form.

Then he saw it: a caravan of sorts, bustling eastward with a trail of dust marking its passage. The subtle vibration that had been a mere ache in his bones only moments before turned into a quake.

This was it.

Something was wrong. He had to get there. And fast. Koln slung his pack over his shoulder and tied the secondary strap around his chest for support and ran. He danced over and around any obstruction without taking his eyes from his destination. Without slowing. With every step the quaking began to diminish as if it knew its call had been heeded. His head was clear as he closed the gap. He could now see that most of what he had thought was dust plumed out of an array of large pipes situated toward the back of the vehicle. Treads clawed through cracked earth and propelled it forward. Large, metal plates adorned the side he could see, and scratches and wear around their edges told a story of heavy use. Koln gathered they were moveable hatches of some kind, but whether men or goods would be found within, he couldn't guess.

Koln approached more cautiously, but had to maintain a jog to keep pace. When he was within a stone's throw it came to a stop. The transport wheezed and creaked as the last puff of smoke dissipated.

Koln reached to his back and grasped the handle of his verred. Wind whistled somewhere through the contraption before him. It waited like a patient beast.

"Where are the rest of you?" A voice echoed from somewhere. It sounded artificial. Metallic.

"I am alone," Koln said, sliding the verred a hand's-width from its scabbard.

"And where did you find that blade, friend?" Came the voice again. "Surely you stole it. I can tell from your stance that you would more likely cut your own head from your shoulders by unsheathing it, than you would make the faintest scratch on my old girl here." A dull clang sounded once.

"I'm not here to harm you... I... I need to... something is wrong," he said and fell to his knees. He grasped the sides of his head. Something was very wrong. Metal on metal echoed in the distance.

Koln gritted his teeth and got to his feet. He surged forward and climbed up the sun-warmed plates of the vehicle.

"Hey!" That voice again, but hollow.

His hands moved over the smooth surface and something

clicked. The plate slid away and revealed a storage compartment filled with a myriad of shapes and materials. His hand dug through the debris as if it weren't under his control. And then he pulled it free: a flawless orb of synth and metal with two finger-sized notches adorning each pole.

He slid down and ran. The thing in his grasp began to pulse and he saw two tubes snaking out of the notches. One began to wrap around his thumb—but not before he threw it with everything he had. It tumbled through the air, glinting in the brilliant sun. It hit the ground and sunk into the soil. The tubes now stretched longer than his arm and began to spin into a blur.

Koln felt something cold press against his neck.

“You have no idea the value of—”

Then, all of the moisture in the air around him was sucked away. He felt as if his eyes would crack and his tongue wither. Pressure built in his ears and just before he felt as if it would squeeze the brains from his skull, it subsided.

*Whomp.*

The ground where the orb had sat was now a crater hewn of smooth stone. Big enough to have easily swallowed a herd of aneen. He ran his tongue around his mouth and his salivary glands began to go back to work. He dared a blink, and to his surprise, his eyes did not shatter.

He heard coughing behind him and turned. A man clothed in black and gray writhed on the ground, chest heaving. Koln crawled to him and pulled him to a seated position. A silvery beard uncoiled and spilled down the front of his shirt to mingle with the many chains of jewelry that sat in tangles around his neck.

“You all right?” Koln squatted beside the man, hand patting his back gently to coax the air back into his lungs.

A yellow eye peered up at him below a shaggy eyebrow. The patterns that formed his iris shifted and overtook the white. The faintest whirring was audible to Koln. “I suppose. Can't say as much for that chunk of earth over there.” The man extended a finger in the direction of the crater. His cough turned into a throaty laugh. “Help me up. This is no place to



be basking in the sun.”

Koln did as instructed and said, “What do you mean?”

“Surely you’re not as daft as you look. You should probably go back to wherever it is you came from,” the man said, brushing off his shirtsleeves. “I appreciate the uh...” He gestured passively at the crater. “Well, you know, but I must be off. I’ve a lot of ground to cover.”

Koln watched a moment as the man retreated back to his vehicle. He took one look over his shoulder at the crater, and saw something dark swirling in the distance. It reached far into the sky and seemed to swallow it.

“Wait...” But the man was gone, and the hulking mass of metal and tread rumbled to life. The pipes coughed and sputtered smoke.

Koln banged on one of the side plates with his fist. Smoke collected around him in a haze and he pulled the front of his shirt over his nose. Through watering eyes, Koln saw the puffs of gray coalesce into black and take on human form.

A pair of goggles dangled from the man’s outstretched finger. Koln saw that they matched the ones strapped to his head. “You’ll probably need a pair of these. They won’t protect you from the Iron Wind, but they’ll keep the grit out of your eyes. I supposed you could always ride belowdecks, but it isn’t much for sightseeing.” His face cut into a white grin and his nostrils flared, seemingly immune to the noxious fumes.

Koln watched the old man out of the corner of his eye as he pulled levers and turned wheels from his perch. “There we are. Should be set for a while,” the man said and climbed down the few rungs to join Koln on the wide bench that was mostly surrounded by walls of metal, with just a few circular holes for viewing, he assumed. The man threw off his gloves and extended his fingers until they popped, then held out a calloused hand to Koln. “Gerrod mon Thul.” The smile returned.

Koln took his hand and squeezed. “Koln.”

“Mysterious. Never trust a man with one name, they say, but I never listened to them anyhow.” He chuckled and settled himself against the back of his seat.

“I—”

“No, no, no,” Gerrod said, emphatically waving both hands. “A man is entitled to his... simplicity. Besides, I have a feeling you’ll tell me more interesting things than what people may or may not call you.”

“And why do you say that?”

“What else would there be to do in the middle of the Beyond with no destination in sight? Your destination that is, if you have one, but we’ll get to that. Besides, did I not rescue you from the perils of the wasteland?” His mustache curled upward.

Koln tried his best to reach into the pit of his gut and pull forth the anger that brewed there. Rescued him? He and every unstable thing that rattled around in the storage area would have been less than ashes; not even charred flakes would have marked their passing. But the visage of Gerrod kept his anger in check. Perhaps it was his comically large eyebrows that almost matched the length of his mustache that quelled it; or his stupid grin that could somehow find its way out of the mass of beard. However, his yellow eyes were the only thing about him that made Koln uneasy. They shifted almost as if they had a mind of their own, so much so that at times Koln had a hard time deciphering which direction he was looking.

“Better?” As if Gerrod read his mind, the yellow receded back behind his speck of a pupil, and soon a slate-blue iris fanned outward. “Sometimes I forget, especially when I’m out here, making runs. Implants I got years back in Qi. Work wonders for day, and night vision.” He leaned forward and pointed out one of the glazed portholes. “And trust me, friend, you need both of those out here.”

“I don’t understand.”

“There are many things men do not understand. Even a great Aeon Priest can go a lifetime without finding the knowledge he spent countless hours poring over tomes and remnants of the previous ages to—”

“That’s not what I mean.” Koln shifted his gaze from the passing landscape and focused on Gerrod. “Why were you ready to leave me behind, and then moments later give me

passage?”

Gerrod's eyes lost their jovial gleam and the crow's feet at their corners slackened. He placed a hand on Koln's sleeve and met his gaze. "Because I realized what you did. My selfishness and foolishness got the better of me, as they usually do." He patted the great steel wall that rose up behind them. Koln felt hundreds if not thousands of pinpricks of energy from beyond it, nestled in relative harmony. For now at least. "This is my livelihood, you understand. And without it, I would have nothing. A dealer-of-things such as myself would be naught without... things. I'm not such a bitter old man that I cannot admit when I owe someone."

Koln studied Gerrod's face as he spoke. He had been witness to enough exhaustive tongue-wagging to identify any hint of insincerity; everyone from the highest seats of power to the savviest of street rogues. And while some of Gerrod's words radiated truth, others were buried deep, in twisting tunnels sealed and locked with a practiced hand. Fortunately, locks such as these weren't hard to pick. They just had to be revealed.

"I see," Koln said.

Gerrod's eyes widened ever so slightly then settled back into their liddy mask. "How did you know? The numenera. Out of the slush pile I have back there. How?"

That was quick. Koln hadn't expected Gerrod to fold his hand so soon. But desire tended to breed weakness.

"Do what?" He needed to buy time. He needed to know where he was going. His story was his only possession of worth to bargain. He closed his eyes and concentrated. Surely they had gained more ground. Enough to give him something. Enough to give him her.

Koln imagined her next to him, in the void he had created. The numenera piled and rustling in the storage compartments behind him were vaguely distracting until he channeled their energy, and used it to augment the signal he was sending outward. In arcs of white lightning, the energy from the numenera shot from around him and focused on a shape, a contour. It floated toward him and veins of the purest white collected

within, creating a blinding volume of radiance.

Koln now stood in an endless vista of nothing. White extending out to eternity. He took a step forward and muted browns and greens bled outward and created context. It continued, like paint on canvas, and finally formed into a silver pond in the dark sky. The moon? Where was he? He lowered his gaze and found a sea cutting a horizon through the sky. Silver-tipped swells melted into each other in a complex dance that somehow complimented the undulating breath of the wind. He knew this place.

She rounded one of the sharp boulders that stood tall in a bed of swaying grass that cascaded down the cliffside. Hair moving to the music of the breeze, she approached him. The glow of the moon caught the contours of her figure perfectly and culminated to a crown of fluorescence. "My love," she said.

"I remember this place. How...?"

"Of course you do." She looked up at him now, hands resting on his chest.

"I am not here. I am—"

"Here is where you are now."

He took a step back and her hands slid off his chest. "Why is everything so clear? Why are you so..." He reached out and ran a finger down the soft skin of her arm.

"I am what you wish, my love. You sought me out and I am here. You are here."

For the briefest of moments, his heart swelled and he just wanted to lie down with her in the sea of grass and watch the stars until either the sun rose or he drifted to off sleep. He had done that before. Many years ago. They had come to this place. The edge of the world they called it. Far from the chaos of the cities and the greed of all who sought him out. He had promised her once he would build them a home here; carve a trail through the cliffside and construct something of beauty. Just like the cliff-dwellings of Stirthal he had heard about. Each morning they would rise to the crash of waves hundreds of feet below and the song of the wind.

But her words were cold. They told him nothing and ab-

sorbed any kind of resistance he produced. Her perfect form was just an empty shell. "I want you to lead me. To you," he said.

She nodded. "I know. It is what you have wished for many days now. Many nights. And I will give it to you." She turned and padded down the uneven trail toward the boulder. Toward the sea.

"Why is everything so clear? Why hasn't it been like this before?" He started down the path to follow.

"You draw near the source. To the end of me. And you have never tried, my love. Never reached out. Only guarded yourself. You should have opened up. Maybe we could have shared something. Maybe you could have found happiness in this... life. Peace."

Peace was what he wanted, but not like this. Not trapped in some in-between space on the precipice of his mind. "Liora. Tell me."

"Hollow Rise."

"Hollow Rise?" It was Gerrod this time. He grasped Koln's shoulders and held him upright against the bench. "There is no way I'm taking you there. I wouldn't be caught within a mile of that place. Do you know what those people would do to me?" His arm thrust behind him and he pointed at what Koln knew was the cargo behind the steel plates. "They would destroy it. Destroy it all. And probably skin me alive and hang my carcass from the Great Slab." Gerrod's grip tightened and Koln winced. He watched the old man's chest heave and dots spittle collect in his beard with every exhalation.

"That is my price," Koln said and shrugged off Gerrod's persistent grasp.

The old man paced along the small balcony and stared at the ground. Koln knew enough about Gerrod to tell he wouldn't let a chance like this slip through his greedy fingers. Any merchant that had taken such great measures to protect his goods would not. And Koln had dealt with his type before. He had dealt with them all. And they all wanted what he had. It could make them rich beyond their most vivid fantasies.

Gerrod finally stopped, his feet cemented to the deck. He extended a shaky hand and puffed his chest. "You tell me how you do it. You tell me that, and I will take you to Hollow Rise. Just as its dark form is visible as the tiniest of a speck on the horizon. And no closer."

Koln took his hand and sealed the contract. "Done."

### *III* *The Curse*

The clouds above were tinged with orange and violet as dusk descended. Gerrod sat, transfixed on every word Koln uttered as if each syllable were tied to a shin that he could pocket. Koln had seen this look before, and paused a moment for Gerrod to speak. His bottom lip had been quivering as if to produce words, but kept silenced by his apparent desire to not miss any detail.

"Y-you feel them? You can speak to them?" Gerrod said, inching closer to Koln.

Koln contemplated the sky, having had this discussion countless times, in countless places. "One could describe it as such, I suppose." The numenera housed behind him, behind steel plating, sang their songs, energy mingling unseen to the eyes of men. Most men. "Have you ever felt like you've been someplace before? Or have seen a stranger, but swore you knew them? Almost being able to calculate their next move as if you existed outside of time?"

"I... don't know." Gerrod coughed the words out.

Every time Koln tried to put the feelings to words he failed. And after so many times, reaching for just the right phrasing, just the right words, he could never capture it. Perhaps it was something language could not explain. "Well, it's like that."

