

THE ROBOT THIEF

PATHFINDER'S JOURNAL: WHISPERS IN THE WASTELANDS 5 OF 6

A few days after we left my village, Eirian and I stood inside a junk shop filled with scrap metal, dusty potion bottles, cracked stone artifacts, and three customers who had taken offence at our inquiries.

One of them already lay unconscious on the floor next to the sword I'd knocked from his grasp. Eirian waited by the shop door while I threw the second man over the counter.

The proprietor gave a squawk of fear from his hiding spot behind the counter as the thug sailed overhead and crashed into the shelves behind him. The third man, Ulfen by the looks of it, came at me with fists swinging. I knocked one hand away but took the other straight to my face. Pain shot through my nose as it cracked audibly. A gush of blood wetted my lips and beard.

As the man wound up for another swing, I pushed in close to him, clamping my right hand onto his shoulder and driving my left into his ribs. I'd always favored my right hand in a fight, but the strength the cuff gave to my left arm had increased steadily as we moved north. I felt the familiar energizing tingle spread out and infuse my arm with power as I fought.

THIS PLACE WAS
OUR BEST BET FOR
FINDING TRYG.



THE ILLUSTRATION ON THE SIGN MADE
UP FOR THE LACK OF CREATIVITY IN
THE SHOP'S NAME.

The man finally dropped to one knee, wheezing and struggling to fend off the pummeling. I dealt him a sharp blow to side of his head, and he went down.

Hinges creaked as Eirian cracked open the door to peer outside. She closed the door again and said, "No one's coming. Apparently we haven't drawn any attention."

I wasn't surprised. Lackthroat had a poor reputation among my people, and my short time in the town made me think that scorn was well placed. Small huts crowded the sides of trash-filled streets. Flies clouded above rats that had been killed and left to rot. The few people we saw who didn't ignore us entirely gave us calculating looks, as if trying to decide whether we were worth robbing. My scarred face and metal forearm convinced them that we weren't.

Eirian crossed the room to stand before me. The bear within me settled back down to sleep as Eirian chanted. She touched her hammer and then gently rested her fingers on my nose. I felt an uncomfortable cracking under my skin, but the pain washed away instantly. I tried to wipe the blood away with my sleeve, but mostly succeeded in smearing it all over my cheek. "Thanks."

"The shopkeeper's getting away," she said.

I turned and darted to the rear door, toward which the proprietor was cautiously crawling. He yelped when I grabbed the back of his collar and heaved him upright.

His tanned skin was smooth and stretched over a lean frame. His collar felt greasy in my hand, and his shoulder-length black hair was uncombed and matted in the back.

"Now," I said. "Let's have some answers."

I hauled him back to the stack of crates he was using as a counter and dropped him on the floor. He put his back up against the flimsy crates, eyes darting from me to Eirian and back again as we loomed over him.

"I don't know anything," the man whined. Eirian took up a low chant, glancing at me and giving a subtle nod. The proprietor stared at Eirian, curious what she was up to.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Calt."

I glanced sidelong at Eirian. She tilted her chin in a small nod. "Well, Calt, I have some questions and you're going to answer them. Fast. Tell me what I want to know and we'll leave you here alive and with all your limbs in the right places."

He swallowed audibly and nodded.

"Someone came here recently. Less than a day ago. He had a robot with him, a small robot you could carry in your arms. I want to know who he was and where he went."

"Yes, yes, I remember," Calt said eagerly. "He came in last night, just afore close. Wanted to sell me the robot but I couldn't afford the price he was asking. He left and I don't know where he went."

Eirian shook her head. I dropped to a crouch next to Calt. He shrank back, as if hoping to disappear into the crate he had his back against. "I've been marching for days across the plains trying to catch this man. From his tracks, I realized he was heading to Lackthroat. Your town has a reputation among my people, and I knew I might have to question some of you cowards. That's why I asked my friend here to use her magic to pick out the truth."

