

HOMECOMING

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I couldn't be sure, but the longer we traveled across the plains, the more I felt like I was communicating with our little robot.

Four days ago, Eirian and I had left the site of the destroyed village and resumed following Tryg across Numeria, more north now than west. The robot maintained a steady pace that Eirian and I easily matched. We kept watch for signs of pursuit but seemed alone on the plains, with not so much as a passing trader in sight. As we drew near to whatever ultimate destination summoned Tryg, I found myself curiously aware of exactly where the robot was. If I closed my eyes I could sense his location in a way that went beyond the sound of his treads crunching over the pebbled plain.

When I said as much to Eirian, she looked thoughtful. "Do you sense anything else from him? Thoughts or... emotions?"

"Nothing. I couldn't even say exactly how far he is from me. It's a strong enough sense, though, that I could take a step and be sure I'm following him."

Neither of us mentioned the cuff, but we both thought of it. There was nothing else that could explain my new connection with Tryg.

As we progressed across the plains, we fell into a routine. When we stopped during the day to eat or rest, I sprinted up to Tryg and grappled him. Eirian followed with a rope, bound the robot securely, and staked him down while we took the time needed. When we were ready to resume our trek, we untied Tryg and then hurried after him. He always started off at a brisker pace, as if making up for lost time, and after the third or fourth stop I noticed Tryg increasing his speed whenever I started to catch up to him. The robot was more than a mindless automaton, that much was clear. Once I dove for Tryg right as he skittered laterally and I faceplanted into the dirt. It was the first time I could remember Eirian making a sound that resembled a laugh.

When we stopped for the night to rest, Eirian used her stone-shaping magic to seal Tryg into the earth. On our second night out from the village, the robot struggled mightily as Eirian tried to trap him. I had to hold him down until Eirian cast her spell. My gaze met Eirian's over Tryg's prison and I saw a ruefulness in her eyes that I felt myself. Trusting a rope's strength all night was impractical, though, and so the stone prison it was. When we released Tryg the next morning he shook himself as he came out of the earth, scattering dust and grit about, and then he angled his head at me as if assessing me before rolling off.

On the fourth day, familiar landmarks began appearing in the distance. I spotted a jagged hill that we called "The Watcher" because it resembled the profile of a face gazing up at the sky. There was a stand of poplars, one taller than the rest, my village had named the Dancing Sisters. I looked from Tryg to the Dancing Sisters and back again.

"We have to turn here to reach my village," I said.

Eirian glanced back at me. "Is it safe to leave Tryg for so long?"

I thought for a few minutes and we walked along in silence. Eirian didn't ask again, waiting instead for my readiness to answer. More and more I was appreciating her silence—it was more thoughtfulness than the stoicism I'd first assumed.

"I don't know how long it will take to find Tryg's destination and get this cuff off," I finally said. "I want to stop in for at least one day. I think Tryg will be safe if we bury him well."



Eirian nodded and reached for her hammer holy symbol. I sprinted ahead and was surprised when Tryg slowed down. Apparently the robot had decided either that we were too strong to fight or that we'd release him again, as we always did.

Tryg sat quietly while Eirian cast her spell, scooping out a section of ground. I placed the robot gently in the depression and Eirian cast a second spell to cover Tryg in a flat section of rock. We piled gravel and loose earth over Tryg's hiding place to further disguise it.

When we were satisfied with our efforts, we turned north. My village was still a half day's travel away. We picked up speed. I was hoping to reach home before nightfall.

The sun sank to the edge of the earth and below, streaking the sky with its tints of orange and purple. Shadows stretched across the plain in familiar patterns. I'd hunted these plains so often as a boy that the feel of the packed earth under my feet, the stretches of raw stone, the way the light fell over the rolling hills—all of it was as familiar to me as my own skin.

As the light failed, I saw the leaping flames of campfires ahead. My village sat at the base of a ridgeline only a dozen feet high, sheltered from the shearing winds that often cut across the plain. Clusters of huts sat around communal firepits.

After two long years of traveling the world, I was home.

My stride quickened, and as we neared the village I called out to the watchers I knew must be there. They emerged from the shadows, sisters I'd known since childhood. They cried out my name and clasped me on my arms.

One of the sisters, Kendra, exclaimed, "Welcome home, Sidek. Welcome!" She broke off and pulled back, embarrassed somehow.

