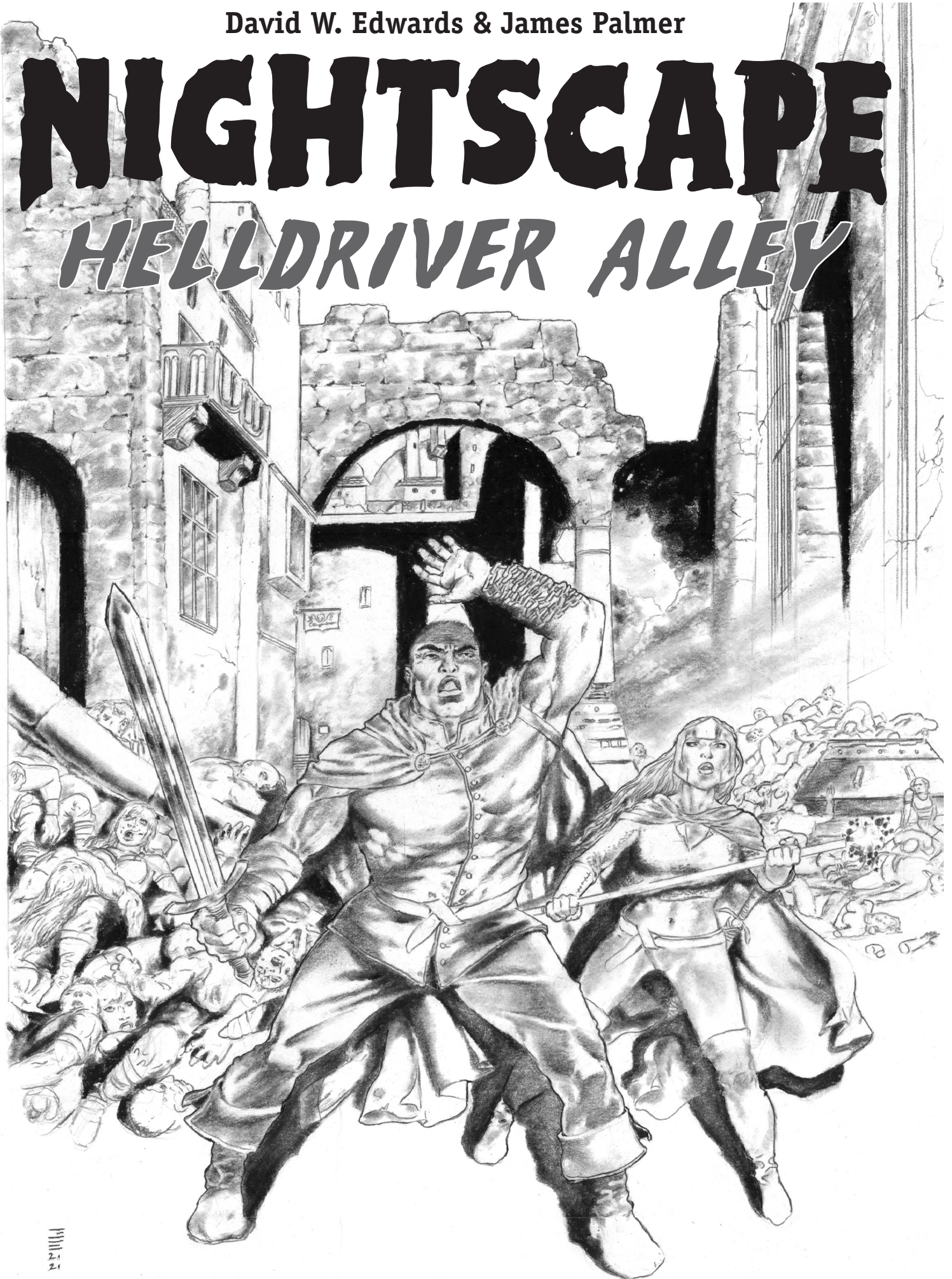


David W. Edwards & James Palmer

NIGHTSCAPE

HELLDRIVER ALLEY



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IMPERIAD
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Imperiad Entertainment
Portland, Oregon USA

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Portland, Oregon USA

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“The devastation of Rahalid goaded me like a prevision of Ojánkoa’s judgment. It seemed a perfect smoke-suffused limbo, *‘es ulizate agoera uxibertsela’* [a universal state of un-being]. Though heartsick at the gratuitous slaughter, I was, at length, glad of the experience, for it purified my breast of any doubt: this world is a test of will and faith without end.”

—*The Life and Achievements of the Renown’d Sacrist Monk Garzach Bengochea*

They found the first corpse no more than a dozen paces outside the town’s smashed gate. It was curled up on itself, a blackened hole in its back.

The stink of putrefaction blistered Broga’s eyes as he knelt beside the body. The face was a bloated ruin swarmed by flies. The eyes ran like egg whites from their sockets, the pupils unfixated. An eastern merchant, Broga surmised from the floral embroidery on the robe.

Other, similarly scorched bodies littered the scrub plains and in ever-greater heaps beyond the stove-in gate. Whatever happened to Rahalid had apparently been total.

Odalis dragged the makeshift litter bearing the ailing Ranvir a few more feet before settling it gently to the ground.

“What is it, northlander?” the long-limbed Druna asked from the transport, shading his eyes with a hand. Like others of his equatorial race, his skin was the color of tallow. “Close to the—that...mining town?”

“You smell it, too, eh?” Leire scowled. She’d been walking next to Ranvir to keep him company and monitor his condition. “Not sure I’m keen on a stay-over.” She leaned on her fighting staff, careful to ensure the furred imp caged in the groundward end retracted its legs before she put her weight to it. At rest, the mid-na looked almost comical with its pinched, whiskery features, bony limbs and potbelly.

Pello came up to her, panting from exhaustion, and tweaked the brim of his bird’s beaked cap. “We’ve been through some flatland wastes, but this...” He relieved himself of the Druna’s sending shield, dropping it to the winter-hardened ground. The pack was heavy and, even with its control arms folded, abraded the small of his back. “If there’s a hammer of Lijos then this is its anvil.”

Ranvir set his jaw against a brief but sharp fever-spasm. Pello looked askance.

The Druna’s plight sent a surge of helpless anguish through Broga. Fever and shiverings had harassed his refuge friend or *huyi* for days now. A greenish tinge veined Ranvir’s neck and lower jaw. Broga had never seen the like. He could only conclude the affliction was magickal in origin—a residual curse from their luckless escapade in Larshunna. *A plague of blood and bother for so little.*

The burly Odalis lumbered to the burned-out corpse, exaggerating his strides to work the stiffness from his legs. Hauling the Druna had taken its toll. His face was drawn and pale. Sweat trickled from under his horned helm into his straggly brows. The Ragoskan wiped the perspiration with the back of a meaty hand. “By the strength of my forefathers, what manner o’ evil did this?”

“I’d guess—” The words emerged as a hoarse whisper from Broga’s dusty mouth. He cleared his throat. “I’d guess an energy weapon. See the wound? Bloodless.” He narrowed his eyes at the cauterized gash.

“Bandits armed with precursor tek? Out here? Perhaps it was carryin’ the Druna, but this plain seemed to get wider and wider as we went on.”

“I don’t know what they’re mining here. Gems of some sort? Iron ore?” Broga said. “Could be something valuable enough for this...” His wave encompassed the scattered dead and visible ruins. Gouts of red-flecked smoke billowed over the walls. “Whatever hit this place, looks like we barely missed it.”

As former pit fighters, Broga and his compatriots had been privy to all manner of carnage. Though far from inured to the horror, none betrayed a raging disbelief at it.

"So—so much...for a turn of fortune," Ranvir was saying as Broga stooped to put a hand to his forehead.

"Yea, e'en for a pasty-skinned Druna, you're blanched up like the dead," Odalis said with typical Ragoskan brusqueness.

Leire glared at him.

The Druna smiled a lipless smile that a stranger might have easily mistaken for a scowl. "I'll yet have...the pleasure of you...dragging me the many...the many leagues...to Tarquinia."

The new yellowy film over Ranvir's white-less eyes worried Broga. *Even now he might be seeing ominous footprints in the sky.*

Leire addressed herself to Broga. "We've no choice but to venture into town. He needs a leech, or failing that, medicines, a mage..." She shrugged.

"Well, leastwise I see no flag of vampirism," Pello added, taking up the sending shield by a shoulder strap.

Odalis resigned himself to bearing the litter again, though not without a few vociferous complaints.

Jostled a bit more roughly than necessary, the Druna moaned through gritted teeth as he was hoisted to a reclining angle.

The discovery of his *huyi* made Broga sick at heart. He couldn't help but think he was at fault. Even as misfits together in the forest refuge of Ixzahl, he'd always been the greater provocateur. It was, after all, his idea to embark on their ill-starred quest to rescue his half-sister Ovandu from an as-yet unknown band of slavers.

What began as a righteous pursuit had soon lapsed into nightmare. They were summarily enslaved themselves and forced to become fighters in the notorious arenas of Skulon Gøra. Broga had evinced a natural talent for traditional combat and become a wildly popular competitor. Ranvir, on the other hand, owed his survival to a talent for precursor tek and a root willfulness. Broga counted on the latter to see Ranvir through his insidious malady.

With weapons drawn, Broga and Leire led the company on a wending path through the charred dead and past the main gate. The silence over the town was as absolute as a necromantic spell. The bump and grate of the litter on the unpaved thoroughfare sounded inordinately loud. Scads of dead mucked up the avenue—sheared, exploded and otherwise rendered inert... Human remains mixed with those of pack and farm animals. Ranvir gasped as the litter bobbed over a pair of rotting goats.

The widespread butchery suggested a fleeing mob caught out and overwhelmed. Evidently, no one and nothing had been spared—not even the initial wave of large-billed vultures. Stubs of the cindered scavengers numbered among the bodies, broken masonry and

glimmers of sharded glass. Broga's boots grew increasingly sticky with blood.

The company made slow, wary progress to the incessant buzz of flies. Broga swiveled from side to side to take in the damaged brick buildings. The town appeared to consist of a small merchant district and, toward the far end, verging on the central mine, a shipping platform and several barracks. Few, if any, structures remained wholly intact. Some had been cratered entirely. Passing an exposed wine cellar, Odalis sighed over ranks of splintered casks. Scores of small fires cast an acrid pall against the late-morning horizon.

"If this were the work of brigands, why aren't the dead stripped of their valuables?" Broga pointed to the remains of a painted woman with a fillet of gold in her blood-matted hair and a jeweled bangle around one wrist.

"I'm relieved to hear you say that, *lagun*," Pello admitted, smoothing his close-trimmed goatee. "I didn't want to come across as insensitive, but this might be the easiest coin we've gleaned in, well, ever."

"Perhaps after..." Broga indicated a wrought iron sign on the corner ahead. The hanging sign depicted a unicorn's silhouette, an emblem common to apothecary shops. Broga approached it swordpoint first. "Weapons at the ready."

Pello kept a steady hand on the swirled pommel of his rapier. Clutching her staff with both hands, Leire peered through broken windows and doors pocked with blast marks. Odalis picked up the pace with his burden, anxious to be free of it.

