

UNEARTHED TREASURES

PATHFINDER'S JOURNAL: WHISPERS IN THE WASTELANDS 2 OF 6

We left Hajoth Hakados shortly after dawn and struck out northwest across the Numerian plains. "I've lived in the wastelands all my youth. I know its secrets," I said. "Most travelers follow the riverbank, a longer route that leaves them easy prey for bandits. We'll cut across the plains and cross the river near its end."

Eirian made no response. By the time the sun reached its zenith, I had learned that my traveling companion spoke only when necessary. At first I found her silence eerie, almost grating. I offered up observations on the land, commenting on familiar features and relaying hunting stories from my childhood. She listened in silence, even showing no reaction to my best story—that of the time I went hunting and was in turn hunted by a starving worg.

Eirian made no comment at the end of my tale. With a touch of reproach, I said, "Most people find that story exciting."

"How can it be exciting when you obviously survived?"

I had no argument for that.

As evening fell, we came upon a stretch of broken earth. Misshapen mounds stood between gullies that cut across the ground. A greasy haze hung over the area like fog. Creaks and whirs sounded in the distance. The remaining sunlight glinted off bits of bright metal stuck among the jagged rocks. I hesitated here.

"You said you knew how to travel the wastelands," Eirian said. "Yet you seem uneasy."

"My people distrust technology," I said. "We avoid these places, places where we might encounter mechanical creatures or technological artifacts. I admit I have little familiarity with such areas."

"I can guide us through."

I glanced at Eirian. She stared serenely toward the horizon. "You said you are a scavenger of ruins. Have you been here before?"

"Yes," she replied. "Many times. It was a village ages ago, built to excavate the land. No one has lived here for centuries, but some of the structures remain."

"Then this place must hold no more secrets for you."

She shook her head. "The ground always holds secrets. Quiet earth can unfold and reveal treasures beneath. Machinery buried in stone tombs can dig its way out after thousands of years. Even a well-picked site can hold new prizes days, weeks, or months later. Some say that a machine lies beneath this land and sometimes it churns, trying to dig itself out."

"I can see why so many androids would stay in Hajoth Hakados then, despite the danger. There's no need to move farther away if you can always scavenge new items in old sites."

She fixed me with her calm gaze, and now that I knew to look for it, I could see the metallic sheen where the sun caught her eyes in the right way. "Not all androids are scavengers."

Her tone made it impossible to tell if I'd offended her. I started to speak, but she held up a hand. "I recommend we rest here and strike out again in the morning."

"Agreed."

We made our camp, rough as it was—two bedrolls on either side of a small fire that we used to heat dried meat and some withered vegetables in water to make a thin soup. We ate the meager meal with hard rolls and then covered the fire to so as not to attract unwanted attention.

"Are you still certain you wish to accompany me?" I asked as we ate.

Eirian nodded. "You have been marked by Brigh. I go where you go."

"My people might not be as welcoming to you as I have been." I took a drink from my waterskin. "They still mightily distrust technology."

"You hold no such belief."

My gaze dropped to the metal cuff on my wrist. The ache had faded, but the cuff still resisted all our efforts to remove it. I grimaced. "I have traveled much and seen wonders my parents never dreamed of. I accept some technology and innovation may be necessary. You can't always live by tradition."

After a moment of quiet, she asked, "Will they harm me?"

*EIRIAN WEARS THIS
CONSTANTLY, BUT SHE
MOSTLY KEEPS IT
TUCKED INTO
HER JACKET.*



"No," I said. "I will speak for you. But they may not allow you inside the village."

"Then I will wait outside until the Whisper in the Bronze guides me elsewhere."

Her placidity lent a strange weight to her words. I could easily picture her waiting outside my village, through rain and fog and deep chill, letting the months pass until I set out again.

I hoped Brigh would guide her elsewhere soon.

I drove sticks into the ground around our campsite and strung thread between them. Eirian hung a few shards of metal from the string, a rudimentary alarm should anyone disturb us in the night. I wrapped myself in my bedroll while Eirian found a comfortable place to rest.

