

THE SIGNAL IN THE SHIP

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As a boy on the plains, I had learned my people's talent of going for days with only minimal sleep. I had learned to track prey for days on end, half-dozing as my hunting party followed our quarry from a distance, waking to full alertness at a hint of danger. I had learned to move quickly at a moment's notice, pushing more speed and endurance out of my limbs than others could.

I drew on those techniques now. Before, I had always slowed my steps to match Eirian's pace, but now I took full advantage of my long strides. She had to hurry to keep up with me, though her android frame didn't wear under the exertion as my body did; she stuck by my side for hours without complaint.

My connection to Tryg remained steady as the dusty earth passed beneath our feet. He was uneasy, I could tell, in Ryden Vass's grip. I tried to send reassuring signals to the little robot. My sense of how close Tryg was fluctuated; at times we seemed to be growing nearer, but then he would grow distant again. I guessed that Vass would set Tryg down from time to time to get a bearing and then snatch him back up to follow the heading on horseback.

Hours into our journey, I had fallen into a trance state. The stars pulsed overhead. I moved across the uneven ground more by sense than by sight. Eirian spoke once but I didn't hear her words. At some point, I realized I wasn't following

Tryg as much as the signal that drew us both. We were one and the same, Tryg and I—robot and barbarian following an electronic call across the plains.

The whinny of a horse shattered the silence. I stumbled and broke free of my reverie. Every muscle in my body ached. My eyes felt tight and dry. I fumbled for my waterskin and drained it. Then Eirian and I crept forward.

We had carried on for most of the night, but I judged from the position of the stars that dawn was still at least an hour away. The plain ahead sloped down toward a series of small foothills, rocky and cragged, covered in grass bent by the stiff winds that blew across the plains.

Ryden Vass's two Technic League guards stood watch before a dark crevice in a hill face. Three horses stood tethered nearby, one of them Vass's partially mechanical steed. I felt drawn to the crevice, the pull of the signal strong and steady.

Then without warning, my connection to Tryg was severed. I gasped.

"What is it?" Eirian whispered.

"Tryg," I said. "I can't sense him anymore." I hesitated. "He must be back in the box."

The only other alternative was that we were too late.

With a spell from Eirian that cloaked us in silence, we were able to get right up to the guards before they noticed us. We fought briefly, the utter silence of the battle adding to the dreamlike haze I felt within. My overpowered arm and my desperation proved too much for the guards, and they soon lay in crumpled heaps on the ground.

As Eirian and I headed for the crevice, sound returned in a rush. "The signal is so close," I said. "It feels like it's pulsing in time with my heartbeat."

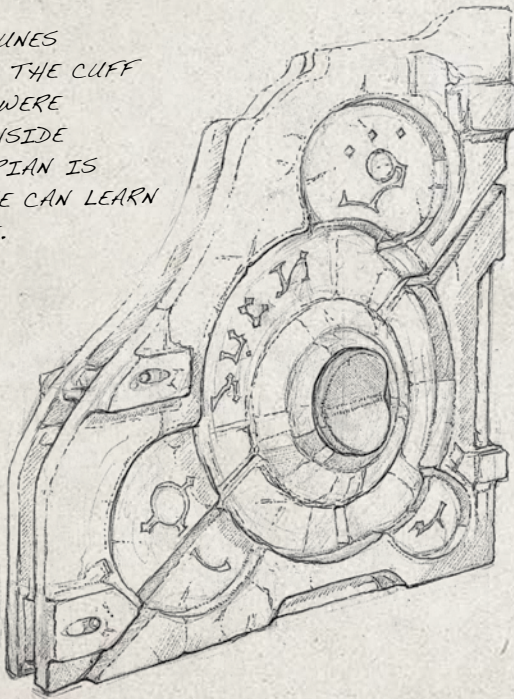
She nodded. "The ship is calling you."

