

THE ROAD HOME

PATHFINDER'S JOURNAL: WHISPERS IN THE WASTELANDS 3 OF 6

We continued following the robot toward the setting sun. Tints of orange and red streaked the sky like open wounds. We had fallen into an easy rhythm, striding in silence as the mechanical creature rolled along before us. When I grew hungry, I ate as we walked, gnawing on jerky and handfuls of sun-dried berries.

Soon, though, we would have to rest—or rather, I would while Eirian maintained her placid watch. When that time came, we'd have to find a way to halt the robot's progress. For now, I was content to follow our mechanical guide. As a boy hunting game across the plains, I'd learned to march overnight on the trail of my prey. I could push aside the need for sleep and even food and drink, refusing to feel the fatigue in my muscles or the growling in my gut. There was no need to push myself so hard at this point, but that training did help me to keep pace with the robot.

The sun's lower curve had just touched the horizon when a ridgeline came into view. The wall of rock stood only a few feet high, but the ascent was sheer and slightly concave. I pointed to it. "The robot will have trouble cresting that wall. We can make camp there when it stalls."

We picked up our pace, closing the distance between us and our mechanical guide. The robot spun forward on its treads until it came within a hand's breadth of the wall. Then its appendages shot out from its curved torso. The robot tried to climb the wall directly, spearing the tips of its "legs" into cracks in the wall. It lacked the strength to lift its whole body, however, and soon slid back to the ground. Balancing on its two back appendages, it walked up the wall

with the other two, giving the appearance of a dog rearing up on its hind legs. As Eirian and I watched, the robot felt along the surface of the ridge, swiveling from left to right to cover as much area as possible.

"It's smarter than I thought," I said.

Eirian nodded. "All the robots I've ever seen possess some ability to cogitate. Some are simple machines that follow orders as they are given, but even those possess the ability to adjust those orders depending on the complexity of their situation. Others are as smart as the elf-wizards of Kyonin, I've heard, but even the most basic robot is at least as intelligent as a well-trained horse."

"I think that's the longest I've ever heard you speak at one time."

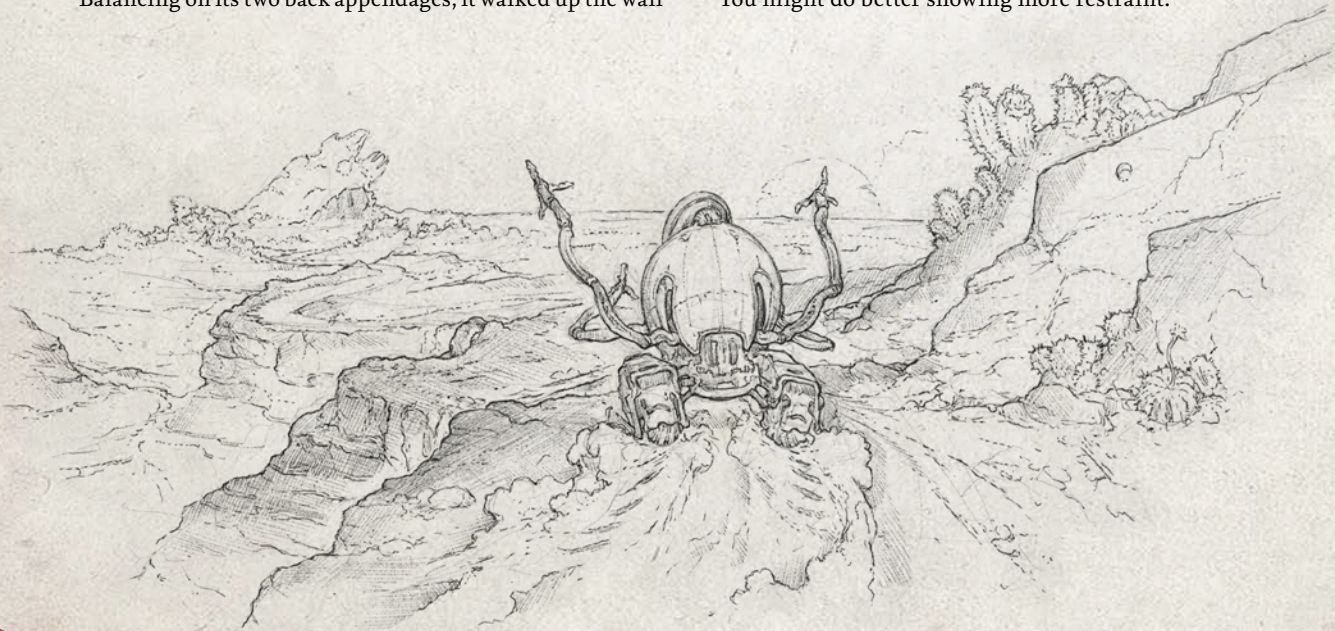
To my surprise, Eirian's pale face contorted into something that could be recognized as embarrassment. "Have I failed to give you needed information in a timely manner?"