I had almost drifted off when I heard a sound—a repeated thumping that was so low and distant I hadn't heard it over our conversation and movement. Now that we were still, I could sense it on the very edge of my hearing: *clank clank clank*.

"Do you hear that?"

"I do," Eirian replied after a moment. "I cannot tell what it is."

"Nor can I." I sat up in the dark, listening. "I don't think it's getting closer."

"I agree. Perhaps we should investigate in the morning."

Part of me wanted to head out into the night and track down the source of the mysterious sound, but it remained distant. There was no reason to investigate right at the moment, in the dark.

"Very well. In the morning."

Eirian sat silently, watching over the camp as I rested. Sleep eluded me, though. I stared up at familiar stars and listened to the far-off clanking, like a mechanical heart beating in the night. The moon was almost overhead when I finally closed my eyes and let sleep overtake me.

My people call the areas of devastation in Numeria "rendlands." Rendlands can be as small as a hut or as large as a town. They pop up like mushrooms over the face of our land, marking spots where fragments fell from the sky during the Rain of Stars. Explorers, researchers, and scavengers dig up these areas from time to time, hunting for bits of skymetal or artifacts from distant worlds, though most of these places have been stripped clean. This rendland's proximity to Hajoth Hakados made me suspect that it had been excavated many times before.

We picked our way across the landscape. Craters and narrow ravines scarred the ground, making for treacherous footing. We were only a few minutes into the area when a tremor tore open the ground near my feet. I leaped back and managed to hold my balance as a two-foot-deep rift opened before us. The ground stilled again, as if nothing had happened.

Eirian put a hand on my arm. "Are you hurt?"

I shook my head. "Let's keep moving."



*IF WE WOULDN'T HAVE COME BY, THIS
LITTLE GUY WOULD STILL BE STUCK*

We pressed on through a barren region of trembling earth. More than once I was almost knocked to the ground. Soon, though, the tremors subsided and the wreckage of old stone buildings came into view. The *clank clank clank* grew steadily louder. Eirian left her hammer at her belt. I wasn't sure whether she ever used the weapon in battle or if it served only as a symbol of her faith.

Given a choice, I'd rather fight with my hands than use a blade. I flexed my left hand, testing its mobility. I still felt a twinge when moving it, but overall noticed no change in its range of motion. If anything, the metal cuff added stability and weight to my forearm. I hastened my pace, moving a half-step ahead of Eirian.

She stayed behind me as we threaded our way through the ruins. Most of the buildings looked to have been dwellings—simple stone structures that had mostly collapsed. Some remained intact, though, even to the roofs. Piles of rubble blocked what once had been streets. We stepped carefully as we approached the source of the noise.

The thump never grew unbearably loud, but the sound seemed sharper, more distinct, as we approached a gully. I motioned for Eirian to slow.

I sprinted ahead, not caring about stealth. If danger lurked in the gully, I would come upon it fast and overwhelm it. I slowed and paused for only a moment at the edge of the gully, and at the sight of what lay within I jumped down without hesitation.

A tumble of fallen rocks blocked the gully a few feet to the north. The *clank clank clank* echoed clearly down the earthen canal. A mobile metal device beat itself relentlessly against the stone barrier, its body clanging against the stone.

Eirian arrived at the edge of the ravine and peered down at me. She held her hammer in one hand. "I am glad to see you have some means of defending yourself," I said.

She looked at her hammer then back at me. "Brigh comes to my aid in times of need. What is that?"

I approached the metal creature. A single yellow eye glowed from the center of its round body. A pair of treads revolved beneath it, rolling across fallen rocks but never gaining traction. Four spindly, multi-jointed appendages sprouted from its body. The whole apparatus would have fit in my large pack.

"I've seen creatures like this before, on the plains." I walked cautiously around the whirring device. "I believe it's a robot."

Eirian landed lightly behind me. "Like the gearsmen of Starfall." Her voice carried a tone I was coming to associate with discomfort.

"I don't think this one belongs to the Technic League, judging by how long it's been here." I pointed. "That limb is pinned under the rocks. Maybe it was passing through and got caught in a rockslide. This area is unstable."