The crevice wound into the cliff face, shutting out even the starlight. Eirian took the lead, guiding me with her heightened android vision. The tunnel twisted left, then curved to the right. My eyes gradually adjusted, and soon I could see the rough tunnel walls pressing in on either side of us. The ground sloped ever downward as we crept on. Soon the light ahead grew bright as torchlight, and we stepped into a corridor.

Metal walls gleamed, soft and smooth, down the length of the corridor. Two door frames, each lacking a door, led from the corridor into rooms beyond. I saw the corridor turn at its end, leading farther into the fragment of the ship. A track of soft white light glowed along the ceiling.

Panels along the wall and ceiling showed severe dents. Several had come loose and fallen to the floor, covered by a

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light coating of dust. Sparking wires hung from the missing ceiling panels. Where the ship met the rock wall, dead wires and thin tubes hung from a twisted mass of metal.

"How did it get here?" I whispered. The eerie beauty of the place stunned me enough to arrest my hurried pace. I stood transfixed, trying to take it all in.

"Brigh did not say," Eirian said. There was a note in her voice I'd never heard before. I thought it might be awe. "All I saw in my vision was this fragment of ship shifting when the earth sustained a tremor. Old systems activated in the shock—systems designed to repair the damage done when this piece broke free of a larger craft."

"And Tryg is part of those systems." Eirian had told me of her vision during our pursuit of Ryden Vass. We were in the broken fragment of a starship, perhaps even part of Silver Mount. The systems had woken up and sent out the call for repair robots. Tryg, lost and wandering, had heard the call and had been making for the ship.

"I understand now," I whispered. "Seeing how deeply it's buried... the damage done..."

Eirian nodded. "An army of Trygs could not repair this ship."

But the ship didn't know that. It could only follow its orders. Those orders demanded Tryg disassemble himself so the ship might use his energy to fix itself, no matter how futile the procedure would be.

I suspected that were I one of its crew, the ship would be sending me instructions as well. The strength of my powered arm would have helped me lift heavy panels back into place and clear debris from the wreckage. The cuff didn't integrate fully with my body, though; while I'd felt driven to reach this place, I had no idea what to do now that I was here.

Footprints marred the dust in the floor. Ryden Vass was ahead of us. I pointed to the tracks and Eirian nodded. Together we hurried down the hall.

We followed Vass's tracks through more shattered corridors. I had to track her carefully, as she seemed to have explored every chamber. Benches and shelves stood in many of the rooms, some buried beneath piles of rock and debris, others still holding repair tools, metal boxes filled with fluids, and coils of wire. Painstakingly I followed the thread of Vass's steps. It took only a few minutes for me to discover a second set of tracks.

"Something else passed this way," I said.

"Did Vass meet someone here, perhaps?"

I shook my head and pointed to the tracks. "See how these points are arranged? The three oblong pads and perfectly uniform strides—I think this might be another robot's tracks."

Eirian nodded. "There would be more repair robots than just Tryg. The signal could be calling any number of them here."

We pressed on. Much of this area had been obliterated, probably during whatever cataclysm buried this fragment of



MACHINES IN THE SHIP HARVESTED ROBOTS FOR PARTS OR ENERGY OR SOMETHING.

EVEN THOUGH ROBOTS AREN'T ALIVE, IT WAS STILL GRUESOME TO WATCH.

ship so deep underground. Once we had to climb through a narrow passage among collapsed, half-melted sheets of metal. The corridor widened on the other side of the wreckage, leading us to a closed door. From behind the door, we heard an intermittent, high-pitched whine atop a lower hum. Both sets of tracks passed beyond the door.

"Any idea what's in there?" I asked. Eirian shook her head.

We examined the door together, and Eirian surmised that a round, glowing button surrounded by runes to the side of the door opened it. She pushed the button and the door sped upward and disappeared into the ceiling.

A large chamber lay beyond. Collapsed ceiling tiles, coiled wires, narrow metal boxes, and overturned metal furniture—looking too delicate and fragile to support anyone—covered the floor. A mix of footprints swirled around the dusty floor. A heavy metal frame stood against one wall, surrounding a round aperture leading into the darkened tunnel beyond. It took me several moments to make sense of what I was seeing.