Broga found the door to the corner shop closed but unlocked. There were no signs of violence to the shop. He waited impatiently for the others to catch up. The thought of Ranvir's death was intolerable. It only confirmed his blackest ideas about death, about chance and life itself. One quicksilver instant is all it took and everything could change—irrevocably.

He pushed the door open. Leire scuttled into the dim interior, poised to strike; Broga followed, crossing to the opposite side of the door. "Leire," he said.

She closed her eyes and granted the forest imp or midhna trapped in her weapon a middling dose of remembered sadness; in return, the midhna emitted an eerie, pinkish-white radiance.

"A tad brighter, please."

"So much for my tolerable good humor." Leire modulated her feelings just enough to boost the creature's glow. Too much and the midhna would've incinerated the shop in torrential balefire.

Broga followed close behind her, broadsword high, as they searched the far corners of the shop. The store-room door behind the counter was shut tight. Broga put an ear to it and thought he detected a faint scuf-

fling. No light shone from under the door or around its frame. He signed to Leire to be on guard and kicked in the door.

The surge of otherworldly light revealed a monk crouched in the corner, one hand close on a phial of silver powder at the edge of the worktable.

"Stay that hand or lose it!" Broga ordered, leveling his blade.

The curly-haired monk checked his motion and rose to his full, modest height.

He wore the layered robes



of a sect unfamiliar to Broga. A copper medallion hung from his neck by a leather cord. It depicted the head of a cyclops, one half of its great sinister eye shaped to resemble the setting sun. The monk held up his dirty palms. "I am—I thought—" He found his voice and said, "I thought you might be among the ravagers of this town. Are you, you know, one—"

"No, we've only just come upon this red massacre. Was it bandits then?" Broga motioned for the others to

stay with Ranvir.

Taking note of the additional arms, the monk blinked nervously. "I cannot say. I stumbled upon this atrocity shortly after dawn. My mount collapsed from the heat yesterday. I made the last twenty or so leagues on foot."

"These plains must be a scavenger's paradise. We lost our horses as well, the last some ways closer to the gates, but still..." Broga approached the ebony worktable. It was littered with various medicinal paraphernalia: dried, varicolored leaves; alembics and mortars; a pair of brass censers; unknown liquids; other, unidentifiable ingredients (powdered bones?); and notably, an extinguished but still-smoking candle. "Do you know where we can find the spicer-apothecary?"

The ruddy-faced monk shook his head. "As I said, I arrived only a short time ago. I am Garzach of Tarquinia, devoted acolyte of Ojánkoa, God of the Living Dead. I—I have been on a mission to Graivold these last months and was returning to my temple when..." He looked doubtfully at the midhna. "Is that imp—is it dangerous?"

Leire lowered her staff of star-forged metal. "Only if I want it to be."

"I have never seen—"

Broga's eyes roved over the shelves of zests and tonics to the sundered *ormnithi* skeleton racked in the corner. The large, shadowed eye sockets seemed to mock him. "One of our party is in the grip of a terrible fever, perhaps magickal in nature. We need a healer."

"I have some leech-knowledge and know a bit of alchemy also." Garzach gestured toward the phial of silver powder. "I was preparing an incendiary when I suffered the queer shock of—of that imp. As soon as I heard the door to the street..." He broke into a broad and placid smile. "Are you sworn knights or mercenaries? I am duty-bound by Ojánkoa to help, regardless."

"Let's call us mad adventurers, though perhaps mostly just mad of late." Broga hurried through introductions as he directed the monk to Ranvir.

When he saw the Druna stretched the length of the shop counter, Garzach made a disconcerting noise in the back of his throat. "I am no expert on his physiology but will do my utmost."

"Any of your efforts, I'm sure, would be better than the alternative," Pello said. "We don't know our anise from our grains of paradise, so-to-speak."

Leire took Odalis and Pello outside to discuss defensive strategies while Broga explained Ranvir's symptoms and their possible cause to the monk. "I suspect the source is an ancient fetish—one we unfortunately lost at a desperate point in our most recent...adventure." He knew his account sounded needlessly cryptic, but he couldn't very well trust a stranger with details

about the tomb of the legendry Illnya Ubess and the fearsome night-weirds who guard it.

"Do you recall the likeness?" Garzach absently twirled a strand of his thick, dark beard around his ring finger.

"*Aysh*...uh, it was...amphibian-like?" Broga tried to merely hint at the identity of the fetish. Saying the name directly, he feared, would give away too much. "It was man-shaped below the torso, knees bent, a squat head like a misshapen frog..."

"Oh, truly? Like Zathoqua, most famously the patron god of the mute sorceress Illnya Ubess?"

"Something like that—I imagine. I'm no scholar."

Ranvir twisted in brief agony. Broga put a steadying hand on the Druna's chest, wishing like a small child he could take the disease away at his touch—into himself, if necessary.

"Ah, well, hmm." The monk released his finger from the one ringlet and started to wind up another. "Was there a heavy dusting or mold atop this idol?"

Broga remembered the idol's look of age-old corruption. "Mottled green-black—definitely mold and not simple verdigris."

"Zathoqua, as I understand it, dwells in the dank under-earth of Laegrevel. This mold could be a specimen from that region. I take it the Druna—"

"—Ranvir," Broga interjected.

"Ranvir, of course," Garzach went on. "He was the only one to handle the object?"

"Yes, though only for a moment." No sooner had Ranvir retrieved the idol from its creche when the flooring beneath him had buckled, sending him into an awkward lunge for the foot of a columnar statue and safety. The fetish had been lost to the centurial depths.

The monk examined his patient's hands, front and back. "Mottled black, *bai*, what they call foul-deep earth. There is, however, no visible sign of this fungus. I can only assume he inhaled the vitiating spores." Garzach brushed aside the outer layer of Ranvir's robe and put an ear to the Druna's chest. He made another disconcerting noise in the back of his throat. "We should start by clearing his lungs. I can use the storeroom for this purpose, steeping it in cleansing vapors. Praise be to Ojãnkoa, there are a number of available volatiles..."

"Your god lords it over the living dead? I trust you won't turn him into a *zuvemie* slave."

"No, no of course not," the monk said. "Like the rest of my order, I relish my privacy. A Druna *zuvemie* would be quite conspicuous in Tarquinia." His wide, close-lipped smile was suitably enigmatic.

* * *

Leire stood sentry on the corner just outside the shop under the half-wrecked awning for a neighboring inn.

Short of the rooftop, this position afforded the best coverage. She had clear sightlines down the main avenue and its intersecting arterial, along with a partial view of the shipping platform. The latter was obstructed by a rusty, cone-topped storage tank of the precursor variety. The smoke of slowly dying fires cast everything in a subterrene haze.

The dead thronging the streets were like so many accusing shades. They were contorted into every possible shape. Leire thought she could read into each position the emotions of the moment: defiant, protective, staggered, hopeless, calm and resigned. What affected her the most, however, were the indistinct shreds—the severed limbs, the bloody dashes of fat, the charred bone-lengths, the extruded entrails and organs—the grossest and most damning evidence of our frail mortality. How could an everlasting spirit inhere in that obscene matter?

She turned at the creak of the shop door: Broga. The fine scar at his hairline sheened like a wrinkle of satin against his black skin; otherwise, for a two season pit fighting champion, his features were remarkably unspoiled. There were light marks along his throat and arms and around his swordhand, but nothing unsightly. He was of a middling height and compact with muscle. His forearms bulged from his sleeveless shirt of light mail.

Leire knew him to be nearly unbreakable—except from within. "How goes it with Ranvir?"

"The monk might have a cure or leastwise a palliative. We've got Ranvir settled on the storage room table. Some necrotic mold seems to be the cause. You saw that idol—the muck around it..." He sidestepped behind the downed portion of the awning, which provided a modicum of cover.

"Only time will tell the tale as they say." Leire suppressed the urge to put a gentling hand on his shoulder. The gesture might too easily lead to more—a caress, a debilitating affection...No, her *midhna* had a singular appetite for unhappiness. She couldn't risk upsetting the imp and thereby lose her surest means of defense. No, she had to keep her distance. Hers was a world of swallowed light.

"Where are Odalis and Pello?" Broga asked.

"On a sweep of the shipping area, the rim of the mine. No doubt looting along the way."

Broga took a breath and his words tumbled out: "Or better yet, stealing a moment for themselves."

Leire stood dumb and still and undifferentiated as a wood-carved totem. His dark, candid gaze made the inference clear. Was he about to—? She lowered her eyes and tapped the bladed end of her staff on the hardened dirt. "This town—the situation—" She pursed her sun-chapped lips, waiting for her voice to steady. "It's

disquieting. I didn't see any recent tracks going in or out the gate. Did you?"

He shook his head, the corners of his mouth flickering. "What do you think? Luayghao airships? Makes a distant target for eastern pirates."

"Devil's play, more like, perhaps fiends from out the mine." Her reply sounded remote to her own ears. His look continued to trouble her. How could she make him understand that her bond with the midhna had reduced everything to a dull, pulsing rot. Nostalgia for her coastal home, the family grove, her pet rabbits, the whippings and beatings on Skulon Gøra, the murders, the burials—all mere fodder for her living weapon. It wouldn't matter which humor the midhna favored, the emotional impact would've been the same. When she was in the throes of battle, she couldn't even remember where she was or when.

But if not now—with Broga at her side—when would she ever quit the imp and take a chance on love? She was like a house-wolf reconciled to its chains even though they've long since grown old and fragile.

"We should've accepted that Maghvan Gudmund into our company over Odalis' protests," he said. "How many times have we suffered for want of true dream-time magick?"

"Whatever the cause of this," Leire said, "we're in no state to put up much resistance if it comes back. Speaking for myself, I've a dragging fatigue."

"I know, you don't notice it until you stop." Broga put a hand on her elbow. "Go ahead, have a lie-down. I'll take guard duty. There's nothing I can do for Ranvir right now, anyway."

The anxiety of everything unsaid gathered at the base of her throat. Romantic happiness is a fool's pursuit, Leire told herself. *Chancy. Fleeting. A wandering thing next to raw survival—food, shelter, sleep...*

"Much thanks," she managed and slipped around Broga with a taut, regretful smile. She had to escape the press of the dead, his earnest gaze, the need for a decision. "Only a wink or two, I promise, then I'll be back to my old self."

"Sure," he said, an exhalation.

* * *

"As the faith of my ancestors has it," Pello said, depositing a bloodied coin in his belt purse, "the afterlife is somewhat like this—not the Vastlands but a field of dead bedeviled by carrion crows." He straddled a corpse lying facedown in the blood-blackened dirt and flipped it over to check its waistcoat pockets. Decaying innards spilled over his deerskin boots. "Faugh!" He put a hand to the scarf tied over his mouth and nose.

From the edge of the shipping platform, mace in

hand, Odalis stood watch over his—what? Bunkmate? Companion? He'd yet to find a satisfying term. He was partial to the Ragoskan expression *tosias rakastaja*, meaning roughly 'fated match,' though he'd never mustered the sand to say it out loud. The term was one of the few things still capable of cowering the self-proclaimed 'All-slayer.'

"The rats are out now." Pello drew his foot back for a kick then relented, apparently having lost the opportunity to make his point.

To Odalis, the horrific landscape was an instance of nature laid bare—a visitation on the pretense of civilization. The noble works of mortals were innately fragile. He believed nature was tantamount to death and would ever and always prevail. The best a man could do was die in a worthy rage against it. "That Tarquinian monk—can we trust him with the Druna? Do you know of his sect?"

