

THE SAFEHOUSE

PATHFINDER'S JOURNAL: WHISPERS IN THE WASTELANDS 1 OF 6

We sailed for days up the Sellen River on a rented barge. Only one of us was a sailor by trade—the captain and owner. The rest laid claim to some other profession: trader, farmer, herbalist, carpenter. Most were River Kingdoms born and bred, and thus had sailing in their blood. I was the least practiced at the art, save for a halfling messenger from Brevo. She was too small to be of much use with sails and oars, but did what she could willingly.

It was the two hundred and forty-eighth day of my travels, and I longed for the sight of home.

Though I had spent those two hundred and forty-eight days roaming the eastern reaches of Avistan and chronicling my adventures there, I had seen little in my travels as strange as Outsea. The last port we stopped in before leaving the River Kingdoms, Outsea was a region where humans walked on wooden docks and lived in houses built on stilts, while under the water aquatic beings of all kinds made their homes. I saw merfolk swimming up watery “streets” as gracefully as Taldan noblewomen would sweep down cobblestone avenues, and submerged sahuagin guards watching our craft for signs of trouble. We’d resupplied and spent one night in the town before beginning the last stretch of our river journey.

The sun rose high and pale as we crossed the border into Numeria. When my help on deck was not required, I stood at the stern and watched my homeland roll by. The marshy, tree-shrouded terrain of the River Kingdoms gave way to hard, dry earth, laid bare to the sky above. My heart sang to see those rolling clay hills and scrub-covered plains.

To outsiders, Numeria may seem harsh and barren, but I knew its secrets. For twenty years, I’d lived within its borders, never straying far from home. Then one day while out hunting, I found a body lying among the scrub. Its bones had long been picked clean by scavengers, but the satchel at its side was intact. The papers within bore the address of a Pathfinder lodge in Castle Urion. I took it upon myself to return the papers, thinking only of a reward. Instead, I found a taste for travel and adventure within my soul. Now, years later, I had undertaken many missions for the Pathfinders. This last had been the longest and most arduous.

My village was still days away, but I pictured my father’s smile upon seeing me again, my mother’s aloof greeting but the gleam of pride in her eyes.

By evenfall, we had docked in the trade town of Hajoth Hakados. The captain of our barge shook my hand.

In passable Hallit, he said, “Good fortune and swift travels to you, Sidek.”

“And to you as well,” I replied, then disembarked and set foot on my native soil again.

It had been some years since I traveled through Hajoth Hakados. The town was much as I remembered it: a collection of clapboard homes covered in the dust of the plains sitting scattered outside the walls of the city. I strode west along a wide dirt road, leaving the waterfront behind me. People on the street took note of me as I passed, their eyes glancing down my arms and evaluating my scars before they nodded to me in respect. I returned the gestures.

Strolling through the city, I passed a collection of shops, the one-story buildings made taller by wooden false fronts. Many had already shut their doors against the encroaching night. From behind curtained windows came the glow of lamplight; it seemed some townsfolk here turned in early.

By the time I reached the center of town, the streets were thinning of people. As I walked, I listened for the sounds of conversation and laughter, hoping to find a quick drink and a laugh before seeking out the Pathfinder lodge. For a small city, Hajoth Hakados was a trade hub in southern Numeria, and the inns often filled up with travelers and merchants.

Loud voices and the echo of a laugh caught my attention. I followed the sounds, turning down a narrower side street where the buildings pressed closer together. I soon realized I had erred. The houses here were smaller and more run-down than those by the waterfront. No lights gleamed in the windows of these homes. The voices I’d been following faded. I came to an intersection and was about to turn around when the voices returned, loud and harsh.

I spun in the direction of the commotion. A woman stood at the mouth of an alley. Three cloaked figures advanced, surrounding her. I saw the flash of steel in the starlight.

The woman clutched a burlap sack to her chest. I could see little of her form beneath her loose tunic and breeches, but she stood a head taller than those that menaced her, and a bronze hammer hung at her hip. Still, she shrank from their approach. “Get away,” she said. I had to strain to hear her. “It’s mine.”

“We just want to take a look,” one of the cloaked figures said. I gauged their walk, evaluating them as two men and a woman, all with trouble on their minds.

“Yeah, what’d you find?” another asked. “Maybe we can do some trade.”