I leaned forward and poked one finger into the merchant's chest. "And she says you're lying."

"All... all right," he squeaked. I rocked back onto my heels, letting my hands drape over my knees so he could see my bloody knuckles and metal arm. "He came in yesterday in the afternoon and wanted me to examine the thing. Said it had some sort of tracking mechanism in it making it run in one direction."

"Are you an expert on robots?"

"It's more of a hobby," Calt answered. His shoulders relaxed a bit. "I buy and sell scavenged scrap and I've learned a thing or two. The robot was set to return to the source of a signal—sort of like birds migrating in the fall. It had to follow the signal back to where it came from, probably some kind of larger structure or another robot."

"So where did this customer of yours go?"

"I don't..." he began. Eirian shook her head immediately and he started over. "He said he was going to follow the robot to its destination, but first he wanted to tell someone about it."

"What do you mean tell someone? Tell who?"

Calt squirmed. I bunched my muscles and glowered. Calt took a breath and squeaked out, "Ryden Vass."

I almost lost my balance. I stood up, towering over Calt. He flinched. "Vass? Of the Technic League? Why..." I paused, trying to think of the best question to ask. Eirian had warned me ahead of time that her spell would last only a few moments. "Do you know this customer? Is he a regular?"

"Yes," Calt said reluctantly.

"Tell me who he is and why he'd go to Ryden Vass."

One of the unconscious men stirred and moaned. I added, "Quickly!"

"His name's Teleran. That's the only name I know him by." The words spilled out from Calt's lips. "Used to be in the League, I heard, but they sent him out, don't know why. Some tell as he's trying to get back in, prove he can do it. That's why he's looking for Vass."

"Did you do something to the robot? We've been... tracking it, you might say, but yesterday we stopped getting the whatever you called it. The signal."

"I didn't do nothing! It was far beyond my skill in tinkering. I gave him a crate to keep it in, though. He said



*EVERYTHING AND
EVERYONE IN
LACKTHROAT WAS
GREASY AND DIRTY.*

*CALT WAS BAD AT
LYING, BUT I WAS
STILL APPRECIATIVE OF
EIRIAN'S MAGIC.*

it kept trying to get away, so he had its legs all tied up and a bar jammed in its treads."

I clenched my fists and then forced my muscles to relax. "Any idea where Vass is?"

"There's a dig site about ten miles west of town. Think her men have been seen in that part."

I stood up. "Thanks for the information, Calt. I won't forget it. Or you."

Leaving him with that menacing thought, Eirian and I slipped out of the shop. Once on the street and moving away from the building, I murmured, "Who knew Calt had such loyal customers? You could have fought alongside me when those men drew weapons."

"You didn't need help," she answered, and I was forced to agree with her. "I don't think they were particularly loyal to the shopkeep. I think asking questions here is frowned upon. Violently."

"You may be right."

"My spell lapsed right before he answered the last question," Eirian added. "I can't be sure he was telling the truth."

I pulled my cloak around me a little tighter. "We'll find out soon enough."

For the first time since we left my village, we had a chance to catch up to our robot thief. He'd spent much longer in Lackthroat learning about Tryg than we had learning about him. The previous evening I'd gotten only a few hours of sleep when my connection to Tryg severed. The sudden disappearance of the link between us was so jarring it shook me awake. I could still sense the main signal, the one that called both me and Tryg, but the robot had vanished. Eirian and I agreed to press on, and though it was hard on her, she kept up while I marched through the night.

After we arrived at Lackthroat, we had followed the robot thief's tracks to the dingy shop where we interrogated Calt.

I led us from there through the narrow streets until we once again strode across the open plain.

Neither of us spoke until we were well away from the town. As we marched side by side, eyes fixed on the horizon, Eirian said, "We'll find him."

"Are you making conversation?"

"I can tell you're worried." I glanced at Eirian and saw her watching me as she walked. I snapped my gaze back forward. "We'll get him back, though."