"No, of course not. I just meant you usually stay silent unless you have something important to say."

"Why else would I speak?"

I opened my hand and gestured to take us both in. "Maybe to share thoughts or feelings? To get to know each other better. We've been traveling for days, and I know no more about you than when we started."

The robot backed away from the wall and fell forward onto its legs. It scuttled to the side and reared up again, searching for a way over the barrier. Eirian watched its progress as she replied, "You're so open with your thoughts and feelings. You might do better showing more restraint."



"Too open?" I couldn't disguise my surprise. "Most folk consider me reserved. Some Varisians declare themselves your lifelong friend after fifteen minutes, and Taldans tell you their family lineage back seven generations. By comparison, I'm downright stoic."

"You have the openness of someone not afraid of violence."

I stepped closer to Eirian and almost laid a hand on her shoulder, but thought better of it. The last thing I wanted was to make her feel unsafe. I took a half-step back instead. "Are you afraid I'll hurt you?" I tried to keep my tone easy, though I was deeply unsettled.

She turned her clear gaze on me. "I don't believe the Whisper in the Bronze would have twined our paths if you meant me harm. But you yourself said your people react with hostility to technology. Many mistake androids for humans and then lash out at us when they learn the truth. Some accuse us of misleading them with our human-like appearance and take offense. Others hate technology and see us as the embodiment of a sickness infecting this land. Have you forgotten the circumstances of our first meeting?"

"No, I haven't." I returned Eirian's gaze steadily, hoping to project concern and compassion. "I didn't mean to push you to reveal more of yourself than you're willing to. I just thought conversation might pass the time, maybe help us trust each other. I'll hold my tongue more often."

"No." This time she was the one who stepped forward and touched my arm. "Don't constrain yourself in an effort to please me. Talk as much as you like, and I'll keep silent as much as I like. The only way to trust is through honesty."

I smiled. "Wise words.."

Eirian started to reply but broke off and pointed past me. "Look at that."

I turned and saw that the robot had found a cracked section of ridgeline where fist-sized rocks had broken off from the mass. It worked busily, swooping around the fallen rocks and using its spindly appendages to gather small stones into a ramp set against the ridgeline. When the heap of broken stone was tall enough, the robot circled around and wheeled carefully up the ramp, its treads crunching against the loose shale. It used its appendages to pull it up the last few inches and over the lip of the ridge before trundling onward.

"Clever," I said as we hurried to follow. "Reminds me of my dog, Tryg."

"Tryg?"

"My father named him. It means something like 'persistence' in a dialect of Kellid. Tryg hated being tied up and always found a way off his lead. He'd never go anywhere after he got free—one time he gnawed through a waxed and braided cord, and I found him on his back, legs in the air, dozing in the sun not five feet from his chewed-up tether." I chuckled at the memory.



HE MAY HAVE BEEN AS STUBBORN AS HELL, BUT TRYG WAS A GOOD DOG. I'M PRETTY SURE HIS STUBBORNNESS CONTRIBUTED TO HIS CLEVERNESS. IT WAS ALWAYS HARD TO KEEP HIM OUT OF THINGS.

By now the sun had nearly disappeared and shadows stretched across the plains. I was almost ready to suggest making camp when a dark spot on the horizon caught my eye. I pointed it out to Eirian. "See there?"

She nodded slowly. "I see it. It looks like a cloud, but far too low."

I was about to reply when the smell reached me. "Not a cloud," I said. "Smoke. Something's burning."

Then, underneath the smell of ash and burning wood, I caught another odor. The rich, greasy smell of sizzling fat. My stomach turned. I'd experienced the scent before, and it was unmistakable.

Someone was burning.