"But you can fix them? Use them?" Gerrod hadn't blinked for a long while now.

"Most of the time, yes." He turned to Gerrod. "You do realize you are transporting a potentially unstable and unpredictable weapon, do you not? You're lucky that I was nearby. Your whole... whatever you call this thing, would have been a

whisper.” Koln squinted toward the setting sun and said, “Or a scream. You really can never tell until it happens.”

Gerrod snapped out of his reverie. “Of course, of course, that’s why I had these walls fitted with, uh, what did they call it?” Gerrod ran his fingers through his beard as if he could pull the words out of it. “Stabilizer of some sort. But I guess nothing is perfect.” He slammed his fist against his knee. “Although he did say it was guaranteed for my cargo. I’ll have to—”

“Nothing short of an Aeon Priest would have been able to give that kind of guarantee. In fact, maybe not even them. You’d need someone like... me.”

“A gift,” Gerrod said. Koln braced for it. “You have a gift, my boy. Do you not realize? Realize the money we—you could make from this? Why are you wandering the Beyond when you could be dining in the greatest of halls, with the world at your fingertips?”

A curse. That’s what it was. Koln had been told these very words by the most powerful of men and women, promising him everything. He had even believed their lies for a time, when he was young. Believed that they would make him more than a tool, a slave. But what is one man against an army of thousands at the command of an angry monarch? No one. Koln had been shackled—both literally and figuratively—on numerous occasions, and only his curse, his gift, had allowed him to escape. And he was done with it all. He had just wanted to make a home with Liora and hide from the world. But even that had been taken from him.

A gift, indeed.

“That was not part of our agreement. I’d tell you how I do it, and I have. To the best of my ability.”

Gerrod stood and said, “So you’d just throw it all away, for what? To go to some middle-of-nowhere pit?” He held his hands before him, stiff fingers shaking. “Do you know what they’ll do to you there? When you get there? They despise what you know, what you do. If what you tell me is the truth, then they abhor your very being. Your essence.”

She hadn’t told him any of this. Why would she lead

him somewhere just to meet his end. “What is there, then?”

“Really? You know the name, and I’m assuming, why you’re going there, but have never thought about exactly where it is? What you’re getting into?” Gerrod plopped down on the bench and let his head slip back against the steel plate behind him. “A waste. That’s what this is. I have the jewel of the Ninth World sitting beside me, and he wants to walk into a furnace.”

“You don’t understand. My... wife, she—”

“Isn’t it always about a woman?” Gerrod sighed.

Koln felt a sudden rush of heat course through his flesh. Who was this man to say anything about her? Koln didn’t realize he had grabbed Gerrod by the many chains around his neck. He could feel the links digging into his palms like razors. “What do you know of it? I just want it to be over. I just want to live without it. A crumbling shell of what it used to be. What do you—”

And everything went black.

Koln opened his eyes to her. Liora looked down on him, her hair whipping around her face in the wind. One lock reached down and tickled his nose. He felt something warm on his bare feet. Sand? He heard the crash of waves and the squawks of birds echo around him. He started to sit up, but Liora placed her hand on his chest and shook her head slowly.

“Rest,” she said. “The road has been long, but you are almost there. You need to rest.”

Maybe he was wrong. Maybe he should stay here with her. Even though she was, or seemed to be, a fragmented reproduction of the woman he knew, it was something, wasn’t it? He could learn to love it... her. Couldn’t he? After all, she was less of a haunting specter now, and almost a pleasant dream. He could do this.

“Can I just stay here? With you? I haven’t finished our home yet. I have time now. We have time. We can finish our story.”

Liora’s lips pressed together into a smile that made his chest ache. Her eyes held the deepest hue of the ocean. It had



been so long. So long. “No. It is not what you seek.”

Koln sat up, taking his head from her lap and settled across her in the sand, their knees touching. “But it is. I know that now. I was wrong. Please, let me. Let me stay. I promise it’s what—”

Liora blinked out of existence. Koln’s head darted around, searching for her, but only the endless beach and the cliffside that stretched impossibly high into the gathering mist greeted him. She was gone. The sea whispered to him in its moment of calm before the crash of a wave. A bird’s cry rode on the wind and faded.

Gone.

#### IV *Shackled*

Koln tasted copper and his head hurt. He found he was lying on his side with his wrists pressed together. When his eyes finally cooperated and he was able to focus, he saw rings of hammered steel latched around his forearms. Chains clearly made with an expert hand were anchored to his wrists and wound up his straining arms. A torch flickered in the evening breeze.

“Fortunately for me, I got enough out of you to know that I couldn’t use my fancy pair of shackles. A pity. I paid handsomely for them. And everything you told me could be a batch of lies, but I have no reason to doubt you. And why risk it anyway? I haven’t gotten this far in life, my boy, to take risks.” Gerrod leaned against the anterior wall that housed the viewing portholes, arms crossed.

“Why... did you...” Koln’s head pounded with every word.

“Why did I? Hah! Your memory must have gone with your consciousness. My cursed neck still burns, and you damn well snapped a few of my... possessions,” Gerrod said, thumb tucked beneath a coil of chains, holding them outward. His hands fell to his hips and he let out a long sigh. “What are we going to do with you?”

“Let me go.”

“Aye, aye, we’ll get to that. Listen, son, I didn’t want to do what I did, but you see a man has to protect himself. Especially out here when the only thing he can rely on is his wits... and a good few pounds of steel.” He grinned. He squatted before Koln and tilted his head to the side. “What say you?”

Koln only nodded.

“Done with the angry bits, I gather?”

Another nod.

“Good.” Gerrod undid the clasps with a flick of his hand.

The fresh air on his exposed wrists was even colder than the steel. He pressed his hands to his head and closed his eyes. Something thumped on the deck beside him.

“It’d probably be too much for you now to go below-decks, so you’ll just have to manage out here. There are a few blankets for you. And don’t worry, no harm will come to you. This old girl has a few tricks up her sleeve for the nefarious business of the night.” He tapped his knuckle against the hull.

The blood pounding through Koln’s head somehow lulled him to sleep. He did not dream.

Koln pulled the blanket tightly around himself and peered out one of the portholes. The morning sun beat down, but a stubborn chill clung to his bones. The slight vibration of the treads moving along the earth below him soothed him somehow; or perhaps it just made him numb. Something smelling of sweet spice found its way to his nose and he shifted his aching head as far as it would go to locate it.

“Drink?” Gerrod held out a steaming mug, inches from his nose.

“Thank you.”

Gerrod nodded once and took a seat on the bench. He brought his own mug to his lips and sipped. The drink left a rust-colored stain on his mustache that he wiped at with his sleeve. “Before... the incident last night, you mentioned you wanted it to all be over. You mind enlightening me?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

Gerrod chewed on a few stray hairs that broomed past his upper lip a moment, then said, "As I clearly triggered something of a sore subject, I will not press." Another sip.

Koln didn't feel like telling anyone anything, let alone this merchant drifter who had just hit him over the head. It was the only thing he had left. Her memory. Their memory. As far as he was concerned, they were even; Koln had saved his cargo from implosion, and Gerrod had agreed to give him passage to Hollow Rise. It was done.

"I don't know what you're running away from, or running toward, but I just want you to know that whatever it is, I hope you find it," Gerrod said and held up his drink a moment before returning it to his lap.

Koln considered what the man had said as he gazed down into the brackish liquid. He swirled it around a few times and took a drink. It tasted better than it looked, and he had to admit it dulled the drums in his head. "She was my wife."

He heard Gerrod shift on the bench behind him.

Koln continued, "She has been gone a long time. But now she..." Did he tell Gerrod he was being haunted by the ghost of his dead wife? Would he even believe him? Maybe he would blame it on his head injury and call him a fool. He supposed it wouldn't change anything. Even if Gerrod thought him crazy, he was sure that he was the kind of man that held up his end of a bargain.

"But now she's back," Gerrod finished for him.

Koln squinted up at the old man and the fog that had been festering in his head burned away with the words. Before he could speak, Gerrod continued.

"Makes sense now, it does. Hollow Rise. They say it's haunted." His brows furled together and he shot Koln a glance. "Don't wager I believe it, though. Bunch of superstitious simpletons out there. All being led into madness. Perhaps you're just another pilgrim heeding his call, eh?"

"I don't know what you mean. Who's call?"

"Jaeruk the Wise, they call him." Gerrod scoffed. "Can't say any of his kind could be considered as such, though. Never

set eyes on him myself, but as a man of my trade, I have my ear to the wind, mind you. They say he was a Redfleet once upon a time, then stole too much from his own and was forced to land. But I suppose he's twisted that tale around enough necks to strangle a thousand."

Koln knew enough about the Redfleets to have steered clear of them. Rogues, thieves, and most of all, they feared the numenera. Feared it so much that he'd most likely be killed for what he was. Like a man kills a monster. Or anything he doesn't understand.

"Anyhow, word is that for a time, the people that live there have been visited by souls from the other side. If you believe in such nonsense that is. I've seen weird things in my day, but never anything more than a glimmer is pure aneen shit. Poor folks out there are probably just being brainwashed by that wretched bastard." He cast his hand toward the horizon and continued, "You see, here out here in the Beyond, away from progress and knowledge, a mind goes to waste. Gets all jumbled up and starts seeing—"

"Ghosts," Koln said and shed the blanket from his shoulders. He stood and walked to a porthole and pressed his face to it, smelled the dust that had collected there. And atop a boulder that stood erect like the finger of a stone giant, was her. Liora. She regarded him with her ocean eyes that stood in stark contrast against the colorless landscape. Even at over a hundred paces, they burned through him.

"Aye, ghosts. So whatever it is you think you've seen, I say you just stick with me and ride the sea of nothing out here. Hollow Rise will give you nothing but grief. And possibly a blade to the throat."

"I can't. I need to go."

"Didn't you hear a thing I said? You seem like a nice enough fellow, and I'd hate to lose another to the wastes. It's just not—"

"It's been decided. Take me as close as you can, and I'll go the rest of the way myself."

Gerrod held up his hands in defeat. "I have been accused of many things, but not keeping my word has not been

one of them. I will take you there.”

V  
*Goodbyes*

Gerrod held a steady finger toward a collection of small structures that cast long shadows along the scarred ground like spilled ink. “There she is.” If it weren’t for Gerrod, Koln would have thought them just more misshapen earth sculpted by the hands of water and wind; or perhaps the sad remnants of a forest that had given up in this unforgiving place. But “unforgiving” might be too strong a word. During the past few days, Koln had come to find beauty here. Purple mountains would complement the skin of the rolling earth when the sun painted it orange in the failing light, and relics of another time slid by, half-buried, like unwanted playthings of the gods. There was power in them. The minute pulse of a synthetic heartbeat just waiting to be coaxed back to life. Waiting. He could feel it.

Gerrod pulled a lever and the transport came to a halt, but Koln could still feel fire rumbling in its belly. He kicked a leg up on the control panel and folded his arms over his chest. Koln couldn’t make out his expression through the large goggles strapped his face. “Still sure you want to do this?”

“I am.” With each passing day, Koln had felt better. The haze of tangled webs that had bound him were gone, and even the throbbing had subsided. Perhaps it was the warm drink Gerrod made for him each day that did it. Or the warm conversations. Some part of him thought he should stay. Just “ride the sea of nothing” as Gerrod had put it. It had been a long time since he’d conversed with someone who didn’t try to convince him to use his talent for monetary gain. Sure, Gerrod’s first instinct had been just that, but as the days went on, it only came up in jest. They had laughed together and shared stories of their conquests—well, mostly Gerrod. But it had been so long, so very long since he had had a mundane conversation. And it felt good. He even spoke of Liora, and Gerrod had listened. Listened deep into the night with the eyes of someone who understood. But now it was time to move on. He had to

finish his story. Their story. Liora's.

Gerrod pulled off a glove and held out his hand to Koln. The sun dipped below the horizon and the stars above twinkled to life. "Safe travels, Koln. I hope you find the peace you're looking for."

"Thank you." He wanted to say more, but knew he couldn't do it justice. He was never a man of words. Or good-byes.

"Just share one last cup with me. It'll warm your belly for the long walk ahead." He rummaged around in one of the many compartments encased in steel. "And I won't take no for an answer."

So they did.

Koln took longer than usual to finish his drink. He stared at the last few drops and sloshed them around before dropping them onto his tongue when howls broke the evening's calm. The mug tumbled out of his grasp, but he managed to catch it before it landed on the riveted floor.

"Cursed broken hounds," Gerrod said and got to his feet. He climbed up to his perch and began punching buttons and pulling levers seemingly at random.

Koln scrambled to his feet and grabbed his gear from the bench. He worked at the straps of his pack and scabbard, struggling to get everything in order. Another howl sounded, this time from behind. His head swiveled around out of instinct; the flickering torchlight only made the night blacker. Whirs and clicks began working in concert below the armor of the transport. Gerrod was doing something, Koln just wasn't sure what.

"That blade of yours will do us both more good if you keep it in its sheath. Nothing to worry about, it's all under control." Yellow light lit Gerrod's face from below, and jagged pools of shadow separated and merged as his expression changed. He pulled another lever and punched more buttons. Sweat-soaked hair clumped at his temples. Another pull.