Thinking she regretted her exuberance, I clasped her arms in turn. "I've not seen a sight so pleasant as the fires of home. This is my friend, Eirian. We've been traveling a long time today and could use a meal."

Kendra glanced at her sister Lanren, who nodded and sprinted into the village, running ahead to let them know I was home. Kendra took my arm and nodded to Eirian. "Come with me. I'll take you to the fire."

I wanted to sprint to the center of the village but Kendra took small steps, holding me back. I didn't notice at first, excited by my return and chatting to Eirian about the dinner we could expect. By the time I realized Kendra was intentionally delaying me, my father was already coming toward me, arms outstretched.

"Father," I said. I broke away from Kendra and strode forward, taking his hands in mine. "It's good to see you."

"Sidek." His voice was glad but his smile trembled. I couldn't recall seeing that look in his eyes before.

I looked over his shoulder. "Where's mother?"

Another look in his eyes told me all I needed to know.

I remember every moment of that evening with absolute clarity. At the time my mind was clouded. I seemed to walk



*IT WAS NICE TO SEE KENDRA
(AND HER SISTER LANREN)
AGAIN AFTER ALL THIS
TIME.*

*I WAS REMINDED OF THE
CRUSH I HAD ON HER WHEN
WE WERE KIDS.*

in a dream. Eirian disappeared and I didn't notice. People spoke to me and their words flowed over me like water.

When I woke the next afternoon, I remembered every sympathetic word and gentle touch from the night before. I remembered, too, the way old friends, relatives—people I'd known all my life—drew near to offer comfort and then shied away at the sight of my arm. In my grief I'd forgotten how it would seem to my people. Some avoided my gaze and slunk away while others stared in open shock. Despite my haze of emotion, I found the sense to remove my cloak and wrap it around my forearm, a clumsy covering.

I lay unmoving on my bed for some time. Something felt lodged in my heart, like a fragment of a splintered arrow. I rubbed my hand on my chest and opened my eyes. The sunlight on the tanned hide windows cast a warm glow over the room.

Thoughts of Eirian stole across my mind. I hoped someone had taken care of her. The thought of helping someone else was enough to stir me from my rest. I stood, my eyes gritty and my balance off, as if I'd been drinking all night. I had raised a toast in my mother's name. Emotion had done the rest of the damage.

She died so quickly, my father had said, no one realized how sick she had been. Illness came to my village from time to time. If our healers could not help with their herbs and magic, we carried the sick southward to Torch. This time, though, the sickness came on too fast. My father said she had died in peace, asleep. They had thought to send word to me but it would cost a great deal to pay a wizard to speak across the miles, and I was expected home soon anyway.

I left my room and looked in on my father. He slept still, looking far older than I remembered. He had lost weight

in the last year and his cheeks were hollow. His long dark hair, the same shade as mine, thinned across his scalp. His scars stood out, old and new crisscrossed over his skin, white and gray. I left him sleeping and stepped out into the village.

Friends greeted me and I did my best to smile and thank them for their kindness.

Kendra was at my side once again. "It was a poor homecoming for you."

"If I had to learn this way, I'm glad I had so many around to support me. I'm only sorry I couldn't be here to help my father."

"It was a shock, but we made a circle around him. We made sure a friend sat up with him for the first week of nights. And Estred made sure he ate." Unlike most Kellids, Kendra had a dark red tone to her hair that glowed in the afternoon sun. She was one of our strongest hunters and scars marked her arms like tattoos.

"I'm sure she did. Bowfuls of prairie chicken stew?"

We shared a dry, sad laugh. I scanned the crowd of villagers going about their afternoon routine. The sight was a balm to the pain in my chest—still there, but less tender. "My friend, Eirian. Where did she go?"

*ALL OF OUR BURIAL CHAMBERS
FEATURE ONE OF THESE ALTARS SO
PEOPLE CAN LEAVE REMEMBRANCE
GIFTS.*



*I'M GLAD FATHER ADDED HER
FAVORITE DAGGER TO THE ALTAR.*

Kendra's gaze flicked away. "She stayed with me last night. After breakfast, she left to look around the area. I think she's up on the ridge."

I started to turn away but Kendra reached out to stop me. "Tell me about this." She gestured at the metal cuff on my arm.

My cloak remained wrapped around my forearm, its ends tied together. I resisted the urge to hide it behind my back. "It's a long story. I didn't put it on myself, not on purpose. Eirian's helping me find a way to get it off."

"I hope you find a way soon. It's uncanny."