The sneer in his voice and his drawn blade left no doubt as to the nature of that trade.

The woman held her treasure more tightly and made no answer. By some agreement the three aggressors pressed their attack all at once. Two forced the woman against the alley wall at blade-point while the third, the man who'd made the offer of trade, tried to rip the sack from the woman's arms.

I sprinted across the street before I'd half thought of interfering. "Three to one are unfair odds," I called out. The man struggling with his victim turned his head toward me but held on to the bag.

"Leave, or share her fate," he snarled.

The venom in his tone surprised me. Of course any villain interrupted mid-crime would be hostile, but his words seemed personal. There was something more here than petty larceny.

One of the other two muggers turned and pointed her blade at me, warning me with its point to stay back. I glared at her, knowing my battle-scarred face and arms were often enough to ward off potential trouble. She shrank a bit from my gaze. "It's her fate that concerns me. Take your dogs and slink away, lest I rouse the whole town when I beat your hide."

A sword tip pricked my skin. The mugger threatening me had found her courage, stepping forward and nudging her weapon against my side. "Move on," she rasped. "This isn't your fight."

It hadn't been, but it was now.

I growled and slapped the sword away with the back of my hand. My knuckles caught on the blade, drawing beads of blood. The mugger—another Kellid, I could now see, her features strong and scarred under her hood—lunged at me with a savage cry. I couldn't tell if she meant to kill me or simply to drive me off. It mattered little. I raised my fists to defend myself.

She came at me blade first, a straight chop meant to slice open my forearm and drive me back. A strong move, but my time outside Numeria had taught me fighting techniques beyond the ones passed down by my people. I shifted to the side and dropped one arm, then threw a hooked punch at the spot where her fingers wrapped around the sword's hilt. My fist connected with solid force and a crack, snapping at least one of her fingers, and my attacker grunted in pain. The sword fell to the ground.

She stepped back, cradling her injured hand, while the leader hissed, "Get rid of him!" The third mugger, the silent one, dashed up to aid his comrade. He too had a short blade out. It sliced through the air, chopping close to my shoulder, and only my battle training saved me as I spun to the side. Avoiding that attack left me exposed, and the woman punched me in the kidneys with her uninjured hand as she darted past. My calculated tactics fell away as a rush of animal ferocity surged through my body.

*HER FACE AND TONE
ARE VERY DIFFICULT
TO READ.*

*IT DIDN'T
OCCUR TO ME
AT FIRST, BUT
ONCE I SAW HER EYES
IN THE MOONLIGHT, I
KNEW WHAT SHE WAS.*



In my village, we were taught that the mad energy that comes to us in battle is the strength of the wild, the essence of an animal spirit that swells our muscles and hones our skill. I've always pictured mine as a great bear.

The bear woke inside me now. With a roar, I spun and slammed my fist into the woman's face. She staggered, clutching at her broken nose, blood gushing onto the ground. A sharp pain ripped into my back, but it seemed far away, insignificant. I drove my other fist into her stomach, and she dropped to her knees, wheezing. A short punch to the back of her head took her down.

When I turned, I saw my own blood smeared along the other mugger's sword. He was a Kellid too, and I could tell he recognized the snarl on my face, the flint in my eyes. I jumped at him, hands outstretched, and he skipped back just out of reach. With another glance at my scars, he shrugged, turned, and ran.

The leader still struggled with his victim. Before I could come to her aid, the sack over which they fought tore open. Bits of metal—some brightly glinting, others badly rusted—poured out of the sack to scatter on the ground. The leader gave a strangled cry of rage and shoved the woman back against the wall.

I got to him before he could do further harm. I locked one hand around his throat and drove the other under his ribs. He squealed and his eyes rolled back in his head. He managed to score my side with a small blade before I choked him into unconsciousness.

By the time I dropped his body to the ground, my bear slumbered once again. My muscles ached and the wound in my back stung sharply. My eyelids drooped, and I fought back thoughts of sleep. Now was not the time, though. I turned to the woman. "Are you injured?"

She shook her head. "You didn't have to do that." Her voice remained quiet, so quiet it seemed almost lost in the dark. I couldn't tell from her tone whether she was angered or grateful. Her short, dark hair framed her narrow face like ravens' wings.