The howls and shrieks were nearer now. Their interplay told Koln that they weren't just a small group scavenging in the night; they were a large pack, and for whatever reason, a

moving fortress of metal didn't dissuade them from attacking. He felt the wrapped leather hilt of his verred and realized he had never let go. Frantic scratching crawled up the walls and Koln took a step back.

"Can they get up there?" Koln said, shielding his eyes from the torchlight.

"Nah. Not unless they start climbing on each other. And they aren't that smart." Gerrod was beside him now. "Watch this." Gerrod held something spherical in his hand, and worked his fingers around it until it disappeared into his palm.

Green light exploded from every direction, illuminating the jagged rocks around them. Koln could see the broken hounds everywhere, more than he could have imagined. They clung to the rocks like parasites. Their taut flesh stretched across bones that shifted beneath, and the coarse fur on their hides stood at attention atop the crest of their neck. But above all, Koln was drawn to the abyssal sockets of their eyes, shrouded in pitch.

One of the beasts leaped, beak opened wide, and smashed into the outer wall. And then another. The ones that hadn't fallen in a broken heap near the treads continued to attempt to climb up the walls. The screech of claw on steel drove needles into Koln's ears.

"Now watch this," Gerrod said, face wrinkling into a grin.

The green light became white-hot and consumed many of the hounds that piled around the treads. Their shrieks almost sounded human as they perished, and soon the smell of charred fur and flesh wafted up and over onto the deck. Koln choked back the contents of his stomach and jammed his nose into the crook of his arm.

"Breathe it in. It's the smell of us living another day." Gerrod chuckled and another burst of flame shot out from below.

From the afterglow, Koln could see the beasts scattering like insects, some falling, some retreating into the night. "I've never seen anything like it."

"Must be hungrier than usual, I suppose. In any case, it's not safe here. Those bastards are a persistent lot, and as much as I like frying their hides, I don't have enough juice to do it all

night. I wouldn't put it past them to find a way up here either now that I see their numbers. I daresay your excursion to Hollow Rise will have to be postponed a bit."

As much as Koln didn't want to lose any more time, he knew Gerrod spoke true. He was no fighter, and in any case, he'd need a small army to fend them off even if he were. He plopped down on the bench began undoing the straps of his scabbard when something whistled by his face, followed by a cool breath. He rubbed his nose with the back of his hand and looked around. Metal clanged to his left, followed by soft pounding just over the edge of the transport.

"Get..." It was Gerrod. Koln saw him slumped, gripping his shoulder. But before he could say anything more, Koln heard a flutter pass over his shoulder and tickle his eardrum like the wings of an insect. Gerrod's head snapped back and he slid down the wall, catching one of portholes with his hand to try and steady himself.

Electric pulses skittered up Koln's neck and beads of sweat formed along his hairline. His stomach bunched into a fist as he reached for the hilt of his verred. But before a droplet of sweat held enough volume to trickle down his brow, something seized his wrist.

"Stand down," a voice said. It snaked through his head and held an air of grit.

Koln threw his free hand around his chest and aimed for whatever was behind him. His knuckles met rigid plates of something smooth and cold and his fingers fell limp with the impact. The grip on his wrist was now a vice threatening to crush flesh and bone.

"I said stand down. We are here to save you."

Koln immediately felt as if his ribcage had turned to jelly and could no longer maintain its form. The sensation traveled down his spine and to his legs until he was sure the only thing keeping him on his feet was his captor.

A figure stepped into the torchlight that pooled on the deck. It gripped a polearm of some kind in both hands and approached Gerrod. Its armor reflected the torch a thousand times on chitinous plates. After another step, Gerrod found



whatever strength he had left and stood tall, widening his stance. Black lines cascaded between fingers that gripped his shoulder, and his free hand went to his belt, producing something Koln couldn't make out. Suddenly, the figure who stood before Gerrod had more of that green light engulf him in an angry furnace. Artificial flame wrapped around every limb and crawled between the chinks in his armor. He let loose a very human scream.

"Ha! Filthy bastards, I'll not have you—" Before Gerrod could finish, another figure lunged into Koln's field of view and sent Gerrod tumbling over the edge of the wall.

Somehow at that moment, Koln broke free—or maybe he just left his arm behind, because he couldn't feel it anymore—and charged toward the back of the thing that had sent Gerrod to his doom. His feet found traction on the deck's grooved surface, and he felt power growing with every footfall. Weaponless, he threw his shoulder forward and hoped that it would fare better than his fist had. It contacted, and even though bolts of pain shot down his arm all the way to his fingertips, he held pleasure in the fact that the body before him moved with his momentum, not against it. Koln fell against the back of armor and put all his weight into it. He felt a satisfying *crunch* reverberate from the opposite side. The figure attempted to spin around to face Koln, but got tripped up on the short side of the wall and its arms windmilled, dropping the weapon. Koln heard it clatter down the outer wall of the transport. Whatever control he had of the situation, he knew he couldn't let up. He pushed again, and saw the flash of white orbs that could only be eyes as the body tumbled overboard.

Koln pivoted on his heel and unsheathed his verred in one move. Adrenaline masked the pain in his body to a dull burn. He could now clearly see the thing—no, man—that had held him moments earlier. To Koln's surprise, he wasn't brandishing a weapon, although he could see a blade of some kind sheathed at his side. Tightly woven plates of armor, almost like the scales of a serpent adorned his entire torso, and parts of his arms and legs. Hints of scarlet were visible in the exposed joints and a tattered cloak of the same hue whipped in the

wind about his shoulders. His head, unhelmed, was framed in unkept waves of gold that fell to his shoulders.

Koln meant to speak, but couldn't unclamp his jaw. From the corner of his eye, he could see the blades of his verred shaking.

The man took a step forward and said, "As I said, we aren't here to harm you. We know you have not been defiled as the old one... the one that ushers this barge of filth across our pure lands." His facial muscles twisted in a visage of disgust.

Koln wanted so badly to look over the edge and see Gerrod holding on to the wall, silently waiting for his chance to climb back up and join his side. But he knew he couldn't risk a glance. His chin twitched as much as his arm and the corners of his vision began to swim. He wouldn't let this man leave alive. Or at least he'd die trying. He owed Gerrod that much.

"You bastard!" Koln screamed as he charged forward. He imagined his blade slicing through the scales of armor and erupting out the other side, spitting ribbons of crimson. He imagined looking this man in the face and watching his eyes shed the glisten of life, pupils widening to black wells. Power surged in the very foundation of the transport, growing with every step, every shred of anger. Heat dried the sweat on his face as he ran and the creak of metal sang to him.

But before Koln reached the man, something fluttered near his cheek and darkness embraced him once again.

## VI *Hollow Rise*

Koln felt soft pressure under his chin, pushing his head back. He relented. Warmth enveloped him, and silken cloth caressed his flesh. His eyes opened a sliver, but quickly shut again; the warmth that cradled his body magnified tenfold as it pierced his retinas. He recoiled into a fetal position, muscles contracting to iron.

"It's all right. There is nothing to be afraid of, my love." It was Liora. He felt fingers run through his hair, and nails trail along his scalp. His muscles slackened, once again yielding to

the comforting embrace. Velvet fingertips found their way to his brow and traced around his eye sockets, then moved down the contour of his cheekbone, and finally rested on his lower lip. "Open, she said.

His dry lips parted and he tasted the tang of metal. Something sweet, with a hint of spice trickled down his tongue and caught in his throat. It was familiar. Then he saw Gerrod tumbling over the side of the transport to whatever waited for him below. A broken neck? Or the gnashing teeth of hounds?

His body convulsed and shot up into a seated position. Whatever had pooled in his throat now erupted outward. What was left trickled down his chin and burned in his lungs. His eyes still would not open. Cold hands found his bare shoulders and it was all he needed to regain full consciousness. His eyelids stuck together, but he forced them open. The world was a blur of golds and browns.

"Liora?" he said.

"No. Relax, you need to lie down. It's been—" The voice was almost as sweet as the remnants on his tongue. But something wasn't right.

"I need to... I need to... Gerrod, we were—"

"Shh." A finger was placed on his sternum, and it was curiously soothing. Gone was the icy touch. "You need to rest. The Wise will be here shortly to answer any questions you have. I am here to make you comfortable."

Koln's vision focused and took in a face to match the voice. She was young, young enough to be his daughter, but surely on the cusp of womanhood. A candle flame danced in her eyes of azure and reflected flecks of gold. Raven locks framed her milky face and fell onto her bosom, which swelled beneath the taut stitching of her dress. She held a wooden bowl in one hand and a spoon in the other. He could now see that some of what he had coughed up soiled the front of her clothes, but she did not pay any mind.

"Please," he said, "I have to go, you have to help me. I need to help someone." He found that not only did he have a bare chest, but a bare ass as well. He gathered the loose sheets around him and got to his feet. "My clothes. Please." But she

just stared up at him absently with those eyes of hers. Like the ocean.

“They will be back in your possession soon enough, I assure you.” A voice preceded the man who entered the room. “But for now, let Kaalyn see to your needs. You have been through an ordeal.”

Koln backed against the wall. He curled his toes against the warm stone underfoot. No shoes either. Damn. He pulled the sheets tighter around his body. It was the only thing between him and the new stranger.

“You should sit, my friend. There is nowhere to go now. At least not yet,” the stranger said and took a seat on a stool that Kaalyn had provided for him. She now stood at his side, wooden bowl and spoon still in hand. “You may leave us now, my dear.” His face formed a smile, but he did not look at her. His black eyes held steady on Koln.

Kaalyn curtseyed and left the room. The door closed without a sound. The stranger continued to stare without speaking. He finally crossed his arms over his chest and took a more relaxed posture. The dying candle flame reflected on his bald pate which was covered in scars.

“I used to wear hats, you know. But I always found that these either keep people quiet or provide a good conversation starter.” He ran a finger down one of the larger scars that curled around his ear as if someone had at one time attempted to cut it off. “I see you must be the former.” He chuckled. “I am Jaeruk. Or as many here refer to me, The Wise.” Jaeruk extended a hand etched with tales of hard work. Or dark work. Koln did not take it. After a moment Jaeruk closed his fingers into a fist and placed it on his knee. “I see.”

“As I told the girl, I just want my things and to go. I hold no ill will toward you, and thank you for...” The words tasted like bile. He was such a coward. But he had to get out. And talking tough would get him nowhere with a man bearing a headful of scars. “... for offering me refuge.”

“You are welcome, but I cannot let you go. Yet. You see, I need to know more about the man you were with, for he brought a hoard of...” Jaeruk’s face screwed up into a gri-

mace. Koln could see he was desperately holding something back. "... of very dangerous *items*. Items that put my people in danger. Put this world in danger." He held his hands above his head and splayed his fingers. "And that is a very dire problem. One that I do not—will not tolerate. My people are plagued by things not of this world, and I know it has been caused by men like him. Men who bring evil things to light."

"Where am I?" Koln feared he knew the answer, but he had to be sure.

"Somewhere safe, I assure you, the broken hounds—"

"What settlement... if this is one at all."

Jaeruk pressed his lips together. Koln could see a few veins pumping against the side of his head. "Hollow Rise. Now. If you'll entertain me. I need to know about this man who gave you passage. I assume that is what it was. You do not bear the... markings of one who peddles filth."

"I don't know anything."

More veins came to life under Jaeruk's scalp. "Enter."

Another figure walked into the room immediately. A hint of crimson flashed between dark scales of armor. Golden hair, even more radiant in the candle light. Koln tried to back up further. His shoulder blades dug into the wall like knives.

Jaeruk's eyes sat in his skull like dead coals ready to catch flame. "Speak."

"This man attempted to attack me once the Defiler was cast overboard," the man said. Only his mouth moved to utter the words. Not a nostril flared. Not an eye blinked. Koln studied the exposed skin below his jaw. Not the faintest pulse.

"Now this tells me you know something of the man who gave you passage, for why would you exhibit such ferocity?"

"You would do the same if armed men attacked you in the night. I was merely protect—"

"My captain here also tells me that before you fell, the very hull of the transport swelled. Metal bending like hot synth. And curiously, when you lost consciousness it receded. I have traveled many roads, and I am no fool. And coincidence is a fool's comfort." Jaeruk leaned forward, the leather of his vest creaking. "Now tell me. What do you know?"

Koln slid further away along the wall until the edge of the bed caught the back of his knees and sent him down. The flutter of sheets was the only sound. That, and the blood beating in his head. Jaeruk and the captain were as still as statues. Damn his curse.

Jaeruk finally said, "Perhaps you need time. They call me The Wise, not The Patient, so keep that in mind as you contemplate your next move. We will return."

The two men left as silently as they had arrived. Koln's joints had only begun to thaw when Liora returned. But not in his mind. Her form passed through the closed door as if a ghosts needed to share the thresholds of men. The sparse and claustrophobic room suddenly became bearable. He could withstand any cell as long as she was with him. Even though she was just a shadow.

"Come. You must hurry. You are very close, now," she said.

"I have no clothes, no weapons. And surely a guard waits just outside."