"Me, too." I nodded to Kendra and strode away. It took me some time to get to the edge of the village as everyone wanted to stop and talk. Finally, I made my escape and walked along the curving trail that led up to the ridge.

I found Eirian's tracks and realized their direction would take her to the wooden platforms where we placed our dead. I took my time, soaking in the familiar landscape as I followed the path.

She stood a respectful distance from the platforms, silently examining the simple planks held aloft by cut and fitted timbers, her hands clasped behind her back. She looked at me as I drew closer.

"This is where you put your dead," she said.

"For a time."

She returned to her study of the platforms. "And then you move them?"

"After the wind and sun have taken away their vitality. We wrap the remains and inter them in the caves."

"Is that where your mother is?"

The pain in my chest spiked and for a moment I fought to draw another breath. As much as it hurt me, I was glad to hear Eirian speak of my mother. It would have been worse if she pretended nothing had changed since yesterday.

"I was going to go there now to see her. Would you like to come?"

I don't know why I offered to bring Eirian with me, but she nodded and turned to follow me.

The entrance to the caves wasn't far from the village. Eirian and I ducked inside the dim interior. In contrast to the bright hot afternoon, the cavern air felt chill on my skin. I lit a clay lamp that sat on a shelf just inside the cave and Eirian followed behind me as we made our way down the tunnel.

The ridgeline was mostly clay and the tunnels had been carved out as needed, growing deeper and more complex the farther we went. We walked through two large chambers stacked with the wrapped bodies of my forebears and the ancestors of everyone in the village. Between the chambers we walked softly down cramped corridors lined with shelves on which small bundles of bones rested.

The third cavern, the newest one, was only half-filled with bodies. Eirian stood by the entrance and held the lamp. I saw my mother immediately. Even with her body dried and wrapped in cloth I knew her. Her body was closest to the door, of course, but I swore I could recognize the slope of her shoulders and the outline of her slim hands beneath the cloth.

I knelt by her side. I wished I knew the right words, the right prayers, to offer. All I could do was remember the way she'd looked when I last left home. She always looked stern, disapproving of my travels outside Numeria, but always with a hint of pride in her eyes. She would take my chin in her hand and examine my face, then let go with a sigh. "I suppose you are a man after all," she'd say every time I left.

I didn't feel like a man, kneeling there by her side. I felt lost.

When I'd said as much of a goodbye as I could, I stood, surprised to find my knees stiff. Eirian waited until I came back to the entrance before she turned and led us back out by the light of the lamp.

When we emerged blinking into the sunlight, I thought the whole village had assembled outside. I looked again and saw it was only the elders and my closest friends. Their expressions were grim and my heart seized. "Father?" I started to say, but then spotted him in the crowd. I relaxed. "What's going on?"

My father stepped forward. Last night I'd seen sorrow in him I'd never seen before. Now I saw a new anger. "What do you mean by this?"

"By what?" I said. I still felt unbalanced, off-center. "I was saying goodbye—"

"You brought *her* into the most sacred place we have?" His voice was colder than the caves we'd left. "Into the place where our ancestors sleep?"

I looked at Eirian. She remained silent and placid beside me, but I'd learned to read her a bit. The tightness around her eyes and the tenseness in her shoulders showed wariness, even fear. "She's a friend of mine. I didn't think—"

"No, you didn't." Kendra stepped forward from the crowd. "She stayed in my hut all night, never sleeping. The hammer she wears is a symbol of the goddess of machines."

"I trust Eirian," I said, fighting to keep my voice calm.

"You come back here," my father said, "with metal on your arm and a machine woman at your side and you think you can bring these things into our home? Did you even once consider the damage you were doing to our village?"

"She's not a thing."

"Sidek." Eirian's voice was low. "I should go."

"The machine shows reason," Kendra said. Her voice held no bitterness, no contempt, only a calm agreement.



MOTHER'S DEATH HIT MY FATHER HARD. I COULD SEE IT ON HIS FACE THOUGH HE TRIED TO CONCEAL IT.

I'M SURE THAT CONTRIBUTED TO HOW HE TREATED ME AND EIRIAN. WE'LL REPAIR THE BOND SOON.

"We'll both go," I said. I started back toward the village, motioning for Eirian to follow. "I'll get my gear and we'll be on our way."

"I'll meet you at Tr—at our meeting place," Eirian said. She started in the other direction, moving quickly to circle around the village.