The floor of the tunnel beyond the aperture moved slowly, like a flowing river made of some spongy black substance. Metal pincers hung from the ceiling, grasping the metal body of a robot. It was larger than Tryg, almost the size of a halfling—vaguely humanoid with an ovoid body and head and multi-jointed appendages.

Half of the robot's body was gone. Two snakelike steel cables extended from the metal pincers, writhing around the little robot. When they reached the robot's one remaining leg, they fired bright beams of light at the joint. The shrill whine filled the air again and an acrid smell rose from the robot as the beams ate through its leg. We watched in horror as the beams slowly burned through the joint. They sliced cleanly through the leg, which fell onto the moving tunnel floor and was carried away.

"It's a maintenance station," Eirian said. Her voice held a burr of fear. "This is where the repair bots are disassembled and their parts used to patch the damage."

"We have to find Tryg. Now."

Multiple exits led from the room, and the tracks on the ground looped over each other in a confused muddle. "Which way?" Eirian asked.

I searched in haste, struggling to trace the thread of Vass's footsteps. Time trickled away from us. "There," I said, pointing.

We hurried to the door. Eirian touched her hammer and then her brow, whispering a prayer to Brigh. She pressed the button on the wall and the door slid up into the ceiling.

I stepped through the doorway first, into a chamber twice as large as any we'd passed through. The floor arched like a bridge reaching its apex in the center of the room, over a chamber that sank several feet below us. Thin metal ladders

hung from either end of the bridge. Against the walls of the chamber below stood tables and shelves filled with tools and equipment. A maintenance station, like the one we'd just seen, hummed in a far corner. Blue light filled the chamber, and at the end of the bridge stood a fearsome machine.

A glowing blue orb hung suspended in what looked like a web of light that crisscrossed all the way up an aperture sunken into the far wall, stretching from the bridge to the ceiling. I recognized the light—the beams were the same kind that had dismembered the robot in the previous chamber. Runes glowed along the aperture's frame—familiar runes that matched those on my cuff and Tryg's torso.

"That's the power core," Eirian whispered. "I saw it in my vision. It's the heart of the ship, which started beating once more when the ground shifted."

Ryden Vass stood examining the strange machine, making notes in a leather-bound notebook. Tryg's box sat at her feet.

The bear within me stirred.

She turned to look at us and I was struck by her poise. She seemed utterly unsurprised to see us standing in the doorway. Dark curls of hair framed her defined Kellid features, and she wore the same green-tinted armor I'd seen on her in Hajoth Hakados. At her side hung a savage-looking mace.

Vass stared at us without speaking. I struggled to find the right words.

"We don't care about the ship," I said finally. "Only the robot. Let us take him and we'll leave you to explore the ship at your leisure."

She studied me for a moment, weighing my words. "I believe you," she said. Her voice was as strong as her appearance, resonating with the deep timbre of Kellid voices. "But the robot is here on some mission. I'm here to observe what happens when it reaches its destination."

Vass crouched down and lifted up the lid of the lead box.

"No!" I shouted, and sprinted forward across the bridge.

Tryg clamored out of the box, his metal appendages skittering on the bridge. Our connection flared to life again, strong and steady. I felt a jolt of recognition from Tryg as our minds linked once more. Any interest he had in me, though, was overwhelmed by his orders to sacrifice himself to the reconstruction of this doomed ship.

Tryg seemed disoriented for a moment as the signal reasserted itself. Vass drew her mace, hefting it in two hands, but I had no interest in fighting her. Tryg lumbered off the bridge and landed lightly on the lower floor. He moved toward the maintenance hatch. I wouldn't reach him in time.

Vass swung at my chest as I sprinted past her. I ducked and slid along the smooth metal bridge, closing the few remaining feet to the power core. I heard Eirian call my name as I leaped to my feet. Vass was coming for me, and Tryg had almost reached the hatch.

If I couldn't stop Tryg, I had to kill that signal.

I thrust my cuffed arm into the blazing power core.