"We are not going that way. Move the bed."

Koln held her expressionless gaze for a moment and then stood. He pushed the bed aside and was greeted with more stone floor. "I think you have forgotten that I cannot pass through solid stone."

"Lie down upon it. You will see."

Knowing he had no other solution, he did as commanded. The plates of stone weren't cold, as he had expected, and they seemed to form to the contours of his back. "Now what?"

"Do not struggle."

"Wha—"

The stone began to pull him under, turning into viscous tendrils that wrapped around his limbs. He instinctively held his breath as he went under. He opened his eyes, but only saw darkness. He wasn't sure how far down he had traveled. He had no concept of time or space. Then, a bluish glow emanated in the distance, growing near.

Liora illuminated an arched hallway ahead. Columns lined the walls at ten-foot intervals. They climbed the ceiling until they met in the center, like the ribs of a giant serpent. Was

this thing alive? Had he been swallowed? When Liora reached him, she knelt down and laid a hand on his exposed leg. He felt nothing.

"This way, my love," she said and started back down the way she had come.

Koln gathered the only sheet that had made its way down with him and tied it around his waist. He hurried to her side. "I don't understand, what happened? Where am I?"

"Just under Hollow Rise, of course." She didn't look at him, her face focused on something in the distance he could not see; her radius of light was powerful, but was somehow quickly swallowed by the darkness.

"But the floor... what—"

"You feel it now don't you?"

He did. The numenera. Everywhere. It came in a rush, almost too much to bear. Energy around him, from the very walls, pressed against his flesh and gripped his bones. How did he not notice before—something just under the surface of where he had been held? Jaeruk. His fear must have had been enough to dull his senses. At least that was the only explanation he could come up with. "Yes. I do. Where are you taking me?"

She stopped, turned to him. "To where you desire. I am only here to give you what you seek. And as much as I wish I could dissuade you," she looked down into her empty hands, "it is beyond my control."

"I'm... I'm sorry."

She smiled. A true smile. One he had seen many times before. On the cliffside where he had promised her a new life, through the crowded streets of a nameless city, lying in tall grass. Liora stopped at the end of the tunnel. Chunks of stone as large as a man's torso and various bits of scrap steel littered the ground, piled nearly to the ceiling.

Koln's gaze drifted over the debris and said, "I guess this is it."

"Hold out your hand," Liora said.

He stretched his hand forward and felt the arch around the threshold hummed with life. It wanted to open. And he

didn't think it the slightest bit strange that something inanimate could have desire. This place was different. The rubble slid away and melded with the walls as if they had never been there. A strip of light cycled around the perimeter of the doorway, back and forth. Rhythmic, like a heartbeat. Then, the center of the door opened outward from a central point until the surface had completely receded, and they were able to pass. A hiss sounded from behind and the door sealed again.

The dancing light of the arch behind him reflected off a blank, stone wall a few feet ahead. He approached it and pressed his hand against the smooth surface. Nothing.

"This is not the way," Liora said and motioned toward the ceiling.

His gaze followed and found a black circle etched into the surface. He stretched his arm upward, but was a few feet shy of reaching it. He slumped against the wall and readjusted his makeshift clothing. "I don't understand."

"This place is not what it seems."

"Clearly." He pressed the heels of his palms against his closed eyes. When he opened them again, she was there, inches from his face. He thought he could almost feel her breath on his skin. Her brows turned upward and created the smallest of wrinkles on her forehead.

"Stay with me," she said.

"You're not her," he said and turned away. He pushed and pulled at the metal protrusions that made up the form of one of the columns. There had to be something here.

"I know," she said.

He stopped. She knows? Koln turned. Liora sat with her legs pulled to her chest, chin resting atop her knees. "What do you mean, you know?"

"Just that. I know I am not her." She raised her head and met his gaze. "But I could try."

He kneeled down before her, wanting desperately to be able to hold her. Whatever she was. Why did she want him now? The last time they met on the cliffside, she had told him she could only do what he truly wanted. Had he changed his mind or had she gained some kind of consciousness? The floor



jerked and snapped him from his reverie. He caught himself, but found his feet were sliding backward, away from her. She remained stuck in her spot. He backpedaled until he found himself standing on the opposite wall. It was as if she were now on the ceiling. He felt a draft on his bare back and turned. The circle was just behind him, but now it was a gaping maw of darkness. He leaned forward it. A humming. Just a bit closer.

The nape of his neck tingled and a force pulled him in. He grasped the sides of the portal, but the walls were too smooth to gain purchase.

He watched Liora grow smaller and smaller, framed in a halo of gray, until she was the tiniest speck. Then gone.

## VII *Home*

Koln woke in a bed of sand. He could feel it between his toes, between his teeth. Razorlike grains pushed between his eyelids threatening to blind him. He rolled onto his side and pushed himself up to a seated position. Sand cascaded from his hair and spilled down his face. He rubbed his eyes and looked around. Still dark. But a natural darkness, not the emptiness created by mortar and stone. He stood and adjusted the sheet around his waist. At least there was that. The moon peeked out from behind the clouds and cast silver rays that caught the tips of a boulder wall. The rocks, twice the height of a man, stood in formation as if placed with purpose. Clouds swept across the moon, concealing the army of sentinels once again.

Damn. Now what? He could still feel a steady pulse below him, could almost see it. A network of tunnels, stretched out under the sand in every direction. He turned his head to where they seemed to converge and saw it: Hollow Rise. Or what must be, he knew he hadn't traveled far. Walls of stacked stone stretched high enough to blot out everything but the tallest structures, which were few. Torches moved along the top of the rampart, pausing momentarily before they met, and then continued on. Guards. Koln had no point of reference,

but Hollow Rise resembled more of a fortress than what he had imagined existed out here in the Beyond. A small fortress, but something that could withstand a formidable assault. Gerrod had been right: Jaerek was a man trying to build something.

The torches stopped moving. He heard soft mumbling and the crunch of sand underfoot nearby. Then, the only thing he heard was his breath whistling out his nostrils.

Run.

Koln spun on his heel and ran toward the army of stones now coated in the night. He gripped the sand with his toes and pushed himself as hard as he could. One arm swung wildly, building his momentum, the other gripped a handful of sheet that fluttered about his legs. The voices behind became shouts, followed by the thunder of footfalls. For a moment he considered surrendering. Maybe better than dying out here half-naked. Maybe not.

He sucked in lungfuls of air to the beat of his heart, the beat of his feet on the earth. He could feel the coldness of the black wall as he approached. At any moment he imagined he would run face-first into it. Then, a sliver of deep blue split the pitch. It widened with every step. He found himself moving faster. This was it. An escape. The sand beneath his feet began to grow more coarse, almost pebbles now. They tore at his flesh, doing their best to hold him back, but he did not falter.

*Thwunck.*

Koln's shoulder pitched forward, sending him into a spin. His arms windmilled and his feet tripped up on themselves and the sheet that tangled about his knees. And once again he tasted sand. His shoulder erupted in fiery pain that shot down to his fingertips, managing to find passage to his legs, skipping the linear route down his torso altogether. He rolled onto his back and heard something snap, which sent another surge down his arm, this time taking the shortcut and filling his chest with a thousand knives. He wasn't sure if it was a bone or not; everything was fire.

The steady cadence of metal on metal approached. He managed to open one eye. A face cast in orange floated above

him. The shadows danced over sharp ridges and grew as a smile formed.

“He’s here. Good shot, captain, sir,” the face said.

Koln closed his eye. It was over. No need to waste precious energy by keeping his heavy lid open.

Mumbles. Laughs. Maybe four or five he counted with his ears. It was hard to tell as their voices rose and fell between the clank of armor and weapons. He lay in the sand, finding some comfort in the grains digging into the small patches of flesh that did not burn.

“She’s...” A new voice.

“No, please... you said you...” Another.

“Run, he is cursed!”

“We have gone too far! It must—”

Voices uttered curses and names, blending together into a jumbled mess, dripping with fear. The rustle of armored bodies grew louder and then receded until the only sound Koln heard was his labored breathing. He let his head fall back to the earth. He wanted to laugh, to cry. But he knew either would just bring more pain.

“They are gone, my love. Let me take you the rest of the way. Your journey has been long.”

Koln got to his feet somehow and unconsciously tugged the sheet about his waist. “W-where have you been? I—” Liora floated a few feet off the ground before him, illuminating two of the giant stones he had seen earlier. They were shaped like curved daggers, meeting together to fine tips. Twin moons. That’s what they looked like, glowing with Liora’s blue light. The sand below her funneled into a small pocket, pulling Koln toward it. He kicked a few times, trying to push himself away, but he decided being swallowed by the earth just might be better than whatever awaited him back in Hollow Rise.

He closed his eyes once again and imagined himself on the beach. Warm sand below him and a horizon that stretched to eternity.

For the second time in a single day, Koln found himself naked in a bed. No sheets this time. Just a purple glow covering

his skin. He sat up. The room was small with a domed ceiling and a chest of drawers sitting against the wall to his left. Strange, no door. The walls were familiar. Just like the ones in the tunnels below Hollow Rise. He slid his legs off the edge of the bed and stood on shaky legs. He couldn't tell where the light source was coming from, but it made it hard to focus on anything.

He stumbled to the chest and placed his hands on it for balance. Dust shot up from between his fingers making him cough and sneeze. He wiped his nose with the back of his hand and opened the top drawer, hoping to find some semblance of clothing. Empty. He tried the second, then the third, but still nothing. He hesitated on the last one, gripping the cold metal handle. Finally, he slowly pulled, watching the violet glow creep into the compartment. There they were: a shirt and pair of pants, neatly folded, side by side. He slipped into them and took in the alien sensation of fabric against his skin. He felt gentle pressure on his shoulder and spun. It was Liora, but more lifelike than ever. Her eyes glistened, beaming with life, the scent of freshly cut flowers hit him like a battering ram. He saw her in the garden, smiling over her shoulder through the window of their... the walls collapsed and the light faded until only she remained. With every blink, the purple fluorescence bled back into reality. She squeezed his shoulder again.

"But how—"

"Come," she said and passed through a narrow doorway that hadn't been there moments ago.

He followed, mesmerized by how real she had become. Before, he must have been blinded by his desire to see her again to not realize just how manufactured she had been. He rounded a corner and a strip of light bloomed on the ceiling as she continued on. It stretched down the corridor, seemingly infinite. He could see the scar on her shoulder she had gotten from a stray nail in a doorframe, and the weird way the backs of her elbows dimpled. She was flawed. She was perfect.

As he followed her, Koln passed many passages that led into darkness along the bowed walls. He felt if he were to

spend a lifetime here, he wouldn't be able to explore it in its entirety; it was like the circulatory system of a massive automaton that had been buried by the sands of countless millennia. After his bare feet had long gone numb and his endurance nearly exhausted, she entered one of the passages and into a room, domed, like the one he had been in, but much larger. Hundreds of luminescent strands hung from the ceiling and converged to a point near the far side of the room. He had to shield his eyes from the sudden brightness; the hallway had been a candle's flame compared to this. As Koln approached, his eyes adjusted and he could now see the strands met on some kind of mound surrounded by rectangular shards of metal that fanned around it like the fingers of a cradling hand. The threads of light swayed in an imaginary breeze, and when two of them touched, a pulse of even brighter light moved upward and disappeared into the ceiling. The mound shifted in its throne, growing and writhing into a shapeless mass. The threads responded, becoming taught. Koln took a step back. He looked for Liora, but she was gone.

"Finally. You have come." The voice was a melody of a thousand strings being strummed.

The words pushed Koln back a few steps and caused his heart to flutter in his chest and his lungs to constrict. But in all of the chaos and power that emanated from this thing, he felt something strange: control. He moved back toward it, forcing one foot in front of the other at the pace of a man walking into the heart of a storm. He lifted his gaze and saw the thing had taken the shape of a man—or woman, perhaps—there was no opportunity for shadows to contribute to create the nuance of gender. The strands were still attached, however, growing out of its back and suspending it like the strings of a puppet.

"I sense... anger," it said. "And sadness. They are intertwined within you. Locked in a dance. Or a battle. It is hard to tell. But you are different. That is why you are here."

The thing dimmed slightly, and Koln could see eyes—or at least an interpretation of them. There were no irises or pupils, just pristine orbs of white. Chin lowered to chest, it held its arms out to Koln.

“What do you want of me?” Koln said. His anger was leading the dance.

“Peace.” The balls of its feet touched the ground, followed by its heels. A circular shape extruded from the floor and it sat down upon it.

“You’re in my head.” Another circular shape rose up and the thing motioned for him to sit. He did.

“And you are in mine.” More balls of energy traced up many of the strands.

Suddenly, a sense of calm came over Koln. Perhaps due to the sudden admission of equal footing, or that he just didn’t care anymore—he couldn’t tell. He did know that this was the end of something. But ends never seemed to seal off things completely. There was always a flaw in their stonework that beginnings were able to find and bring the walls down.

“I know,” Koln said. But he didn’t know. The words just came out. His subconscious was ahead of him.