"I know we will. I'm not worried."

"You must be," Eirian said, "or we wouldn't be chasing him. You can sense Tryg's destination on your own now. You can follow it to the source without him, and learn how to remove the cuff from your wrist. That's what you want, isn't it?"

I didn't answer right away, and Eirian accepted my silence. Miles passed under our boots before I said, "It is what I want. But I don't like the idea of the Technic League taking Tryg apart to figure out what makes him so curious and clever and tenacious. We put him where the robot thief could get to him. I let him get away. That makes him my responsibility."

Another mile passed. Eirian said, "Is he more than just a machine, then?"

"Yes," I answered. "More than just a machine."

Less than an hour later we came to the dig site.

We heard the pit well before we came to it—the whole place was filled with the shouts of workers and the ring of pickaxes against stone. We rounded a small heap of stone

and saw a pit over a hundred feet across gaping in the earth. Scaffolds and rope ladders led the way down. Eirian and I circled to the south and approached the pit with caution, taking cover behind more piles of fragmented stone.

When we got to the edge, we saw that despite its breadth, the pit was only a dozen or so feet deep. Clusters of laborers worked to excavate the uneven ground. They were a thin and ragged bunch who worked steadily but listlessly. Many had visible scars, but not the kind a warrior earns in battle. These were angry red puckers that ran across their backs and sides or encircled their limbs. Eirian whispered, "Test subjects used by the Technic League and forced to work when their usefulness is otherwise ended."

Two members of the Technic League, armed and armored, stood watch at one edge of the pit near a cluster of wooden buildings while two more patrolled the area. We crouched down lower behind our rocky shield, and I was glad the sun was low and shadows stretched to hide us. I edged around our cover for a better angle and looked out again.

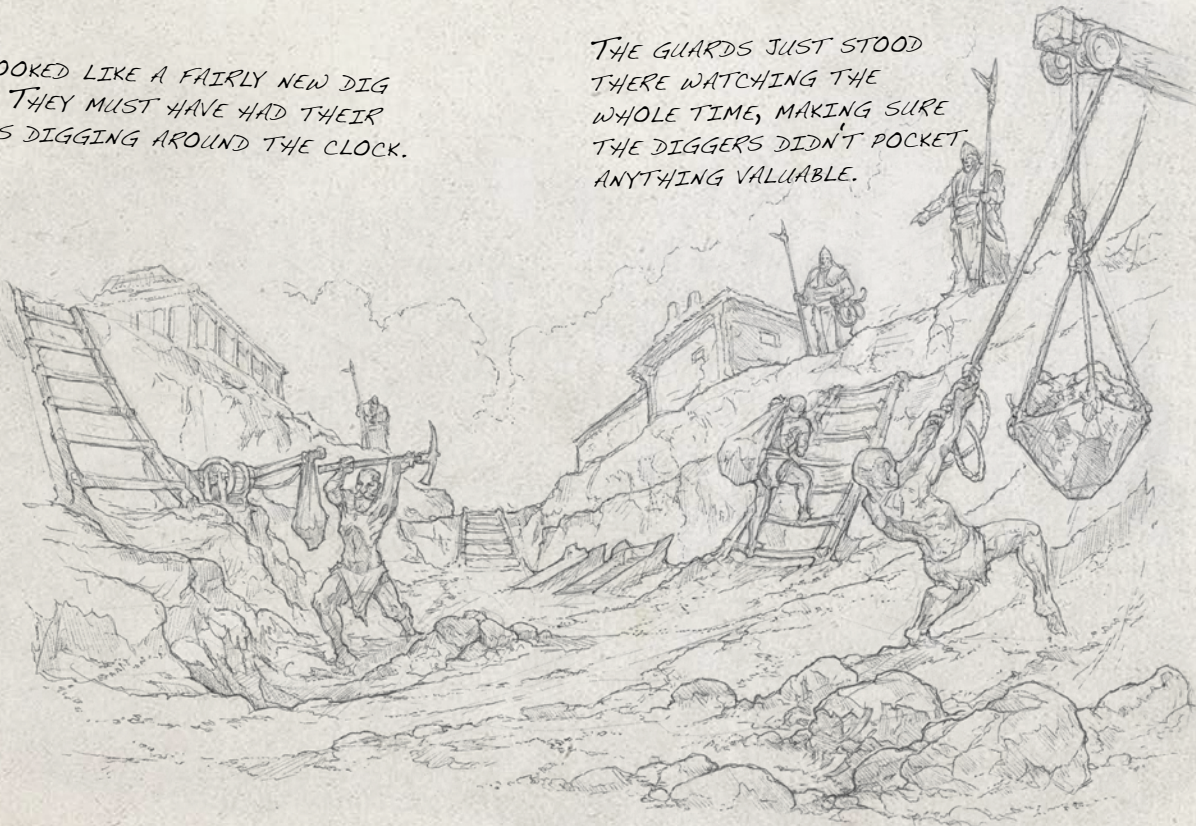
A figure had just climbed up a scaffold and out of the pit. I couldn't make out many details from that distance, but when the figure opened up a dull metal box and a little robot clambered out and started pulling himself over the rocks, I recognized Tryg instantly.