THE CORE'S BLUE LIGHTS MADE EVERYTHING EVEN MORE EERIE.



THE BEAMS WERE STRAIGHT LINES MOST OF THE TIME, BUT THEY'D FLICKER AND PULSE IN WEIRD WAYS, ESPECIALLY WHEN CUTTING THINGS.

The light beams that surrounded the core cut through the cuff as though it offered no more protection than leather. I howled as my skin burned. I clenched my fist around a metal bulb in the center of the blue eye and pulled. With the last surge of the cuff's extraordinary strength, I tore the heart out of the ship.

The core went black. The light beams skewed, bouncing off each other and the edges of the aperture. What had once been an orderly web of light was now a mad tangle of beams refracting over and over. Singed and smoking bits of metal fell from my wrist, but metal rods still pierced my skin and held the last fragments of the cuff onto my blistered arm. The pain was excruciating—it felt as though needles stabbed through my flesh all the way from the back of my hand to my elbow. Even unclenching my fist long enough to drop the metal heart hurt almost enough to make me pass out. I swayed for a second before collapsing onto my knees.

My moment of weakness saved my life. Ryden Vass's mace whipped over my head just as I hit the ground. She cursed. "You fool. You've destroyed my greatest discovery!"

I lacked the energy to even reply. Between my lack of sleep, the overnight march, and my wounded arm, I had precious little left to give. I grunted and twisted to the side, throwing a punch at Vass's kneecap.

She stepped back and my fist glanced off her greave. I overbalanced and fell forward, catching myself with my right arm. My left hung uselessly, my flesh still red and steaming. Eirian's voice floated across the room to me. Vass brushed at her ear and shrugged, as if knocking away an insect. Whatever Eirian tried hadn't worked.

"I will end you for this," Vass said as she stepped forward again. "And then I'll take that robot apart piece by piece. The knowledge it will grant me will be invaluable."

The room had gone still. Vass's words seemed to echo off the walls. It was the signal, I realized. Its call had gone silent.

Eirian had started another chant but Vass wasn't waiting. She lifted the mace overhead, ready to crush my skull. I threw up my uninjured arm in a futile defense against the blow.

With the click-click of steel on steel, Tryg climbed up over the side of the bridge. Clinging to the edge with three of his appendages, he made a move. The fingertips of his remaining appendage flipped back and a bright green beam shot from the center into the back of Vass's calf.

Vass yelled and stumbled to the side, grabbing at her leg. I staggered to my feet. A wave of nausea swept over me.

She recovered quickly and switched her mace to a one-handed grip. Vass swung underhand at Tryg's tiny form. He started to shift to one side but she connected with the edge of his torso and sent the little robot flying back into the chamber below.

My bear awoke with a roar.

Even my fury couldn't kill the pain in my arm entirely, but it seemed to diminish some, becoming farther away as

if my injured arm hung barely attached to the rest of my body. Power surged through my form—not the artificial strength of the cuff but the true, innate power of my people. I sprung to my feet in a crouch.

Vass turned after striking Tryg, bringing her mace up to finish me off. I slammed my fist into the center of her chest. Part of me still expected the metal to dent under my knuckles, throwing Vass back as I'd thrown Teleran back. Even my furious strength couldn't compare to the cuff's power, though, and my arm shuddered with the recoil of my punch. Still, the blow was enough to knock Vass back a step.

She tightened up her grip on the mace and narrowed her eyes. Two sharp swings nearly connected with my rib cage but I spun away from the first and deflected the second. I grabbed her upper arm and pulled her in too close for her to get an effective swing in. We danced around, swinging in a tight circle.

"Let me go!" she grunted, struggling in my grasp. I knew I couldn't hold her with only my one hand.