The robot's persistent course took it toward the smoke on the horizon. After a short discussion, Eirian and I agreed to follow it. Waiting until dawn may have been the safer course, but there might be people still alive and in need of help. The smoke showed that whatever happened there had happened recently.

Another hour of travel took us within sight of a village—or what used to be a village. I caught Eirian's eye and she nodded. We quickened our pace to get ahead of the robot. The moonlight and the dying fires illuminated the scene.

The buildings reminded me strongly of my own home—my people built our homes in the same way, with hewn timbers for the frames and walls of woven bark, animal hides, or mud daub. My chest tightened at the sight of the smoldering huts. Amid the burning frames I saw the remains of people's lives: hand-carved bedsteads, cupboards, even scorched cradles.

Near the edge of town, a rack made for drying animal hides had collapsed into a pile of charred sticks on top of a week's worth of skins, all burned beyond salvage. The roof of a longhouse, a gathering place for the villagers,

FITTING WITH HER METAL STEED, VASS WEARS THE HELMET OF A CAVALRY SOLDIER THAT IS PROUDLY MARKED WITH THE SYMBOL OF THE TECHNIC LEAGUE.



SHE CERTAINLY HAS AN IMPOSING NATURE ABOUT HER.

blazed brightly against the night sky. Just before us, an arm stretched out from beneath the collapsed timbers of a hut. Its fingers curled as if beckoning us, begging our help even after death.

Before I could respond to the dead man's plea, a gust of wind blew the smoke sideways, and I caught a flash of movement deeper in the village. I gestured urgently to Eirian and we scurried toward the collapsed hut, putting it between us and whoever still lingered in the ruins.

Even as we ran, I heard movement behind me. The robot had caught up to us and followed its inexorable path through the village. Hoofbeats sounded in the dark. Whoever had attacked this village would be on us in seconds.

I darted for the robot. It tried to scuttle past me, but I dropped down on it and grabbed two of its appendages. My cuff flared, and magical strength shot up my arm. I wrestled the robot toward our hiding place, but it was slow going. The robot fought me, straining against my grip. I felt like I was wrestling an eager dog without a harness.

I could hear the horses galloping in the shadows, louder and louder. I dragged the robot another few feet, but we were still exposed. The hut was a dozen feet away. I readied myself to let go of the robot and defend myself against whomever was about to emerge from the darkness.

Then Eirian was next to me, crouching at my side and whispering strange words. She rested her fingers on a patch of bare stone.

I jerked my hand away as the stone peeled back in front of the robot. Eirian's magic hollowed a pit in the stone and the little robot tumbled in, its appendages waving wildly as it scrambled for purchase. Eirian drew a quick breath and resumed chanting. The stone surged again, arcing over the

newly formed pit. Within seconds the robot was completely sealed in the stone hollow.

When she was done, Eirian pulled on my sleeve to let me know. We raced back to the hut, hiding ourselves just as the riders came into view.

I recognized their leader instantly. I'd seen her first in Hajoth Hakados two days earlier. Now, as then, she rode a steed outfitted with mechanical parts. Its topaz eye shone as if lit from inside. Atop the part-mechanical horse, the woman sat with the easy grace of an experienced rider. She wore the same armor she had in Hajoth Hakados, but her hair was now tucked under a helm of indigo metal. On the brow of the helm shone a silver cog. Dried blood streaked the woman's right cheek, resembling ritual markings in the darkness.

Two riders followed the leader. One glanced in my direction, and I shrank back behind the edge of the ruined hut. Eirian crouched next to me and I could feel the tension coiling in her body.

The hoofbeats drummed past. I dropped my gaze to the mound of stone beneath which our little robot friend hid. One of the riders galloped directly over the mound, the horse's shod hooves striking the stone and making a hollow clod against the robot's hiding place. I winced and held my breath, but the rider didn't seem to notice.

A moment later, the riders were gone, the sound of their passage vanishing into the night. I let out my breath and straightened.

"She was the same rider from Hajoth Hakados," I said.

Eirian nodded slowly. "I have always hidden whenever I see the Technic League, but I've heard stories about her. Her name is Ryden Vass. She's an arcanist who joined the League almost a decade ago. She leads expeditions in the area to excavate and steal technological items."

We picked our way over to the stone mound that was imprisoning our robot. I tapped my toe against the stone. "A clever plan, this. Why would the Technic League attack a village? My home was never attacked, but then again—we didn't have much they'd want."

