



# Corner Bar Magazine

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Page 1 – BENEATH A DARK VEIL by Nat Gillespie. The author writes, “I am a caregiver and a writer living in Travelers Rest, South Carolina, and my work is previously unpublished.”

Page 28 – CLIFF’S NOTE by Walt Trizna. The author writes, “My name is Walt Trizna and I am a retired scientist having spent 34 years in research and have been 24 years as a writer. Most of my stories have been horror and science fiction. My publications include a novel, *New Moon Rising*, published by Mélange Books. This publisher has also published my novella, *Elmo’s Sojourn*, as an eBook and in a print anthology, *Curious Hearts*. I have also had 24 short stories published. I have a blog where I offer short stories, poems and the occasional essay. Everything offered is free. My blog address is: <https://walttriznastories.blog/>”

Page 33 – THE TRILLIONAIRE’S HOUSE by Neil Pullen. Mr. Pullen is in the UK and writes, “I was inspired from a young age into the world of writing via the works of Asimov, Clarke and especially Frederik Pohl, and was lucky enough to be published a handful of times in small press magazines in the UK during that time. Many years have now passed, and I’m eager to scratch the writing itch again.”



# “BENEATH A DARK VEIL”

by NAT GILLESPIE

The damp air of the bog clung to Vala like a suffocating shroud, thick with the scent of decay. The fog swallowed all sense of direction, and it felt like she'd traversed the dismal place forever. The oppressive silence was broken only by the squelch of her boots and her mare's occasional snort of weariness. The poor beast had become sluggish, its coat slick with sweat. They were both past the brink of exhaustion.

In the distance something wavered, a trembling flame that pierced the haze. As she drew closer, a wooden post took form, with a lantern hanging from its arm that cast weak halos of murky light through the mist.

Vala came to a slow halt beside it, squinting into the gloom that stretched endlessly around her.

“Some kind of marker?” she murmured, uncertain.

There was nothing else to do but guess. Picking a direction, she pressed forward, boots dragging through the sodden earth. Long moments passed before the glimmer of another lantern appeared ahead. Relief nudged at her chest as she urged Pil into a faster stride.

The fog thinned as they moved, drawing back just enough for Vala to make out the twisted silhouettes of trees whose warped roots clawed along the ground. The lanterns stretched on, dim and scattered.

“Not much farther now.”

Eventually, the rudimentary shapes of a village began to take form.

The buildings were in ruins, many having collapsed. Beyond one, a shadow of movement caught Vala's attention. Tugging the hood of her overcoat further down, she approached. Someone was crouched in front of a dilapidated house. His clothing was tattered, and as his gaze lifted to look at her, Vala saw deep weariness etched into the harsh lines of his face.

“Is there an inn nearby?” She had never been one for pleasantries.

He studied her for a long moment but said nothing, instead pointed westward. Vala's head turned to follow, seeing only silent dwellings and the scattered luminance of lampposts throughout the village. Looking back, she found the man curled up against the wall of the building, his coat tugged against his frame to ward off the cold. He'd closed his eyes and buried his nose in the material. Knowing she'd get nothing else from him, Vala led Pil further into the village.

As they pressed deeper into the settlement, the fine hairs on the back of her neck rose in warning. She'd passed through many broken places since arriving on the continent, wondering more than once if the land was at war. She'd yet to come across any strongholds or marching banners, though. No soldiers or factions. Whatever happened here had either already come

and passed or was hidden beyond sight.

The silence pressed heavier as she moved forward, until a candle's flicker behind a windowpane broke through the gloom. The building was hunched and weathered, with a leaning stable beside it. The inn. She quickened her steps, her belly clenching. Now that the possibility of food had presented itself, hunger clawed at her insides.

She'd nearly reached the building when the inn's door burst open and three men spilled out, dragging a heavily bearded, gaunt figure between them who dug his heels into the dirt and fought with wild determination.

Vala thought little of it. Just some drunk causing mischief.

Her presence would have gone unnoticed were it not for Pil, who sensed the tension and released a sharp snort, which drew the attention of the men. Their heads snapped toward her, and unease prickled at Vala's spine.

The bearded man twisted in their grip, his frantic eyes fixed on her. "Please—help me! You don't know what they—"

His words were cut short when one of the aggressors struck him hard across the temple. His head snapped sideways, and his body went limp, collapsing into their arms.

"It's not your concern, outsider."

She watched as they dragged him around a nearby building and vanished from view, before releasing a weighted sigh through her nose.

The warning, while hostile, still rang true. It wasn't her place to get involved. She's just turned toward the stable when the sight of someone standing outside the inn's door halted her steps again.

It was a small woman, her back bowed with age. Deep lines etched her weathered face, and her stark white hair trailed down her back in a

thick plait. She regarded Vala a moment longer before turning down the same path the men had taken and disappearing into the murk.

The confrontation left something cold beneath Vala's skin. It wasn't fear, but close enough to make her jaw clench. She scanned the village again, taking in the narrow streets and crooked rooftops veiled beneath the slow creep of mist. Everything felt still now. Too still. She glanced back at the inn. Its doorway yawned open like a waiting mouth.

This was a land unknown to her. She had no allies here, no map. Stumbling across the village had been sheer luck. The next settlement could be days away, and neither she nor Pil had the strength to risk it.

"We'll eat, rest a bit, then keep moving." Her voice sounded more confident than she felt. Pil's ears flicked, as if she believed her, and that was enough.

Inside the stable she found a snoring man curled against a corner. He didn't wake as she led Pil into a stall. There was a scarce scattering of damp hay on the ground, which the mare immediately began to consume. Vala removed her satchel from the saddle and took a moment to run her hand along Pil's neck.

"I'll be back for you." After a final delay, she left the stable and headed to the inn.

As she entered, the warmth of the hearth on the far wall hit her like a physical force. A handful of figures who sat at weathered tables turned their heads in unison as she entered, scrutinizing her through the building's inner dimness. The weight of their distrust settled upon her.

"Don't mind them. We don't get many visitors these days." A woman approached from behind a nearby bar, wiping her hands on a dingy cloth. She was slight, with angular features

and a sharp, calculated gaze that searched Vala from head to toe. “You look like you could use a meal.”

“Do you have any rooms available?”

A look of surprise crossed her expression.

“Oh, you want a room?”

“I’ve been traveling for a long time.”

“I can tell.” She moved to stand behind the bar and motioned for Vala to approach. “We’ve a few rooms. They’re drafty but comfortable enough. I’ll need payment first.”

After she’d named her price, Vala retrieved the coin from her satchel, disheartened to see so little remaining. “I left my mare in the stable. She’ll be safe there?”

“Yes, Miss. Gunter’ll keep a watchful eye on her.”

“You may want to wake your watchful eye.”

Vala immediately regretted the snide remark. Luckily, the woman didn’t take the words to heart, but instead grumbled her disdain at the stable keeper’s lack of awareness.

“I’ll wake him immediately, Miss.”

“Could you bring some food to my room as well?”

“I’ve got a pot of stew in the kitchen.”

“That will do.”

She nodded. “The rooms are upstairs. They’re all empty, so take your pick.”

Vala turned toward the stairwell, the warped floorboards creaking under her boots. Her hand brushed the banister, but before climbing she stopped short and looked back. “The commotion outside,” she said. “What was that about?”

The barmaid stiffened, her expression carefully neutral. “Just someone who drinks too much and says things he shouldn’t.” She waved a hand, as if brushing the matter aside. “He’s caused trouble before. It’s nothing to worry

about.”

Though the woman’s voice was steady, her eyes had flicked away.

Vala didn’t press.

At the top of the stairs was a short hallway dimly lit by the hearth below. She entered the nearest room and was met with the stale scent of neglect. It was sparsely decorated, with only a narrow bed beside a small wooden table. When she set her satchel on the yellowed and worn-thin mattress, a cloud of dust puffed into the air. The wooden floor groaned beneath her as she crossed to the window and looked toward the stable below.