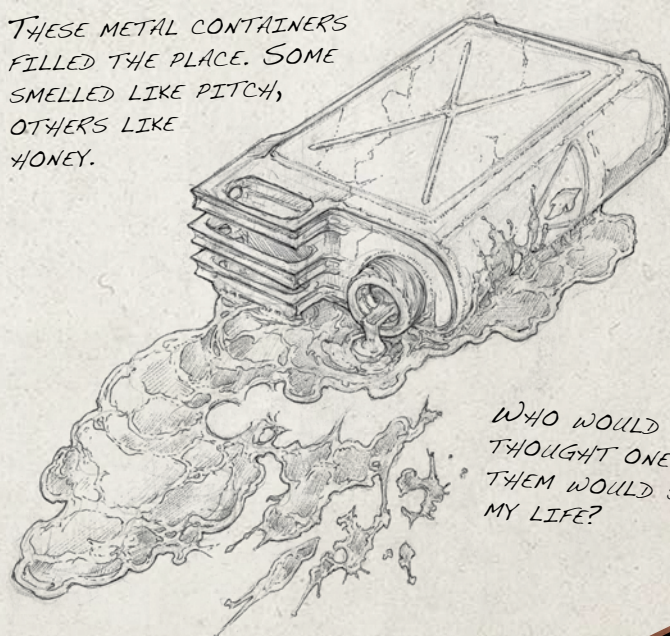
"Gladly," I growled. I smashed my forehead into hers and we broke apart. I rode high on my bear-rage and barely felt the blow, but Vass looked dazed. She staggered back, pressing the heel of her hand between her eyes.

A hand clapped around my ankle and I jumped. In my hazy battle-drunk state I almost kicked Eirian in the face, but I realized it was her at my side before I reacted. She'd climbed up one of the ladders—I hadn't even seen her drop down into the chamber below—and with her grip I could feel healing energy flow into my battered body. The pain in my arm grew still more distant and I felt a surge of energy.

"It's her armor," Eirian said. "It's some kind of skymetal. I'm having trouble affecting her with Brigh's gifts."

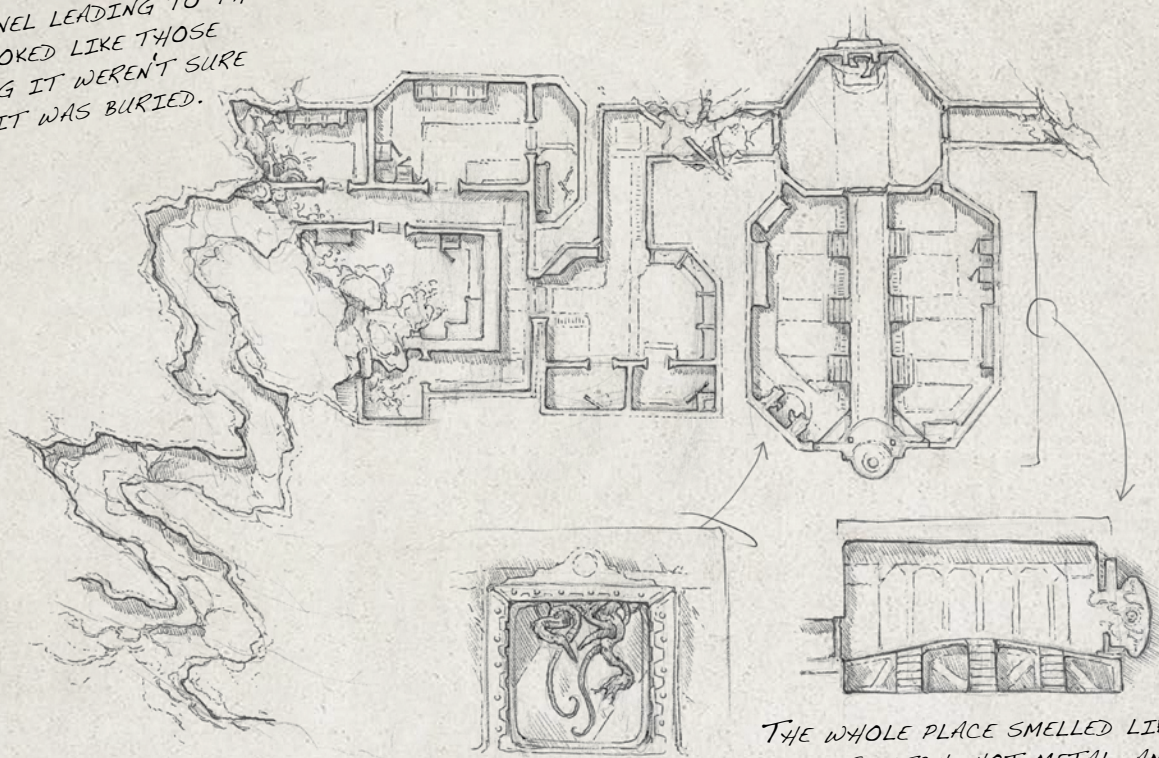
"Think of something else, then," I said. That was all the time we had before Vass recovered and came for me.