My link to Tryg snapped back. In addition to my sudden awareness of the robot's location, I noticed another sensation, a new one. It felt like relief.

Tryg was glad that I was near again.

IT LOOKED LIKE A FAIRLY NEW DIG SITE. THEY MUST HAVE HAD THEIR SLAVES DIGGING AROUND THE CLOCK.

THE GUARDS JUST STOOD THERE WATCHING THE WHOLE TIME, MAKING SURE THE DIGGERS DIDN'T POCKET ANYTHING VALUABLE.



Movement back in the pit caught my eye. A group of Technic League agents stood next to a long wooden workbench that seemed to hold items of interest that the laborers had uncovered. Though I was too far away to hear, I watched the League members discuss something in a very animated fashion. One pointed up to a corral where several horses grazed and then in the direction where the figure—who I could finally make out as Teleran—had started after Tryg. Another nodded and began gathering up satchels stored beneath the workbench. A third listened while pulling on a pair of leather gloves. As she tugged on the gloves, she looked straight up at our hiding spot. I ducked back out of sight.

Ryden Vass.

“We have to move,” I whispered to Eirian. “I think Vass is about to go after Tryg and Teleran. We need to get to them first.”

She nodded and motioned for me to lead.

We crept around the rocks, keeping to the shadows when we had to dart over open ground, trying to always keep our distance from the patrolling guards. As we neared the far side of the pit, my connection to Tryg and the mysterious signal suddenly surged with power. A shock ran through my arm and I stifled a cry. A mad desire to rush toward the source of the signal filled me, but I fought the impulse down. I stopped for a moment, clutching at the gritty surface of the rock pile next to me. When I had mastered the new, stronger signal beating in my mind, I turned to Eirian.

“Something strange just happened. I... Eirian?”

Eirian had put her back to the rock and slid to the ground. Her eyes rolled back in her head as she shook silently.

“Eirian!” I called as loudly as I dared. I grabbed her by the shoulders and tried to steady her. Her mouth was slack and her head lolled to the side.

Lacking any idea of what was happening or what I could do, I cradled my companion to my chest and twisted around to look out over the pit again. Tryg was trundling away in the direction of the signal. Teleran followed in his wake. Ryden Vass and her two associates climbed the scaffolding toward the horses.

I crouched even lower to steady myself and hoisted Eirian into my arms. Her shaking had stopped, but her eyes had closed and she made no sound. Her stillness was terrifying. I straightened, lifting her with ease. Her weight didn't seem any more than that of a human woman her size.