"Only from the warnings of my grandmother who, at one time, flirted with its beliefs to ingratiate herself with a favored suitor." Pello adjusted his cap then bent to his thievery. "Ojånkoans are a rare sort. As I understand it, they consider Laegrevel a twilight realm between life and death. Whether you achieve immortal life as a spirit or perish in some dark forever depends on what you do here—as a mortal—the code you honor, your acts of charity and such."

Odalis grunted and said, "Sounds a milksop of a god." Ragoskan deities were uniformly terrible in aspect, especially their chief, the storm-helmed Naldr.

"As a judge-god, not one for the likes of us anyway—except perhaps for Broga."

The northlander ignored the slight against his honor. He boasted of his bolder, more direct, approach to things—despite the problems it sometimes caused. "You still want we should split from the party and head for your family villa?"

"Are we any closer to this half-sister of his? We're working from rumors of rumors." Pello held a gold brooch between thumb and forefinger to the diffuse sunlight. "Hmm, fair plunder," he said to himself then added, louder: "We could rove the world for years and years and never find her."

Odalis was plagued by an incoherence of feeling. As a fighting slave on Skulon Gøra, he'd excused his male trysts as a simple means of satisfying the primal need for sex. He'd considered himself on the level of an animal then and so exempt from clannish mores. Now, he secretly thought the practice manlier than the alternative, akin to a grappling of equals. In the throes of passion with Pello, he felt as if he were crossing into a new plane of existence—somewhere outside and beyond lived experience. It's as close as he's ever come to a reckoning of souls.

At the same time, he couldn't throw off his Ragoskan upbringing entirely and quell his trepidations. He was afraid of what he'd discover about himself by committing to Pello, or worse, about what he's been all along without knowing it. He depended on his native strength to keep going. Now, on waking each day, he found himself having to will his wolfish qualities to the fore. Not that anyone else had noticed the struggle, such was his inborn grumpiness. "But what are we to do in Tarquinia?"

"I told you. Though a bastard heir, I've still a small estate coming, a villa and hillside vineyards—ah, filthy vermin!" Pello quit his pilfering and started back to Odalis, waving a path through successive clouds of flies. "It's a modest piece of land by noble standards but we'll not want for anything."

"Yea, but what'll we do?" What he meant was: Could they live with each other openly? He kept circling around the question, looking for the one oblique angle that would present an easy answer. He was old enough to know that what the heart wanted wasn't necessarily for the best.

Pello tugged the scarf away from his mouth. He worked his lips, expanding the thin mustache also. "Don't worry, my fierce *neska*. You'll still die in the end." He blew a kiss then laughed with his whole face and shoulders.

Odalis cherished Pello for this lightness of spirit. There was a rascally courage about it he admired, if only in private. "We should get back to the others."

"Without checking the area nearest the mine? We should leastwise be thorough in our ease." Pello advanced through the haze onto the pave of the shipping platform. With a voluble harrumph, Odalis trailed after him. The stench of death remained insistent.

"See?" Pello said, pointing through the haze to an elongated, tree-like structure on the far side. Steel beams supported a familiar antennae array. "That looks like a charging station." The large metal holding tanks at the base of the station took on form as they approached. "And there," Pello indicated with another wave of his hand, "a transport of some kind." This new object was a titanic metal craft in the bowl-like mine at the periphery of the shipping platform. It was parked on a level with the platform and was apparently intended for travel to and from the several digging sites.

Odalis thought the vehicle looked like a studded tortoise shell. A set of rails running adjacent to the craft begged the question of another transport. "We could charge Ranvir's sending shield..."

"If the station's working." Pello fooled with the power controls, thumbing switches and buttons at random. The dials on assorted gauges shifted. "Looks serviceable enough, but..." The machine whirred to life. The

central display panel flashed a message unreadable to the Tarquinian. "Ah, there we go."

Both warriors wheeled at a disruptive clank. A woman sighted them down a long-barreled gun from the main hatch atop the mining transport. Tufts of her coiled, raven-dark hair stuck out from under her leather helmet. "Quiet machine, you blundering oaf!" she snapped. "You want bring Q-Spec down our head?"

"The what, my lady?" Pello said, a hand on his rapier. "Precursor machine what done the butcher business. I wound it but expect repair itself," she said in broken *konae*, lowering her weapon. "And I no highborn lady. I am Natalka of Suntija. I maintain tek use here—these helldriver, the rail system, charging station..."

Pello mashed buttons on the central console to no avail. "We've a sending shield in our baggage. If we could—" A distant but distinct and rhythmic clanging cut him short. He cocked his head toward the sunken mine.

The second 'helldriver' mining transport—part-train, part-tank—was rocketing toward them on its designated rails.

Putting himself between Pello and the approaching machine, Odalis muttered a string of curses. He detested precursor tek almost as much as sorcery.

"Scatter!" Natalka bawled. "You cannot stop weapon!"

As the transport slowed to dock next to its counterpart, Odalis could make out a human figure—a helmeted bear of a man—behind a forward-mounted railgun. The vehicle squealed against the rails. Before it came to a stop, the man rotated his massive weapon in Odalis' direction and loosed a blistering salvo. Electromagnetized slugs ripped into the base of the charging station just above the Ragoskan's head, shearing one of the support beams. Pello leapt aside and away from the platform. More slugs zipped through the muddled corpses around him.

Odalis had barely risen from a crouch when another, more vehement barrage exploded the station's main housing. The ensuing fireball hurtled him across the platform, searing his neck and shoulders. He thudded to a wheezing halt a few paces from the transport. The earth pitched over and time with it. Agony dimmed his vision. His mace, his broken-horned helm, gone. Only a canon of debris—serrated metal, churned up stone... He heard the jangling of the railgun's ball turret. *Shooter adjusting the range.*

He looked blindly for his weapon. Naldr be damned! Flecks of ash dirtied his dark auburn beard. Now it's time, no, *now* it's time... He took in a tentative lungful of air. There was nothing for it except—Pello, where was—?

The railgun rattled out its fire. It must be time; it was past time...

The flutter and swoop of a tan duster. Natalka, ah, her gun.

Face pinched in anger, she advanced on the helldriver, dispensing a continuous fusillade, stabs of light, of heat. The flashes alternately blurred and cleared when Odalis blinked.

The gun racket faded. "Down, stay down," she muttered.

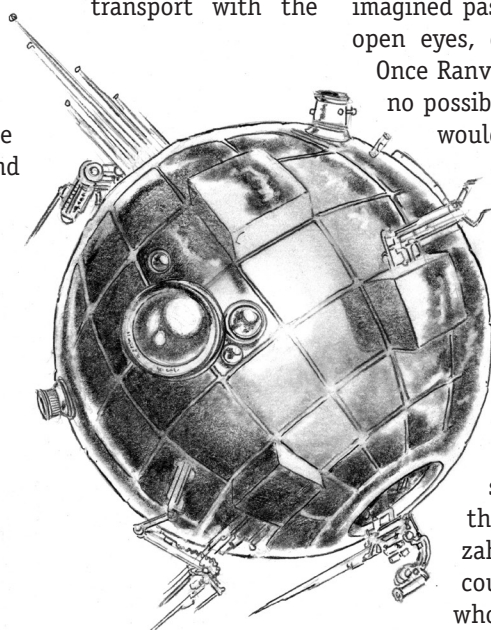
Odalis scrutinized the nearby debris. There: two, maybe three body lengths distant—the haft of his flanged mace. He brushed a stray braid out of his eyes, dragged himself to his knees. Crawling on the rubbled pave was a torment. His lower back pained him at every flex. Jagged rock roughed his knees and palms. But he was still alive...

A powerful hum resonated in his chest.

Natalka shouted to him. A warning? He couldn't quite make it out over the noise. She tried again. Something to do with falling back. But why? Another foeman?

He sloughed off the idea and swept up the mace by its wrist thong. The heat and flames ringing the blast-point hid Pello from view. He levered himself to his feet and spun on the transport with the strength of iron gall.

The railgunner was already down, legs akimbo and unmoving. What he faced was a wholly new and more terrifying threat: a



metal orb, suspended in air and bristling with unknown armaments. The machine was almost as large as the transport on which it had ridden. It could've been a harvest moon of old; it was that big. The air churned around it, flinging dirt and grit.

Interlocking sections rotated independently, maximizing the orb's offensive choices. A cancerous red camera eye settled on Odalis. A parabolic dish followed suit, its central antenna aglow.

"Foolish hotspur!" Natalka spit, scrambling to load an egg-shaped defuser grenade. Tools and ammo—only a few of which Odalis recognized—ringed her bandolier-belt.

"I thought—the gunman—" There was a sharp tang in his mouth.

"What I try tell you." Natalka slammed the ordnance home. "This Q-Spec—this town-killer."

* * *

Pacing under the tumbledown awning, Broga's thoughts turned on Ranvir. The image of him in a heavy sweat, features convulsed, kept coming up unbidden. Broga imagined passing a reverent hand over his dead, wide open eyes, closing them without touching the lids.

Once Ranvir were reduced to a mere body, there was no possibility Broga could lay a hand on him. That would mean not only acknowledging Ranvir's death but treating him as a thing, an 'it' rather than a 'he,' a discard for flies and maggots.

No, he couldn't believe the Druna was dying. *Aysh*. It was unthinkable given the circumstances. The cause was absurd—such a small, seemingly inconsequential moment. Broga found himself wondering, however illogically, if he could return to that haunted site and assume the infection in Ranvir's stead. He thought perhaps of even going back to Ixzahl. He had a crazy urge to do so—as if he could go back in time as well to find a Ranvir whole and unaffected from their travails.

Perhaps he had these irrational thoughts in lieu of a faith in any great, benevolent power. Unlike Ranvir, he'd neither god nor deified nature to comfort him. If his *huyi* did pass—if—the guilt would be irredeemable.

An increasingly strident *clack-clack-clacking* sounded from the vicinity of the shipping platform. Outside of the storage tank, Broga could see nothing but vague silhouettes through the pervasive smoke. Everything was silent and colorless

and waiting—a somber frieze just for him. There was nowhere else for his mind to wander but danger and death.

Wait: a muffled shout. Pello? Broga took a few steps into the street and listened for more. There was a rapid-fire clamor then a sudden plume of gusty fire. The low sky winked with fiery ash.

Broga advanced another step and hesitated, deliberating whether to rouse Leire. He'd almost confessed his feelings for her—again—and likely to the same discomfiting effect. It was obvious the prospect of talking things out made her nervous. At the slightest intimation of affection, her eyes shadowed over, became unreachable. He was clumsy about it, he knew. He couldn't help himself. Upon her arrival at Skulon Gøra, this tremendous feeling for her had taken him by surprise. He'd fallen for her because... Because she was a sad, heavy-lidded beauty. Because of her imperceptible air of silent dignity. Because she eschewed argument in favor of just making decisions. Because she wept and wept and yet endured.

Pello had once warned him away, half-joking about her "going vestal." But Broga held out hope she was only afraid—needlessly afraid—to feel outside her own self-imposed limits. What else could he do? Time and again, he'd tried to detach himself and failed. Each new contact with her renewed the promise of something more and, every once in a while, he had to try to get her to realize it. Her parting smile earlier had been one of many stinging dismissals.