I watched the little robot struggle, its limbs pinned beneath the rocks and its treads trying to move them. Eirian spoke again. "Perhaps we should assist it."

I started to shake my head. The robot looked to pose little threat, small as it was. But we knew nothing of its origin or purpose, and it seemed safer not to interfere.

At almost at the same instance, Eirian and I noticed the markings on the robot's round head. We both took a step forward.

"The runes," Eirian said, pointing.

"They match the ones on my cuff."

"My cuff."

"Of course." I dropped to one knee next to the trapped robot and held my arm next to its markings.

"They're identical," Eirian said. I nodded in agreement. A band of etched panels surrounded the robot's eye, and each one contained a rune matching one on my—I mean, Eirian's—cuff.

"If this robot has something to do with the cuff," I said, "we might somehow use it to get this thing off my arm."

"Do you have a plan?"

I shook my head. "I may be more comfortable with technology than my people, but that doesn't mean I understand it. Isn't this more your specialty?"

Eirian examined the robot. We tried tapping my cuff against the robot, touching the matching runes together. Nothing happened. The cuff stayed firmly wrapped around my wrist.

"I've reached the limits of my knowledge," Eirian finally said. "Whatever the connection between this robot and my cuff is, I can't tell."

"Then maybe we should release it," I said. "It seems to be trying to get somewhere. Flocks of birds fly from Mendev to Qadira in the summer then return the following season. Maybe this robot is on its way back to its home."

"You think if we follow it, we could learn about its origin?"

"We might even meet its maker. And the maker of the cuff."

"It's pointed toward your village."

"Better still. Now, how to free it."

The rocks crushing the robot's limbs and body were piled all around. I hunted for an item I could use as a lever. Eirian tried to lift one of the rocks off the pile but could barely shift it. I hurried back to help her.

"I don't see anything I can use for a tool," I said. I grasped the rock and tried to move it. "Perhaps together we can—"

The rock moved so suddenly that Eirian and I both staggered off-balance. It slipped from our grasp and tumbled down the pile, glancing off my ankle as it did. I winced as a bruise blossomed.

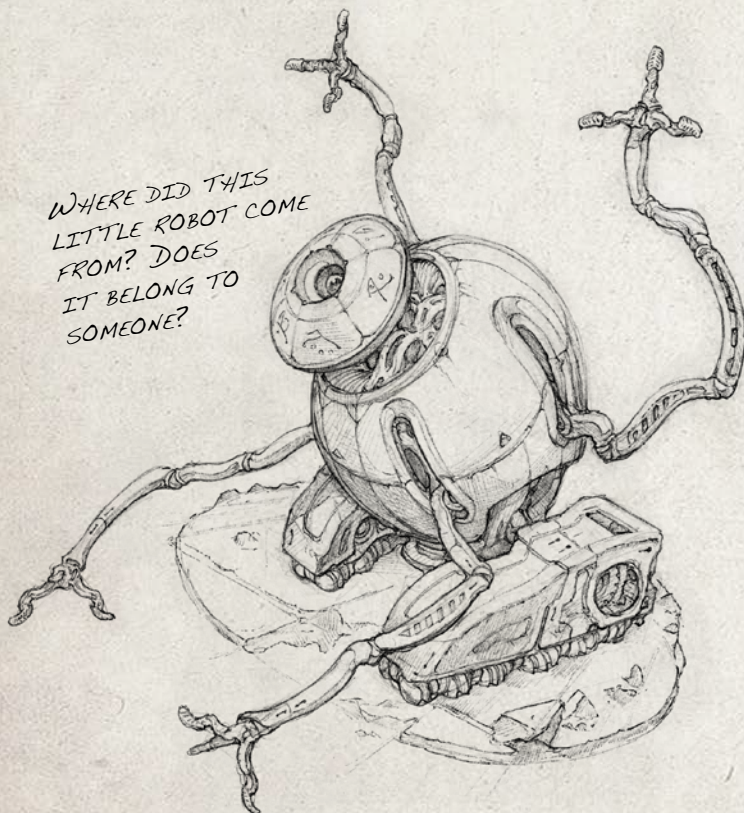
"Sorry," I said. "I didn't realize it would come loose so fast."