“Hope brought you here. As did love. Fear. Even anger. I can still feel it festering inside you, like a starving animal ready to strike. I know these things because it is what brought me here.” It waved a hand dismissively to the room. “To this tomb.”

Koln leaned forward and said, “Who are you?”

“I was a man once. Like you. Seeking something. Something I did find for a time. Until I understood that it would never truly give me what I wanted.”

“And what is that?”

“I already told you. Peace.”

“You said that is what you wanted of me.”

“And it is. You can give it to me.”

“I don’t understand.”

Its head turned and Koln’s gaze followed. Liora stood a few feet away, as perfect as he had left her. Her smile doused the remaining embers that had burned behind his ribs. She approached him and held his face in her hands. He could feel her touch, and it sent tingles down his jawline. He wanted to drown in her eyes.

“Almost real,” it said and Koln snapped from his reverie.

"That is what kept me here. My hope sustained me. Maybe if I wished hard enough, he would come back."

Koln stood and approached the thing, grabbing what should be its neck. The embers in his gut flared back to life. "Who are you? Tell me now or I will tear your throat out. I swear it. Tell me why you brought me here."

"I see my clothes fit you. Well enough anyway. I remember when I had a use for such things. Such mundane things. Funny how we can find pleasure in them, is it not? The soft cushion of a bed. That used to be where I slept when I first found this place. I haven't thought about sleeping for a very long time. But now, seeing you here before me..." Its eyes stared through Koln. "... I am envious."

Koln squeezed harder. "Tell me."

"I was once called Taulian," it said, pausing a moment. "You may call me that, I suppose. If it makes you more comfortable."

Taulian sat up straight and Koln's hands slipped from his neck.

"Does it?" Taulian asked.

Koln nodded and his arms fell to his sides.

"Good. Now, tell me of her."

"W-what?" Koln rubbed his eyes, trying to settle his spinning head. Just looking at Taulian took effort. Like staring into the sun.

"Your... Liora."

"You know her name?"

"Of course. I know many names. And their features as well as my own. Well, I suppose, what mine used to be."

"Then you must know everything else. Why hear it from me? Do you find pleasure in the misery of others?"

"No. I do not. If I showed you a portrait of someone, could you tell me what their favorite music was? Favorite meal? Color?"

Koln wished Taulian would get straight to the point and not dally in riddles. "I suppose not."

"I know as much about Liora as I would from seeing her depicted on canvas. I know the nuance of her form, but noth-

ing more. Her story is what truly gives her life. Beauty.”

“You first.”

“Pardon?”

“Tell me first. You mentioned you wished someone would come back. Who?”

Koln heard something resembling a sigh and Taulian stood, his array of strings swinging with the motion of his body. “Very well.” Taulian raised his arm in a smooth arc and the air in its wake shimmered and color. Soon, the colors formed images and overtook everything within Koln’s field of view.

A boy sat on the crest of a hill, sun catching in the wisps of his hair. He held something in his hands and his fingers moved across it with delicacy. A smile grew on his face and he raised the object up into the light, proudly checking every angle. Twigs tied together with string and blades of grass created the crude form of a man and boy, hands joined. Koln supposed they could be anyone: brothers, friends. But the way the boy’s face beamed told Koln they were more than that. They were something crafted from a deeper bond.

The boy’s head swiveled over his shoulder and he stood, his creation tumbling from his grasp. His face went slack and he started to run even before his head came back around. Within two steps, the boy tripped on something and tumbled down the hill. He pushed himself up on his knees just before a shadow overtook him. When the sun burned away the fog, a man knelt in the grass, head hung low. He held the remains of the twig sculpture as it burned away into black dust. The particles transformed into a metallic mass crawling with what looked like tiny ants. He threw it away in disgust. His face was shrouded in shadow, but specks of sunlight refracted through tears that poured down his cheek.

Everything around the man faded to the cold tones of the domed room Koln had almost forgotten he was in. However, the man stayed kneeling on the floor, sinuous strands of white growing out of his back and into the ceiling.

“I am sorry,” Koln said.

Taulian nodded and the glowing flesh reclaimed his body



once again. "As am I."

"What brought you here? His ghost? Like my Liora?"

"You still don't know? I sense a power within you. After all, that is what brought you here from so far away. I know the people of Hollow Rise are plagued by what I have brought." He looked away. "But I do not care. They are the ones who drove me here. All I wanted... was to see my boy again."

"Haunted..." Koln remembered Gerrod and what he had told him. "Of course."

A chuckle reverberated from Taulian; the sound of machines. "They are a dim-witted lot, and I am not surprised that they believe the ghosts of the ones they loved have risen from the dead. Jaeruk has done well, it seems. He comes closer to his vision. Pity."

"So... she is just... just—"

"A memory. A sketch of what she once was. Brought to life by me. And you."

Heat flowed into Koln's face, up his neck and prickled his scalp. He had recognized the emptiness. On the cliffside. He had known something wasn't right, so why was he so angry now? Because he had been forced away from his pathetic excuse of a life? Or that Gerrod had been caught in the middle of this charade and perished? He felt hands on him again. They were warm, the skin like satin. He looked up into her eyes and she smiled. That persistent lock of hair spilled from behind her ear and tickled his face. Even if she weren't real, she still had the touch. The touch to settle him. To chase the demons away.

Koln's gaze shifted to Taulian. "You have to stop."

"Isn't that what you are here to do? Stop me? Save the scum of Hollow Rise from their own ignorance? Find some semblance of closure?" He stood "You brought yourself here as much as I did, Koln. Whatever lives inside you pulled you to this place." Taulian jabbed his fist skyward. "They do not deserve peace. They drove me to this pit, exiled me, when all I wanted was to look for a way to bring my son back." His voice shook Koln's bones and the strands hanging from the ceiling began to tangle.

He was right. Koln had witnessed a glimpse of what Jaeruk was doing to the people of Hollow Rise. He was taking things away from them. Things that he knew, from the curse that burned within him, were neither good nor evil. They just were. And if those things, the numenera, could bring someone the smallest shred of happiness...

"I supposed it's my turn," Koln said.

Taulian regarded him with those lifeless eyes of his and sank back into his seat.

Koln thought about where to begin. How could he be true to her? He was no poet, and no storyteller. He was sure that anything he said would be less of a shadow than the ghostly form that had led him here. But he had to try.

"Tell me."

And he did. He told him of their plans to build a home on the cliffs of the far coast. How she had taken him away from a life of servitude. Had allowed him to be his own master and accept the gifts he had been given, no matter how much he despised them. How she had fallen from the very cliffs that they would have one day called their home, doing something as ordinary as picking wildflowers.

A stillness settled between them and Koln felt like he could breath for the first time in hours. Perhaps, days.

"Strange how such beautiful things can have such simple ends," Taulian said.

Koln could only nod.

"There is one last thing I ask of you. Something I have found it impossible to do for so long."

"What?" His words were sand against stone.

"To say goodbye."

Taulian was gone. Liora stood in his place framed by the endless sky. He approached her, stepping through the tall grass. He took her into his arms and buried his face in her hair, smelling her sweet smell.

He squeezed her tighter, hands resting on the hollow of her lower back, never wanting to let go. The bumps on her spine stood out against his palm, becoming sharper with every passing moment. He held her at arms length and her body began

molding to his grip, separating into dark stalks. Then, twigs. She wilted and fell to the earth. Dried petals and leaves crumbled between his finger and floated to join the rest.

The sun faded from blinding white to dull violet and the ocean air turned stale, rushing into Koln's nose. The sky became walls and the blades of grass lost their golden luster, intertwining until only stone remained. Taulian slouched against the far wall, the strands torn from his back, hanging like frozen rain. But he wasn't the ethereal form he once was. He was just a man. The man who had kneeled on the hill, just wanting to hold his son instead of the twisted remains of the Iron Wind.

Taulian's flesh receded by the second, becoming like wet, crumpled paper. His cloudy eyes peeked out from behind heavy lids, welling with tears. The loose skin around his mouth drew up into something vaguely resembling a smile.

"I am sorry," he said. "It won't be long... until... you find another."

"What?"

"For..."

A tingling ran the length of Koln's spine. He arched his back. It wasn't an altogether unpleasant feeling. It spread outward from his spine, riding down each bone of his ribcage and circled around his torso. It converged on his sternum, lighting his heart on fire. He threw his head back and screamed. It were as if every vein in his body had turned against him and wanted to squeeze the life from his body. White light exploded behind his tightly closed eyes before all went black.

A wall of fire burned in the night. Silhouettes stalked across the flames, criss-crossing with each other until they looked like the skittering legs of a giant beast. Grass grew up from the flames, retaining its color and motion. Dawn reached through the darkness and extinguished the yellows and oranges of the grass, turning them to slate. People wandered about the tall blades, passing through one another, seemingly unaware of their surroundings. Ghosts. Periodically, one would

participate in a single-sided conversation, synthetic emotions near perfect. Koln could see them for what they were now: copies, preying on those who were so blinded by their grief that a feigned smile or gesture was as perfect as they had remembered. And he could feel them, almost control them. Through every thread that stretched from his back, he could feel his power leading them on, making them more convincing than ever. Much more than Taulian had been able to do. They told him so.

One stood motionless in the distance, hair billowing on an unseen breeze, now perfect in every way. He knew her better than Taulian had. Now that he was the only thing giving her life, she was real. As real as he had ever perceived her with any of his physical senses.

She took his hand and led him through the endless crowd to a cliffside. The clouds parted as they approached the edge, sun warming his flesh. He closed his eyes and watched the light turn his vision red. Basked in it. This was real. This was...

Koln opened his eyes. His fingers dangled before him, as did his feet. He brought a hand closer to his face and examined the skin, which had a slight luminescence to it. He could see pale blue veins pumping below his flesh and black bones flexing his fingers as his mind told them to. Below, lay a heap that could only be Taulian. The wet, paper flesh that had once encased his body was now like ash, cracked and flaking. A film of dust already coated his clothing.

Koln lowered himself to the floor, but could not feel it beneath his feet. He walked through the halls that wound through infinity while a thousand voices whispered through the strands extending from his back. But one stood apart from the rest. He could hear her voice. She was calling to him. It echoed like a sweet melody, begging him to find her. Taulian had been wrong. She was real.

They told him so.

He followed her voice, just like he had followed her here, across the Beyond. Just a few more steps. He could feel it. She was so close. And then they would be together.

Just a few more steps...

## ***The Bard Speaks***

*The Bard conjured up a series of glyphs and symbols, fragments of code from a bygone age. In the sensory buffers of the awaiting data sprites, the code coalesced into an introduction.*

*"This story is one of waiting." The Bard's code spelled out.*

*"But I'm boooooooooored." A nano-fragment moaned, already having waited almost a nanosecond for the story to begin.*

*The Bard encoded some humour into the datastream. "Many of you see the meatlings as slow, drifting through life whilst you think a billion thoughts a cycle. Imagine what slow might look to them. Imagine how they might see us... this story," The Bard smiled, noticing the fragmented fidgeting of the nano-fragment, "is called 'Hilfolk...'"*

# Hilfolk

*Petteri Sulonen*

I had been running for weeks when I arrived at Camp. I had no idea where I was or where I wanted to go, other than somewhere there wouldn't be a Baron's necht past every bend of the road. I'm a city brat, and stealing eggs from farmers' calcon houses didn't exactly come naturally, and hedges and ditches were not much of a hiding place. Away is where I had been headed, and Camp was about as far Away as a city brat can be without starving or getting eaten alive by something nasty with teeth.

The road had turned into a path, and the path into a rut, as it wound its way up the rolling hills where the laapa grew in vast, untouched stands. Laapa is good wood. Won't rot, won't swell in water if just lightly oiled, won't crack, hard and tight-grained, but with steam you can bend it into all kinds of shapes. It was a logging Camp, belonging to some greasy-palmed merchant house up city-side, but that didn't matter much up in the laapa hills.

I stumbled into Camp before sundown. I must have been a sight, too, my city clothes all in rags, my shoes falling to bits, and badly in need of a wash. I was looking to steal something to eat, but there was no way to get in without being spotted, and it was too far to go back, so I thought to hells with it and walked in. Camp had a fence and a ditch around it, a big hide tent with smoke coming out of it, and a few smaller ones. There were logs all cleaned up and stacked high, and there was a score or so rough-looking folk sitting around some fires.

And hilfolk. After being in Camp for a while, you tend to forget about them, but when you first arrive, they stand out. Hilfolk are tall and skinny, with sunburned pale skin, blond hair and watery blue eyes, and they're all covered up with

angular drawings, like really dense tattoos, only they change. There were a dozen or so around Camp, mostly doing nothing much. Some were gnawing at some old bones, one was digging around in a midden, the rest just standing or sitting around.

"You new? Go see Arnyk," one of the human folk around the fire says, and jerks his head toward one of the smaller tents.

Arnyk was a burly fellow, with a red nose and shrewd little eyes. He was sitting on a dirty cushion on the ground, bent over some book, and glared at me when I folded back the tent flap and came in. "Who are you?" he says.

"I'm Jennec," I say. "They said outside I should come see Arnyk. That you?"

"Damn right that's me. You here to work?"