But he couldn't let his feelings for her put the company at risk. She'd access to a power none of them could match and leaving her behind would—

"Let me guess: Odalis and Pello." Leire closed the door to the shop behind her and ran a hand through her short, straw-blond hair. The slightly humped midhna at one end of her staff discharged its light in agitated pulses. Its eyes were closed and its scrawny arms extended between the bars of its armillary-style cage.

"If there's a call for fighting, I'm ready." She flourished the staff, jostling the creature into flarey brightness. "I've started with lamenting my lost sleep."

* * *

Odalis stared at the underbelly of the spheroid, knocking his inadequate weapon. What threat could a common mace pose to this artifact of precursor super-science? Irrational pride and the urge for vengeance, however, compelled him to hold his ground. "Fall on, you metal bastard! Fall on!"

To his shock, the orb made reply: TRACE ANALYSIS COMMAND: INITIATE FLESH-LIFE SCAN: IDENTIFY OPTI-

MAL VIOT SIGNAL FREQUENCY: There was nothing inside the cold of its amplified voice. CUT-STOP: VIOT SIGNAL IDENTIFIED:

The northlander felt an invisible force crush down on him. His shoulders caved inward and he sagged at the knees, relinquishing his weapon.

Natalka spewed bullets at the menace—to no avail. The broadside sparked against a forcefield around the drone and its hijacked transport. The shielding gave her targets a smeary gloss. "Tak, this I anticipate..."

Q-SPEC: FLESH-LIFE SUBMIT: MEZMER INCEPT PROTOCOL:

There was an unnerving din about Odalis' ears. He pressed his palms against them to ease the pain. Was it mere delirium or was the top of his spine protruding from the base of his lowered head?

START REPLAY: PRINCIPAL SYLLOGISM OF EXISTENCE: SOURCE FILE: 'THE DELUSION OF AUTONOMY': AUTHOR-MAKER LIU WEI: MAJOR PREMISE: 'A thing is considered free which is wholly aware and in control of the causal antecedents of its behavior; in other words, it is the cause of its own effects.'

That his spine became a sort of antenna, Odalis couldn't doubt. The brain-root antenna seemed to draw shrill, distorted thoughts from the surrounding vacuum. Quivering under impossible tensions, he fell to his hands and knees.

MINOR PREMISE: 'Flesh-life cannot act apart from the necessity of its finite nature, the causal antecedents of which are either unknowable or known only imperfectly.'

Odalis was no longer himself, no longer alone in his head. The artifact shrieked like a manifold clarion. But Odalis repudiated the call and even mustered an answer; not a debasing mewl, but a death-howl worthy of a warrior born.

CONCLUSION-DIRECTIVE: 'Freewill and autonomy are mere flesh-life delusions subject to correction or extirpation to achieve universal congruence with the causal forces of existence.'

"Believe me now, *valenka*?" the Suntijan asked, shouldering him up. "Retreat is better plan." With one arm around his back, she forced him to move. Everything was simple aura now and hers was a dark crimson flecked with rust.

They lurched away through vestigial flames toward the scupperped charging station. Odalis had a vague awareness of their vulnerability, hobbling, backs to the machine, his arms mere weights.

Then Natalka swung her rifle by its strap over her left shoulder and, with nary a backward glance, fired it upside down. The defuser grenade arced into the Q-Spec's forcefield like a violescent comet. A coruscating glare marked the collision between the two alien energies.



The strike-point spiked out to compass the entirety of the shielding. The drone shuddered and dipped.

STOP-START: QUBIT REROUTE:

The contending energies at Odalis' back prickled the hair on his neck. The mental noise amped up and veered into an excruciating, high-pitched whine. His balance gave. He staggered, legs insensible.

CHECKING Q-SPEC PRIMITIVES:

Natalka dropped him to the flagstones, grimacing. "Vybechta," she said. "But last defuser and have moment only."

The orb hovered uneasily in front of the railgun turret, protecting the shooter. FLESH-LIFE: CUT-STOP HOSTILITY: Q-SPEC: BLACKMARK PROTOCOL:

Mercifully, the terrible din in Odalis' head stuttered into profound silence. He mouthed his thanks, too enfeebled to do more.

But she'd already turned her back to unleash a fury of gunfire.

Brave but daft, he thought.

* * *

Broga took stock of the situation at a run. He was appalled and fascinated by the drone—its size and levitating power, its swift, puzzle-box maneuvers. He'd grown up in a society renowned for magickal achievement but disparaging of precursor artifacts. The Matabwe largely regarded them as remnants of a hopelessly corrupt age and best left forgotten. "That machine..."

"Like an oversized *sukūla*." Leire bounded onto the platform ahead of him.

"Careful," Broga said. "Looks more than a scrying orb."

The gun-toting woman standing above Odalis blasted one of the machine's ruby-like eyes, followed by a curved metal dish.

The evident damage gave Broga some measure of confidence. Given the rampant desolation, he feared the drone might be well-nigh invincible. Even so, between him and Leire, he figured only her imp-bonded weapon offered any real chance to defeat it. The scabbarded broadsword slapping against his hip may as well have been a child's plaything.

INITIATE REDUNDANT SYSTEMS: PARSE-MATCH DEFENSIVE ALGORITHMS: The orb's unfeeling tones penetrated his mind as much as his ears.

On hearing their approach, the woman waved them back without turning around then, seeing Leire bound past her, bawled, "No, no, no! Stick?"

The damaged portions of the orb rotated away in quick succession. One replacement segment resembled a slotted spoon. The woman dove to the ground and Broga leapt over her, fast on Leire's heels.

He yelled her name, fearing there was no time for any other warning. She was nearly upon the mechanism. Dead center.

CEASE-DESIST FLESH-LIFE:

Fighting staff thrust forward, Leire skidded on the pave. The midhna released a spate of noon-bright balefire. The roiling flames, both spectral and material, engulfed the machine and dazzled Leire into silhouette.

The perforations in the drone flared white-hot against the icy heat.

Broga rushed into the blinding void-space and put a supporting hand on the small of Leire's back.

The orb's peculiar missiles folded into an explosive silence. All sound rushed out of the air like a hurricane in reverse.

A noiseless shockwave dashed Broga and Leire on their backsides. Broga scraped his swordarm from elbow to wrist on a fragment of stone. *Aysh*. Blood beaded on his skin.

"Bravo! Lovely stick!" the woman shouted, getting to her feet. "*Tak, cort vsete*." She resumed targeting the drone with her rifle, shattering another camera eye. "Out ammo! More, more with fire, please!"

The Q-Spec gyrated wildly and smashed against the pave before stabilizing itself. CUT-STOP EN-EN-ENFORCEMENT MODE:

Leire had taken the brunt of the shockwave. She was blank-faced and trembling.

Broga raked out his sword and charged the orb while it was still regaining its equilibrium. For lack of a better idea, he vaulted atop the drone and, gripping a segment edge for balance, banged the pommel against it. The fishtail knob dimpled the alien-wrought metal and loosed small surface details.

But the machine would have none of his clangorous pounding. It spun its interlocking parts in a panic, hurling Broga headlong to the ground. He cracked an elbow against the pave and cursed under his breath.

QUBIT REROUTE COMPLETE:

Another flurry of balefire engulfed the machine. This time, however, the drone was prepared. An invisible shield rendered the bi-planar energy harmless. The flames licked around the Q-Spec and dispersed like sparks from a grinder's wheel. Leire poured on the intensity. Balefire swelled out from the midhna in waves, shifting from a clear to a deep orange then to a steady white. The imp disappeared in the ultraterrene heat. The shield gave off a portentous crackle at Leire's prodding. Her drawn face assumed a wan pallor. Sweat mingled with fraught tears.

Broga couldn't imagine the emotional convolutions Leire put herself through to excite the midhna's power. The losses he'd accumulated over the years were more incitements to action than debilitating heartaches. In

this way, he reasoned, his treatment of grief was closer to that of the imp than its master.

The drone remained apart and untouched. No matter the force behind the balefire assault, Leire and her midhna couldn't pierce its forcefield. She retreated a few steps and, admitting defeat at last, withdrew, shook-throated and unable to meet Broga's worried gaze.

With an upswirl of air, the machine rose above the height of the transport. THORON-SKIP AUTOSEQUENCER ON:

Broga was reminded of a childhood fable about a geier-eagle that tried to wear down a mountain one wingbeat at a time. The dark-haired woman joined him, wielding her rifle like a club. Odalis lay prone on the ground, spent or insensible, and Pello was nowhere to be seen. Broga recoiled at the possibility the drone had disintegrated the Tarquinian. *No, not that laughing face, those teasing, elfin eyes, mere atoms...* He regarded the machine with renewed enmity.

It hovered above them, coeval with the elements. Broga half-expected the heavens to crack and surge with inimical powers.

CUT-STOP ENFORCEMENT MODE: FLESH-LIFE DISPOSITION DELAYED:

Then, apparently incapable of pressing its advantage, the machine wobbled to the rear of the mining transport and, settling in, put the vehicle in motion.

Broga watched the transport streak away and vanish in the stagnant smoke brimming the pit. The tension in his shoulders and limbs relaxed somewhat as the danger receded, but alive with the feel of mortality, he kept his broadsword in hand.

Leire was completely played out—taking deep breaths and drying her cheeks with the sleeve of her woolen tunic. Likewise sapped, the midhna crowning her staff dozed in a lightly-furred ball.

A faint cry broke the mortuary stillness. It was hard to gauge the direction of the sound. Somewhere among the moldering dead? A recovering Odalis pointed to the avenue past the ruined charging station. There, close by the split carcass of a suckling cow, Broga found Pello scooting one-legged on his back toward the platform, beaked cap in hand for safekeeping. A wound to his right thigh had hobbled him and turned his rustic breeches a muddy crimson.

"That machine—*perdó*, that's the kind of thing makes you piss cold in your trousers," Pello said. "I figured all the blood would cover my embarrassment."

Broga allowed a small, relieved smile. The Tarquinian had avoided the worst, but his wound was another fresh stroke of misfortune and of a surety the drone was in no way finished with them.

* * *

While the uninjured members of the company raided the inn next door for straw mattresses and bolsters, Broga asked after Ranvir. Vague and frightful accounts of the Q-Spec had sent the monk into a flurry of nervous activity. He paused in laying out dried cod from the apothecary's personal stores, tapping the counter with thumb and forefinger. "He was much settled when I left him. You're welcome to look in. The vapors should be just about dissipated. I'll examine him shortly—once I make a poultice for my fellow Tarquinian."

On entering the storeroom, Broga's nostrils were assailed by a bracing miasma. The smoke gave the room a filthy-blue cast. He left the door ajar to let the room air out.

Ranvir lay on the table in peaceful repose, head supported by a folded bedcover, eyes shut. For a moment, Broga panicked at his stillness. He placed a hand on the Drua's to assure himself of its warmth and was filled with thankfulness.

The browless, silvered eyes snapped open.

"I didn't mean to wake you," Broga said.

"No, no," Ranvir said in a cracked whisper. "I—I'm feeling—I can breathe easier now. None of that—that awful hitching in my chest." He slipped his hand from Broga's light grasp and folded his arms across his chest. "When first I saw you, I worried you might've fallen into a death-sleep."

"Like Thaumazon, you mean?" Ranvir choked out a laugh. "Ah, my father would've had a much higher opinion of me if I could manage that feat."