Its sloped roof blocked any view of her mare inside. It was the first time they’d been apart since she’d purchased the horse, and the separation left a hollow feeling in her chest. They’d shared countless nights under open sky, the quiet rhythm of Pil chewing grass a comfort in the darkness.

A soft knock at the door pulled her from her thoughts.

“Come in.”

The barmaid entered, balancing a tray of food and a large wooden tankard which she set on the table. “I brought some ale. It’s not our finest, but it should put some warmth in your belly.”

Vala distractedly gave thanks, her eyes already drawn to the meal.

“Where are you from?”

The question was unexpected and more personal than she’d like. Refusing to answer would likely draw suspicion, though. She settled for a vague response, hoping it would satisfy the woman’s curiosity. “The east.”

“The east? Don’t tell me you crossed the Marrows.”

“Is that what you call the wasteland beyond

the village?"

"It is. People here won't even go near the edge. It's full of sinkholes and rot."

"I noticed." Vala muttered wryly. Her eyes fell to the tray, where a chunk of bread sat.

The barmaid caught her gaze and smoothed the wrinkles of her skirt. "I'll be downstairs if you need anything."

Once the door had closed, Vala reached immediately for the bread. It was stale, but quality mattered little to an empty stomach. She softened it in the stew and took a gluttonous bite, eyes fluttering shut as she chewed. The stew was mostly broth, but she ate it quickly and licked the salt from her lips like a satiated cat.

At the Sanctum, food had been nothing more than nourishment. They'd eaten fish for nearly every meal, either boiled or salted and dried in the sun. And ale? Vala retrieved the tankard and held it to her nose, inhaling the faint scent of wheat with a soft smile. The Elders had believed that indulgence clouded communion with the divine, so she'd never tasted it before fleeing the coast.

Now, though, she savored the richness of it on her tongue, and the warmth that followed as it slipped down her throat and pooled in her belly. It was a different kind of connection. One that didn't demand sacrifice.

Moving to the window again, she settled on the narrow sill and finally pushed back the hood of her overcoat, running a hand through her prickly hair. It had grown some during her travels, but the intricate patterns etched into her scalp remained noticeable. Though the people of this land likely wouldn't recognize the markings, she'd come too far to risk her freedom. She'd keep her head covered until they were completely hidden.

Vala tipped the tankard back and drained

the remaining ale. Her gaze moved to linger on the bed, the weight of exhaustion heavy in her bones. The long trek through the Marrows had caught up to her. She was still on edge, though. The village and its few inhabitants steered her instincts to remain on guard. Sleeping would leave her vulnerable, but she could rest her legs and body, at least.

She pulled away from the windowsill, making to move towards the bed when a wave of dizziness washed over her.

Vala swayed and reached for the table's stability, but her hand slipped awkwardly against its surface. Dread blossomed rapidly in her belly.

*No. No, no, no...*

She looked at the empty bowl nearby.

They'd drugged her.

Her limbs had already begun to stiffen. The door stood only a few steps away, but after taking just one, her knees buckled and the floor rose to meet her. The impact struck like a dropped boulder in the strangled quiet.

The door creaked open.

"She's still awake."

Vala recognized the barmaid's voice.

"Won't be for long."

Her head was too heavy to lift, but through the edge of her vision she saw someone approach. It was the stablekeeper, no longer snoring in the hay.

"What's this strangeness on her head?"

"Never mind that! Get her downstairs and outside. You know how much Urda hates waiting."

He grumbled something under his breath about taking orders from a "waif of a thing" before crouching beside her. The heat of his arms closed around her middle. Vala tried to warn him away, but her protest came out guttural and

useless.

“No use fussing, Miss. I slipped a heavy dose of Mirethorn in your stew. Best to let it run its course.”

The world tipped as she was lifted and slung over the stablehand’s shoulder. Her head dangled downward, every jolt of his stride rattling through her skull.

Her vision blurred, and then there was nothing.

#

*Dim torchlight filled the cave and writhed along the walls. Beyond the mouth’s opening, Vala could hear the distant rhythm of waves as they crashed against jagged cliffs. She lay on the damp stone within. The air was thick and choking, heavy with the pungent smoke of burning herbs.*

*The Elders sat in a ring of robed stillness around her. Their chanting rose and fell with measured cadence, each note vibrating against the stone. It was too much. The smoke, the sound. She felt dizzy from it all, on the verge of sickness.*

*A shadow loomed above her.*

*The Skin Scribe.*

*His hands were papery and cracked, stained with old ink from ceremonies past. He cradled her skull and turned her head until Vala’s cheek met the cold floor. She wanted to pull away, but the Elders held her limbs firm.*

*The Scribe reached for a nearby bowl, dipping a thin blade honed to needlepoint into liquid which shimmered with oily surface tension. He brought it to her scalp. The first cut stole her breath away. It burned like a flame, searing through skin as the needle tugged. A choked whimper escaped her lips.*

*One of the Elders leaned close. Her eyes were glazed over, lost in the rapture of the burning herbs. Her voice was thickened with reverence when she spoke.*

*“It’s all for the gods.”*

#

Awareness slowly began to surface. Vala’s eyelids were heavy and her senses dulled. She felt detached from her body, limbs not yet cooperative. Her dream lingered on the edges of her mind. It was a haunting memory of a past she’d run from but could never escape. Its permanence marred her skin—a constant reminder of what she’d endured. Even now, the sensation of fingertips softly grazing her head remained.

The heaviness of sleep finally shattered as the sensation continued to linger and grow more real. More present. Vala’s eyes snapped open. She lay sideways on the floor of a closed-in wagon, her wrists bound before her. Kneeling above her, with her hand still reaching out, was the crone from the inn. Vala recoiled instinctively, scrambling backward until her spine struck the wagon wall. The jolt sent a wave of dizziness crashing over her.

“Be at ease.”

Though the crone’s voice was brittle from age, its fragility failed to calm Vala’s defenses. “Who are you? Where am I?”

“My name is Urda, and you are in the Marrows.”

They meant to leave her to die within the bog, then. Still, it could have been worse. They could have buried a blade in her gut back at the inn. At least here she had a chance. She’d crossed the Marrows once. She could do it again.

“You do not seem fearful. Most who encounter the Marrows die with terror in their blood.”

Vala met her gaze without wavering. “There are easier ways to ward off outsiders. I would have left if you’d just asked.”

The crone’s lips pulled into something too thin to be called a smile. She leaned back, study-

ing Vala with skin-crawling scrutiny. Her pale gaze lingered on the swirling designs etched into her scalp. At some point while unconscious, someone had taken her overcoat. Stolen it, most likely. She had no hood now. No protection. The marks of her past lay bare for all to see.

“Where do you hail from, child?”

Vala remained silent. Defiant.

The crone sighed, rapping her knuckles sharply against the wagon wall. It jolted to a stop almost at once. The shuffled sound of footsteps could be heard outside, and then the heavy cloth at the wagon’s rear was pulled aside. Harsh light spilled into the confined space. When her vision had cleared, Vala found herself staring at a stern-faced man standing in the opening.

The crone leaned her weight forward and peered at Vala. “Whether you know it or not, fate has brought you here. We all have a role to play. You’ll soon understand yours.” Without waiting for a response, Urda turned to address the newcomer. “Put her with the rest.”

At the order, he climbed into the wagon, seizing Vala by the arms. She thrashed against him, but her fight was clumsy, and he hauled her outside into the familiar landscape of the Marrows.

Closest to Urda’s wagon stood robed figures who carried torches that barely broke the fog. Their faces were mostly hidden beneath deep hoods, but Vala could feel the weight of their gazes upon her. Several men on horseback also surrounded a second wagon with iron bars. Inside, bodies shifted restlessly behind the slats.

Vala’s eyes locked on a familiar sight, then. Pil.

Her mare stood nearby, muscles tense beneath the weight of a mounted guard. The rider jerked hard on the reins, forcing her head down

and ignoring the animal’s obvious distress.

“Release her!” Vala twisted violently against the hands restraining her.