"There are few true obligations in life." I bent to pick up the scattered contents of her bag. "Our character shows in those actions we choose to take. Let me help you with this."

"No, it's alright." She knelt down next to me and grabbed for the bits of metal, placing them on the torn sack. "I have it."

Again her voice held no clue to her meaning. Was this a token protest or a genuine request? "If that's your wish," I said. "But you'd best hurry before your attackers awaken."

She hesitated, and said in that flat voice, "You didn't kill them." When her gaze met mine, a shock ran through me. Her eyes held a faint silver sheen in the moonlight, and her skin was very pale.



THE HORSE MUST HAVE BEEN SPECIAL TO WHOEVER PUT SO MUCH TIME AND EFFORT INTO DOING THIS TO IT.

THE HORSE WAS AN ALARMING SIGHT, BUT ITS RIDER FRIGHTENED ME EVEN MORE.

An android. I had heard tales of her people, but never met one in person.

"No, I didn't. You have a few minutes at most." The contents of the bag looked to be little more than junk. I saw broken pipes, rusted screws, plates of metal no bigger than my palm, and mud-caked fragments of some sort of ceramic vessel. Near my knee, a shiny length of pipe as thick around as my forearm had split in two. I picked it up to hand it to the android. "If you wish me to leave, though—"

The pipe halves quivered in my hand. In the blink of an eye, they turned to liquid metal and slithered from my hand up my arm. I yelled in shock and the android fell back, eyes wide. The pipe re-formed into solid metal around my left forearm, like a single bracer that extended up over my wrist and covered the back of my hand with a hexagonal plate.

Sharp pain dug into my arm, as if needles pierced me down to the bone. I choked off my howl of pain.

The android woman leaned forward and grabbed me by my newly armored wrist. "That's mine!"

"You're welcome to it," I grunted. I shook her off and turned my arm over. I saw no seam, no lock. "Just get it off me."

My time abroad had helped me come to terms with the prevalence of technology in the world, but I still had no desire for this mysterious metal cuff to lodge permanently on my arm.

The android tried to get her fingertips between the cuff and my skin. There was no room. I scooped up a metal fragment from the ground and handed it to her. She tried wedging the shard under the cuff to pry it off, but before she could make much headway, I heard the drum of hoofbeats.

"Someone's coming." I looked at the still-unconscious bodies on the ground, watching for any hint of stirring. "We must have made enough noise to attract the guard. I'll explain what happened, if you prefer to—"

"No," said the android. She ceased her efforts to free me. "Guards go on foot here."

Thus far, the only emotion I'd heard in the android's voice had been that brief flash of anger. Now, though, I heard another one.

Fear.

"Get up," she said. She stood, unfolding to her full height, and pulled me up by my arm. We stood at almost the same height—I suspected she might even be an inch taller. "We have to go."

"Why? What's happening?"

The hoofbeats grew louder. Whoever the riders were, they were coming down this street. The android pulled me deeper into the alley, and we flattened ourselves against the shadowed wall. "It's the Technic League," she said in her low monotone.

Four horses cantered down the street. I could see few details in the darkness, but the black armor of the riders gleamed with an indigo sheen in the starlight. At the head rode a Kellid woman, helmet resting on the pommel of her saddle, dark hair hanging in two loose braids. She wore less armor than her men, but her greaves and gauntlets shone with a pale green light, like the luminescent moss I'd seen in the marshes of the River Kingdoms. It was her steed that drew my attention the most. The beast seemed but half flesh. For a right foreleg it had steel rods that hissed and wheezed as it trotted. The one eye I could see glowed bright yellow in the night.

One rider pointed to the bodies that lay at the mouth of the alley amid the android's spilled treasure. The woman whose nose I'd broken stirred and moaned.

"We must go," the android said. She tugged on the edge of my cloak and pointed to my arm. "If they see you, they'll kill you, or worse."

I'd heard stories of the Technic League's passion for collecting technological devices, and the cuff fixed to my arm would certainly be a prize to them. Wordlessly, I turned and followed the android down the alley and around a corner. We were soon lost among the narrow streets.

As soon as the sounds of the Technic League agents had faded, I grabbed the android's hand and stopped. "Wait. Where are you taking me?"