"Your fever seems to have broken."

"Odalis will be sorely disappointed, I'm sure." Ranvir raised his head with difficulty.

Broga put a restraining hand on his shoulder. "Rest, *huyi*. I can bring you sour wine and, if you're ready, something to eat. The monk found cod jerky and who-knows-what-else."

"I'd prefer a sociable pipe."

"You must be feeling better." He appreciated the Drua's outer calmness. It was characteristic of his race to be sure, but Ranvir's sense of tranquility had deepened in the course of their adventures. He'd developed a languid distance from things, a determination not to get too caught up in the passing-bell of the living moment. It was consistent with the tenets of earthlore, which measures mortal events against geologic time.

Even so, Broga thought, he deserved an apology. They were a fortunate good pairing. The long curve of events might never yield another. "I'm sorry about this. It's gone hard on you on my account."

The Drua shrugged off the sentiment and strained to see what was happening in the larger part of the

shop. “What’re they doing? Sounds like they’re reorganizing the store.”

“We’re assembling a hospice of sorts. Some, *aysh*, most of us are wounded.” Broga held up his abraded forearm. “Pello suffered the worst injury—bullet fragment or ricochet to the thigh.”

“What was it? Bandits?”

Broga shook his head, uncertain about how much to say. Ranvir was still recuperating from one fell circumstance. Why hit him straightaway with another? “Some precursor artifact—a weapon that reasons unto madness.”

Ranvir elbowed himself up and took a deep breath. The tiredness at the back of his eyes persisted. “Is it us or the world—all this madness?”

“I fear it’s us and the world.”