My father hurried to catch up to me as the rest of the villagers began to scatter. When he spoke, his voice was still angry, but now held the heaviness of regret. "Sidek, I shouldn't have spoken so harshly. It's been so long since I've seen you and... and it's been hard."

"I understand," I said, but the words I'd heard continued to cut me. "Still, I should go. I need to get this thing off my wrist and Eirian's the only one who can help me."

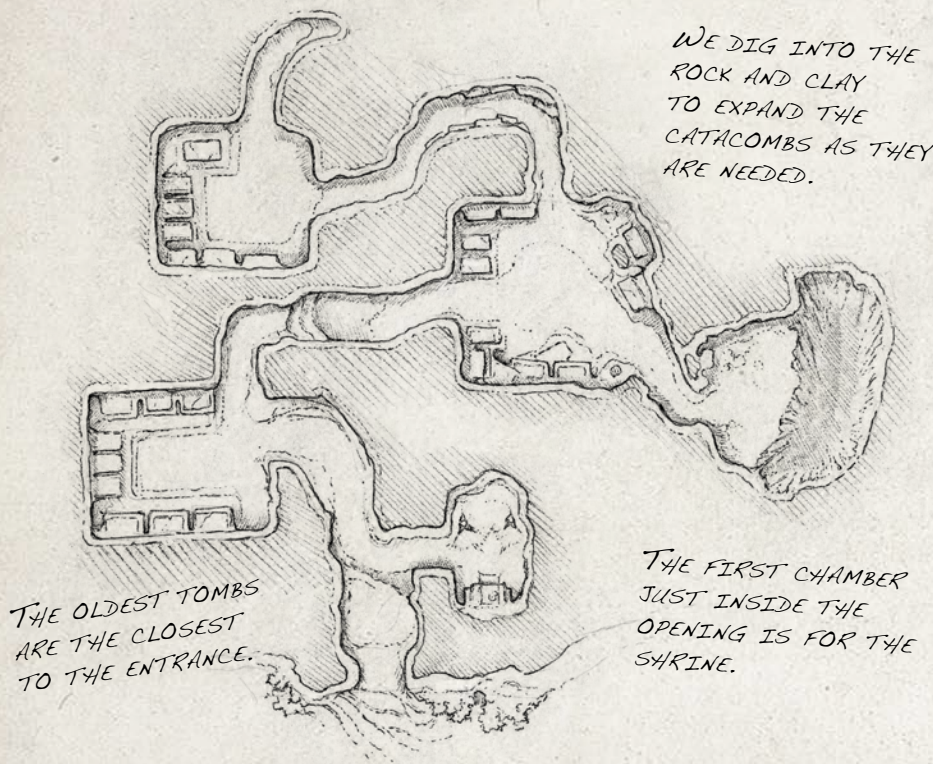
"You'll come back, won't you? When you're healed of this... affliction?"

I stopped and faced my father. My eyes burned. I took his face in my hands and leaned my brow against his. "When I'm healed, I'll return to you."

We stood together for a time, and when I pulled away he didn't try to stop me.

It took me only a few minutes to gather my things and strike back out across the plains. Kendra met me at the edge of town with a satchel.

"Food and a few supplies," she said, pushing it into my hands. "Sidek, I didn't mean—"



"We'll speak of it when I return," I said. Walking past her without making eye contact, I left the village without looking back, not wanting my last look at home to be marked with such anger and grief.

I saw Eirian in the distance as I neared the Dancing Sisters, and caught up to her as we passed the poplars. I gave her some time to walk with me in silence before I said, "I'm sorry."

"It's my fault as much as yours," she said. "I should have realized what your people would think."

"I forgot how much I've changed. How different I've become."

"I know you meant no harm," she said. There was a note of distance in her voice. I wanted to push further, but I let it go. I was learning the wisdom of silence. There would be more time for speech on the road.

We planned to camp when we reached Tryg's hiding place, as it'd be close to sunset. As we neared the place where we left the robot, though, we both saw evidence of trouble. A pile of broken earth and stones marked the ground where Tryg should have been. Eirian and I both broke into a jog.

We saw the same sight but I don't think either of us wanted to believe it. The stone ground where Tryg had hidden was smashed open. A heavy rock lay discarded nearby. A hole gaped in the stone shell, just big enough for a robot to squeeze through.

I reached into the hole and felt around in the rubble, but I knew it was useless. Tryg was gone.