She turned, her silvery eyes eerily luminous in the dark. "Somewhere safe."

"So you say. What is this place?"

"I cannot tell you. Its safety lies in its secrecy."

She tried to move again, but I held up a hand to stop her. "That's not enough. I need to know I'm not better off on my own."

"If you leave, that makes you a thief." She touched her fingertips to the metal cuff. "That belongs to me."

I bristled, hearing the bear growl in my spirit. "I'm no thief."

"Then follow me, unless you want the League to snap you up."

I followed, frustrated at my inability to judge the android's words. Truth and lies hide in our voices, and hers was unreadably flat. I matched step beside her. "Tell me your name then, at least."

"Eirian."

"I am Sidek."

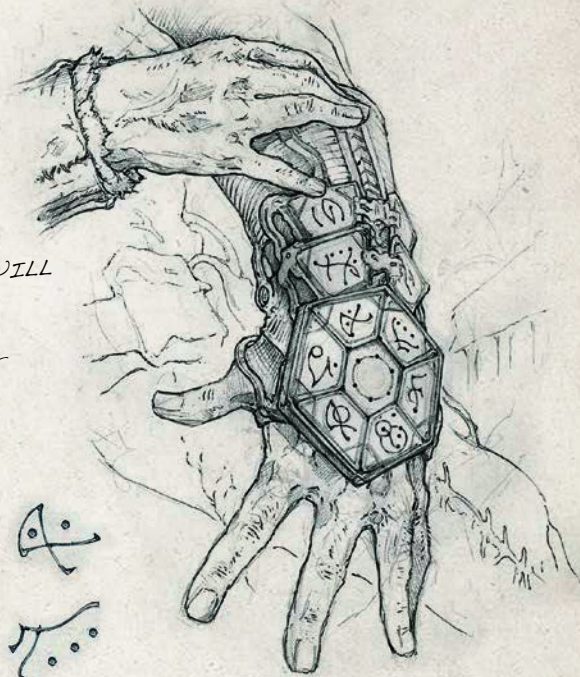
She made no answer to that. We walked in silence for some time, keeping to the shadows and watching over our shoulders for the League. Some time later we reached the edge of town that lies outside the walls, where rickety wooden shacks and sheds sit in disarray. We neared a small home with half a dozen little sheds behind it. Eirian led me to one of them and stopped.

"Turn your back," Eirian instructed.

NOTHING WILL
BUDGE IT.
GET THIS
THING OFF
MY ARM!



THERE HAS TO BE
SOMEONE WHO CAN
HELP ME TRANSLATE
THESE SYMBOLS.