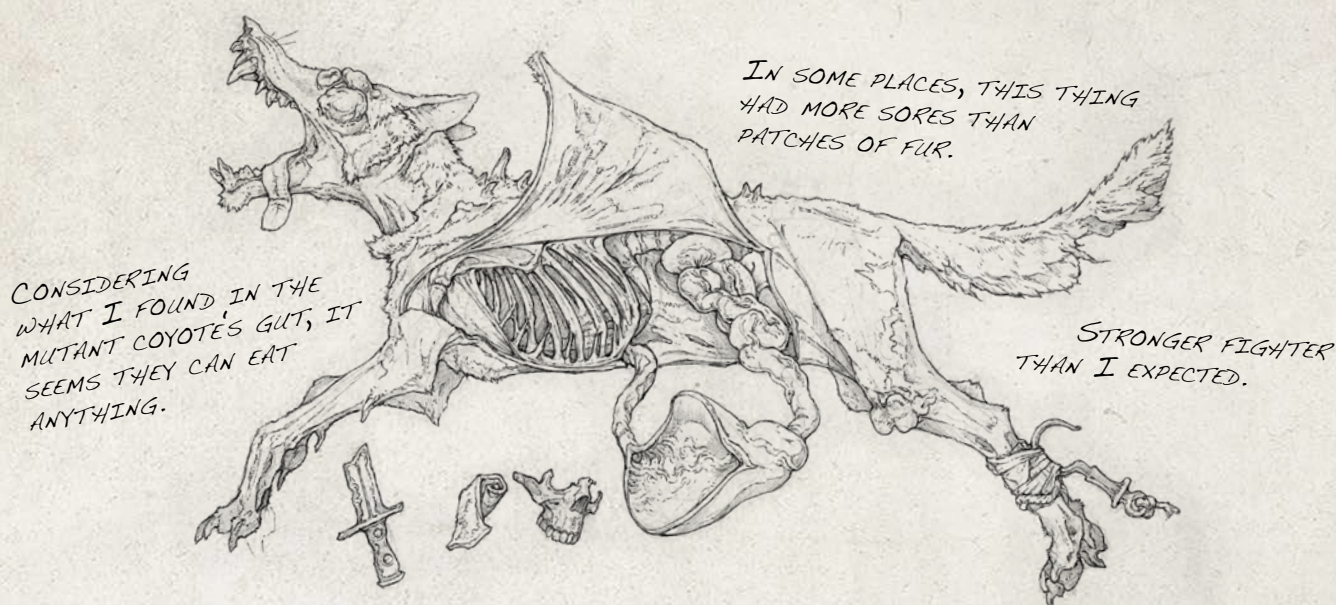
"It shouldn't have." Eirian bent to examine the stone. "It's much too heavy."

"You must have loosened it."

"I did not." She straightened and stepped back. "Try to move the next one."

I put my hands on either side of the topmost stone, even though I could tell it would be too heavy for me to move. The rocks were larger than my head, rough and gritty with the same tawny hue as the wastelands. I gripped the rock tightly and tried to lift it.





To my surprise, the rock shifted. I tightened my grip and as I did, I felt the cuff around my wrist tighten. My arm tingled as if the muscles within all contracting at once. I lifted the stone—it wobbled in my uneven grip, but the strength in my cuffed arm allowed me to pull the stone off the pile and toss it to the side.

"It's the cuff," I said to Eirian.

She received this news with her usual placid demeanor. "Then clear the rest away."

I set to work, and in a short time I'd removed nearly all the rocks. As I lifted the last stone, the robot pulled its spindly limbs free. It shot forward, climbing over the rubble and hauling itself up the ravine wall like a spider.

"After it!" I barked.

Eirian and I scrambled to follow the robot. Once it reached the surface, it retracted its limbs and began trundling along on its treads.

"It's certainly on some sort of mission," I said as we sprinted to catch up with the robot. Eirian nodded. Once we were abreast of the little machine, we slowed to a walk. Though it maintained a steady pace, the robot was not overly quick.