THESE METAL CONTAINERS
FILLED THE PLACE. SOME
SMELLED LIKE PITCH,
OTHERS LIKE
HONEY.



WHO WOULD HAVE
THOUGHT ONE OF
THEM WOULD SAVE
MY LIFE?

THE TUNNEL LEADING TO THE SHIP LOOKED LIKE THOSE WHO DUG IT WEREN'T SURE WHERE IT WAS BURIED.



THE WHOLE PLACE SMELLED LIKE A MIX OF PITCH, HOT METAL, AND THE PLAINS DURING A THUNDERSTORM.

She was focused now, the first blush of her rage having subsided into icy determination. She leveled blow after blow at me, and I gave a little ground each time. Despite Eirian's healing, my left arm was too badly damaged to use, and Vass was an experienced fighter.

I landed a solid punch and followed it up with a quick rush that knocked Vass back a few feet. She teetered on the edge of the bridge but kept her footing. Her face was twisted with hate as she glared at me, her eyes promising a painful death. I readied myself for another barrage of blows. I could feel even my fury-fueled strength fading. As I caught sight of Eirian rushing around on the floor of the chamber below, I hoped she had a plan.

Vass swung her mace out wide, aiming her next attack at my injured arm. I turned too slowly and the edge of the mace bashed my blistered flesh. The pain blinded me for a moment. Stars crowded my vision. My strength was flagging and I knew my body would soon give in. I'd asked too much of it for too long.

I shook my head and the black patches before my eyes cleared. I waited for Vass to press her attack. She tried another swing at my injured arm, but this time I was ready. I lashed out with my good fist as the mace ripped through the air. It struck Vass in the wrist, causing the mace to go spinning. She stumbled back, cursing and clutching her hand.

Behind her I saw Eirian climbing back up the ladder. She had something in her arms—at first I thought it was Tryg.

But when she stopped at the top of the ladder, I saw it was one of the metal boxes of fluid we'd seen on the repair benches.

She tipped it onto the bridge, and a gleaming viscous pool of iridescent fluid spread out before the humming power core.

I summoned one final burst of energy and charged Vass. She was moving to retrieve her mace and realized too late what I was doing. She threw up her hands and tried to brace herself, but I slammed into her with all the weight and speed left in my body.

I drove her back only a few feet, but it was enough to push her onto the slick in front of the core. She tried to cling to me as her balance went, her boots sliding on the slippery metal.

I gave her a final, hard shove. She dragged me down as she lost her balance and we slid together down the slope of the bridge.

Vass's heavy armor pulled her along faster, and I slid right behind her. I scrambled on the bridge for purchase but the oil made it impossible to stop myself. Eirian still stood on the ladder, though. As I sped by her, she reached out and caught one of my armor straps. We watched as Vass continued to slide.

It wasn't until the very end that she understood, and by then it was too late. Screaming, she slid into the refracted light-net within the aperture. That hideous high-pitched whine filled the air, blending with her screams. Within seconds, mercifully, the screaming stopped.

Fatigue crashed into me like a wave. I struggled to remain conscious but my vision dimmed on all sides. The last thing I saw was Eirian's concerned face, and then darkness overtook me.

I awoke in the fresh air. The sun glowed high overhead, and a warm breeze stirred my clothes. I sat up stiffly, my muscles creaking in protest. Though I ached, I felt better than I deserved to.