Still, carrying her body while trying to avoid detection proved difficult. I made it a dozen yards closer to the robot thief, but by the time I reached the last bit of cover, the thief was well on his way after Tryg. I set Eirian down and tried to think. Leaving her helpless next to the pit would be unconscionable—many Technic League agents would love nothing more than to capture and experiment upon



LIKE A LOT OF PEOPLE, TELERAN WAS SEDUCED BY THE LURE OF POWER THAT THE TECHNIC LEAGUE DANGLES IN FRONT OF PEOPLE.

I ALMOST FELT SORRY FOR HIM. ALMOST.

an android. Every moment I delayed, though, meant that Tryg rolled that much farther away.

I propped Eirian against the rocks and tried another gentle shake. “Eirian?” I chafed her hands together. “Eirian!”

No response.

I looked back out from behind the rocks. Teleran was a speck in the distance now and Vass had reached the horses. As I watched, she and her companions began harnessing their mounts. If I sprinted now, while no one was watching, I could make it to the thief. I could take Tryg and move south, hiding my tracks, then circle back around for Eirian.

I called her name again. A thin line appeared between her brows and she stirred, faintly, as if struggling to come awake. With a final, helpless look in Tryg's direction, I settled on my heels next to Eirian and waited for her to wake fully.

By the time Eirian opened her eyes, Ryden Vass was thundering toward the robot thief astride her semi-mechanical horse. Eirian came fully conscious and sat up. After a glance at me she followed my gaze in time to see Vass and her companions ride past the robot thief. Vass leaned sideways in the saddle and scooped up Tryg. The horses kept on, leaving the robot thief to continue trudging in their dust.

“Are you well?” I asked Eirian. My voice sounded harsh and strained, even to my own ears.

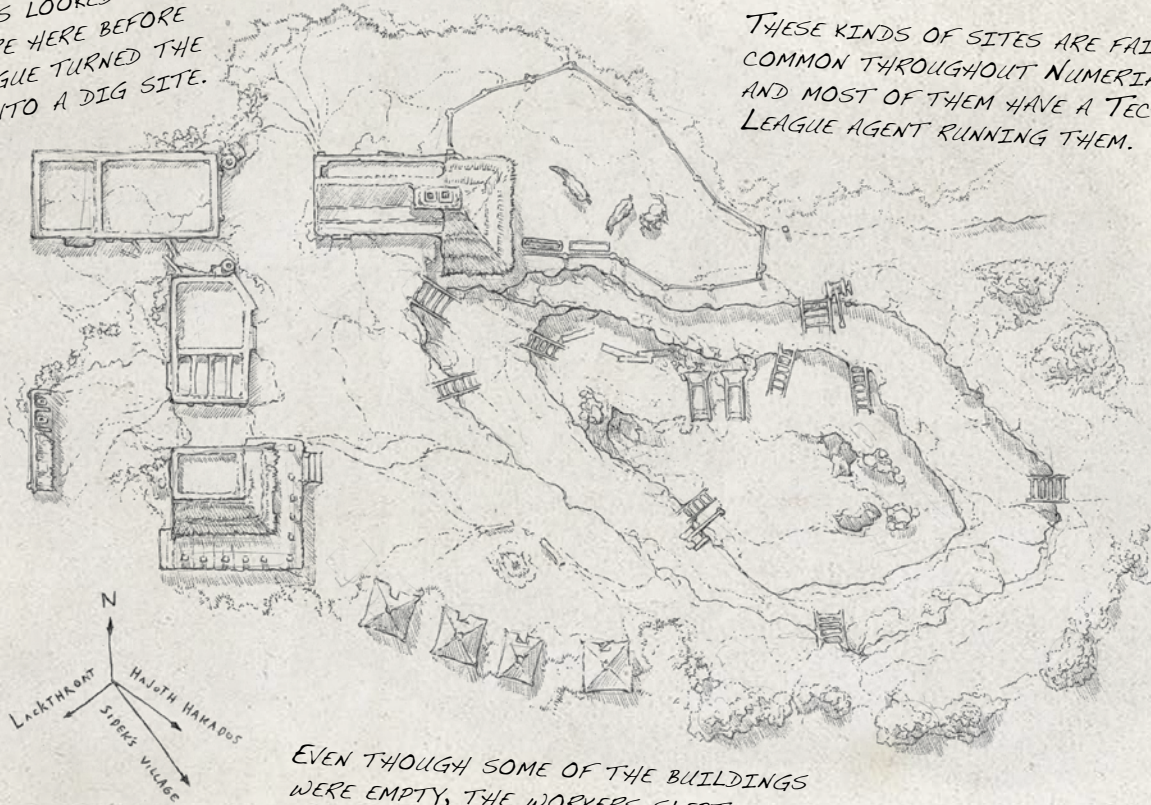
“I—I think so,” she whispered. “Sidek, I have to tell you...”