We followed the robot for a while, and though I watched it carefully for signs of hostility, the robot seemed completely unaware of our presence. I admired its ingenuity. When it encountered rough terrain or obstacles, its limbs extended and it clambered over the impediment or brushed its path free. In smooth areas it drew its appendages back in and rolled along on its tread. Eirian and I had no trouble keeping up with the robot, though from time to time we had to clamber over a rocky barrier.

"Once we get onto the plains," I said, "we'll travel more smoothly."

"I'm interested in seeing how it gets across the river."

I smiled at that thought.

We'd been traveling for almost an hour, and I believed we were close to the edge of the rendland. The sun was still early in the sky. I entertained thoughts of stopping for a midday meal once we were back on the plains.

As I tried to think of a way to keep the robot from getting too far ahead of us while we stopped to eat or camp, a scream jolted me out of my reverie. Eirian and I spun around.

We saw nothing. The scream came from the west, from beyond the piles of scrap and stone. The tremulous howl of some wild animal cut the scream in half. I touched Eirian's shoulder. "Follow the robot. I'll catch up."

"You're putting yourself at risk."

"Someone needs help. Go, I'll find you."

Eirian strode after the robot. I sprinted, threading my way through the ruin. The animal howls continued, raising the hairs on the back of my neck. The howling chorus was shrill and sharp, sometimes disturbingly like human laughter. I had traveled many places in my life and met many fearsome creatures. This could easily be a trap, but I couldn't risk abandoning a traveler in need.

The path curved around a mass of broken stone and I slowed as I followed it. A clear space lay within the ruin, perhaps an old town square. A decrepit building with a wide stone porch across the clearing might have been a town hall, maybe even a temple.

The howls had died away to a solitary *yipyipyip* that pierced the midday silence. Around the bend, bodies lay crumpled on the ground like so many piles of scrap. Oozing blood formed puddles on the ground. Three bodies, dead and unmoving, and a fourth rushing toward me with slaving jaws open. I caught sight of one gleaming eye surrounded by

swollen green pustules and a set of overlarge, jagged fangs and then it was on me, teeth seeking the meat of my arm.

I braced myself and swung my arm wide as the animal leaped for me. Its lean, gray-furred body arched like a bow, its front paws tight together, its bushy tail curving between its hind legs. I smashed my arm into its yellow muzzle and the creature flew sideways, yipping. It landed on its side and rolled but came up on its feet immediately and charged me again.

I squatted to steady myself and drove quick, successive punches into the animal's breast when it leaped for me again. My knuckles bruised on some sort of bony carapace covered in patchy fur. I'd seen coyotes on the plains before—scavengers, mainly, but also hunters of small prey like rabbits and ground birds. But no coyote I'd ever seen had bulbous growths on its hide, or that thick of a breastbone. And this beast was twice as tall as an ordinary coyote, nearly the size of a wolf.

Growing up in Numeria, I had seen a few animals mutated by the technological waste that lurked in the soil. Here, it seemed, I had met another.

The coyote stumbled sideways, then spun around and nipped at my arm. Its overlarge teeth ripped long furrows through skin and muscle. I grunted in pain, and within me the slumbering bear began to wake.

When the coyote charged again, I met its shrill bay with a guttural roar. My blood rushed like a river in my ears. I dove forward and smashed my shoulder into the coyote's chest,