Eirian's voice took on the tone of discomfort I'd learned to listen for. "You were also probably too remote. Their patrols don't stray far from the large settlements. Sometimes they demand tribute from villages—gold, technology, even raw materials like metal. Sometimes they come for subjects."

"Subjects?"

"For their experiments."

I turned to face the village. "Tryg seems safe where he is. Let's see if there's anyone left to help."

Eirian started toward the ruin. I followed, scanning for any sign of movement, but the village was still and silent except for crackling embers and the shifting of timbers. The only motion I saw was the drifting of clouds of smoke.

Bodies lay among the ruins, but not as many as I'd expected. I'd seen death in my time—too much death—but

the sight of their broken forms still shook me. The smell made it worse. An elderly woman lay face-up in the path, her eyes closed and mouth slack. She'd been cut open, shoulder to waist. One arm curved over her brow, as if she'd thrown it up to defend herself against a slashing blade.

We passed a few more bodies as we approached the center of the village. "I didn't see any captured slaves with the riders," I said to Eirian. "But there aren't many people here."

"Vass probably sent the slaves off with her main force and then stayed behind to loot the village," Eirian said. "She would have brought more than two riders with her for an assault like this."

"We're lucky we didn't cross paths with them on the way here." The smoke and char of the burned bodies coated my nostrils. I wiped at my face, trying to rid myself of the stench.

To our left, something rattled in the wreckage. Eirian whirled, hammer up and ready to strike. I darted past her, leaping over a blackened timber beam. My heart pounded and I felt the bear stir in my chest.

No riders galloped out of the dark toward me. No mutant coyotes bayed in the night. I saw a figure shift on the ground, half-pinned beneath a collapsed hut. Singed thatching heaped around him like drifts of snow on the plains of Irrisen. I might have missed the man, were it not for his feeble movements.

I dropped to a crouch beside him. "Lie still. Help is here."

He gasped for breath, his face contorted with pain. He looked to be not much older than I, and his tanned skin and scarred arms marked him as a plainsman. Open sores oozed at the corners of his mouth and down his jaw.

"No... warning..." he managed. The sores cracked and ran with yellow-green pus when he spoke. I made a motion as if to cover his mouth.

"Save your strength," I said. "My friend is a healer."

"Not for this," he wheezed. Eirian knelt opposite me and examined the man. She looked at me and shook her head.

"They poisoned... our warriors." I had to strain to hear the man's words as his voice faded. "When we... went down... they took the others."

"They enslaved your tribe," I said. "We can track them down! Free them!"

Eirian shot me a look I ignored. The man grasped my wrist with his unpinned hand. "They wanted the cairn...our ancestors built it to hide..." He trailed off and his eyes slipped shut. I was about to remove his hand from mine and begin a prayer for the dead when his lids flew open. His fingers tightened like steel. "We kept the ground hallowed. Kept it hidden so it could never harm anyone. And now... we are gone."

The life slipped from his body. I crossed the man's arm over his chest and bowed my head.

Eirian touched her hammer and the dead man's brow, then waited for me to finish my prayers. "The poison was beyond my ability to heal. I'm sorry." After a pause, she added, "We can't bring back his people."

"Why not?" I stood up and glanced around as if expecting to see the slavers passing near, ripe for attack. "They can't have gotten far."

"They'll outnumber us significantly, even without Ryden Vass," Eirian said. "They'll have talented arcanists within their group. And if we managed to defeat them, when they don't return to Hajoth Hakados, Ryden Vass would come looking for them. Worse, she might have already joined back up with them, and if she finds an android and a man with a technologically enhanced arm, neither of us will know freedom again."