"How could this have happened?" Eirian's voice held a burr of fear and frustration. I'd never heard her so moved before.

"Someone must have seen us hide him," I said bleakly. I scanned the area but saw no one beside us.

Eirian crouched by the hole and touched its jagged edge. "Or someone has been following us."

I turned the thought over in my mind. "In the rendland, we heard someone set on by the coyotes. They were gone when I arrived, but I saw the dead coyotes that they'd left behind."

"In the village too we found marks on Tryg's hiding place. Remember?"

I cursed. "The same person, perhaps. Or, at least, the same blade—the marks on Tryg's hiding place match the stab wounds of the coyotes. I was keeping watch while we buried him, but whoever stole Tryg must be a better sleuth than I am a lookout."

"Brigh sent Tryg to us," Eirian said with the earnestness I only heard when she talked of her goddess. "I'm sure of it. We have to get him back. Can you find the trail of whoever took him?"

I scouted around the area. Eirian stayed by the hole, watching me in silence as I worked. I tried to focus on the ground but soon became distracted by an unusual impulse building in my mind. I stopped moving and closed my eyes, focusing instead on the impulse.

I could still sense Tryg.

As before, I felt certain that I could let this sensation guide my steps and it would take me straight to the robot. He was moving north, I realized, steadily north. I almost opened my eyes, eager to begin the pursuit.

But I realized that underneath my pull to Tryg I could feel another sensation, a stronger pull. North, still, but more to the west, almost in the direction of Starfall. It felt like a voice calling me without making any sound, as if someone very important to me was urging me onward. I could resist the call but not ignore it.

I tried to focus on the sensation, tried to understand what was calling, but I had no sense of who or what it was. It had no name or impulse attached to it beyond calling me toward it.

I heard the rustle of Eirian moving and opened my eyes to see her standing next to me. "What is it?"

"I can sense Tryg. And more. I think I'm feeling the same force that draws him onward."

"You mean you can follow the same path he does?"

I nodded. "I think so, but Tryg isn't following that path anymore. Someone is carrying him away from it." I pointed north. "That way."

"What lies in that direction?"

"Beyond my village, a lot of empty plain until we reach Lackthroat."

I retrieved my pack from where I'd set it down next to Tryg's hiding place. "Do we press on, then?" Eirian said as I readied myself.

"I can go for some time without sleep. We have to close the gap between us and this robot thief." I picked up the heavy rock used to break our robot free and squeezed my hand around it. "And when I find him—"

I'd only meant to imitate striking the imaginary robot thief with the rock. To my surprise, though, the runes on my cuff flared and a surge of power suffused my arm. The rock cracked in half in my grip. I stared, openmouthed, and then squeezed my fist again. The rock split in two and grit rained down.

Eirian and I both stared blankly at my hand. I opened my fist and let the shattered rock fall to the ground.

She was the first to speak. "You're getting stronger."

I rubbed my cuffed arm with the opposite hand. "Another mystery," I said. "One that will have to wait. First, we get Tryg back."

Together, Eirian and I faced north and struck out again across the plains.

BURIAL CUSTOMS OF NUMERIA

There are almost as many burial customs in Numeria as there are villages. In the city of Starfall, residents typically bury or cremate their dead as in most major cities across Golarion. Among the plains people of the country, though, a number of different customs hold sway.

Natural forces are often used to prepare or dispose of the dead. A common method of the former is to leave the body exposed to the elements and wild animals of the area. If a body is left on the ground, the villagers assume wild animals and insects will scavenge the corpse and leave very little behind. The remains can then be bound in cloth or a specially prepared leather pouch and either stored or buried. Bodies can also be placed on wooden platforms or atop tall rocks to protect them from land-dwelling scavengers. In this case, birds and the elements deflesh the body, leaving behind clean bones to be interred or otherwise preserved.

In regions where the earth is soft, Numerians may bury their dead individually or in mass graves, or construct barrows in which to inter their loved ones. In mountainous or rocky regions, Numerians sometimes inter their dead deep within caverns and let time and the elements take care of the rest.

Most Numerians leave tokens on their dead, ranging from wooden pendants engraved with family or religious symbols to fine robes and valuable jewelry. Most bury their dead with few possessions, however, preferring to leave the items to the living who knew and cared for the deceased. As a general rule, Numerians strive to carry on memories of their dead kin in some fashion, whether it be through stories told of ancestors, carvings or paintings commemorating the deceased, or stone cairns that mark the history of the village.