He wrestled to keep hold, dragging her towards the wagon where someone quickly moved to unlatch the iron gate. She was shoved roughly inside, but not before spinning around and striking her assailant hard across the face with her bound hands. Blood sprayed from his nose as he stumbled back with a curse.

The gate swung shut before Vala could jump out. She clutched onto the bars and jerked at them wildly. “Pil!”

The man she’d struck stormed towards the back of the wagon again, obscuring her view. “One more word,” he snarled. “And I’ll gag you.”

Their simmering gazes clashed before he turned away and swung onto a nearby horse.

“Move out!”

The wagon jolted hard, throwing Vala’s face painfully against the bars. A mocking chuckle from somewhere ahead drifted toward her. Gritting her teeth, she ignored the mockery and turned to look at the other prisoners. They huddled against one another, too broken even to lift their heads.

“Where are they taking us?”

A rasp of weak laughter cut through the gloom.

“Curse your luck, traveler.”

It was the stranger from the inn, the one she’d seen knocked unconscious and carried away. His outburst, once lost in the chaos, now echoed back with chilling clarity.

“You were trying to warn me.”

“Lot of good it did.” His voice was frayed at the edges, like he’d been shouting for hours.

At least someone had fought back.

She asked again, “Where are they taking

us?"

His gaze grew distant, as if sliding into deep thought. When he spoke again, the hushed words were almost lost to the wagon's rattle.

"Have you ever seen a god?"

She thought she'd misheard him, but his gaze didn't waver. "There are no gods."

"I thought the same once." He leaned his head against the iron gate, eyes drifting away.

"Give the Marrows time. You'll believe."

Vala narrowed her eyes, her frustration growing. She was tired of riddles. Stretching out her foot, she kicked at his outstretched boot, feeling somewhat satisfied by his jolted reaction.

"Tell me what's happening!"

"They plan to kill you!"

The other prisoners shifted uneasily, cowering deeper into themselves. Vala could only stare at him, heart hammering against her ribs. She had suspected, but hearing it aloud was a different thing altogether.

"There's a place—a temple deep within the Marrows. That's where they're taking us." His voice dropped in grim finality. "We are to be sacrifices."

*Sacrifices?* She turned frantic eyes toward the locked gate.

"Don't bother," he said, reading her thoughts. "Even if you managed to slip the bars you wouldn't make it far. There are too many of them. There's no way out."

Maybe not yet. But she wouldn't go quietly. When the gate opened again, she'd be ready. She just had to watch, wait, and think. Timing was everything. There would be a moment, and when it came, she'd take it.

Vala lost track of how long they traveled as time bled into itself and stretched thin. The steady clatter of wheels gnawed at her nerves, and every bump in the road jostled her sore

limbs. The fog, denser now, coiled around the caravan like a living thing, smothering the torches to wavering flames that barely lit the path ahead.

"We're close."

Vala turned to the bearded man, studying the rigidity of his shoulders. "Have you seen the temple before?"

"Once, when I was a child." He swallowed thickly. "They took my father. I followed their torches for what felt like days before reaching their wagon at the temple's edge. It was unlike anything I'd ever seen. Like a nightmare made real."

A chill traveled down Vala's spine. "And your father...?"

He looked at her then, his face starkly pale. "By the time I found my way into the temple it was too late. Whether you believe it or not, something ancient governs these lands. It was here before us and will be here long after our bones turn to dust."

His story was undeniably tragic, but part of her still recoiled. How could they accept such a barbaric fate so easily? She could almost feel the years of resignation in the air, heavy and broken.

"You could resist," she spoke low, careful not to alert the nearby guards. "They outnumber us, but if we all stood together we'd have a chance."

He and the other prisoners turned their gazes away, silent, as if her words meant nothing.

"You don't understand." The hoarse voice came from the corner of the wagon, where an old man with sunken eyes shifted into view. "We turned our backs on the old ways once. It was our downfall. Pestilence swept through the village. Our crops failed and the Marrow's rotted. And the babies, girl," his voice broke.

“They were born dead, one after another. We begged for mercy. But the god had abandoned us.” He bowed his head, as if the weight of the memory might crush him. “We thought we could live without its blessing. We were wrong.”

As he finished, Vala’s eyes drifted to his lap. While the rest of the prisoners were bound, he remained free. A quiet chill settled over her as she realized it could mean only one thing.

He’d offered himself willingly.

The wagon lurched to a sudden halt, jolting them all into anxious awareness.

They had arrived.

Ahead, a stark and foreboding temple rose from the wasteland. Jagged spires jutted from its upper walls, curving skyward at uneven angles. The sharply precise geometry was unlike any craftsmanship Vala had ever seen. It had the look of something otherworldly and ancient.

The land around the temple was a barren graveyard of cracked earth and creeping rot. There were no trees or grass, only an overwhelming stench of decay. Yet for all the ruin around it, the temple was untouched, as if preserved by some unseeable force. No cracks or weathering marred its walls.

“How long ago did your people build the temple?”

“It wasn’t built by our hands.”

Vala turned sharply toward the bearded prisoner. “Then who did?”

“No one knows,” he said quietly. “Only that it was always here.”

“That’s not possible.”

“The gods don’t concern themselves with what we think is possible,” the old man murmured from behind her.

Vala had no reply to that. She didn’t believe in gods, but she couldn’t deny the reality of the thing before them.

“Is it not beautiful?”

Urda had left her wagon and now stood a short distance away, eyes lifted toward the temple. Her face held an unexpected softness, as if she were looking upon a long-lost home returned to her.

“It is the heart of all we are. The reason we endure.” Her gaze slid toward the prisoners. “You’ll understand soon enough. What awaits is a blessing. A bond that reaches beyond death.”

The moment stretched, brittle and uneasy, until someone barked a command and riders dismounted in a rush of motion. The prisoners shrank away as the barred gate was opened, but one by one Vala and the others were hauled out into a tightly controllable knot.

The horses had grown ill at ease as well, though Vala couldn’t tell whether it was due to the tension in the air or fear towards whatever waited within the temple. They stamped at the dirt, tossing their heads and jerking nervously against their reins.

“Get them under control!” One of the men barked.

But it was too late.

A stallion lashed out, its hind legs snapping backward and slamming into a nearby guard. The man staggered backwards just as a piercing, familiar whinny cut through the chaos.

Pil.

The mare thrashed against the reins and reared up to strike at the air. The rider released his grip on the reins, and the horse bolted without hesitation, thundering past Vala into the surrounding fog.

This was it.

Vala pivoted on her heel, ramming her shoulder into the nearest guard and catching him off balance. He stumbled, slipped, and crashed to the ground. She ran, twisting away

from the outstretched arms that grabbed at her. Shouts rang out behind her, followed by the waterlogged slosh of boots in pursuit.

“Run, traveler! Run!”

The bearded prisoner’s wild laughter rang out before a sickening thud cut it short. The brutal sound of a fist meeting flesh. Vala flinched but didn’t stop.

Her feet pounded against the damp ground, splashing through shallow pools and sinking mud. The shouts of her pursuers gradually dulled behind her, then faded into nothing. She pressed on, lungs burning, until sharp pain flared in her side with every step. Knowing that she couldn’t keep the pace much longer, she searched the area for a safe place to catch her breath.

A cluster of rocky formations ahead broke the monotony of the landscape. Veering toward it she collapsed behind its shelter. Cold seeped through her clothing as she pressed her back against the rock and tried to calm her breathing.

Though the Marrows had grown quiet, she stayed low and unmoving for a long while. Just listened and waited. Only when the quiet stretched uninterrupted did she dare glance around the rocks.

No shapes moved in the murk. If they were still searching, it was somewhere else.

Vala rose, reaching for her aching side before remembering that her hands were bound. That needed to change. Picking a direction, she began to walk, gnawing at the coarse rope around her wrist. The bog sprawled as far as the eye could see, wet and colorless. Each step sank into the spongy earth, making progress feel twice as slow.