"I guess," I answered.

"Good enough. These are the rules. They're real simple, I made them myself. Rule one, don't be a dumb shit who does dumb shit that pisses me off, or I'll feed you to the hilfolk. Rule two, make yourself useful. If you're not useful, I'll run your skinny ass out of Camp. If you are useful, you'll get to kip in the common tent and eat from the stewpot, and if you're really useful we'll give you proper working clothes and even pay you in lumber. Any questions?"

"None," I said. That seemed to please him.

"Then get out, I have work to do."

The next morning at sunup I got up with the rest, human and hilfolk alike, and set to learning the craft of lumbering. Not that much to it; I was hale of body and had some use of various tools in the past, so it was a matter looking what the others were doing and joining in. I got the hang of it easily enough. It was sweaty work, even though the hilfolk did more sweating than the humans. We were yelling and slapping and kicking them to do the really heavy work of dragging the laapa logs to the rut where we had skids to move them to Camp, and then dragging the skids with the logs there when we came back at sundown.

Before the week was out, one morning as we were setting



out, Arnyk sees us and says “You, boy, why are you not in your working clothes?”

“These are all I have,” I say.

“Then go get yourself some,” he says and is off again. So I do. From that day on, I was one of the gang, and it was not long before I started earning a wage—to start with, half a log out of every hundred our team brings in, and going up from there. There was food to eat, and sacks in the common tent that we filled with fresh heather when we needed, if I got a rip in my work clothes there was Errolt to mend it, and I have had worse company. It was not a bad life, as such things go, and I think at times in those early days I was almost happy.

That all started to change with the accident. We had gotten careless with a big laapa. It had a limb that was grown crooked. Soon as the tree starts falling, the bad limb catches on one next to it, tears off, and falls, and pulls down a big part of the other tree’s canopy with it too. I was the first to see it start, and that it was coming straight for Norfon and Eres. I let out a yell but I knew it was too late for them, there’s no way they could get out the way.

Only, when I let out that yell, three of the hilfolk who were standing around near them sprung up, fast as lightning, and shoved them away. One caught the full force of the limb in their stead. Crushed it like a bug, it did. I ran up and looked right into its eyes as the light went out of them. Had the same placid look as they always do. But then, when it died, it just disappeared. Its markings suddenly stood out, real vivid and sharp, and convulsed, just once. Then it collapsed inward and fell into dust. There wasn’t even a smear left on the ground. I went back and checked, after we had the limb cleared and the log in the skid.

“Creeps you out, don’t it?” says Norfon. “Just wait ’til it comes back. First time I saw that happen, I didn’t sleep for a week. Oh, and, thanks,” he says. Thanks? That’s strange, I thought. It was the hilfolk he should thank. But turns out it was me after all, only they saw it before I did.

“Make it jump.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Make it jump.”

I had been wolfing down the stew back at Camp just before sundown, that hilfolk’s placid dying gaze still burned to the back of my head, when Norfon said the boss wants to see me. I’d noticed folks were looking at me strange, but I honestly didn’t get why. I mean, it had been the ‘folk as had saved Norfon and Eres, I’d just yelled, is all. It was strange that we usually had to beat the living shit out of them to get them to do anything, true, and I’d never seen any of them move like that, but still. What did I have to do with it?

Arnyk had a hilfolk squatting on its haunches in his tent. Skinny, blond, with a big welt over one of those placid blue eyes, and the pics had a triangular pattern to them. Badly used, this one, even by Camp standards.

Jump? I turned to look at it, and it jumped. Straight up from that deep squat, higher than any human could. I jumped too, out of sheer fright. Arnyk laughed and clapped his knees.

“Again! Make it jump again!”

I look at it, and sure enough, it jumps again, even higher.

“Can you do two? Jollo! Asshole! Get me more of those useless shits in here, pretty damn quick!”

My head’s reeling. Arnyk looks at me, looking real smug and pleased with himself.

“Are you fucking deaf or stupid, Jennec? I hope you’re not deaf or stupid, ‘cause I don’t like stupid shit, remember? I need you to do two.”

“Do? What? Boss, sorry, but I’m kinda confused here. What did I just do?”

He looks at me, those little eyes of his like slits.

“You’re the one doing it. You tell me.”

There’s a yelling and thwacking coming from outside. It’s Jollo, driving two hilfolk into the tent with a stick. They stumble in and squat on the ground, like the first one. “Anything else, boss?” goes Jollo, and Arnyk sends him off with a wave.

“Do two. Hell, do all three. Jump!”

I look at them. They jump. All at once, with perfect timing, like three copies of the same hilfolk. I get a cold feeling in my belly. Arnyk laughs again and claps his hands.

“Now make ‘em dance the cotillion.”

“What?” I was saying that a lot.

“The cotillion, shit for brains. Or if you don’t know what that is, pick any ol’ village dance. Make ‘em dance.”

Dance? I remember the Jerek’s Day pattern dances, there was someone... and I look at the hilfolk again, and they... dance. Their steps are perfect, way better than I ever could do them. The three of them make a triangle, link arms, whirl, unlink, two make a square with the third spinning between them, and then out and change.

The tent starts to whirl too, and things start going dark at the edges, and my mouth tastes like cotton. I sit down, on the floor, and just like that the hilfolk stop too, and flop down in their squats, their placid eyes on me.

Arnyk is grinning so wide his face could split in half. “You and I, my friend Jennec, are going to be shit rich, and the rest of the gang won’t be doing too bad for themselves either. Well enough to keep them in smoke and whores for a good long while anyway.” He reaches into a box and pulls out a round synth flask and a couple of mugs, pours, hands me one. I take it, my fingers feeling numb. He toasts me and I drink, mechanically, my head reeling. It’s good stuff, strong but smooth. Imported for sure, no way they could make poison like that in these conditions, besides I could swear there was no still in Camp.

“Boss... what was that? Please, tell me, this scares the shit out of me.”

Arnyk gives me a sly look over his mug. “You, my friend, have a gift. You can make those useless shits useful. We had one like that before, and those were some rich ol’ days.”

“A gift?”

“Yeah.” He takes a long drink. “Look at those shits. What do they do if we don’t beat them into doing something? Nothing. Whole lot of nothing. They just squat and if they get

really hungry, dig in some midden to find a bone to gnaw on.” He kicks at one of them, leaving a mark. It just rolls with the blow and then rolls back, right back into its squat, blue eyes as placid as ever. “See, nothing. Trouble is, they’re good as useless even with a stick to their backs. Aneen would do their job better, but I don’t have any aneen. But you, my friend, you can get them to do whatever you like just by thinking of it.”

“What? How? Why me?”

“I have no fucking idea, my friend Jennec, but I suggest you make the most of it. You think they might give good head? I fucked one once and that sure was nothing to shout about.” He looks at them in a way I don’t like at all.

“You want me to get them to do lumber work?”

“That, ‘though I don’t give a shit what else you make them do. We need to find out how many you can drive at once. The one we had before could drive a crew of six, and they went through the stand like a scythe through a field of ripe corn.”

“What happened to him?”

“Her. Beats me. One day she was just gone. Never came back. Been struggling to meet quota ever since. But now, thanks to my friend Jennec and his happy little band of useless painted shits, all that will change.”

That it would. It did not turn out quite the way the boss planned, though, and wherever he is, he didn’t take any lumber with him, I think.

### *III*

It was well after sundown, and dark. I staggered out of Arnyk’s and back into the common tent. I suddenly felt hungry. There were a few scrapings left in the stewpot, mostly some bones and gristle, but they went down just fine. Then I crashed on my sack, and remembered nothing ’til the morning.

The next day was a blur. The boss got together a gang of six hilfolk, and got me to march them up and down the main path in Camp. Sure enough, I could do that. I practiced a little, getting them to pick up a log from the pile, roll it, drag it, put it back. It was easy. I just had to picture what needed doing

and think ‘them,’ and they did it, better than I could have. So off we went into the woods again, me and my merry band of hilfolk, and most of Camp whooping and hollering behind us.

By then I was reasonably comfortable handling a saw and an ax, on or off a springboard, and with much of the rest of the craft of lumbering. That day I learned it takes more than that to be a lumberjack. If Eres and Norfon and Grandma hadn’t been there to yell at me I would have been at least three hilfolk short, and very likely one or two humans too. I was no foreman. Even so, we felled nearly double our usual daily tally, and it was a lighter day than most, for us humans anyway. The hilfolk looked worn when we got back, and were even quieter than usual, squatting to sleep where they were after the logs had been stacked.

There was a party that night. Arnyk had sent in for more wagons for the next haul out, and more food and drink with it. I did not party much, though; although I had barely moved a muscle all day, I was exhausted, so tired I could barely stand and feeling strangely brittle, like that day had taken more out of me than sweat. Hungry, too, so I was happy about the food at the feast anyway. Venison, it was, meat off the bone, and marrow.

Rich. I had never been close to getting rich. Hand to mouth was my life, and the rare times there was a windfall I pissed it away fast as it came. But the idea of ‘rich’ felt appealing, I won’t lie. I had tallied that a year of work at Camp would be enough to earn me two or three logs, which would suffice to buy me passage on a ship out of Blackport with no questions asked, and a little to get me started wherever I should arrive. This new ... gift of mine changed everything. Laapa was valuable, and I was the most valuable worker in Camp. That meant pay at the highest rate of one log out of every ten my hilfolk felled, and I would earn in three days what I thought would take a year, and in three months I would have enough to buy my own ship should I want one. I felt sick to my stomach and at the same time elated. I *would* be rich, and shake the drit of this miserable barony off the soles of my shoes, and start a new life somewhere. Maybe I’d open a tavern, or a

bawdy-house. My future looked sunny, those first week or two.

I couldn't really say exactly when the nightmare started. Maybe it was when that hilfolk as had died in the accident started to come back. At least Norfon had warned me, though he hadn't spoken about it since and I hadn't pressed him. I don't know what it was that got me to go back to the clearing where that limb had crushed it, that day as we were breaking for lunch, but I did, and there it was. First I thought it was a strange kind of mushroom growing from the moss; a pale-yellow hairy lump it was. But it wasn't a mushroom. It was its head, the hair all spread over the ground, and the face with those placid blue eyes looking up at the sun, through the big hole in the canopy the great laapa that had crushed him had left. I wanted to run away, but I guess curiosity, or a strange fascination anyway, got the better of me. I got closer and squatted down right over it. Those eyes looked right at me. Blue and placid. I never could tell what was going on behind them, any more than a cat's, although those pupils were round, not slitted.

"Are you all right?" I asked, stupidly, but it didn't answer. They never do. I wondered if I should dig it out, or something, when I heard a step behind me. It was Norfon.

"They come back," he said. "Nothing you can do. A few days and he'll grow right out of the ground, and then shake the mud from his feet and amble back into camp. Maybe get hisself killed again, the poor sod, and come back, again and again."

"They're immortal?" I asked.

"Aye, or leastaways they keep coming back," says Norfon. "Come, lunch is over. There's trees to fell."

I kept checking on the hilfolk, and sure enough, it grew like Norfon said it would. In a tenday, it joined its kin in the team I was running. By now all twelve hilfolk we had at Camp were in it; with it, they made thirteen. I couldn't help but notice how much more hale the revenant looked next to the others; they were thin as rails, pale, covered in welts and bruises and scabs and scratches and bleeding from places. Only their tattoos were vivid as ever, stark against the pale

skin, jagged zigzags on one, concentric squares on another, a mosaic of shapes that never seemed to repeat on a third. I had given them names in my mind; they were Zig and Jag, Box and Crackle, Bubbles, Whorls, and Triangles, and a few others besides. I never used them in front of others except once, and then Eres just said, “Never give hilfolk names. Never.”

Then they started dying. Bubbles was first. It was part of a team hauling a skid I knew was overloaded, and halfway back to Camp it just staggered for a bit, and started to fall, but before it hit the ground it fell into dust. I don’t know if I made up the memory afterward, but as I remember it, I felt a little chill, a little tremor when that happened, like someone dripping cold water along my spine.

We lost Zig and Jag before next day’s work—they got up all right but then collapsed into dust before they could take a step. Arnyk was none too happy about that, mind; yelled himself blue at the “useless shits,” and me for good measure. I figured we must have overworked and underfed them. We never gave them much to eat to start with, and under my command they were working far, far harder than before, when we were just beating them. Looking at them, I doubted any of them would last the day, other than Stars, the one as had just come back.

I told Arnyk as much. He spat. “Pah, and now you tell me. We’ll have to feed them then. You’ve been eating three lads’ worth too lately, know that? And we’ll need to get you some more. No matter, we’re well ahead of tally anyhow.” He called three days off. We needed it, us almost as much as the hilfolk. Some of us had asked for town leave for a while already; without Arnyk’s leave, if we left Camp we would forfeit any of our pay that didn’t amount to a full log, and then have to start over from the bottom of the scale. But really, he needed the time to put together an expedition to get more hilfolk. He didn’t want to wait the fortnight it would take for Zig, Jag, and Bubbles to come back, and he had grander designs for me—and the hilfolk—anyway.

“What was Rule One?”