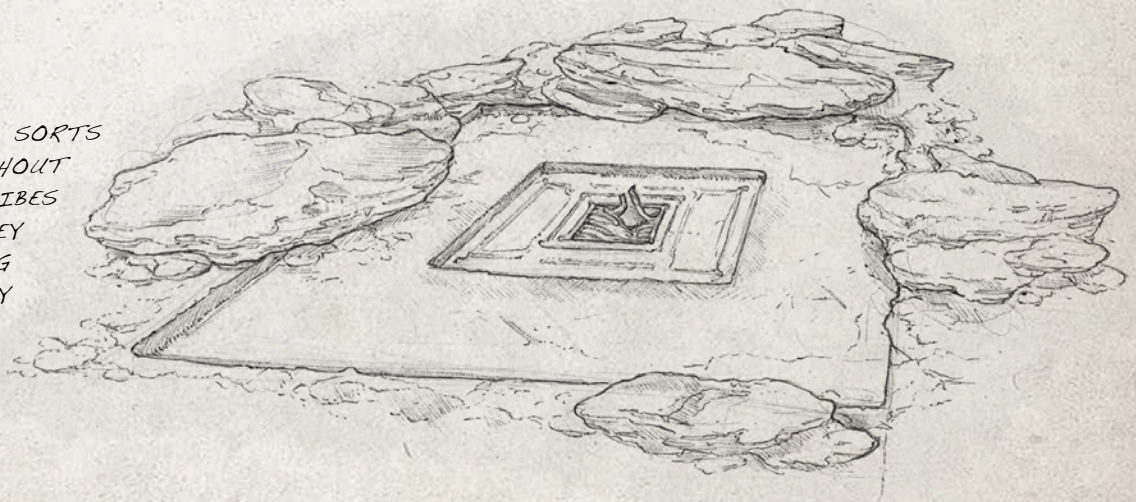
My frustration must have shown on my face, because Eirian walked around the dead man and stood close to me. Her voice took on a softer tone than I'd heard her use before. "This is the way it is, Sidek. We cannot change things."

"I don't accept that."

"You've been away from Numeria for too long."

Her accusation, gentle as it was, struck me dumb. Could it be I'd been absent from my home long enough to be surprised at its ugliness? Growing up, I had lived in my remote village, isolated from the larger settlements. Once I'd joined the Pathfinders, my missions took me outside Numeria's

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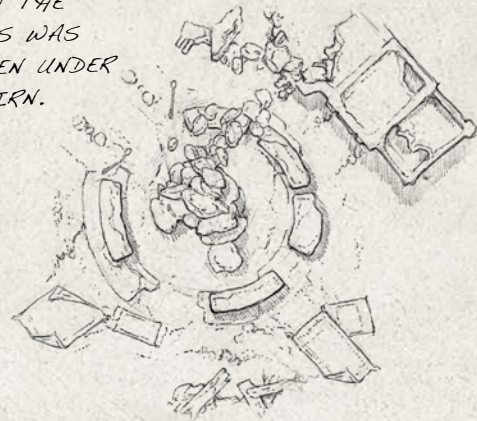


THE RUINED VILLAGE WAS A TYPICAL NUMERIAN SETTLEMENT.

THESE PEOPLE WORKED HARD AND LIVED SIMPLY.



THAT PANEL WITH THE WIRES WAS HIDDEN UNDER A CAIRN.



borders, where I saw the world. Had that worldliness made me forget the brutality of my homeland?

Finally, I said, "You're right. We're unprepared for this sort of battle. But I won't forget those people, or the others the Technic League has taken. I have friends I can call on. I'll find a way to end this evil."

"And stem the flow of the Sellen with your bare hands, too?"

I ignored the barb and turned away from Eirian, though I was silently surprised at her jibe. "Let's examine the cairn."

We resumed our course to the center of town, where the cairn would likely be. Numerian customs varied widely between villages, but the lack of platforms outside this village led me to believe these people either buried their dead or left them in the wild for the elements and animals to take away. The hundreds of stones that had made up the cairn would each correspond to an ancestor who had passed on. Mats woven from plains grasses and dyed in ceremonial patterns were arrayed around the pile, torn and trampled by the horses' hooves. Two nearby stone benches would have provided a place for those who could not kneel, the sick and the elderly, to sit during ceremonies.

A foot-tall wall of clay bricks ringed the cairn. Most of the wall had been knocked down, and the bricks dotted the area. If this village was anything like mine, the village's religious leaders, elders, and anyone else with cause to speak would have stood atop the wall while addressing the community.

The Technic League had utterly destroyed the cairn. Stones lay scattered across the ground as if a giant had

smashed its fist down on the top of the structure. A few of the stones were cracked, deliberately destroyed by the Technic League agents. Where the cairn had stood, a hole two feet across gaped in the ground.

Eirian and I approached the hole carefully. When we reached the edge, I saw a flat metal plate wedged in the ground six inches down. Dirt streaked the plate, and its dull patina revealed that it had lain here for some time. The edges of the rock around the plate looked almost melted, as if someone had pressed the plate into liquid rock and then the stone had hardened around its edges.