There was nothing but the sound of her breath to break the silence. With no distractions, her mind was left to wander. The other

prisoners drifted unexpectedly through her mind. Had leaving them behind been the right decision? Urda could be marching them to their deaths even now.

Her thoughts felt as thick and uncertain as the surrounding landscape.

Needing something to occupy her mind, she checked the rope binding her wrist for any sign of progress. It held firm, not a single fray in sight. Chewing at them had done little more than leave her with a sore jaw. She was so focused on glaring at the rope that she didn’t notice how uneven the ground had become until her boot slipped. Her balance wavered, and before she could catch herself, she tumbled into the mud.

The weight of it all came crashing down.

Vala screamed, the sound tearing through her throat until she was left exhausted and spent. Emptied. She lay there a while before rolling onto her back, dragging a forearm across her face, which only further smeared the grime covering her. The sky overhead was smothered in gray. Just a low, dim haze that pressed down from above, heavy as the land itself.

Slowly, she pushed herself upright into a seated position and swept her gaze over the ground. There was something half-buried in the muck. Reaching out with bound hands she brushed away the slime to reveal what lay below.

Bones.

Human, from the looks of them.

It shouldn’t have been such a shock. The Marrows were merciless. No doubt it hid countless remains of both man and beast. Still, seeing them was different. It was a grim reminder that she could just as easily join them.

She needed to move.

The glint of metal beneath mud caught her eye as she began to rise. Leaning closer she

cleared it away with her fingertips until the rusted edge of a blade emerged.

A cry of relief escaped her lips as she pulled it free from the mire. She braced the weapon between her knees, blade facing upward, and began to saw back and forth repeatedly. The blade was dull, but eventually the rope's fibers snapped one by one until she was free.

Vala rose and rubbed at her wrists, wincing when her fingers made contact with welts. Once again, her thoughts drifted to the others. They hadn't fought. Most hadn't even resisted. The weight of indecision anchored her. Survival had always been her guide. Keep moving, stay ahead of the danger, never look back. But maybe she didn't deserve freedom, not when she cared so little about the survival of others.

Vala turned to look back the way she'd come. She took one step, then another, retracing her path. When the jagged silhouette of the rocky formation rose through the haze, she veered around it and pressed forward. The shape of the temple emerged soon after, like a wound carved into the world.

Her steps slowed as the wagons came into view. Two guards nursing wounds from the chaos earlier sat near the back. She scanned the horses, relieved that her mare wasn't among them. At least one of them had the sense not to return.

Her eyes darted across the scene, searching for a path forward. She might not be seen if she snuck around to the front of the wagons. There were no coachmen in view, which meant they'd either entered the temple or were just out of view walking the grounds. Breathing slowly, she gripped the hilt of her blade.

There was no turning back now.

Keeping low, she crept toward the wagons. Its passengers were grumbling their grievances

to one another, too preoccupied by their injuries to notice her presence. She moved carefully, her gaze flicking between them and the path leading to the temple's entrance.

Prepared to run, she'd taken only a few steps around the wagon before she noticed one of the coachmen slumped against the back wheel. Her blade rose, ready to strike, but the sound of slow and rhythmic breathing gave him away.

He was asleep.

Vala blinked, baffled. How anyone could sleep beside such a cursed place defied reason. The second coachman emerged suddenly from the mist, moving slowly and fumbling with the ties at his waist.

Relief duty, then.

He cast an unimpressed look at his sleeping companion and muttered something under his breath before joining the wounded near the rear.

Seizing her chance, Vala darted from the wagon's cover. The marshland muffled her steps as she crossed, but she hesitated at the temple's threshold as some primal instinct warned her not to go any further. It was the same that had sensed predators in the dark, steered her away from dangerous men, and urged her to avoid paths best left untaken. The gut-deep certainty that had kept her alive since leaving her homeland now prompted her to turn back.

For the first time, she chose to ignore it.

Gloom swallowed her whole, and the outside world faded.

Slowly, her eyes began to make out faint outlines. It was some kind of corridor, with narrow walls on either side. She grasped at the wall, intending to use it as a guide, when veins of light bloomed beneath her hand and crept forward to converge in a circular pattern ahead.

Vala froze, struggling to process what she'd just seen.

It was impossible. Not only the light, but how the wall had responded to her touch, as if aware. Despite her confusion, or perhaps because of it, Vala found herself drawn forward and guided by something beyond logical thought. Crossing the distance, she pressed her fingertips within the circle and watched as it shifted beneath her skin.

Guided by something beyond thought, she crossed the distance and pressed her fingertips within the circle, watching as it shifted beneath her skin. Spreading her fingers, she pressed her palm flat. A soft breeze brushed her face as the wall parted without seam or hinge, vanishing within itself.

She stared into the opening, half-expecting something or someone to emerge from beyond. There was only silence, though. Steadying her breath, Vala stepped forward, and the corridor widened into a vast chamber. Its high ceiling was arched and threaded with the same blue veins that ran along the passageway. Strange panels along the wall blinked in color, and a soft chime echoed somewhere ahead. There were multiple branching pathways within the room, and Vala moved between them, unsure which would lead to the prisoners.

Then, up ahead, she heard the muffled sound of voices.

She slipped into the passageway, skirting the walls until coming to a vast, circular chamber that dropped away before her like a hallowed basin. The corridor gradually widened, opening into a vast, circular chamber that dropped away before her like a hollowed basin. Tall pillars protruded from the floor along the uppermost ring like watchful sentinels, etched with glowing lines that illuminated the space in rhythmic

pulses.

High on the walls, angled structures similar to the ones outside jutted outwards and extended into the open space above. They reached towards one another across the void, as if straining to connect. The effect was unsettling. It was as though the room itself had once tried to close in on something.

Rows of descending steps ringed the expanse, and at the leveled center far below, where the shadows pooled deepest, were the prisoners. They'd been herded together, forced to their knees around a gaping black maw in the floor. Zealots flanked them from the surrounding steps, and guards stood just within the barrier, swatting away outstretched hands with practiced cruelty.

Urda stood, arms outstretched, at a higher vantage point along the ring.

"We offer you these lives, Great One! Accept them and turn your gaze upon us! We ask for your blessing so that our village might prosper again!"

Vala crept to the nearest pillar, hiding behind its width. No one was looking her way, their gazes fixed on the prisoners and the gaping pit at the chamber's center. She knew they didn't expect her interference—not after she'd managed to escape. Hoping their lack of vigilance worked in her favor, she began her descent.

The chamber was vast, and the upper level offered brief slices of shadow between the glowing pillars. She moved through them, careful not to draw attention. It was unlikely that she'd make it down without being seen, but if she could get close enough to capture one of the zealots, she could use him as leverage and hopefully convince Urda to release the prisoners.

As anticipated, she'd gotten halfway down

when someone on the far side of the ring lifted their head, gazing in her direction.

Vala sprinted forward before they could alert the others, grabbing one of the robed bodies from behind. Her blade found his throat in an instant. The nearby zealots recoiled and someone shouted out, alerting the guards to her presence. They immediately advanced, weapons drawn, but Urda lifted a hand and silently halted their progress.

“I knew you would return,” the crone said, her voice steady, almost pleased.

“Release them.” Vala demanded, tightening her grip on the zealot.

“And why would I do that?”

The calmness in her voice unsettled Vala. She couldn't back down now, though. She pressed the blade tightly against the man's neck, urging her hand to remain steady.

“Because if you don't, I'll kill him.”

The zealot gasped, his body stiffening. Urda's gaze shifted briefly to him, but there was no flicker of compassion in her eyes. “We do not fear death when the Eternal holds us in his

breast.”

Vala's stomach twisted. She had expected resistance, but not this unnerving acceptance. Her mind reeled, doubt creeping in. Had she come back for nothing? One of the armed men shifted, and the glint of a sword lifted from its scabbard caught her eye.

Tension stretched taut.