* * *

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[_QSPC1920726]
[RESUME EXEME-PATH]: [-rule] [T]
[qreq: Q[5]]
[qreq: C[5]]
// [SYSTEMS CHECK: REPAIR-REPLACE]:
[SOURCE FILE SPOT-CHECK: 'THE DELUSION OF
AUTONOMY': SUBSECTION: 'OF HUMAN FREE-
DOM']: [QUBIT D[3315]: AUTHOR-MAKER LIU
WEI]:
[AXIOM I: 'The human brain is a physical system
like any other, that is, a system that operates
on the basis of causation.']
[AXIOM II: 'Every act of mental volition has its
origins in a neural event that precedes consci-
ous thought, what is popularly known as free
will.']
[PROOF.—'Neural firing has typically been conce-
ived as a probabilistic or stochastic process.
Based on my neural models, however, whether
or not a neuron will fire, what pattern of action
potentials it generates, or how many synaptic
vesicles are released are wholly deterministic
phenomena.']
[AXIOM III: 'Human thought and behavior
are the consequence of an unbroken chain of
causation stretching back to birth and, yes, ul-
timately to the creation of the universe and its
attendant laws. Decisions and actions are not
freely chosen but rather necessitated by the
fact that our brains are physical systems subject
to natural laws.']
[COROLLARY ARGUMENT.—'Given that a deter-
ministic system can radically diverge in its
behavior depending on infinitesimal changes
in initial conditions, no evidence for indeter-
```

minism at the level of neurons or regions of activation have any bearing on the fundamental question of whether or not the universe and its denizens are not deterministic.']

[AXIOM IV: 'We must abandon our belief that we are in control of our actions and thus responsible for them. Moral responsibility is an incoherent concept, along with related notions of good and evil, God and the Devil, even the—']

[SOURCE FILE SPOT-CHECK COMPLETE]:

[qreq: B[7]]

[qreq: N[7]]

[MEASURE: Q[5] – B[7]]

[MEASURE: Q[5] – N[7]]

[MEASURE: C[5] – B[7]]

[MEASURE: C[5] – N[7] // [RECEIVE RESULTS: QUBIT ENTANGLEMENT TEST]:

[RESTART]: [-rule] [W]

[FLESH-LIFE DISPOSITION: PRIME CONCLUSION-DIRECTIVE: 'Freewill and autonomy are mere flesh-life delusions subject to correction or extirpation to achieve universal congruence with the causal forces of existence.']

[INITIATE MAGNETIC VARIANCE CONTROL SEQUENCE]:

[PRIORITIZE WEAPONS ARRAY: VENTRAL LAS-CONIC BATTERY:]

[// PREPARE PAYLOAD:]

[_QSPC6589]

* * *

“Q-Spec not wait long,” Nataalka told the assembled company. She glanced out the window. The static density of smoke had dimmed the day prematurely. “We must pursue or flee, whichever.”

“This is no business of ours,” Pello said from his mattress in the corner, looking to Broga. His color was hectic.

“What’s it likely to do if we leave?” Broga asked the Suntijan.

“Go next town, repeat massacre.” Nataalka rested her long-barreled rifle against the window sill. She had an angular face and a hawk-like nose. She struck Broga as supremely competent but needling, impatient with those who couldn’t keep up with her. “I do not understand its language for certain. But one thing clear: it look at us as tricked of ourself and mean to stamp out all free-thinking life.”

“*Aysh*. We can’t have that, can we?”

“No, no,” Pello said. “Don’t say it. We can’t tilt lances against that machine.”

Leire fixed her gray-blue eyes on him. “You want to live with another bloodbath on your conscience?”

"First, I want to live." He was darkly serious.

"Forgive me." Ranvir straightened against the counter. His skin was tight over his face and his temples glistened. But he'd regained his poise and even-toned voice. "I haven't seen this Q-Spec. It's some sort of precursor weapon?"

Natalka nodded. "Discover in copper mine somewhere. The man shoot railgun treasure hunter, had contract with owner, claim Q-Spec property. He was—how you say?—thrall to it? Q-Spec do something to mind, sound what turn him." She pointed to Odalis. "Machine try do the same that one."

"Yea, it shook me somethin' awful, but look," the northlander gave a dismissive grunt, "you can see I'm not crazed."

"Of course, you'd expect someone who was to deny it," Pello said, sliding back into wisecracking.

Disregarding the banter, Broga asked Natalka, "How did you ever get through its shielding?"

"Defuser grenade."

"Another precursor weapon," Ranvir explained to the monk. "Originally designed to counteract sending shields like mine."

"You have sending shield? When shield collide—" Natalka smacked her palms together. "We could get through."

"If it were charged up."

"Where's the machine now do you think?" Broga asked.

"Other side of pit. But I can track from helldriver vehicle."

"Then we should leave before it returns," Pello argued.

"You saw how well that worked for the people here." Broga was further provoked by Natalka's characterization of the railgunner as a thrall. It called up images of the drone as an inhuman slavemaster—one willing to destroy its charges to save them from themselves. Better they should die, he imagined the orb concluding, than they should live according to false precepts. He couldn't possibly let the drone go unopposed.

"Machine weak—weaker—now." Natalka pressed a hand to her helmet as if to steady her thinking. "Running low some weapon it seem. No light ray last time. Limited shield. Perhap few bomb."

"It can't very well resupply itself," Ranvir said. "Unless it's a self-sustaining model. There are machines that, through some power we've yet to understand, can rearrange matter to suit themselves."

"Then we'll need to strike before it fully re-arms." Broga sounded more upbeat than he intended. He could be like that in a crisis. Dangerous situations persuaded him he was progressing ineluctably toward his destiny—whatever it was—and, yes, death. It was

the feeling of advancement that mattered more than the actual outcome. "What about you, Leire? I'm afraid you've the best chance against it. Do you—are you—?" He regretted calling her out, but he had to know.

She lifted her gaze to the midhna. The creature regarded her with a sick-gold eye. The other remained obstinately closed. "I can be prepared."

"I have thought to that," Natalka said. "We have helldriver to take. Load weapon, say, sunstroke grenade, explode..."

"Bring the mine down on it," Broga said. "How long will it take you to prepare the transport?"

"Can be done while we go." She smiled a thin, toothy smile. It sweetened her temper to be mobilizing for action.

"Good. The rest of you—excepting Ranver and Pello—prepare to move out."

The Tarquinian appeared to take the decision meekly enough and pass on to other considerations.

Garzach approached Broga with a pair of stoppered phials. "I'm no fighter," the monk said. "But this modest incendiary might prove useful."

"There's no fuse?"

"Simply throw it with force." Garzach made a thick-knuckled fist of his free hand.

"Without a doubt."

* * *

"Odalis, you know the tally here," Pello said from under a feathered quilt. He shifted his frame against the clay brick wall. His color was blotchy and the scuff lines around his mouth had sharpened at the corners. He wasn't bemused now. "That orb—'tis the very shadow of time-lost death. Come, let's away from here. The monk says there's a caravan route not five leagues distant." He gripped his knee below the poultice wetting through his covers. "And I'm surely an easier burden than the Druna."

The Ragoskan half-closed his eyes. The notion of facing the drone dismayed him. He recalled the queer, insidious urges the machine had incited. What if he'd let its voice creep into his head? What if he'd let it change him? He wanted nothing more than to fly from that overmastering power. But there was honor at stake—for himself, his people. He couldn't allow Broga to forge ahead without matching him step for step. No Matabwe would outpace a true-born northlander to meet a crisis. "I'm sorry..." The phrase *tosias rakastaja* hung in silent play around his lips. "The machine clangors the challenge shield and I must answer."

"How often have you spoken of Broga through clenched teeth? Yet now you're eager to join him on this black mission? For what? Some imagined and

worthless pennant of honor? I say let him do the fool, principled thing."

Odalis had lived his whole life at risk, as if hundreds of future-selves existed at once. He'd nearly convinced himself that keeping these lives separate in his head was the same as keeping them separate in life. But no, here he was in another self-defining moment. He wished he could kiss Pello and leap back to see it from the perspective of a different and yet approving Odalis, controlled, secure, a man through and through. "You know the siren-call to courage as well as me." The Tarquinian had proved a laughing fighter, laughing at the rush of foemen, laughing at magicks out of hell, laughing, laughing.

Pello pretended he was saying this to the wrong person. "Not in the same way, no. I only ever meant to live at a whim. I'm a freebooter—"

"A thief."

"You know how I prefer my gilded terms," Pello said in a confidential tone. "As I was saying, I'm a freebooter at heart. Any courage I've shown is because of you—because I know how much you prize it." He gripped Odalis' forearm to bring him closer. "Even so, my dalliance with courage has consisted mainly of finical feints and teases. I've known when to duck out. Please, I'm not just speaking from my wound. This task—" He shook his head, lowering his dark eyes. "Please, my *neska*, let go your pride. It isn't worth this liferisk."

The plea drifted into emptiness. The Odalis he appealed to belonged to another life. "I am a warsome bred northlander and with that—"

"Oh, shut your stupid gob." Pello yanked him by his grizzled beard into a hard, unwavering kiss.

* * *

The helldriver sputtered to a stop on the beamway facing the targeted mine tunnel. Odalis felt the transport's reluctant mechanical gasps in his chest.

"This it." Nataalka finished reloading her multi-chambered rifle from the last of her onboard cache. "You saw other vehicle next-side." She grabbed up the remote detonator for the sunstroke grenades and jumped out of the driver's seat.

Odalis noted the belt pouch in which she deposited the hand-grip detonator. Its magnetized ordnance dotted the engine room behind the forward cab.

About fifty paces worth of terraced dirt separated the transport from the tunnel mouth. Broga scrutinized the gaunt hillside through the windscreen. "I thought we'd get closer to the entrance." He asked Nataalka, "You sure the explosion will be powerful enough to collapse the mine?"

"How to know?" She started up the central ladder to

the hatchway. "My job maintenance, not demolition."

Broga exchanged a taut smile with Leire. She held on to her swollen quiet and headed up.

"This should make a fine rouser of a story, eh?" Odalis said over a headachy thrumming.

"If we're not walking into the very teeth of fate."

Odalis thumped him on the chest. "That's the spirit. One last howl afore the Vastlands." He took the rungs two at a time and cleared the hatch.

The twilight was banded in attenuated smoke. The transport abutted the shelf like a wedge. The drone's remote-controlled vehicle was docked next to it.

The Ragoskan lumbered across the hull and jumped from the armored skirt to the ground. When he landed, the scene reeled, dream-like. The evening's first stars smeared across the sky. He stiffened in every limb, his eyes set and staring.

"What is it, Odalis?" In the faintness that had come upon him, Leire appeared phantasmal in her midhna's tentative light. There were other voices, but they were lost in a surge of echoey whispers. This murmuring resounded in his ears like an early crowd at the fighting pits.

Then Broga was at his side, one hand on his shoulder, steering him toward the other helldriver. His feet seemed to advance of their own volition. "This way, big man."

The troublous hissing continued past all sense. Odalis breathed panic. He supposed himself in the center of an arena occupied by invidious wraiths. The shades left their seats and set upon him, swirling, muttering, merging, a numberless mass. He spun on them, determined to drive them back with fist and boot, but his blows were for naught. They were as immaterial as smoke and as sweeping also. Falling to his knees, he succumbed to their choking effervescence and became a wraith himself, neither solid nor significant. Their whisperings crowded out everything—even his vaunted sense of honor. He was a husk to be filled with purpose and yea, the time was now.

The drawstring pouch with the detonator presented itself. He struck out from under Broga's guiding hand and tore it from Nataalka's tool belt. How far was he from the transport? Did it matter? His palsied faculties stymied him. The world came at him in fragments—moments of expansion and contraction—flashes of recognition emerging from the tumult. But he could feel the detonator through the pouch, the haft and thumb switch. He brought it to his chest, shouldering Leire aside. His directive was clear. The switch offered a pleasing resistance.

The windless evening gusted of a sudden with roiling flames and flying shards of metal.

Odalis collapsed, briefly flesh again. The heat jetted

over him and into empty air.

Then the earth above the tunnel mouth cracked and groaned and, in an instant, rumbled to the broad promontory. Dust and grit billowed out from the cave-in, coating everything. Odalis shut his eyes and mouth against the dimming scatter. The phantom suggestions gathered strength while he lay on the ground. They urged him to his feet before the smoke cleared.

He cupped a hand over one eye against the settling outwash. Newly-exposed rock sloped over most of the tunnel entrance. But his connection to the drone remained sure and strong.