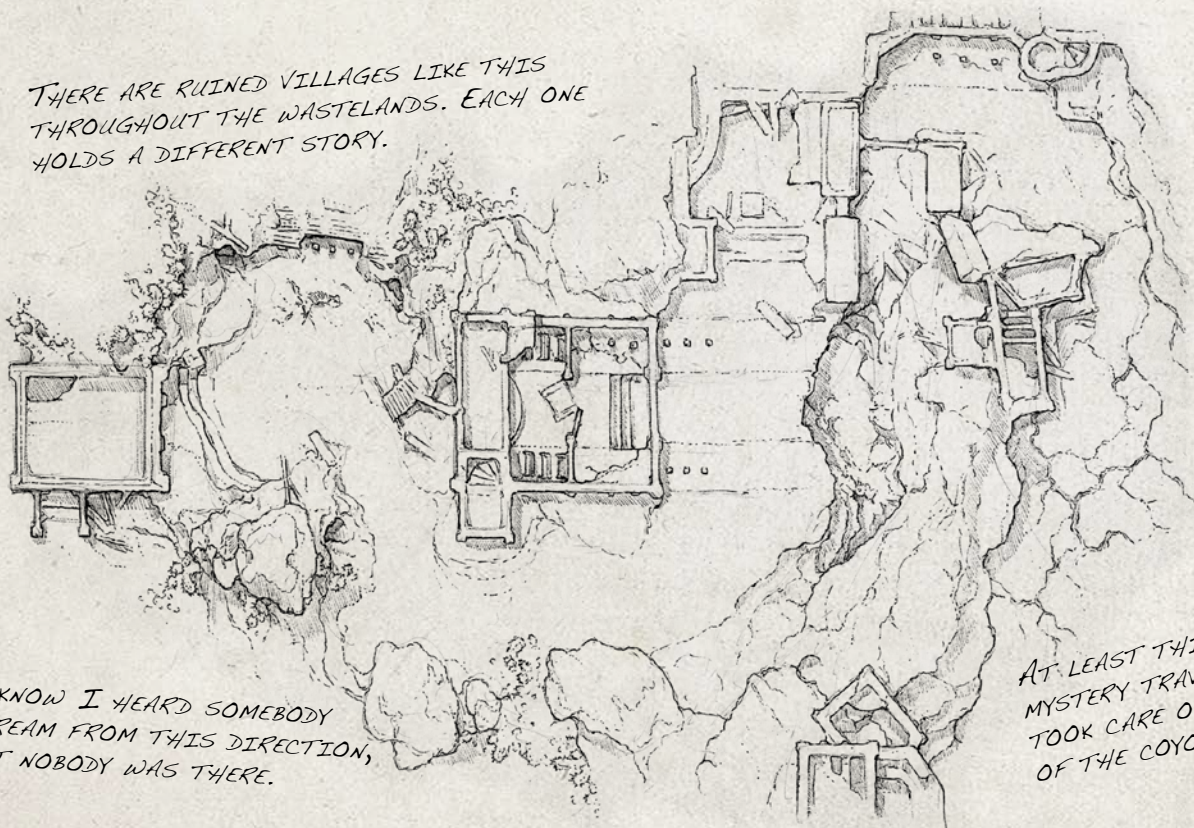
driving it back. Its paws skidded, black nails digging into the earth. It tried to rear up on its hind legs, scrabbling at my gut with its front paws. I flipped it to the side, smashing it onto the ground. It yowled horrifically and rolled over, struggling to balance on three legs. I'd hurt one of the back paws.

As I reached to grab the fur ruff around its neck, the coyote snapped swift as a rattlesnake. It got my hand between its jaws and clamped down. I felt its teeth sink past flesh and scrape the bones of my hand and I howled in pain and rage. I pulled the beast closer to me with my injured hand and drove my other fist into its ribs, over and over. The bones splintered and cracked under my enhanced strength. The runes on the back of the cuff glowed with blue energy.

The coyote released my hand and tried to squirm past me, yipping in pain. I couldn't let it get away—with the injuries I'd dealt so far, it would die a slow and painful death in the wastelands. I flung myself onto the animal's back, letting my weight bring it to the ground. Its injured leg gave way and it went down baying. I pulled myself along its body until I got both hands around its neck. I could do little more than hold on with my mangled right hand, but my left hand had more than enough strength to break the coyote's neck. Its body went limp beneath mine.