Then, one of the prisoners broke from the fray. It was the bearded man. Lunging forward, he crashed into a distracted swordsman, and they hit the ground in a tangle of limbs. Before anyone could intervene, he'd wrenched the fallen guard's sword free and driven it into his belly.

Guards swarmed him immediately, shouting over one another as they tried to subdue him, but the damage had been done.

In the chaos, some of the prisoners seized the moment to scramble up the steps towards the passageway, though most were caught again and dragged back down in a frenzy of flailing limbs. Others defied expectation and fought back, lashing out like cornered animals pushed



towards violence.

Vala's focus wavered, drawn by the clash of bodies surging in all directions. Her captive sensed that distraction and slammed his elbow backward, connecting with her ribs.

The air fled her lungs as she recoiled. Before she could recover, he whirled around and struck her again, this time his fist connecting hard with her cheek. Vala's blade clattered to the floor as she fell. The zealot came at her again, kneeling over her and locking his hands around her throat.

She clawed at his wrists and kicked out wildly, but couldn't shake him off. Panic surged as his grip tightened and the pressure built in her lungs. Her resolve was slipping away, black creeping in at the edges of her vision.

Then, suddenly, his hold slackened, and his weight slumped forward onto her. Dragging a ragged gasp into her lungs, Vala shoved his body aside to see the bearded man standing over her, pilfered sword slick with fresh blood.

He extended a hand, and she took it after a few pounding heartbeats. A sudden and piercing shriek erupted from the nearby pit as she rose. Everyone fell silent, heads turning towards the sound.

"What's happening?"

"We need to go, now!"

\ He sprinted towards the chamber's entrance, but before Vala could follow, a massive shape erupted from the black maw in the floor. Screams broke out among the prisoners still at the chamber's center as the creature pulled itself from the depths on multiple legs, each limb glinting against the darkness as it scaled the inner curve of the floor. A single, glaring red eye swept over the room, darting quickly back and forth. It was unlike anything Vala had ever seen.

The eye lingered on the crone before shift-

ing to the nearest zealot. In a blur of motion, one of its appendages lashed out and clamped around him. With a violent jerk, his body was ripped apart in a sickening spray of blood, halves flung in opposite directions like discarded meat.

Urda's hands trembled as she lifted them in appeasement toward the creature. "Non-believers have betrayed us," she cried. "But our devotion does not waver!"

Horror anchored Vala's legs even as her mind screamed to run. She'd never seen death come so sudden. Or brutal. There had been no chance to fight back, just slaughter, effortless and final. Her mind reeled, trying to make sense of what her eyes couldn't deny.

Eldrid's hand clamped suddenly around her arm, jerking her sideways and breaking the paralysis. She stumbled after him as they fled.

"Don't look back!"

But it was impossible not to.

The creature scurried upward with terrifying speed, limbs stretching across entire levels of the ascending ring in a single bound before pushing itself upwards into a powerful leap. It sailed over them, gliding effortlessly through the air before landing with a deafening impact directly in front of the passageway.

Vala expected it to rush them, but its attention snapped to a cluster of nearby prisoners that had broken free from the guards. One of the captives was snatched mid-run, hoisted into the air, and crushed between steel-like pincers. A second was hurled across the room into a pillar, where he slumped lifelessly at its base.

The bearded man pivoted on his heel, pulling Vala behind him and away from the beast. The scene was grotesque, yet she couldn't look away. She stumbled blindly after him, unsure where he was leading until she noticed a sec-

ond passage partially hidden by shadows on the opposite side of the chamber.

“Stop them!” Urda’s furious cry rang out amid the chaos. “They’ve disrupted the offering! This wrath is their doing!”

Zealots were already beginning to shift on the upper steps, some scrambling toward the far side of the room to intercept them. Vala was so preoccupied with keeping them within their sights that she failed to notice the guard speeding towards them from below.

He barreled into the bearded prisoner, and still tethered by his grip on her arm, Vala was dragged down as well. The guard pinned him to the ground and began landing enraged, unrelenting blows to his face.

Vala launched herself at the attacker, slamming all of her weight into him. The momentum sent him into an uncontrollable roll down the steps, where he slid across the smooth flooring at the chamber’s center, directly towards the pit. His fingers clawed at the floor for purchase but found none, and the next moment, he was gone.

Returning to the prisoner’s side, she found him already seated and spitting out a mouthful of blood. That’s when she noticed it. Directly beside him was a recession in the flooring, so subtle that she would have missed it had he not landed where he did. Edging closer, she noticed a shallow groove that sloped inward.

“I think I found something.” She slipped her hand into the groove, tugging upwards. The panel shifted, but it was too heavy for her to lift alone. “Help me!”

The prisoner’s gaze dropped to the indented flooring, clarity sharpening his expression. They worked at it together, and after a moment of struggle the panel groaned open to reveal a shaft. It was narrow, but still large enough for a

body to fit through.

“Where do you think it leads?” As desperate as she was to escape the carnage, the darkness below stirred an old fear that slowed her resolve.

“Does it matter?”

He released his grip on the heavy panel and dropped into the opening. Unable to hold its weight on her own, it slipped from Vala’s fingers to slam loudly against the floor. A final glance around the chamber and its horrors was all the motivation needed. She followed him down.

#

*The chamber lay drenched in stillness, thick with the scent of blood. Urda knelt amid the carnage, wide-eyed as she took in the broken bodies strewn across the floor.*

*She was the only one left.*

*Swallowing hard, she pressed her forehead to the floor. “Please... grant me mercy.”*

*The monstrosity towered over her. A thin, needle-like appendage extended from its core and descended toward her. Urda clenched her eyes shut and waited for death. Something sharp pressed into her temple, causing searing pain to explode behind one eye.*

*She couldn’t move. Couldn’t scream.*

*Her muscles seized, every nerve burning as if set alight. Something writhed behind her eye, burrowing deeper. It seemed as if the socket itself were being hollowed out, bone and flesh reshaped with terrifying precision.*

*Then, as suddenly as it began, the agony stopped.*

*The appendage withdrew, sliding out with a sickening, wet sound. Urda slumped forward as the tension left her body. Her ragged breaths filled her ears, the sound thin and fragile.*

*Where flesh had once been something unnatural sat. Smooth, cold, and gleaming red.*

*An eye to mimic that of her god.*

#

The shaft tunnel felt like being in the belly of some great beast.

It reminded Vala of the spidery passageways of the caves near her village, where the initiates were led after public rites. She'd been just a child, newly ripped from the familiarity of her home. The silence of the stone was supposed to open their senses to the voices of the gods, but Vala had only heard her own cries and those of the other children. When morning came and the Elders had returned for them, her faith had already been splintered.

"You alright?" The villager had paused and was glancing over his shoulder at her.

"I'm fine."

He hesitated but didn't draw closer. "Your breathing... I thought maybe you were hurt."

"Just keep moving."

"You got a name? Can't keep calling you traveler," he mused. "My name's Eldrid."

She said nothing.

"You don't trust me. Fair enough. But if we're going to make it out we'll need to work together."

Vala had kept herself distant from others for so long, avoiding their questions and curiosity. Yet here, in the depths of this damned place, they were trapped together. As much as she hated to admit it, Eldrid had also saved her. She supposed the least she could do was reveal who he'd risked his life for.

"Vala."

A beat passed between them as they began to move again, and in the silence Vala couldn't help but recall the horror she'd seen in the chamber above. "That thing back there... what is it?"

"I already told you."

"I don't know what it is, but it's not a god."

"You still refuse to believe- even after all you've seen?"

Vala didn't answer. What was the point in arguing? Her lack of belief wouldn't shift his. Besides, questions were pressing at the edge of her thoughts.

"Those prisoners in the wagon, were they all from the village?"

Eldrid hesitated a moment before answering. "Most of them. Sometimes Urda's guards patrol the roads around the village, capturing anyone unlucky enough to cross their path."

*Like me.*

Vala thought back on the eerie stillness of the village. The empty roads and buildings. If Urda was sacrificing villagers, it explained the lack of people she'd encountered.