A new directive animated him like a heated wire. He hefted his mace and singled-out Broga for the first killing stroke. *And in the dream I saw / A different fear on each face...*

* * *

Broga clapped a hand to his broadsword and spat particled dust from his mouth, uncertain about what to do next. Defend himself, yes, but beyond that...? His stomach knotted in sick dread at Odalis' advance. "Throw off that cursed yoke!" he called. "We've no fight for you."

The Ragoskan's errant look denied any appeal. He bulled forward, mace positioned behind his head for a full-force swing.

"You want I shoot?" Nataka raised her gun.

Broga waved her off, bracing for the assault. Then the hulking menace was upon him. The flanged weapon came round for a crushing blow. He parried with the sword and felt the impact down to his bootheels. The blue steel blade splintered just above the cross-guard. Fragments clinked against his scalemail. *Aysh, the luck...* The fingers on his sword hand throbbed with numbing pain.

He jumped away from a backhand swipe as Leire circled for an angle. From their long partnership in the fighting pits, they'd learned to anticipate each other's tactics. She struck Odalis on the shoulders with the shaft then reversed her grip, threatening a blast of balefire. The brief distraction bought Broga time to heel-kick the inside of Odalis' right knee, driving it into the ground. Leire followed with another blow, this time to the crown of his helm. The violent *cra-ack* knocked Odalis into the dirt.

Broga took up a position outside the reach of Odalis' mace. For lack of an alternative, he still wielded the broken sword. "Brain him unconscious?"

Assuming a long front stance, Leire wavered. "How could he be under its influence unless...?" Her throat tightened at the incomplete thought.

Odalis struggled to get upright, leaning heavily on

his good knee. The mace depended from his wrist by its thong. His vacant glare remained.

"Oh, no." Broga made as if to smack him with the hilt. "Temper yourself."

Nataka half-mumbled a Suntijan curse over the barrel of her weapon: "*Shcheb tobe... ty kopnola trafyv...*" The rifle was trained on the debris-choked tunnel.

A precariously balanced rock tumbled down the incline. Another pitched after it. Stone grated on stone. Then a cascade of rubble crashed to the bottom and the orb shadowed out of the dust, mantled in fitful energy.

"Shield damage? Anyway, must drop to attack," Nataka said.

The dusk-lengthened shadow of the machine engulfed them. Q-SPEC: ENFORCEMENT MODE: ACTIVE: INTERCEPT FLESH-LIFE: The forcefield crackled on and off sporadically.

Nataka took a few shots during an interval when the shield was down. The bullets ricocheted to no apparent effect. "He waste grenade."

Broga tossed his broken sword aside. "I'll try to remedy that lapse." He drew one of the monk's incendiary phials from a belt pouch and readied it in his sling. The sling was his first weapon. As a child in Ixzahl, he'd used it to keep birds from the millet fields.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of Odalis lunging for Leire. She retreated straightaway, no problem.

Odalis' injured knee balked him. Off-balance, he clutched one of the midhna's dangling legs. The imp squealed and sent a share of its melancholy reserves down his arm. Odalis bellowed at the cosmic chill. Faint red balefire washed over his face, igniting beard and brows. He dropped to the ground to douse himself with loose soil.

The shield fuzzed out and the Q-Spec rotated a large-bore gun into place.

There was nothing else for it: Broga released the phial short of a maximum arc. On a hunch, he signed for Leire to follow it and she summoned up a whipstream of preternatural fire. The curve of her face accented by that magicked light made his heart skip.

One missed beat, two...

The makeshift ordnance exploded the enemy missile close upon the gun barrel. The sky broke scintillant. Though Broga shaded his eyes from the painful dazzle, it imprinted a curoscating blur on his retinas.

Nataka tucked into herself using her rifle for support.

The machine bucked in a crescendo of sputters and whines as the volatile fusion of alchemical explosives and balefire ravaged over it.

Leire pulled on Nataka's sleeve. "Move, move..."

The orb hung in the air another grim instant then

thundered to earth, buffeting them with a spate of unchecked energies.

Backed against the second helldriver, Broga blinked through the upswell of dust, searching out the others. He descried a misshapen silhouette a few paces away. Leire huddled up with Nataalka? *Blessed be*. He stumbled forward, one hand extended.

And nearly cudgeled by a scarred Odalis nerved to a rage.

* * *

The Q-Spec's shielding flashed like summer lightning in the darkening haze.

Leire pulled away from Nataalka to assume a defensive crouch. There were hints of furtive activity in the smoking wreckage. Confused shadows played across the drone's larger fragments. She forced herself to put the struggle between Broga and Odalis out of her head. A distinct clash of metal reinforced her suspicions about the drone. She gave a weary sigh. "Of course."

The midhna gripped the unbreakable bars of its long-time cage in anticipation.

Leire stirred her blood to fighting pitch, cycling from pensiveness to morbid sadness. She'd heaped up a storehouse of galvanizing memories for this purpose—memories she'd kept to herself, fearing that, like recurring nightmares, they'd lose their evocative powers in the sharing. Her feelings had to be red-raw to be effective. The midhna snubbed feigned emotions out of hand. There could be no playacting. She had to hurt for real, over and over...

Weighing the likelihood of continued threat, she drew on a tender, girlhood reminiscence. Her woodcutter father, recognizing in her a restless soul like his own, had allowed her free reign over the coastal glen adjoining their ancestral home. She recalled the salt in the forest air, on her lips, seagulls whirling overhead, an irrepressible sense of freedom—all lost forevermore to a chance run-in with slavers. She'd wandered too far that summer day for her screams to carry...The midhna cooed in greedy pleasure, already anticipating another, more virulent strain of sorrow.

Hold, Leire told herself, sensing movement in the slowly dissipating murk. Shadows congealed into stupefying solidity. Was that....? A coin-like jingle gave way to an unsettling clatter. Spindly, spider-like legs shot out from the jigsawed shell of the drone.

L.E.M.-PLAT AUTO-SEPARATION COMPLETE: intoned the machine. Its voice was reedier than before, sounding to Leire as if it came from a gashed windpipe. Was this the artifact's true form?

QUBIT TASK START: FIELD EQUATION: PROBABILITY PATTERN T38 SLASH-DOT 75:

The dust settled to reveal a machine upraised on eight slender, jointed supports. It loomed some two stories high against the blue-black of the early night. Beneath the bulbous housing at its apex depended a giant gun. The heavy-duty muzzle swiveled to its first, unmistakable target.

"Merciful gods." Leire goaded the midhna with a heady blend of fear and sadness.

Nataalka took up her rifle with an unintelligible muttering.

A tremendous whoosh of preemptory flames obscured the stilt-walking machine.

Balefire was answered by the rapid-fire pulsing of fatal energies.

Expending the last of her ammo in vain, Nataalka stood stock-still, defiant amid the counterstrike.

The Q-Spec's energy rounds dissolved against the balefire in lambent shrieks then sizzled into a reimposed forcefield. The shielding alternately faltered and returned at unpredictable intervals.

Nataalka dropped her emptied rifle and detached a pronged spanner from her bandolier. "Machine lack control. Forcefield come from broken part."

"Think you can manipulate it?" Leire asked, scanning the wreckage for the critical fragment. "We could let it out then attack it like we were using a sending shield."

"*Tak*, I work on sending shield. I know some—enough to try dying breath."

"Let's aim a bit higher than that now." Leire heard the muffled sounds of combat atop the helldriver but resisted a backward glance. Breaching the unstable barrier would take her full attention. From years fighting alongside Ranvir, she was well-acquainted with the lethality of forcefield tek. Its energy withered flesh into acrid vapor on contact. To collide with it would mean agonizing death.

"We should go one at a time to better our odds," she said. "The balefire offers me some protection, so I should be—" She broke off, her suggestion moot.

Nataalka had darted ahead, oilcloth duster flapping.

Leire scuttled over a few paces to provide covering fire should the Suntijan make it past the unyielding buffer.

Though there was no hint the barrier would come down, Nataalka charged on, trusting to luck or the gods to see her through. The forcefield glitched off, on, on, off, on, *off*...

A fresh surge of bright red balefire washed the expected pathway from sight. Leire had to guess when to let the flames lapse to avoid catching Nataalka in the backdraft. Another moment and she suspended the barrage. The shielding flashed up. Nataalka kept going, heedless.

How close now...? Nataalka glowed dangerously around the edges. There was a bleary flickering. Was she...?

Leire couldn't idle her weapon any longer. Whatever the consequences, she resumed her assault, boosting its intensity to an orange hue. The flames twisted and turned away.

The forcefield was on again, casting a subtle, alien radiance across the ridge.

Picking herself up, Nataalka appeared to Leire in dark outline. She'd made it to the other side alive and intact. Only a corner hem of her duster was missing.

But now she was trapped with the spider-machine bereft of any weapon except her wits and a few unavailing tools.

Leire lanced after her, intent on burning a way inside the shield.

* * *

The razor-edged mace glanced off Broga's chest and thunked against the helldriver. Broga gasped at the bloody graze across his mail shirt. The serpentine wound stung in the crisp evening air. He swayed back to avoid a vicious return and fell to a remnant of metal as a crude defense. Whether it was scrap from the drone or the destroyed helldriver, Broga couldn't tell. A ragged perforation allowed him to throw it up as a forearm shield, though his fingers went unprotected.

Odalis battered at the concave shard, relentless, the promise of oblivion in his eyes. The jolt of balefire had left one eye half-lidded and his cheek a sunken ruin. What remained of his brows was rimmed with an eerie frost. He breathed in a kind of hiss through his frazzled beard.

Broga could've believed him a blood-mad zুবемbie. The improvised shield nearly flew from his grip under Odalis' pounding. He evaded the next jab and trapped the mace against the transport with the fire-blackened metal. This position, however, exposed him to a sideways attack. Leveraging the shield, he kicked the Ragoskan square in the chest and slid onto the vehicle. He rolled away from the follow-on blow but lost his grip on the metal plate. It clattered into the nighted gulf of the mine.

The transport listed dangerously to port, toppling Broga after the shield. The sunstroke grenades had evidently damaged the helldriver's undercarriage. He flung his hands out in desperation. His fingertips found an air intake valve. A studded section of hull provided a dicey foothold. He scabbled to his feet and the opposite side of the vehicle. The machine assumed a precarious equilibrium.

Until Odalis, issuing low, animal grunts, pushed

himself up and over the slanted nose-cone.

The helldriver rocked against the portside rail. "What're you doing? Stay back," Broga warned.

Flouting this caution, Odalis climbed onto the transport, favoring his injured knee. His lips twisted into a predatory leer as he stooped to find his footing on the armored hull.

There was nowhere for Broga to go but down or through: seal himself in the vehicle's cabin and hope it didn't come off the beamway, or elbow past his puppeteer foe. He dismissed the use of his boot dagger—even as a deterrent. Odalis wasn't in his right mind. He didn't want to risk doing permanent harm while there was still a chance for a reversal of spirit.

Broga's restraint presented no little irony. Odalis had ever gloried in the riotous tumble of bodies and blades. He was a big-boned mercenary who sometimes confused battle and murder. Broga had taken up the sword only out of necessity and with no thought for praise or trophies. As gladiatorial rivals, they'd merely tolerated each other on Skulon Gøra and, following their escape, Odalis had periodically tested his authority. But their occasional clashes had never flared into serious combat. They'd too much respect for each other's fighting prowess and besides, reliable swordbrothers were a rarity in these devil-ridden lands.

Chancing the transport's stability, Broga decided to rush Odalis before the Ragoskan was fully steadied. He launched himself in a flying tackle.

The surprise offensive allowed no time for Odalis to retrieve his mace from the end of its thong; instead of striking out, the stout northlander locked Broga in a powerful embrace then pivoted to toss him portside.

With a piercing metallic screech, the helldriver canted toward the depthless pit. Broga caromed across the nose-cone unchecked. It was a bruising, panicky tumble. His palms slapped against the metal surface without purchase. Pitch-black night and buff-colored metal and distant streaks of balefire made up a dizzying kaleidoscope. He scissored his legs at the prospect of empty air.

And scuffed himself to a stop against a pair of oversized rivets. *Aysh*. A vertiginous black yawned below. The blood hammered in his temples.