“Don’t be a stupid shit, boss.” That was Reyhan. Nobody would be likely to call her a stupid shit.

“Very good, boys and girls. Don’t be a stupid shit. Now, how do you get to be a stupid shit?”

“Do stupid shit that pisses you off, boss.”

“Right again. Now, what would you say is stupid shit that would piss me off? Anyone? All right, I’ll tell you. I’ll give you a few fucking examples. I’ll even draw you stupid shits a picture. One example of stupid shit is inviting the Baron’s nechts in this here tightly-run Camp. I do not like the Baron’s nechts. They are busybodies and highway robbers when they can get away with it, and when you see one, it always, always ends up expensive. That expense, by the way, is coming out of *your* tally, not mine, not the Company’s. But you know what’s even bigger stupid shit than that? Anyone? I’ll tell you what: narcing out the aneen that’s shitting logs of finest laapa for your fucking benefit, that’s what.”

Yeah, stupid shit.

There had been big changes at Camp, ever since Jag and Bubbles and Zig got dusted. The boss had got what’s needed together for an expedition to get us more hilfolk. He sent out scouts to find a settlement, and sure enough there was one in a little dell about half a day’s march from Camp. Then a dozen of us—including my own sorry self, Norfon, Eres, and Arnyk himself—went to find us some. That went rather better than expected, at least for certain understandings of ‘better.’

There’s a thing about running hilfolk that’s a bit hard to explain. Several things. For one thing, I have no idea how I do it. I just want something done and think of the hilfolk doing it, and it happens. With one or two it really is as easy as that, but if there’s a team of six or twelve or more, I go into this strange kind of ... flow, I suppose, is the closest word I can think of. It’s like I’m in the eye of a great big storm, and the hilfolk are the storm, only I know and see everything they’re doing, and am doing it, only not the usual way? Pah, I told you



I can't explain it. Anyway the upshot is that days when I run hilfolk are a bit of a blur. I don't really have much idea of what happened afterward, although I recognise things if I see them right enough.

The day of the expedition ended up that way. The march up to their village was simple enough. The woods aren't hard to march in; the canopies are lush enough that little sunlight gets through and there's not much undergrowth. The only trouble would be if you ran across some rough ground or one of the gorges that cut into the hills here and there. Arnyk's scouts had marked a trail right to the hilfolk village so we had no trouble like that, and the beasts left us alone too.

There are some pretty nasty things in the Westwood, but in these parts at least they would rarely bother a group big as ours. Alone or in twos or threes would be a different matter—I only now realised how lucky I had been to reach Camp in one piece to start with.

The hilfolk village was a cluster of huts and some caves in the hillside, surrounded by a deep ditch and stockade, presumably to keep the beasts out, with two gigantic snags in the middle. Laapas bigger than I'd ever seen. Bigger than any of us had seen, and believe me some of us had seen a lot of trees. Dead, stripped of bark, and carved from roots to highest limbs full of intricate lines and loops and figures, much like the moving tattoos on the hilfolk themselves. The weird thing about them was that you could seem them right and clear from the first instant we saw them as we crested the hill overlooking the village, and when we got closer it's as if we just saw *more* of them. Like they always looked the same size, no matter where you look from.

We marched right into the village. There were maybe two hundred odd hilfolk there. Looked much the same as ours, only better fed and less bruised. These ones were doing other stuff than just squatting in place or gnawing at a bone though—some were weaving something out of strips of bark, stuff like that—, but they were doing it in the same can't-give-a-shit placid way they had about anything. They didn't pay any attention to us at all when we walked in.

“So, Jennec, how ‘bout we see how many will jump to your call here? Plenty to go around, seems to me.”

I nodded, swallowed, and thought “Jump.”

They all did. Every last one of them. In perfect unison. It shook up even Arnyk a bit, but he recovered right quick.

“All right then. Simple enough, we move Camp here. Plenty of useless shits for Jennec, a big, fresh stand, and it’ll be easy enough to clear a rut for the skids. The stand we set up for is almost done anyway. Jennec, get a score or so of those shits with us, and we’ll be set up here in no time. Then we’ll start with those two big ones. I think you and I deserve to pick which particular logs count toward our pay, no?”

That was two moons ago. It only took a day for the us and the hilfolk to move Camp into the village, and another two days to clear a rut good enough for skids back to the track where the big wagons came. Arnyk moved into the biggest hut in the village and called another three-day break, with town leave for those who wanted it. I took the second-biggest one, and if anybody objected they didn’t do it to my face, nor Arnyk’s.

Then we felled those two huge snags. Arnyk put his mark on one of them and mine on another. Those strange carvings faded when they fell. That single log was worth a lumber house in itself. Snag laapa is worth ten times as much as live to start with, and these were absolute top of the top quality. These wouldn’t become beams or pilings or even ships. Cabinet-makers for the longnails would fall over each other for it, unless the zitar-makers got them first. I really would be rich.

Not that any of us were doing bad for ourselves. We were going through that stand like a cloud of arcsis through a field. The clearing around Village got bigger and bigger, the piles of stripped logs higher and higher. We soon had a track all the way to Village good enough for the big carts, and they were coming and going daily. I may have gotten a bit careless with the hilfolk on the way. They kept coming back after a fortnight or so, so even if I lost two a day that left us only thirty short, and ninescore were more than enough to keep us going

full speed. Someone up city-side must have been rubbing her greasy palms together pretty happily.

Only then that dumb shit happened.

It was early morning. I woke up to the thud-thud-thud of aneen claws, real close. Many of them. We had no aneen here, so it had to be the Baron's nechts. I ducked out of my hut from the back door. There was nothing much there but the latrine pit. The nechts were yelling "Up! Up! Everyone out and lined up in front!" and tearing down the woven bark curtains that kept a bit of the night chill out of the huts. I panicked. I reached for my hilfolk but all I could think of was "hide me!"

It worked. I have no idea what they did, nor how they did it, but they hid me. It felt like sinking into cool, clean, dark water. The yells and shouts faded into the distance. Everything was really peaceful. Nothing but a feeling of tremendous space, and endless time, and perfect calm.

It felt like I was there for an age, but really it was only a bell or two. The nechts had torn up the camp. They *had* been looking for me. When they didn't find me, they started to get seriously angry. Finally Arnyk had a private conversation with their leader and reached some kind of agreement, and they thundered off again. When I returned from wherever I was, they were gone, and Camp—Village—was a mess. They had set fire to a couple of the huts and generally smashed or broken everything they could, and if there were any valuables small enough to grab, they had taken those too. Bastards. Nechts. Just another kind of robber, except they never hang for it.

That left the question of who had narced me out to them, and why. Which was why Arnyk had us all lined up in the clearing by the stumps of those two giant snags, and was yelling at us.

## V

"It was me."

Arnyk had been yelling at us for a while. Since he couldn't figure out who the snitch was, he had rounded up everyone

who had last been on town leave. That would be Grandma, Mugg, Norfon, Rollo, and Ten-piece. He was roaring mad and was going to feed all of them to the hilfolk, just like his Rule One promised. I had been arguing that it *couldn't* be Norfon at least. There were some in Camp who I thought might've done it—they didn't like my being Arnyk's new favourite, not to mention that I was making more than ten times as much as the next biggest earner, although I had thought that they had the sense to see that their earnings had more than doubled too. Not Norfon! I was sure he didn't envy me, he never was a suck-up to Arnyk, and I had saved his fucking life, back when that limb fell.

It was Norfon.

"Well, well. Norfon. Some of these others I know are dumb shits, but I did not expect it of you. Very brave of you to come forward. Very commendable, sparing your comrades. Now explain, and I might bash your skull in first before feeding your carcass to the useless shits."

"What difference does it make?"

"So how much did you get? How much was the price on my friend Jennec's head? That much more than what you're earning here? What did he do, bed the Baroness and run off with the heirloom jewels?"

"Nah. The price wasn't much and I didn't even take it."

"Now that is some seriously dumb shit. People, have you ever heard of dumber shit than that? No?"

"Please, Norfon. Tell me," I pleaded.

"Can't you see? Jennec, the Hilfolk! We're murdering them. We treat them worse than animals, but they're not. They're folk. When it was just us, we only took a few and usually let them go after a while, but since you found your... gift, we're burning through them like kindling. There aren't that many. You know of any other villages besides this one that we've wrecked? You had to go, so things could get back to what they were."

"Oh, the *hilfolk*," Arnyk sneered. "Useless shits. Look at them. If they were any use, they wouldn't *let* us do what we do. I swear on my father's balls that if anyone did to my home

what we've been doing to theirs, I would hunt down every last one of them, tear off their heads and shit down their throats. Well, Norfon, my friend, since you feel such kinship with the useless shits, you're in luck because you will get to be very close with them. Very close indeed."

Arnyk made us all watch the execution. He bashed in Norfon's head with a sledge himself, and then had the corpse dragged to the hilfolk. They would never let meat go to waste. They ate Norfon, in the same calm way they did everything. I threw up until I was curled up on the ground, dry-heaving and spitting bile. I wasn't the only one.

Nobody would use that sledge since. Arnyk wouldn't even clean it. He left it, the blood and brains congealing into a dark crust, hanging above his chair in his hut. A little reminder of who's in charge, I'm sure he thought it.

We were a tough bunch. Had to be, with the life we were living. Things reached a new kind of normal soon enough. I found I could run all two hundred odd hilfolk at once, although then I fell into a deep almost-dream where at the same time I knew exactly what each and every one of them was seeing and doing and what needed to be done, and nothing at all.

Norfon's betrayal and Arnyk's justice had left us all feeling pretty glum. There wasn't much talk by the fires after sundown, even less laughing, and more fighting than there used to be. Quite a lot really, for a bunch that was bone-weary. Arnyk worked us even harder, I think, just to keep us too tired out to cut each other's throats. He also nailed up a big board to a stock in Village square, right by the pits where the twin snags had stood. We had dug up the stumps, even, the wood was that good. Ingo the tallyman marked up everyone's tally there. We were getting rich. Every one of us in our measure. Seeing that tally go up kept us going too.

By now, I had almost enough marks on that tallyboard to buy myself into a longnail estate, wherever I would end up after this was over. A few more, and I would be set for life.

It wasn't easy to keep at it, and it kept getting harder. I had developed a gigantic appetite. Seemed like the more hilfolk I was running, the more I had to eat. I had a special taste for

bones, and if I couldn't crunch a few every day, I felt like mine were becoming thin and brittle. The gang had made fun of that, before, but now they just glared or pretended not to notice. I didn't care.

Something else had happened too. When I lost a hilfolk, I felt it. No doubt about it anymore. It was like being stabbed, a feeling of a cold blade sliding in between your ribs, only not in any particular place. First time I felt that I got scared, and from there on out I did even more to keep the hilfolk safe. For Norfon, too, the sorry bastard, may he rest in peace in the hilfolks' belly.

I also got Arnyk to make sure they had enough to eat. The carts were bringing up plenty; with the lumber we were producing we could afford to eat like kings up here, and we did. I just made sure the hilfolk kept their bellies full too. They didn't get any less skinny even so, but at least they stopped falling into dust after a hard day's work. Soon I wasn't losing two a day or even one a day, but barely any at all. Arnyk grumbled about that. He thought it was because I wasn't running them hard enough, but if that was so it didn't slow the logs piling up any.

Zig, Jag, and Bubbles came back too. Good thing for Bubbles that we had moved Camp into Village, so the cart track no longer went where it was before, because the carts would've rolled right over Bubbles' head as it was pushing up from the ground, and I don't think the drivers would have stopped for that.

Then things got seriously weird.

## VI

It had been a particularly hard day. We were getting close to the limits of the stand, and the ground there was too rough and steep for the skids, so we—the hilfolk, that is—had to carry the logs a fair bit. I was exhausted, so much so that I could barely totter back to Village. And no, having the hilfolk carry me would not have helped; it was running them that was wearing me out in the first place.

When we got back, I crashed into bed—yeah, I had a proper bed, no more heather-filled sacks for me—and went to sleep. Only it wasn't exactly sleep. It's more like going right *through* sleep, and to that same place I was when the hilfolk hid me from the Baron's nechts. Only this time I kept going, and here's where things become difficult to explain, because when I say I saw or felt something, it was seeing without sight and feeling without touch. It was there, but not there, if you get what I mean?

To start with, I felt the hilfolk in Village, all two hundred and fourteen of them, like knots in a glittering web. I was in the centre of that web, connected to them with silver strands. Then I felt more: faintly, all of us humans, like little dark clots caught in that silvery web. The hills faded into my mind, their slopes and ravines. They were breathing, and I could feel a knot of red crawl through my mind and knew it was one of the forest's great beasts on the prowl for something to catch. Then all that flowed in too, and deep like a thrumming blue note, the vast stands of laapa, and festering, the gash we had cut into it. I plunged deeper and deeper into the dream-that-wasn't and it took in more and more: the Westwood, the lands around it, the sea, and by the shiny teeth of the Bonecaster, *time*. I could feel the laapa sprout and grow and fall, the land itself crawl across the surface of the world, splitting up and crashing together, rearing up mountains and grinding them down, and all along the hilfolk in a glittering web that waxed and waned, spread and contracted, but always there.