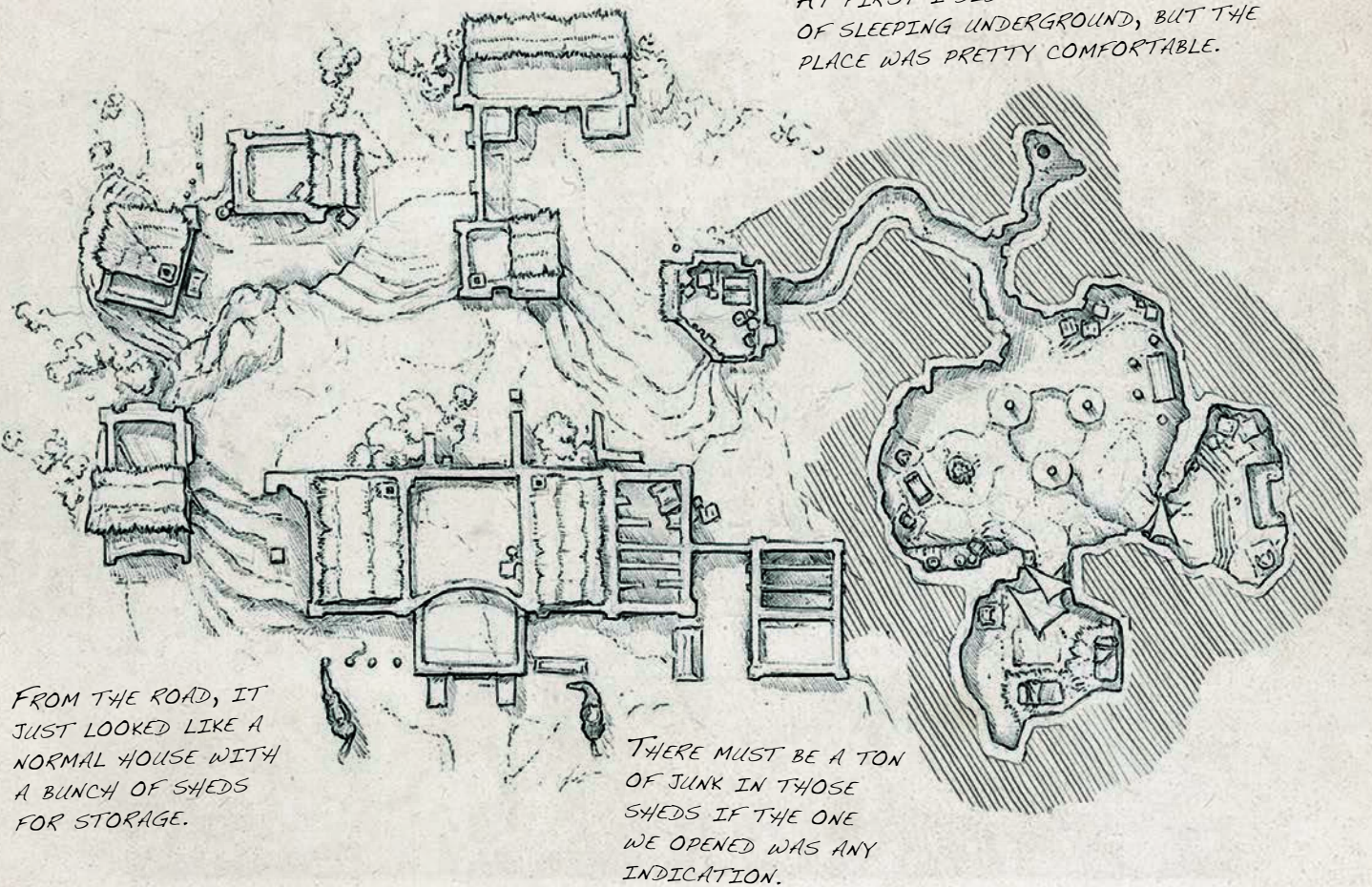
I obeyed, though my patience was reaching its end. The pain of my wounds had settled into a dull ache. My forearm hurt the most—moving it too quickly caused darts of pain to shoot up my arm. I heard Eirian fidget with a latch, and then open the creaky door to the shed.

I looked more closely at the cuff encircling my arm. Along its length I saw small squares etched in the metal, each one containing a number of vertical or horizontal lines. Runes, I guessed, though of what language or civilization I had no idea. I decided to copy the markings and bring them to the nearest Pathfinder lodge once I managed to remove the cuff. Someone there might be able to translate.

While I studied the cuff, I heard Eirian rustling around in the shed, sliding things across the floor. Concerned at the noise she was making, I glanced around at the empty streets hoping no one was taking notice.

The hexagonal plate over the back of my hand held a more elaborate rune: A smaller hexagon with a circle in its center. Straight lines connected the circle to each point on the hexagon. Within each triangular chamber, engraved lines replicated one of the square runes on the length of the cuff.

AT FIRST I DIDN'T LIKE THE IDEA OF SLEEPING UNDERGROUND, BUT THE PLACE WAS PRETTY COMFORTABLE.



FROM THE ROAD, IT JUST LOOKED LIKE A NORMAL HOUSE WITH A BUNCH OF SHEDS FOR STORAGE.

THERE MUST BE A TON OF JUNK IN THOSE SHEDS IF THE ONE WE OPENED WAS ANY INDICATION.

None of it meant anything to me. I just wanted the thing off my arm.

I spent a few vain moments struggling to remove the cuff, and then Eirian's quiet voice instructed me to turn around again.

She had uncovered a hatch in the floor of the shed. A ladder dipped into a dark shaft lined with old rags, furs, and bits of leather. "You go first," Eirian said, "so that I can close it up behind us."

"I can't see in the dark," I said.

The android reached down into the tunnel and pulled aside one of the rags near the lip. She withdrew a glass bead and rolled it around in her palm. After a moment, the bead began emitting a soft blue light.