"In the beginning, one villager was chosen before each sowing. When the crops consistently failed she saw that as a sign that the god demanded more. Anyone who spoke against Urda suddenly found themselves offered up."

"I don't understand...why not just leave?"

"Some did, but then guards began waiting at the village boundaries. Anyone trying to leave was imprisoned. She built a stockpile of prisoners."

Though he was turned from her, Vala could hear the bitterness in this voice. It was the kind that twisted the mouth and darkened the eyes. "How has she gained so much support? The villagers must know that if things continue as they are, there'll be no one left."

"Give people a reason to be afraid and they'll do anything to stay safe."

Vala didn't speak again for some time, her thoughts dark and spinning. The village, the rituals, the prisoners... none of it divine. It had been survival, twisted by fear cloaked in wor-

ship.

The silence between them deepened, broken only by the soft scrape of movement through the tunnel. Closed in as they were, the air felt stifling. Sweat clung to Vala's skin, and the constant need to brush it from her vision was aggravating. She was so distracted by it that she didn't realize Eldrid had stopped until she bumped into him.

"What's wrong?"

He said nothing at first, staring upward. Following his gaze, Vala spotted an outline above, identical to the shaft cover they'd opened in the chamber.

"Is it—"

"I think so." He shifted, giving her room to crawl in closer.

Vala examined the panel. Unlike the one from the chamber, it had no indentation to pull open. Likely because it was on the other side. "Can we lift it?"

"Only one way to find out." He pressed both palms against the panel, his face contorting with effort.

Vala maneuvered closer and joined him.

Nothing happened at first. Then, with a deep groan, the cover shifted just enough to wedge fingers through. Together they worked at it, until inch by inch it finally slid aside. Eldrid met her gaze before slowly lifting his head through the gap.

"Do you see anything?"

"No one's here, but..."

Her brow furrowed. "What is it? What's wrong?"

Saying nothing, he retrieved his sword from the shaft floor and pulled himself through the opening. Vala waited below, hyper-focused on the sound of his footsteps above, listening for any sign of trouble. When time passed uninter-

rupted, she gripped the floor's edge and cautiously lifted herself through the opening.

Towering cylinders filled with swirling green liquid filled the expanse. They were anchored in slanted bases embedded in the floor and stretched upward into the daunting ceiling above.

"What are they?" Eldrid approached one, trailing his fingers through a thin layer of condensation.

"I don't know." The liquid seemed to be in a slow state of flow, like thickened water caught in an endless current. "It's going somewhere... but where?"

"Maybe it serves a purpose. Like how oil feeds a lamp."

If the liquid within the cylinders was the *oil* that fed the temple's function, then what was the *flame*? The memory of the sacrificial chamber surfaced, chaos and blood painted in vivid clarity. Vala had known fear before. In her village it had been a strange sort of ally, pushing her to run. To survive. But the fear she'd felt in the chamber above was something else entirely. It hadn't driven her to act, but had hollowed her out. Against the creature, there had only been the certainty that death was coming.

"We need to keep moving." She didn't want to think about it. And they still needed to find a way out.

Eldrid held back to warily examine the liquid before falling into step behind her. She felt his gaze on her back as they moved between the maze of cylinders.

"Why did you come back?"

She faltered, pausing to glance over her shoulder at him. "What?"

"You were free," he continued. "What made you return?"

"It was obviously the wrong choice." She

felt bitter about the decision. Especially now, so deep within the temple's depths. Escape felt less possible each moment.

"Had you not come back, I'd be dead. It's possible more people got to safety."

Vala's eyes swept over Eldrid's swollen face. Though he'd managed to bring down a guard, his fury had been wild and unrefined. His strikes were fueled by desperation, not skill.

And Vala knew nothing about combat.

Even if they managed to avoid the creature, Urda and her guard remained a threat. The odds were against them.

"Do you see that? Up ahead?"

Eldrid's words pulled Vala from her thoughts. Following the direction of his hand, she spotted something in the distance. Upon drawing closer, they found what resembled a twisted protrusion of black stone, half her height, with rough and uneven edges.

"It seems out of place, doesn't it?"

"It does..." She reached out hesitantly and brushed her fingers against it, a low, resonant hum reacting at her touch.

"What did you do?"

"Nothing. Just touched it."

Eldrid moved around her to approach the stone. Before he could touch it, though, she grasped his arm and halted his movement. "Maybe we shouldn't. We don't know what it is."

"It's just a *rock*."

"A rock that reacts to touch?" She shook her head. "It could be dangerous."

Vala started away, assuming that Eldrid would follow, but when another hum filled the chamber, far louder than before, she turned to find him wearing a sheepish expression, his hand hovering mid-air above the stone.

The ground shuddered violently beneath

their feet, and the floor ahead fractured and peeled open with a groan. A monolith, obsidian black, rose upward from the depths. Lines ignited across its surface as it rose, gleaming in delicate threads of pale blue which curved and interwove to form intricate markings.

Vala's breath caught in her throat.

The markings mirrored the same ones that marked her scalp.

Eldrid's gaze turned to her, the eerie glow of the monolith dancing across his features. "I don't understand."

Neither did Vala. She'd never seen the markings anywhere other than the caves near her village. It made no sense why they would be here, not only in the temple, but on another continent altogether.

"Now do you see?"

Both Vala and Eldrid whipped around, weapons raised.

From behind one of the nearby cylinders, Urda stepped forward. She was... *changed*. Embedded deep in the hollow of her left eye socket and nestled in a metallic ring, sat something foreign. Constructed. Vala knew that the transformation was the creature's doing. It had warped her, shaped her in its image.

"Your presence in the village was never by chance. I knew it the moment I laid eyes on you. And when I saw the symbols, there was no doubt." A slow, knowing smile crept across her lips. "You have an important part to play."

Her altered eye flared as she stepped forward, casting a sickly glow across her gaunt features. The skin around it looked stretched too tight, reshaped to accommodate the foreign presence now rooted within her skull. "You are meant to usher in a new age, just as I am. We are both prophets for our god."

Eldrid's gaze darted toward Vala. "What is

she talking about?”

“She’s deranged. That thing has done something to her.”

“The Great One sensed that my devotion is true and spared me, unlike the false believers. Now we are as one.”

*False believers.* Was Urda referring to her guards and the zealots? Had it killed them all? As terrible as the thought was, it would mean that their chances of escape had increased. Despite the crone’s interference, she was still frail. Her appearance, in a way, was also beneficial. If anyone knew the way out of the temple, it was her.

Vala sprang forward and closed the distance between them. Her blade pressed against the paper-thin skin of Urda’s neck. “Lead us out of this cursed place.”

Urda lifted her arms, palms open in surrender. “And if I don’t... Will you kill me, child?”

Rage and uncertainty warred within her. Vala had every reason to drive the blade forward, yet her hand trembled. She knew nothing of Urda’s past, only the aftermath of choices made long ago. Their village had been steeped in its beliefs for generations. Despite her depravity, Urda was a product of the same fate that had once nearly broken Vala.

Part of her hated the old woman for it.  
Another part understood.

Behind them, Eldrid stepped forward with his sword raised. “Step aside. I’ll do it.”

“It does not matter what you do to me. Another will take my place. The god of the Marrows does not rest. It will prevail, whether you accept it or not.”

Vala’s grip tightened on the blade, disgust hardening her will. “How many more must die before you realize you’re nothing but a servant to your own destruction?”

Urda’s expression contorted, now seething. “What a pitiful creature you are! I see the truth of you. You worship none but yourself. How lonely you must be.”

The crone’s words struck deeper than expected. Vala *was* alone, and every day was another battle for survival. Leaving her homeland had granted freedom, but now she felt aimless, chasing after something she couldn’t envision.

As sudden as Urda’s anger had flared, it ebbed again, replaced by eerie calm. Her gaze lingered on the markings etched into Vala’s scalp. “I understand now why the god has called you here. To wear his markings is a disgrace to his name. It is not transcendence he wishes to grant you, but judgment. He will end you, and in doing so, purify his image of your transgression.”