“Later. We can't let him get away.”

I scanned the dig site to make sure the guards were moving away from us before I hurried after Teleran. Eirian stumbled her first few steps and I took her arm to steady her, but she soon caught her balance. Together we rushed after the receding figure.

As we got nearer, we softened our steps. I clenched my fists as the bear inside me stretched and yawned. Tryg nestled in my brain, the sense of him still strong and near, and I

MOST OF THE BUILDINGS LOOKED LIKE THEY WERE HERE BEFORE THE LEAGUE TURNED THE PLACE INTO A DIG SITE.



THESE KINDS OF SITES ARE FAIRLY COMMON THROUGHOUT NUMERIA, AND MOST OF THEM HAVE A TECHNIC LEAGUE AGENT RUNNING THEM.

EVEN THOUGH SOME OF THE BUILDINGS WERE EMPTY, THE WORKERS SLEPT IN TENTS.

was furious at having lost him again. When Eirian put her hand on my arm I almost shook her off, but instead I took a deep breath and stopped.

She held up both hands, palms facing toward Teleran, who followed a dusty track thirty yards ahead of us. The dig site was well behind us by now and sere grass of the plains stretched to either side, turned orange by the dying rays of the sun. Eirian chanted softly, her eyes never leaving Teleran.

Up ahead, the robot thief stopped, frozen in place.

Eirian nodded to me and we sprinted forward. The robot thief shook off Eirian's spell just as we caught up to him. He drew a rapier, one that had seen much use judging by the battered hilt and scarred blade, and turned on us. Getting a clear look at him, I saw a fellow Kellid, his head shaved close to the skin and his build smaller than mine. His clothes were not made of the homespun cloth I saw on most of my people, but of thin and cheaply made fabric like that produced in Starfall. He came at me fast, faster than I expected, and though I knocked his blade to the side it slid along my shoulder and sliced open the skin. Already he was moving, drawing back and lunging to my right, his blade flashing in the last light of sunset.

I whirled to face him and lashed out with my right fist, trying to knock the sword out of his hand. It was a trick that had served me well in the past, but Teleran kept a firm

grip and twisted so that my knuckles caught on the blade. I winced as blood dripped down my fingers but kept turning until I could smash into the thief with my left arm.

The force of the blow knocked us both back. Since I'd crossed whatever invisible line marked the increase in the signal's strength, my arm had been tingling with power. I hadn't realized quite how much more power the cuff now contained. I staggered for several steps, trying to recover from my own punch. Teleran howled in pain and clutched at his broken, flopping arm. He spat invectives at me as we both gained solid footing.

I heard Eirian chanting and then she darted in and touched my back. My knuckles and shoulder ached less sharply. Knowing Eirian was there to heal me made me bold. I used my right arm as a shield and charged. My bear roared through the pain as Teleran stabbed through the muscle of my bicep. This time I was ready for the strength of my punch as I slammed my fist into his chest. His breath left him with a whoosh and he collapsed, rapier falling from numbed fingers.