I took the glow-bead from her and crawled into the tunnel.

The shaft descended for nearly ten feet before opening onto a winding tunnel almost tall enough for me to stand upright in. I waited until I heard Eirian following behind me before continuing down the winding passage. It ended in a hanging hide curtain.

"Go through," Eirian said.

The floor dropped down a foot beyond the doorway. The walls were made of packed earth, and a few wooden beams reinforced the ceiling. Once Eirian stood next to me, I saw there would be room for ten people—more if they were willing to pack in tightly. I breathed deeply to calm myself. This dark room felt very much like being trapped underground, and I was used to the open sky.

"You have questions," Eirian said. Her forward manner threw me further off guard. I drew myself up, my head just grazing the ceiling, and collected my thoughts.

"Why did those people attack you?" I asked.

"I'm a collector," she said. "I seek out ruins and salvage them for trade goods. Sometimes I find valuable items." Her gaze flicked down to my wrist. Despite the difficulty I had reading her emotions, she seemed almost friendly now.

"So they were thieves, then. The attack seemed more personal."

"Many humanoids distrust androids," she said, as calmly as if she were commenting on the weather. "We keep to our own area because of it, but sometimes we're attacked regardless."

"What is this place?"

"A safehouse," she said. "Many androids live in Hajoth Hakados. Though they claim otherwise, the Technic League makes regular forays here to kidnap subjects for their experiments. We hide here if they're spotted." She gestured other curtains. "There's a space for resting behind there and there, and a toilet back in the entrance tunnel. Supplies there and there. Food, some weapons."

"Do you sleep, then?"

"I have no need of it, but I rest. You are welcome to sleep here tonight, until the danger is past."

"Danger?" Something clicked into place. "You think the Technic League would experiment on me, then?"

"Yes." She touched the metal cuff. "Because of this. They might think you're an escaped experiment, or one that has forged robot parts into your flesh."

I shrugged off her touch. "I'm not an android. I won't live in hiding."

She shrugged and edged around me, heading for one of the curtained rooms. "We can leave in the morning."

"We?" I didn't like the sound of that.

"I'll go wherever you're going."

I grabbed her arm before she was able to duck into the next room. "You can't come with me. I'm going home, to my village."

"Then I go, too." She touched the hammer at her belt and then her forehead, a gesture I didn't recognize. "I spoke ill when I called you a thief. Now that I've had time to reflect, I see that you've walked into the path of fate."

"Explain." I struggled to mask my irritation at her vague words.

"The technology chose you," she said. "You're blessed by Brigh." She touched the hammer and her brow again. "I am her servant. I shall follow you."

Before I could reply, Eirian vanished behind the curtain. I stared after her, my brain trying to make sense of her words. I had heard of Brigh, of course—the Whisper in the Bronze, goddess of technology and invention. And, apparently, androids.

It seemed I had acquired a devotee.

ANDROIDS

No one on Golarion truly knows how androids originate. They emerge fully formed from the ruins that dot Numeria, and seem to have no more idea how they came to be than anyone else. Although androids appear superficially like humans, they are very different from them, and not only physically.

Androids stand taller than most humans, averaging about six feet tall. Their eyes gleam with a silver sheen when viewed in the right light. The faint runes on their skin are usually all but invisible, but they glow with blue light from time to time.

The psychological differences between androids and humans are often hard to notice at first, but are ultimately profound. Androids' emotions are dim and muted, and they struggle to understand humans' passion in the same way humans struggle to relate to androids' glacial demeanors. Although the goals and values held by androids vary from one individual to the next, many concern themselves with self-improvement and invention.

Androids appear either male or female, but their gender seems largely arbitrary. They can't reproduce, even with their own kind, though they can engage in sex. Differences between genders are less pronounced in androids than in other humanoid races; their physiques are often lean and androgynous, and males and females tend to act and think in similar ways.

Contrary to popular opinion, androids are not robots. They are biological creatures who must eat and breathe. Their monotone voices and the fact that they were constructed lead many to consider them machines, but androids can be killed like any mortal creatures. Androids show the passage of years, but not with gray hair or wrinkles. Instead, their skin and eyes become dull and lusterless. When androids suddenly cease all biological functions, it is thought that they have died of old age. Some can even foretell this event with uncanny accuracy.