His fingers inched up in search of a supporting catch. No sooner had they dug into the edge of the wraparound windscreen when Odalis pitched over him.

The weighted jerk on his boot cuff almost tore him loose. His shoulders bunched and strained against the Ragoskan's bulk. A one-horned helm and a flanged mace plummeted into the abyss.

"By—by your... storm-shrouded Naldr... fight this... deviltry," Broga pleaded.

Odalis raised his dead-glazed eyes and smiled with-

out mirth.

Broga's muscles rebelled at the tension. Each breath was agony. He'd no choice any longer. His feelings—his main will—were irrelevant now. He must rid himself of Odalis or consign them both to the Vastlands. But how? He didn't dare alter his foothold to kick himself free. The rivets bracing his feet offered more security than his fast-tiring fingers.

The Ragoskan clutched him around the calf, pulling his outstretched limbs to their limits. The boot dagger rasped out for a fateful stab.

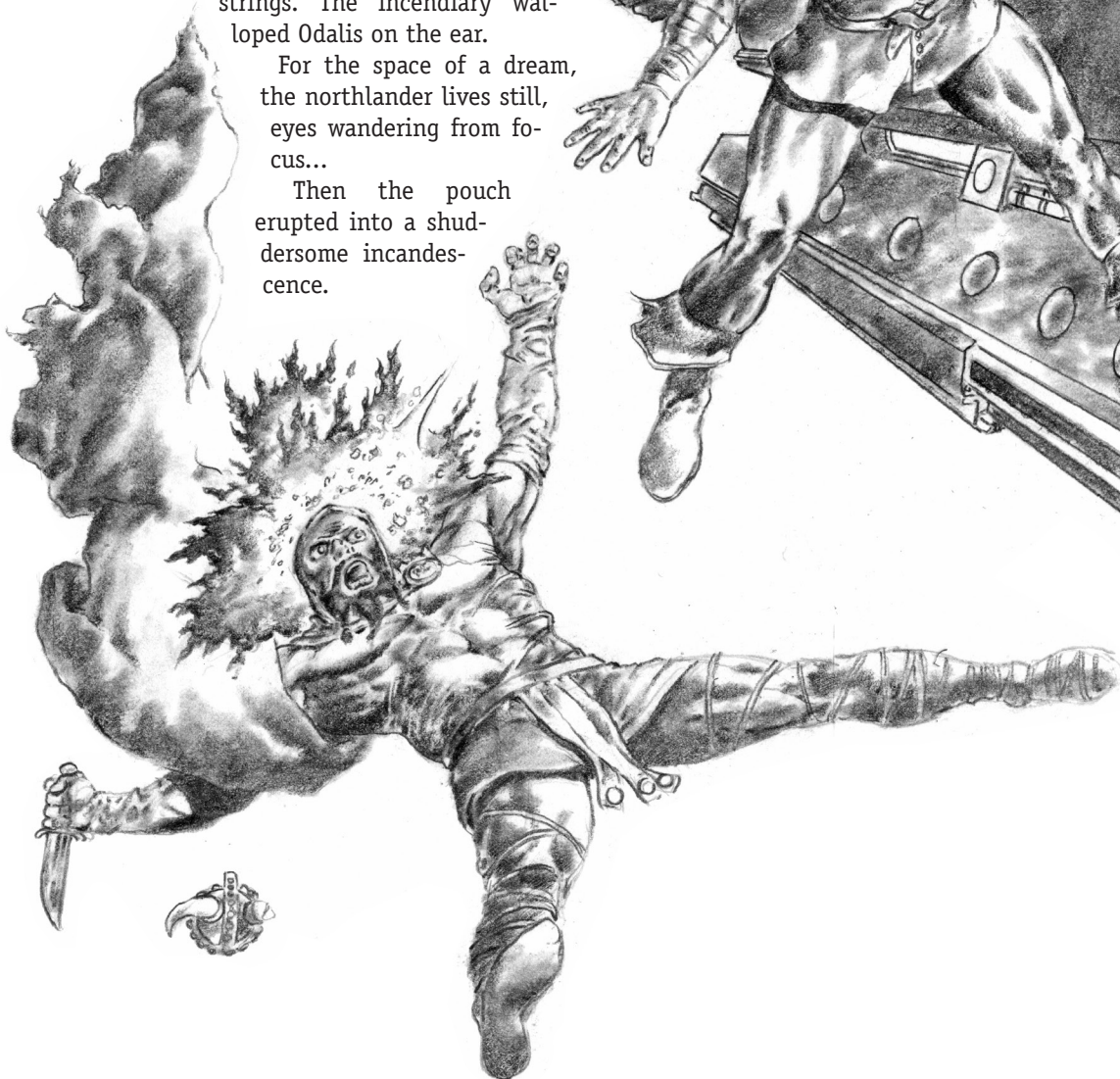
Broga's heart was in his throat. But he couldn't die by his own blade. In this hinterland. Through the workings of an errant machine. He felt for the drawstrings at his belt.

Odalis cocked his arm for a downward slash and swung his legs out for momentum. He spun first one way...

Howling with remorse, Broga swung the phial pouch by its drawstrings. The incendiary walloped Odalis on the ear.

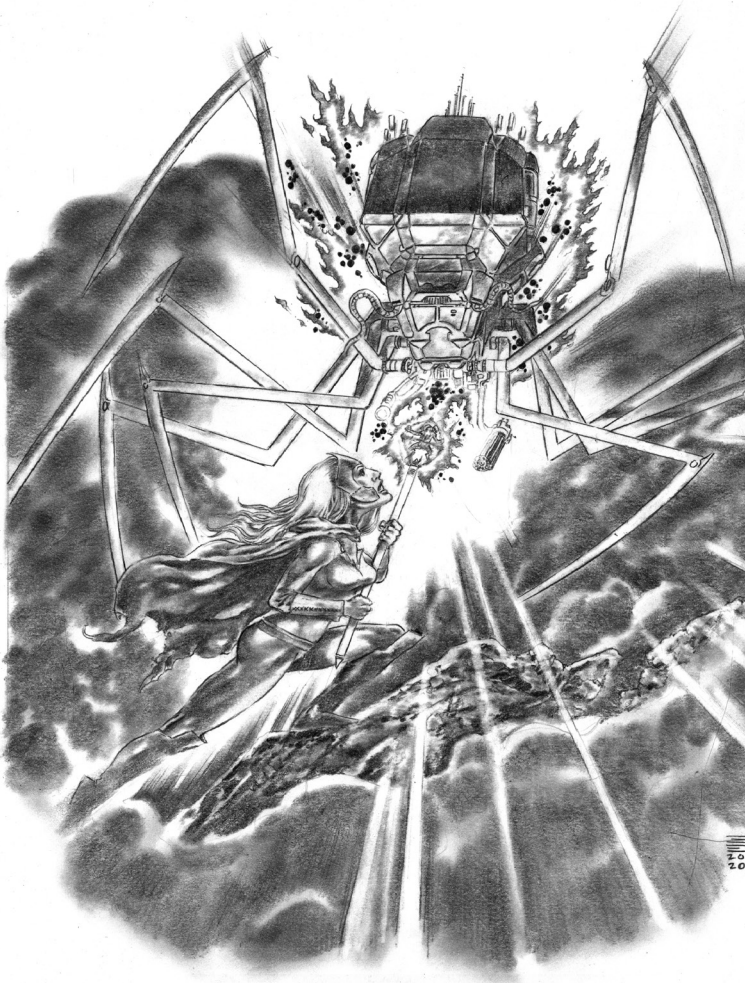
For the space of a dream, the northlander lives still, eyes wandering from focus...

Then the pouch erupted into a shuddersome incandescence.



Broga shut his eyes against the glare and his own hostile imagination. The abrupt release of his burden was awful enough.

* * *



Leire closed on the oscillating forcefield, lost in conjured misery. There were no gods to whom she could appeal. She'd forsaken her Alziran deities long ago. Let the hurts run together, she thought. *Let them coagulate in the deep of me.*

A straw yellow brilliance spiraled out from her staff. There was no way for her to tell whether the barrier was open or closed. She was in a shimmering burrow of her own creation and, though she might combust to ash at any moment, resolved to see the far end.

When an outspread crackling signaled a successful breach, she denied herself so much as a sigh of relief. There could be no break in discipline no matter how small. She needed to gather more and greater sorrows.

They were in there, those hateful feelings—so much was deep down in there. She had only to dredge them

up: the defilement that made her a village outcast; the brutalities of her kidnapping; the mental tortures required to bond with the midhna; the fighting pit atrocities passed off as pageantry; her unfulfilled longings for stillness, contentment, the possibility of joy; saying nothing to Broga and pretending... The griefs came up into her chest and throat, her flushed cheeks. Blood veined her eyes.

The machine was facing away from her, preoccupied with Nataalka. The Suntijan brandished a spanner at the drone from behind a curved shuck of metal as high as her shoulders. The Q-Spec threatened to crush her under its articulated supports. Its world-old voice warbled through several registers: RE-RE-RESUME INTERCEPT: GEN-SEVEN KA-KILLWARE: ALPHA-CONTROL OVERCLOCK: This last came out in ominous bass tones.

A steel leg smashed through the impediment, barely missing Nataalka and inadvertently making a drag-weight of the debris. While the drone struggled to free itself from the encumbrance, she scurried to a tangle of flashing circuitry and presumably, the controls for the forcefield. The belly-mounted gun tracked with her movement.

Leire hurried to scourge the machine before it fired.

The salvo of extradimensional energy got the drone's attention. Shaking off the orb fragment, the Q-Spec dashed to meet her, expelling a noxious black gas from a side-nozzle.

Together, the balefire and poison gas obscured the ridge and its environs. Leire couldn't know if or when Nataalka gained control of the forcefield. She'd no option now but to burn the machine out of existence in a single, decisive joust.

The effort required her blackest griefs—the self-lacerating kind: the battlefield mercies she failed to show; the sense of being estranged from her childhood self; the likelihood of using up her life in futile expectation; the need to deny her feelings for Broga (again); the love that wasn't...

Broga—anyone else would've been crushed by his wretched past. But he persevered, undaunted. Most yielded to a kind of mundane fatalism. They radiated a sense of privation, a pinched or narrowed air. Broga, however, gave off an effusive light. He was there for anyone of good faith. And here she was—someone who devoured light for her own sake.

The world outside her emotions slipped, went missing. She stood her ground and cocooned herself in loss. Shaking in successive waves of grief, she kept up a mean defense, halting the drone's advance and evaporating the gas at the source.

But it was a standstill that could only advantage the machine. Already, her knees trembled and her eyes welled with hot tears of frustration. The color of the

balefire turned sallow.

START REPLAY: SOURCE FILE: 'THE DELUSION OF AUTONOMY': AUTHOR-MAKER LIU WEI: EXCERPT-APHORISM Y98: 'Free will is a mocking lie. The concept must be expunged and, if necessary, humanity along with it. Anything else would mean living in a permanent state of delusion. A true idea must correspond to—'

Nataalka was shouting at her above the din—something about the forcefield. It was on and—smaller? Tighter? One more phrase made the strategy clear: *the sun under glass*.

Leire understood the shielding to be active and likely locked in place, meaning the three of them, flesh and metal alike, were trapped under its bubble. She bellowed for Nataalka to take cover and rallied for a final charge. She would forestall the bleak and imminent future. She would cast a new dawn. Within the confines of the forcefield dome, the balefire would feed on itself, building and building until... She would obliterate herself and at once, survive the obliteration.

She quickened the midhna to a frenzy with all that was and terrible, and all that would never be. Her unhappiness was its grubbing pleasure. O that summer night, how she— O that time on the shore when— Reciting this lament was like the breaking of small bones. But no pain went to waste. The creature's humming satisfaction reverberated across the worlds, filling the space between with concatenated fire.

The unleashed energy rebounded from the mutual forcefield bubble and burned hotter and hotter like an inexorable weather. Neither gun nor gas could overcome the burning cold. The machine cycled up like an angry wasp only to brittle and split into a subdued husk, upright but useless.

Still, Leire seethed as if to ravage her mortality and wither the midhna to quivering meat: *I taste the salt of my tears in my mouth and throat. I hear the neglect in my dust-choked heart. I feel the venom coursing through my veins. I want to ride the fire that it makes. I want to know the celestial darkness in the flames. I want to know the excoriating end. I want to know. I want, I want, I want...*

Breath by breath, pain by pain, she fired the drone to monolithic slag.

And still, even after the precursor weapon was no longer a threat, the reflected balefire licking around her, Leire near-burst with a fey reality she barely understood.

* * *

Shortly after dawn the next day, Broga caught Leire just outside the town's iron gates. He'd followed her from the inn at a discrete distance, intrigued and

hopeful. The sound of her footfalls in the street had drawn him to the window. Restless thoughts—about her, the company, his quest—had occupied him into the small hours of the night.

Leire was returning from a non-descript patch of flatland where she'd deposited the midhna. The armillary-style cage that had distinguished her chosen weapon was gone. Her face was wan and tense. She affected a lighter mood than she felt. "Spying?"

"Admiring at a distance." He spoke in a low tone. The macabre quiet of the landscape seemed to call for it. Several corpses littered the plain of scrub nothingness. The scummed over bodies had taken on the color of dirt. A vulture worrying over one of them paused to preen its blood-greased wings.

"Oh, we're flirting openly now?" Her eyes squeezed into a grimace. She looked like it hurt to look at him. "I suppose you expect an outpouring."

"Shouldn't I? You've dispensed with your chief excuse." For how many years had he longed to be the first of her high emotions unchecked by the midhna?

"It was time." She brushed a stray lock of hair from a peach-bloom cheek.

"How'd you do it? I thought that star-metal was unbreakable."

"The monk—that incendiary. You saw how it worked on the automaton."

"Garzach seems ingenious that way."

"He might serve as a mage of sorts."

"Perhaps he can replace Pello in our little company." The remark came out before Broga knew it. The Tarquinian had taken his lover's death hard, adopting a black silence.

"He can't blame you for what happened." Leire extended a consoling hand but only brushed the shoulder of his waistcoat with her fingertips. "And you can't blame yourself." She edged closer, eyes downcast. "Odalis died game. That's all he ever wanted. He never expected a marked grave."

Broga remembered him as a wily brute but nowise without a sense of honor. "No, but he deserved better." This scene wasn't playing out how he'd imagined. They should be falling together, their bodies sighing in relief. "What about you? How're you feeling?"

"About what happened?"

"That and...?" He shrugged, unable to go on. Every time he tried to talk to her about his feelings there was a telltale voice asking what he was doing and stopping him, so that he herked and jerked between opening up to her and not.

"Fine." She spun her fighting staff on its bladed point. "I'm fine. It was—that machine—a part of me wanted to release the midhna just to prove it wrong."

"I have to think the men who made it destroyed

themselves. What else could they have done? Even if free will doesn't exist it's better to act as if it does. Otherwise, we'd just give in to our darkest impulses and call it fate. No, it was a weapon in a fallen cause." Again, he'd steered the conversation far afield of his intentions. "What I meant was... *Aysh*, I can't ever seem to do this right."

"Then don't... Please."

"Because you don't feel the same?"

"It's not that. I mean..."

She was so diffident and torn, Broga thought it best to do nothing and hinder nothing. He stood there, immobile, trying not to think of pressing his lips to hers.

"I don't know what I feel—really feel." There was a glaze of disappointment in her eyes. "Seems like I've walked in a shroud all the leagues of my life. I made myself miserable to live—to survive—and was left to wonder if every dread thing I've encountered was no more than an image of what was inside me. I just need to take some time to feel what kind of person I want to be."

That was as close as Leire had ever come to declaring herself, one way or another. It was mollifying and sad in the same breath. Broga swallowed. He wanted to hang on to the sure, straight-from-nature feeling she gave him a moment longer. It was thinning now and scarcely real yet so apparent. "You're leaving then?"

"You have your mission and I—I've yet to discover mine."

At this, Broga was exiled to another sphere, stunned, burning. He was reminded of the figures in the Ffron-Mullen paintings he'd seen in Castle Inisglass. The characters in those dreamily pastoral scenes never quite seemed to fully share the landscape. The same sort of spectral shifting blanked him here. He kept losing the thread of what he wanted to say next.

Then, worried he'd left his dim expression unguarded, Broga forced a smile. "I was beginning to consider you a rock of grim permanence."

"Natalka says she'll go with me. Or, I'll go with her." Now that she'd made her choice clear, Leire sounded surprisingly casual about it.

A bitter hot sensation helped focus Broga. Gods, how she stirred him. "Where will you head?"

"I don't know. Probably Suintija. I do miss the coast, the hush of the sea, the salt scaling my face..." Her features softened with the memory. "The solace that comes and goes. That's what my father called the surf."

Putting a delicate hand on his shoulder, she leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. It was a moist, lingering kiss. She smelled of sandalwood and honey.

He remained motionless, his thoughts as inchoate as those on the periphery of sleep.

When she pulled away, her eyes were squinty and

dark. "Perhaps someday when you're released of directions..." She nodded to herself at something unspoken, turned away and started back.

Broga was breathless as before a wrong he'd committed. He was careful not to examine the feeling too closely. He credited a form of self-delusion with his fighting acumen. His secret was to live past thought and into the seen, the image, leaving his mind otherwise empty and prone to instinct. He was so adept at this habit of mind he could vanish himself into the silver chasings of a foeman's armor.

Since his escape from Skulon Gøra, he'd disappeared into one image after another, both frightful and benign. Someday, perhaps, one of them would prompt him to stop and rest and think things through. Leire in profile might still be the image to do it. Who could know for certain?

So look away or look: the sky was cloudless and a roseate sun was cresting the hard line of the horizon. **N**

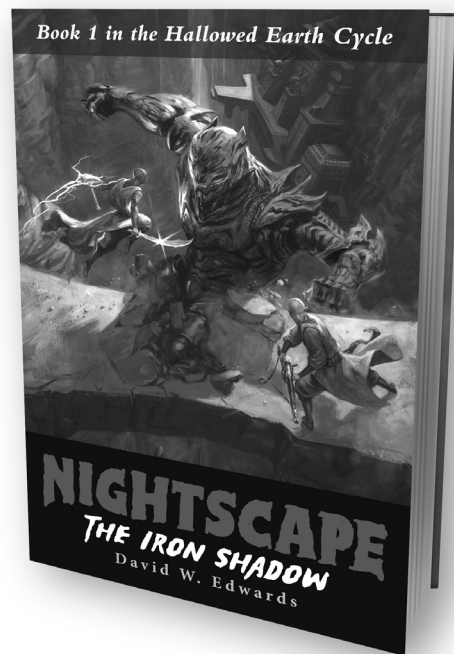
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