“I’ve had enough of this.”

Eldrid closed the distance in two quick strides, grabbing Urda by the front of her tattered robes. With a forceful yank, he dragged her forward and threw her to the ground.

Her altered eye flickered as she scrambled upright. When she lifted her gaze, she found herself staring down the length of Eldrid’s sword, its gleaming edge hovering inches from her face.

“Last chance. Lead us out or die where you sit.”

Vala could tell from his posture that Eldrid was past the point of mercy. This wasn’t just vengeance for the nameless victims of the zealots’ madness. This was personal. His father had been a sacrifice, perhaps by Urda’s hands. Now, with his sword unshaken, he was ready to end it.

Before he could carry out his retribution, a grating wail echoed through the chamber, coming from somewhere beyond the structures.

Vala's stomach dropped. She turned to Eldrid, meeting his apprehensive gaze.

It was here.

Shrill laughter drew her attention back to Urda, where she found the crone's body wracked with unhinged delight.

"It's too late! The god has come!"

With a breathy chuckle, she shifted to crawl directly into the path of Eldrid's sword. Startled, he instinctively stepped back as she advanced.

"I am the god's eye," she whispered. "It sees what I see. Knows what I know." A slow, creeping smile stretched across her lips. "You were doomed from the very beginning."

Vala's heartbeat pounded in her ears. "We need to run."

Eldrid didn't move. "She and that thing are connected. She's too much of a threat."

Vala wanted to argue with him, to tell him that his need for retribution could be the very thing that caused his death. Instead, she spun on her heel and ran past them, hoping for some kind of shelter within the surrounding maze. Doubt prickled at the edge of her thoughts, though. She'd seen firsthand how agile the creature was. How easily it dispatched anything in its path. Had leaving Eldrid behind been the right decision?

*It was his choice*, she reminded herself, and dwelling on his safety would only slow her down. Vala was certain that Urda hadn't followed them through the shaft, which meant the crone must have taken another path that led directly into the chamber.

A sudden thud sounded nearby, followed by the metallic slide of something shifting against the floor. Vala immediately crouched low and pressed herself against the cold base of a nearby structure. Slowly, she leaned around its base to

search the area.

A shadow moved between the cylinders.

The entity wove between them, its spindly limbs gliding effortlessly across the floor. It leapt, body twisting midair before latching onto the side of one and climbing its length.

Its single red eye flared before releasing a thin beam that swept across the floor below. Somehow, instinctively, she knew it was searching for her. Vala pressed herself lower, willing her body into absolute stillness as the crimson light crept closer. Her fingers curled around her weapon, though she knew it would do little against such a threat.

A hand clamped suddenly over her mouth.

Vala startled, raising her blade. Before she could lash out, her eyes landed on Eldrid. He pulled Vala from her hiding spot, moving low to the ground and leading her through the cylinders before crouching down behind one.

"How did you escape?"

Eldrid leaned close, speaking under his breath. "I never saw it. It must have gone straight for you."

Vala remembered Urda's words earlier, about the entity wanting to enact judgment. Could it be true?

"I know a way out of here."

"What? How?"

"Urda. I got her to talk. There's a corridor further ahead. If we walk alongside the wall and keep moving, we should reach it without getting lost."

"She actually told you?"

"Took a little convincing."

Vala stared at him, a question on her tongue. "Did you..."

He met her gaze. "No. I didn't kill her." His expression hardened. "Though I wanted to. I got the information I needed. Then I made sure

she couldn't interfere again. She's back there still, just unconscious."

Though the discovery was a relief to hear, it was also unexpected. Urda had been headstrong and unwavering. What if she'd been lying? She could very well be leading them into a trap. "How do you know she was telling the truth?"

Doubt crossed his expression. "Only one way to find out."

The reply wasn't reassuring, but what choice did they have? They couldn't stay here, waiting to be found.

Eldrid checked their surroundings before bracing for movement. "Are you ready?"

Not really, but it hardly mattered. They pressed forward again, weaving through the cylinders until reaching the wall. Progress was agonizingly slow, and Vala half-expected the creature to drop from above at any moment. The only thing that kept her moving was the possibility that Urda had spoken the truth.

Her thoughts drifted to the monolith as they moved. The crone had been right about one thing at least— there was a connection. There had to be. Had someone from her homeland come to this place long ago? If they'd made it out, maybe she and Eldrid could too.

At last, a sloping incline of smooth flooring appeared just ahead. Before they could take another step, Urda hurtled from the shadows, screaming like a wounded animal.

She slammed into Vala with full force, sending her sprawling. The crone, bloodied from Eldrid's violent interrogation, was on top of her immediately. Despite her frailty, she was feral, a flurry of wild limbs and enraged cries. Clawed fingers raked across her face, and Vala could do little more than shield herself.

Eldrid quickly seized a handful of her robes, dragging her snarling form away. Urda

thrashed against his grip, and as she did, her hand brushed against the blade at Vala's hip. She lunged, fingers closing around the hilt, and spun around to drive it straight into his thigh.

Eldrid shouted and stumbled backwards, hands flying to the wound as blood spilled over his fingers. Vala scrambled to her feet just as Urda lunged at her again, the dagger flashing close enough to feel the air shift against her skin. She caught the older woman's wrist on the next swing. They locked in a struggle, the blade trembling inches between them.

Vala twisted sharply, forcing Urda's arm at an awkward angle. She cried out, her grip loosening enough for Vala to wrench the dagger free. Before doubt could root itself, she drove the blade into the woman's chest. The weapon buried deep, and their eyes met. The weight of the moment pressed in.

With a final, shuddering breath, Urda collapsed to the floor. Motionless.

Vala stood frozen, her breath ragged. Urda's death brought no relief, only a crushing stillness. Behind her, Eldrid released a groan which yanked Vala back to the present. Turning, she found him slumped against the wall, his hand pressed against his wounded thigh. Forcing herself to move, she stepped over Urda's fallen body and helped him stand again.

"Are you okay?"

*"I've been stabbed. What do you think?"*

Though his tone was sharp and sardonic, she didn't think anything of it. "We should go. If she was connected to that thing it's likely headed our way."

"The dagger. We may need it."

Vala's gut clenched. Truthfully, she didn't want to go anywhere near the body. But he was right. She moved quickly to retrieve the blade, and after several tugs, it wrenched free with

a sickening squelch. Blood dripped from the blade, vibrant and glistening. She forced herself not to linger on it, wiping it clean against her pants before tucking it into her waistband.

The passage stretched ahead, sloping gently upward as they moved. Eldrid stumbled behind her, using the wall as leverage to stay upright. Time blurred as they pressed forward, every footfall echoing back from the narrow walls. Vala kept her focus ahead, eyes straining for anything that might resemble an exit, but the passage unexpectedly came to an abrupt halt.

She turned and headed past Eldrid again, examining the walls. They hadn't missed a corridor. The dead end made no sense. Why create a passageway that led nowhere? She saw it, then. The veins along the wall at her side trailed ahead to converge in a pattern similar to what she'd seen at the temple's entrance.

"I've seen this before." Striding forward, she examined the circular pattern before pressing her palm against it. The wall shifted and split apart along an invisible seam to reveal another area beyond.

Eldrid startled. "How did you do that?"

"The entrance to the temple had the same contraption. Didn't you see it when you came in?"

"Can't see much of anything when you're being beaten into submission."

"You've been here before, though. As a child."

"I was young." He shuffled forward to stand beside her, eyes narrowing at the passage ahead. "All I remember is grasping at the walls in the dark. I never understood how any of it worked."

Vala noticed then that a slick line of blood trailed along the floor behind them. *His wound.* She lifted her gaze to his pale and tepid face. "You need a tourniquet."

Eldrid shook his head immediately, gripping the entranceway's edge and pushing himself through the threshold. "No time."

She grabbed his arm before he could pass. "You'll bleed out otherwise."