I got to my feet slowly, rocking with dizziness. My hand throbbed and blood dripped from my fingertips. I took a moment to examine the coyote's body. Beneath its fur I found patches of bony growth reinforcing its hide along with more

*THERE ARE RUINED VILLAGES LIKE THIS
THROUGHOUT THE WASTELANDS. EACH ONE
HOLDS A DIFFERENT STORY.*



*I KNOW I HEARD SOMEBODY
SCREAM FROM THIS DIRECTION,
BUT NOBODY WAS THERE.*

*AT LEAST THIS
MYSTERY TRAVELER
TOOK CARE OF SOME
OF THE COYOTES.*

ROBOTS

Unlike androids, robots are wholly mechanical constructions. This is not to say that robots are mindless automatons. On the contrary, many display uncommon intelligence. Most can talk, though they often choose not to. People have a hard time understanding a robot's motivations, and an even more difficult time controlling these machines.

The origin of robots remains a mystery. Though it seems clear they arrived in the same vessel that broke apart in the Rain of Stars, the given many types of robots, it's difficult to know what any one of them was created for. One humanoid robot might be made for heavy lifting, while another might be a skilled warrior. Though a number of things can be inferred from a robot's appearance, judging one strictly by its external design is a sure way to put oneself at a disadvantage.

Though robots exist in a variety of forms and display numerous powers, they share certain common abilities. Robots' thick metal shells afford them considerable protection, and some manifest energy-based force fields for extra defense. Their built-in weapons can fire projectiles, energy beams, or even plasma. The complex technology that constitutes a robot keeps the secrets of its construction well hidden, but also makes it vulnerable to electrical attacks.

Residents of Numeria treat robots with extreme caution. Though some robots are accepted as a common sight, such as the gearsmen of Starfall, most Numerians understand that robots are dangerous and unpredictable.

patches of pustules. Some had broken open and oozed a foul-smelling green liquid onto its fur. A cursory examination showed that the other three bodies were similarly mutated. I shuddered as I prodded their cooling bodies.

What I couldn't figure out was what had killed the other coyotes. Thin puncture wounds marred their corpses, the kind dealt by a blade. A rapier, perhaps, or a thin short sword. The wounds were too deep for a dagger. I looked around but saw no evidence of whoever fought off the pack. Perhaps he had heard me coming and fled, worried that I might be another coyote.

"You are safe," I called out. "They are all dead."

There was no answer. I poked around the scrap heaps but found no trace of whoever's scream had brought me here. I couldn't afford to lose more time, so I left the coyotes where they lay and hurried back to where I'd parted from Eirian.

I pushed myself to quick-march through my fatigue, a trick I'd learned as a boy hunting on the plains. I caught up with Eirian and the robot less than a mile away.

"You're injured," Eirian said as I fell into step behind her.

"A wild animal attacked me. A coyote with a corrupted body." I described the scene I'd found and my brief battle. "I could find no sign of whoever the pack attacked, so I returned to you. I thought of butchering the coyotes for rations, but worried their meat might be tainted."

"Wise of you. Here, stop for a moment and I'll heal you."

I stopped as directed and Eirian put one hand on her amulet and the other on my damaged hand. Her eyes took

on a faraway look. "Bright Brigh," she intoned, "find the pieces of this man and put them where they belong. Rebuild his form into a perfect whole."

Flickering blue energy lit up Eirian's skin. A circular pattern, like a delicate tattoo, glowed on the left side of her neck. Another appeared above her right eyebrow. Pain surged through my hand as the tears in my flesh wove themselves shut. Eirian's eyelids fluttered. She dropped her hand and her tattoos faded.

"You were glowing," I blurted.

"It is a trait among androids," she replied. She turned from me and strode after the robot.

I hurried after her. "When I fought the coyote, my cuff seemed to activate, granting me exceptional strength. Like when I moved those rocks, but more intense. The cuff glowed just like your tattoos did. With that same blue light."

Eirian's eyes widened. On anyone else, her expression might look mildly interested, but having traveled with her I knew she was registering great shock. "Then perhaps it comes from the same place androids come from."

"Where is that?"

She kept her gaze fixed on the horizon. "I do not know."

Thoughts crowded my mind. If the cuff bore a connection to both the robot and the androids, then perhaps Eirian and I both would find something we sought when the robot reached its destination. We left the rendland haze behind and kept pace with the little machine as it rolled across the plain.