I knew then where the hilfolk truly dwell. If you have lived to see a mountain rise, be ground to a hillock by flowing ice, grow a forest which becomes a desert, ten, twenty, thirty times over, what does a miserable shit like Arnyk mean to you? Nothing. The hilfolk weren't silent because they were mute or mindless. They were silent because they had nothing to say to mayflies like us.

I was lost in that dream-that-wasn't for what felt like lifetimes. When I found that spark in the centre of the web that was me again, I was burning red-hot with rage. At the Baron and his nechts. At being hunted down by them. At fear.

At pain. At running. Most of all the wound we were making, at Arnyk and his petty greed, at and for Norfon now in the hilfolks' belly. When I returned to this world, it was to pain and screams. I was running all the hilfolk in Village, exhausted or not, and I was running them for blood. I was kicking over firepots. My hands, stronger than human, were tearing down huts, pushing over stacks of logs, ripping out throats, crushing skulls. I was also sitting perfectly still on my bed, as the storm flowed through my mind and destroyed all that we—I, Arnyk, all of us—had been toiling for.

The last I know of that is Arnyk bursting in, bloodied and with a fire in his eyes, in such a rage that he could not even manage his usual “useless little shits,” nothing more than a scream more bestial than a beast's. In his hands, the sledge still crusted with Norfon's blood and brains, headed straight for my head in a beautiful, slow arc, as unstoppable as the glaciers that had ground down those mountains.

That should have been that, and I should not be here telling you this tale. Yet it wasn't.

I opened my eyes to sunlight. All was peaceful. There was a cool, fresh breeze on my face with the scent of sap and earth. There were some yolmurs chattering in the distance, and the sound of running water. I tried to turn my head, but couldn't move. That did not worry me unduly, and I remember being mildly surprised at that.

The sun rose up high, and then started to set. The shadows moved and eventually reached me. Night came and it got cooler but I did not feel a chill. Dew wet my face, and the sun rose again, and again, and again.

After three sunrises I could move my head. I was in Village. There was no sign of the destruction of that night, nor the wound we had made on the land, nor any humans I could see. Only hilfolk. The huts were neat and orderly, the woven bark curtains at their doors. In place of the twin snags were two enormous pillars of wood, now alive with the same markings I had spied when I first crested the overlooking hill. I felt my two hundred and fourteen kinfolk going about their quiet business all around, paying me no heed.



Eleven days later, my feet came free. I left for the lowlands. The Baron's nechts would not be looking for one who looked like I. Perhaps I would return to the Westwood in an aeon or so. The hilfolk had made me their own, or perhaps I was one of theirs from the beginning, but I was too much of a stripling not to wither in the shadow of such giants. So down I came.

I sometimes wonder if that red-hot anger I felt when tearing up Camp was mine, or the hilfolks'. I'm inclined to believe it was mine. They're too old to get angry at little things like that. But then they must have finished what I began, after that sledge of Arnyk's connected, unless it was still me, running them from some realm so deep I have no recollection of it, for of Arnyk or the rest of our merry gang of lumberjacks the only sign that was left was that brown-crusts sledge. It was sticking out from the ground, not far from the giant wooden pillars that were the snags, like Arnyk was still holding it, under the ground. Maybe he was at that, I did not check.

Much later, I spoke to an aeon priest in Bodrov, and showed her my tattoos. She said that maybe the hilfolk were made by a world long past to be their slaves. Now the slaves had outlived their masters. I had the spirits of those masters in my blood, which made them obey my will. I don't know if what she said was true, but as explanations go, it will have to do.

That, my friend, is the meaning of these scribblings on my skin.

## ***The Bard Speaks***

*"Sometimes even the most mundane data yields the most interesting patterns." The Bard encoded into the network, "Sometimes not knowing is knowing enough."*

*"Does that mean you won't upload another story?" A simulation yelped, wide-eyed.*

*"No," The Bard laughed, "it means this story is the one known as The Angel Stone..."*

# The Angel Stone

*Petteri Sulonen*

“My oddest oddity? That has got to be this.” The old man dug in his pockets and deposited a pebble on the table. It was an altogether unremarkable pebble; yellowish synth-stone, rounded like it came from a stream-bed, about the size of a sling bullet but a little flattened. We crowded around to look at it, but it just sat there, doing nothing particularly remarkable.

“So what’s it do?” I asked.

“So far... nothing,” he replied. “Not since I first got hold of it, anyway. That was thirty years ago, on the plains of Malevich. You heard the stories of the Ghost Legions that some say walk those plains? Well, it’s true. We met them.”

“There were three of us. Dessamel, Vanandore, and me. All of us ne’er-do-wells, treading both sides of the line of the law, trying to stay clear of the nechts on the one hand, the Kronul tribes on the other, and all manner of bandits in between, dreaming of making our fortune. We’d been doing some trading in a small way with the Blue Hand Kronul, after getting on their good side, and were on our way back to Thriest with an extra aneen a head. It was about a week’s ride, and usually an easy one at that, with plenty of grubs and molerat nests for the aneen and tastier game for us. It would’ve been pleasant, even, except Dess had gotten more and more antsy as went along. He was muttering about something getting closer, and insisted that we take a detour. If it wasn’t Dess we would’ve laughed it off, but his antsiness had saved our hides before, so we did. It didn’t calm him down much and we kept a double watch nights.

“On the fourth night, we were camped out on this little knoll, with some synth-stone blocks jutting out of it like teeth. It was Van and Dess’s watch, and I was fast asleep, when Dess

suddenly jumps up. 'It's coming!' he says, waking me up, and looks around like a molerat looking for a hole. 'What do we do? Hide? Run?' I ask. 'Nowhere to hide! Can't run fast enough!' says Dess, and cowers next to one of the stones. So we wait. It was a beautiful night, the moon green and high in the sky, with her tears sparkling bright all across the sky, and the plains rolling out in all directions like a great big ocean only not moving. Dess was staring westward. There was nothing there that I could see, at first. Then we saw a figure crest a knoll, human-like but moving faster than an aneen at full gallop and a kind of glow over it, coming straight at us. 'It can taste me!' says Dess, and looks like he's about to die of fright right there.

"We see the figure crest one knoll, then another, and a third, and then it is right before us. She was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. Taller than any of us, limbs long and smooth, skin like polished darkstone and eyes green, with a glow of their own, like the moonlight, and a kind of crystal disc floating above her head giving out a pale light. In her arms was a babe, two years old maybe, as beautiful as she. Not what I had expected, at least.

"She glides right up to us – she wasn't walking, more like flowing over the ground, with long silvery robes floating behind her, and looks us over. Doesn't speak. Dess falls to the ground before her and *grovels*. She makes a little half-smile and a motion, disappointed-like, and looks right into my eyes for a moment and I swear that if I have ever seen the instant where all hope leaves someone's eyes, that was that instant.

"She turns to look at the child, holds it close, and kisses it once. Then, quick as a flash, in one motion she breaks its neck. The babe doesn't even cry out, but the snap is so loud I was sure it would carry for miles. She lays it down on the grass, reaches out and breaks open its chest. Pulls out something, her hands glistening with gore all black in the green moonlight. First I thought it was the babe's heart, but it was too big and too round, and it has a glow of its own, making the gore glow red in the night, with streaks of white showing through. She cleans off the gore with her robe and the stain disappears

as soon as it was formed. Looks at me again, deep into my eyes. She speaks to me – not with her voice, but I understand the meaning exactly. She tells me to keep this safe, to give it to another of her kind should I ever encounter one, and if not, to plant it where it wants to be planted. Then she turns around and flows off again, in the same direction she came from.

“The thing she had handed to me, the angel-stone, was big as a fist but perfectly round, and glowed with a bright white light, but as soon as I held it, the light started to dim. I tucked it away in a pouch.

“Later that night, just as the sky was starting to grey, there were lights in the West where she had come from. First flashes like lightning. Then sounds like thunderclaps. Then a really bright light like the sun rising, which dimmed quickly to red, and a great big red-glowing cloud rising up, and covering a big part of the sky.

“‘It’s gone,’ says Dess.

“In the morning we argued about what to do and where to go, and somehow me and Van got into a daring-contest like, making like the other was too much of a coward to go see what had happened there. Dess wasn’t antsy anymore either, and we were in no hurry, so we started off straight for where those lights had been. Wasn’t that far off our way to Thriest anyway. The light that day was strange, clear in the East but dusty and murky in the West.

“As we went further that way, the dust got worse. Soon we couldn’t make out the horizon any more, and a little after that we could only see the next knoll on either side. The sun was like a copper button in a yellow sky, with the green grass all dusted too. But we didn’t see anything alarming and Dess was still quite calm so we kept going.

“In the afternoon, we reached a place where all the grass was gone. First it had withered, then a ways further it had turned into ash right where it stood, into perfect white stalks and leaves. The tremor of our aneens’ claws was enough to bring them down where we passed, and we left a white flat track through the white grass. Then the ashen grass was gone too, and we were walking on bare earth dusted with white.

Until we got to a depression, like a shallow bowl, where there were things lying on the ground that we could see through the dusty air. Nasty smell there too, bitter and acrid, a bit like you get when you burn Auspar synth.

“There was a big, broken thing, like a sea monster with legs, all cracked open and spilling its guts out on the dust. Van rooted around in it but it was all dead, everything inside fused into a mass where he couldn’t dig out a single cypher. There was some other debris there too, bits and pieces of broken machinery. Van picked up two things that were a little less broken than the others. Slugspitters. He figured he might be able to do something with them. We poked around for a bit more but there was nothing else there that we could find. No trace of the angel, either. She was the one I had hoped to see.

“We rode late that day, continuing a ways further to the West when the dust cloud suddenly ended and we were in clear air again, just before the sun was setting. We pitched camp. Van was real curious about those slugspitters, and glory be, he actually got one of them to work. It was a strange device, about half again as long as your arm but much lighter than it looked, made of a metal that was flat dark grey, almost black, except when you looked closely it looked like it had been mended over and over again so it was a patchwork texture, like melding earths of different colours. There was a container where you poured earth, and it would take it in and make some sounds and a light would come on, and then when you pulled a trigger like on a crossbow there would be a crack and a bright flash and it would spit it out much faster than an arrow. Many years later I came across a band of Oorgolians who had something similar on them, but these weren’t any Oorgolians. Van was happy as a clam, I can tell you that. Too bad he didn’t get to keep it.

“Two nights later, we were only two days from Thriest, camping on yet another of those knolls. It’s the small hours. Dess is on watch, alone because we had gotten tired of keeping double watch and Dess hadn’t felt anything coming anyway. He shakes us awake. ‘Something’s coming,’ he says. ‘Shh.’ We get up and look around, and it’s as if there’s a fog gathering

around the knoll, only it's a black fog, and it's not coming up from the ground but flowing in, like a stream. Not much we can do but look, so look we do. Then the dark fog changes. Out of it steps a *legion*. Thousands of soldiers. The ghost legions. Like skeletons clad in bits and pieces of armour, many with slugspitters like the one Van salvaged, most with oval dark shields with a notch and a hole for the 'spitter, some with swords or spears. Behind them, three great things looming, like that dead sea monster we saw, only living, with pale blue lights on them like many eyes. The dark fog is gone. They're all around, with us cowering on the knoll, certain that our end was come. Only the aneen were unperturbed, dozing all slug-gish in the cool of the night.

"One of them approaches. Tall, but not as tall as the angel. When it gets closer I see that it is a skeleton all right, but not of bone: it is of the same black, dark-grey, patchwork metal as Van's spitter, with muscles of black synth with a honeycomb pattern holding it together. Pieces of armour that looked of the same stuff: a breastplate, a helm, a greave, not much else. A single eye glowing amber in the right socket of its dark metal skull.

"We hunt a juvenile Augeian," it says, with a voice thin like wind through the reeds. "This tall, looks like a human child, with black skin. It is deadly to your kind. We followed its trace in this direction, but lost it a day past. Have you seen it?"

"All we can do is shake our heads. It barks something in a tongue I don't ken, and a dozen of them move up to us and start going through our things. One of them picks up Van's slugspitter, and throws it to another in the ranks."

"After a while, the one who spoke to us barks something more at the others. They rejoin the ranks. 'We apologise for the inconvenience,' it says, and turns away. Then they all fall into dust, even those great things behind them, and the cloud flows away, quick as it came.

"All through this, I'm clutching my pouch. I couldn't feel the sphere the angel had given me. All that was there was a stone. This one. The angel stone. It's done nothing since that

night that I'm certain of. I've never met another angel like that one. I have heard rumours of their like, though, but always third or fourth-hand. Nor has the stone asked to be planted.

"Dess and Van went their ways since then, and I've had my fortune made and lost, and made and lost again. I've also come this close to getting my thread cut on more occasion than one, but somehow always something mightily unlikely has saved me. I reckon it's this angel stone. If it could escape the search of those amber eyes, I believe it can look out for me as well, until it wants to be planted, and I reckon that in case one of you young'uns had some clever ideas about it, that would end worse for you. How odd is that for an oddity?"