I dropped down and put a knee on his chest. Eirian came up as Teleran writhed beneath me.

"Talk," I said. "Fast."

"You broke my arm! My ribs," he gasped.

I dug my fingers into the man's side and he kicked and screamed. "Yes," I said. "I did."

I pulled back my hand. "Tell us what you told Vass and my companion here will heal you. Remain silent and you'll soon find there are much worse things I can do to you."

The robot thief glared at me. "I showed her the robot," he said, grimacing. "Told her it was homing in on something. She was interested."

"You've been following us since Hajoth Hakados, haven't you?"

"It was my robot! I saw it first. I just needed a way to pry it loose. But when I came back, you'd taken it."

"You were going to turn it over to the Technic League. I heard they dismissed you. Is Vass going to get you back into the League because you gave her the robot?"

Behind the pain and hate in Teleran's gaze, something darker lurked. He pressed his lips together.

A few short, sharp punches into his side got him talking again. "Stop! Stop! Stop! Yes," he howled. "She said she would put in a good word. When I first apprenticed there were things, experiments, I... I couldn't do them. I tried but I wasn't ready. I just needed more time! But they said I wasn't strong enough..." He drifted off, distant.

"Where is Vass going now?"

"Wherever the robot goes," Teleran said sullenly, returning from whatever dark reverie had gripped him. "I'm to follow her and meet her wherever the trail ends. Then, she said, she might take me back."

I got to my feet. Teleran wheezed on the ground. "We're close," I said to Eirian. "I can feel it. We can catch them if we hurry."

"You haven't slept in over a day."

I waved her off. "I can do it. I've done it before, hunting on the plains."

"All right."

I looked down at Teleran's form. I messed him up pretty good. "He told us what we needed to know. Heal him and we'll go."

"No."

I looked at Eirian in surprise. Her voice was mild as ever, her face composed. "We said we'd heal him if he talked."

"You said that." She looked at Teleran. "He stole a robot and handed it to the Technic League. They experiment on my kind. Brigh will not heal him. I will not."

"You can't leave me here like this," Teleran said. "Hey. Hey!"

Eirian started walking.

I hesitated for a moment before steeling myself against the man's cries. I jogged past him to catch up with Eirian.

Before I could say anything, she said, "I have to tell you something."

I fell into step next to her as she continued. "We are very, very close now. When we came near enough to the source of the signal, when I collapsed, I was granted a vision."

"Brigh spoke to you?"

Eirian nodded. When she looked at me, her eyes were shining like silver coins. "I know what Tryg's mission is. I know why the signal draws him near. And if we don't hurry, not only will Ryden Vass gain a valuable prize, but Tryg will be utterly annihilated."

ROBOT SALVAGE AND REPAIR

Though intact robots command large sums if they can be captured and sold, robot parts also prove valuable in Numeria. Many general stores also function as junk shops where metal parts can be bought, traded, and sold. Shop owners quickly learn which parts fetch the highest prices and which are "salvage slop," worth little more than the raw value of their metal components. The components in highest demand tend to be small, intricate circuits, wires, and pieces composed of rare metals.

On the unsettled plains of Numeria, scavengers pick over old dig sites and excavate buried wreckage to sell when they return to civilization. Pieces of the ship that crashed during Starfall are buried deep beneath the surface in many regions, and persistent adventurers can bring new pieces of it to light. Some scavengers, unable to find suitable ruins on the plains, instead wait for others to salvage a spot and then rob the excavators.

Though many shop owners in Numeria understand the value of robot parts, few understand how robots are built. Even those with a passing understanding of robot construction must resort to spells such as make whole to repair robots. Priests of Brigh have access to make whole and other spells that repair and bolster constructs, but would never use their power to repair a robot for sale. Rumor holds that actual technological understanding of robots eludes all but top-level members of the Technic League, and they do not give up their secrets.