An indentation in the plate showed where a square object had been removed. The broken ends of a few fine copper wires poked up from the notch.

"This is what they came for," I said.

"How did they know it was here?"

I crouched by the hole and touched the plate. It felt cold and dusty. "Rumors, perhaps. I've known tribes to do this. They find pieces of the machinery that fell from the sky long ago and hide them away. The elders perform rituals to cleanse the ground, believing that technology so hidden won't hurt anyone or infect the land."

"You said your people were superstitious, but I didn't realize the extent."

"Technology can be dangerous." I stood up and gestured at the cuff on my wrist. "Just because it's useful doesn't mean it can't be deadly. We don't understand what came from the sky. Some believe the safest course of action is to lock it away."

Eirian's eyes glittered. "Is that what you believe?"

"I did, once."

"And now?"

I looked at the sky, tried to pick out stars behind the haze. "Sometimes I think my people had it right. But I've seen more of the world now. Some days I don't know what to think."

Eirian made no reply, busying herself instead with sifting through the wreckage of the village in search of supplies. I left her to her task and set about rebuilding the cairn. It was well past midnight when we finished. I was exhausted, and Eirian had found few supplies; most things of value were taken by the Technic League or damaged beyond use. She showed me her findings: a few lengths of rope, a stoppered clay jug of wine, a half-dozen bits of sharp stone, and a bone knife. None of it had spiritual significance, and the villagers wouldn't need the items, so I nodded and she stowed the bounty in her pack.

We said our respective prayers over all the bodies we could find and left them for nature to take. "Let's find a safer spot to camp," I said.

"Not too far away, though," Eirian said. "We can leave the robot in the ground overnight and free him in the morning once I've offered my prayers to Brigh."

I nodded and we headed back to Tryg's hiding place. I had in mind a small dell that we'd passed on the way in, close enough that we could see the village but far enough away that we wouldn't have to smell it.

As we passed the stone mound covering Tryg, though, I stopped and pointed. "Look."

Eirian stopped and followed my gesture. "Scratches?"

I bent to examine the mound more closely. I heard a faint tapping from within as Tryg tried to free itself from its prison. A dozen long scrapes marred the surface of the mound, as if from a metal tool or a sharpened stone.

I straightened and turned in a slow circle, straining to see. Even in the bright moonlight my vision was limited. The night seemed still, hiding no threat.

Eirian noticed me straining my eyes against the darkness, so she scanned the area as well.

"Let's camp here instead," I said. "We can keep an eye on Tryg."

"What does it mean?" Eirian knelt down and traced one of the scratches with her finger. "Someone attacked the stone?"

"Someone tried to open it."

Together, Eirian and I searched the surrounding area. When we were satisfied that whoever had been here was gone, I placed my bedroll next to Tryg's hiding place and readied myself for a few hours of sleep before dawn.

"Do you think it was the Technic League?" Eirian asked as I settled down.

"No," I said. The haze was lifting and the stars shone brightly in the sky. "We would have heard them if they'd doubled back. And they likely would have succeeded in freeing Tryg. This person was careful, stealthy. I don't know who they are, but it seems we're not the only ones interested in our little robot."

THE TECHNIC LEAGUE

More than 200 years ago, the Technic League came to be. This group of unscrupulous spellcasters came together to study the strange technology littered across Numeria. They subjugated numerous Kellid tribes using not only their skill with arcane magic, but also the technological artifacts they possessed.

Before long, the Technic League realized that excavating ruins and experimenting on the items within could take them only so far. The League wanted to explore the interaction between technology and living flesh. At first, the agents experimented on themselves or willing individuals, but soon their need for subjects overrode their ethics (if they ever had any to begin with). They began experimenting on prisoners and slaves, but some even resorted to kidnapping people, dragging these poor souls back to their towers and workshops.

Once the Technic League discovered the secret to controlling gearsmen, they were able to make use of the robots to solidify their power and influence.

Admission to the Technic League requires intelligence, confidence, and in some cases, a near-complete lack of empathy. The Technic League's interests are best served by those wholly devoted to expanding the League's power and increasing its knowledge. Many who join the League and find it too ruthless for their conscience find themselves upon the laboratory tables as the next day's experimental subjects.