Soft footsteps fell behind me. Eirian came into view, a small crease on her brow communicating her concern. She asked no question, only looked at me.

I nodded. "I'm all right."

She crouched down next to me and picked up my left hand. I looked down at the scarred flesh, the pockmarks where the metal rods had kept the cuff on my wrist for so long.

"I did what I could," Eirian said.

I flexed my hand. My fist wouldn't close all the way and my forearm felt somewhat dead, as if the muscles had fallen asleep and only some had awakened. "It will do," I said.

There was a skittering of metal on rock and Tryg scrambled up on the other side of me. He sat back on his treads and angled his head, looking for all the world like a dog sitting next to its master.

The three of us sat together in silence for the next several minutes. I rested my hand on Tryg's torso and stared at the horizon. Behind us was the crevice leading down into the ship wreckage. Vass's horses still stood tethered nearby.

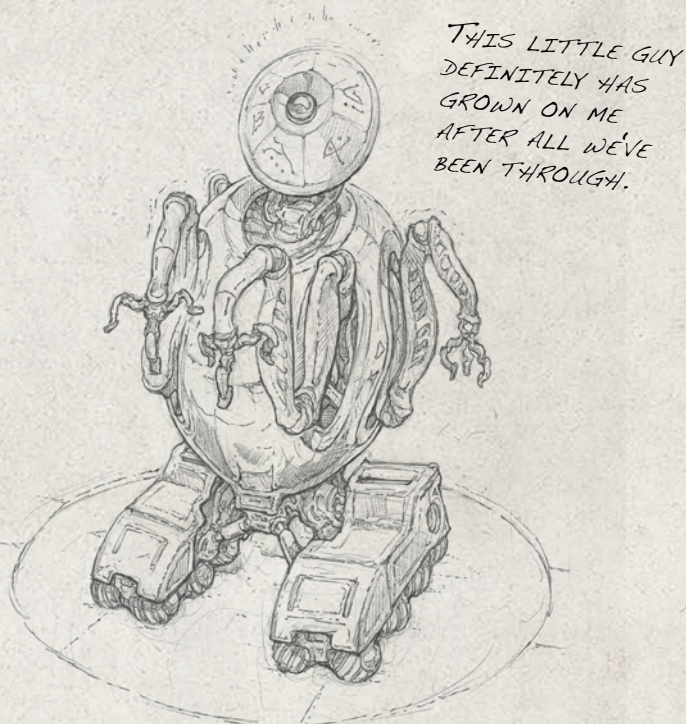
"I rescued Vass's notebook," Eirian said. "It appears that she made detailed observations about the ship."

"I'd like to examine the place further," I said.

"And then?"

I stared into Eirian's cool, clear eyes. "There's a lot I'd like to do here. I've been away from home for long enough. I made a promise to a dying man to free those enslaved by the Technic League. And there are many secrets still to learn." I stopped for a moment, searching for the right words. "I could use a partner."

Eirian made no reply, but by then her silences spoke more to me than most people's words.



STARSHIPS

Not all residents of Golarion know or even speculate that other worlds exist among the stars. In the past, at least one vessel from space arrived at Golarion and crashed on the planet. This event, known as the Rain of Stars, changed the landscape of Numeria and brought strange technology to the world.

The largest starship fragment known is Silver Mount in Starfall, but smaller sections have been uncovered across Numeria. Some of these are larger than houses, while others are as small as horse carts. All of these starship fragments appear to have come from the ship that crashed during the Rain of Stars, though fortune-hunters are always chasing tales of independent ships rumored to have landed before or after that dramatic event.

The technology within starship fragments is alien and difficult to understand for the average adventurer. Most of the starship fragments lack power, so their technology fails to function. Some of the technology is simply too complex for anyone but the most brilliant researchers to understand. Occasionally, though, a bit of functioning, low-complexity technology—usually a robot of some sort—comes to light and fetches an exorbitant price from collectors, researchers, or inventors keen to unlock its secrets.