"But the creature—"

"Hasn't been seen or heard since we left the area below." She moved around him to grasp the edge of his tunic.

"What are you doing?"

He twisted around to track her movements, but Vala gently pushed at his shoulder to force him still again, swiftly cutting a long section of the material with her dagger. As she pulled the strip free, the hem of his tunic lifted to expose a portion of his lower back. In the dim light she caught a glimpse of his thin waist, and a spine pressed starkly beneath skin. Each vertebra was distinct. Sharp.

She thought back to her trek across the Marrows, to the gnawing emptiness in her stomach that had plagued her. At the time, she'd thought she understood true hunger, but now she realized it was nothing compared to what the villagers must have experienced. A lifetime of scarcity had carved Eldrid's sharp edges.

"Vala."

Tucking her dagger into her waistband, she moved to help him sit against the wall, not liking how he all but collapsed into it. She set about wrapping his leg quickly, trying to overlook the blood that smeared against her hand.

"What do the markings mean?"

Vala met his gaze briefly before returning to her task. When she spoke, her voice was low, barely audible. "My people view it as a symbol."

"A symbol for what?"

"Life," she muttered simply, without emotion. "The Elders believed it to be a vow from the gods. A promise to always watch over us, so

long as we devoted ourselves to servitude and worship.”

“Life...” Eldrid fell suddenly into a deep fit of laughter.

It took her a moment to recognize the irony behind his outburst. She shook her head with a wry grin, tying off the tourniquet with a sharp twist of her wrists, which abruptly transformed his laughter into a gasp of pain. “We’re not dead yet.”

Vala helped him to his feet, and together they entered the new area. A sprawling network of suspended walkways stretched above a vast chamber below, where strange workings that resembled immense rotating rings thrummed. They paused near the edge, bracing against the waist-high barrier as they looked down.

“Nothing about this place makes sense.” Eldrid muttered beside her.

Vala doubted it ever would. The temple proved that there was greatness beyond comprehension. She understood why people would worship such a place and anything within it. “Come on. We need to move.”

The choice ahead wasn’t easy, though. Each pathway seemingly twisted towards destinations unknown. There was no clear way forward, or markings to suggest which would lead out to the Marrows. The weight of indecision settled heavily over Vala. Taking the wrong turn could mean wasting time that they didn’t have. She chose a path and hoped it would be the right one.

“Your village...what was it like there?”

The instinct to stay silent gripped her. From the time she could speak, she’d been taught to keep the ways of her people secret, especially from outsiders. No one knew what truly took place behind village walls.

But what was the point anymore?

“Like living in the palm of something vast

and hungry.” Her words hung heavy as she directed them around the curved pathway. “I come from a sect very similar to what I’ve encountered in your village. They worship multiple gods, only one’s unseen.”

Her gaze remained fixed ahead. It was easier this way, speaking to the air. “Our gods demanded servitude, and the Elders made sure there was never a lack of devotees. Children were regularly initiated into the sect. To be chosen was supposed to be an honor.” Her voice hardened, turning foul. “All they were doing was pulling terrified children from their homes. I couldn’t watch it happen again.”

“And they let you leave freely?”

“Not at all. Whenever new devotees were initiated a ceremony was held. The entire village would attend. It was the distraction I needed to escape. After leaving I came across a merchant on the road, and when night fell, I snuck into his camp and robbed him.” Shame coursed through her at the memory. “I’m not proud of it, but I would have likely died otherwise.”

“You did what was needed to survive.”

She knew that, but hearing Eldrid say it out loud brought a sense of peace she hadn’t known she needed. “I found the first port, booked passage, and ended up here.” A slight smile tugged at her lips. “Pil—that’s my mare, I bought her from a farmer in a small settlement shortly after landing. We’ve been traveling since.”

Vala slowed as the walkway funneled into a narrow tunnel ahead, the sharp angles of the temple softening as they passed beneath its shadowed arch. Eldrik followed a few steps behind, his pace uneven but determined. He hadn’t spoken of his injury, but she’d noticed how his jaw clenched with every step. There was tension in his movements and a hitch in his stride.

Hopefully the tourniquet held until they reached the surface. Once outside, a fire and steady hand could cauterize the wound. The threat of infection remained, though, and Vala had no idea if medicinal herbs grew within the Marrows.

Her concern lingered until a familiar metallic scent crept into her awareness.

Even before the tunnel widened, she knew what waited ahead.

They emerged in the same chamber where the entity had first appeared, through the passage they'd once tried to escape through before entering the shaft. Any relief Vala might have felt evaporated completely at the sight that awaited.

*It had been a massacre.*

Bodies lay scattered across the upper level and slumped upon the descending steps in awkward angles. The knowledge that their deaths were just a fraction of the suffering inflicted upon the village made bile climb to her throat. This was just another page in a long history of bloodshed.

*"Monster."*

Eldrid's harsh whisper mirrored the fury which Vala felt. They moved carefully through the carnage, stepping over twisted limbs and slick patches of blood that turned the floor into a mirror of death. Vala kept her eyes ahead, focusing on the far wall where she knew the way out lay. A familiar figure among the dead halted her progress, though.

It was the elderly man from the wagon.

He lay curled in on himself, his frail body swallowed by the stillness of death. Vala wondered if he'd held steadfast to his beliefs, or if his willingness to be a sacrifice had wavered in the end.

A subtle distortion shifted suddenly across

the floor directly beside him, as though the light from the pillars above had bent. At first, she thought her eyes had betrayed her, but it happened again. Dread curled low in her belly as she willed herself to look up.

She saw nothing at first, then her eyes caught on a shape nestled against one of the spires high above. Eldrid noticed her gaze and cautiously tilted his head back.

A mass of shadow unraveled above before a single, burning red eye pierced the darkness. Vala's gaze darted towards the exit. Maybe if they moved slowly, didn't draw too much attention to themselves, they could reach it before the creature descended.

"Move slow," she muttered. "Don't run. Not yet."

Every sound felt amplified in the stillness as they inched forward. The rustle of fabric, the strained release of breath... It was thunderous to Vala's ears. Her gaze shifted repeatedly between the exit and the shape overhead. The creature hadn't moved, yet she could feel its attention focused on them.

Why wasn't it chasing, then? Had its appetite for bloodshed finally been appeased upon Urda's death? Or perhaps the truth was more unsettling. Maybe it wasn't chasing them because it didn't need to. It recognized the balance of predator and prey, and felt no urgency. The hunt was already over.

"We have to run." Vala said under her breath, eyes fixed on the exit.

Eldrid hesitated, his weight shifting with uncertainty.

*"Now!"* she shouted.

As if her urgency had roused it, the creature moved. Its hulking form detached from the shadows, limbs scraping across the wall's protrusion as it gave chase and launched itself into the

air, soaring overhead to cut off their path.

Vala had her eyes locked onto it when Eldrid stumbled, his foot sliding out from under him on the slick floor and collapsing hard. She scrambled to reach for him as his hands scrambled uselessly against the blood-smears.

“Go!” He snarled, shoving at her weakly. “Run, damn it!”

Ignoring him, she grabbed his arm and helped pull him upright. He sagged against her on unsteady legs, but she didn’t slow, practically dragging him alongside her as they raced towards the exit. Above them, the creature had leapt to the wall above and was racing downwards.

Its body stilled suddenly, tensed, and *rippled*.

Sensing its intent, Vala skidded to a halt as the creature dove downward like a striking predator, crashing into the ground before them. The impact sent a shockwave rippling through the floor, causing Vala’s legs to buckle beneath her. She hit the ground hard, a jarring pain shooting up her limbs as Eldrid tumbled beside her. As the creature advanced, he fumbled for his discarded sword, his fingers slipping once again through the gore. Finally, his hand closed around the hilt, and he leaped to his feet with a cry, charging forward.

He never got the chance to strike.

A limb lashed out in a blur of motion, striking him with brutal force. Vala’s breath caught as he was hurled away, his body twisting helplessly before landing to slide along the floor.

Vala barely had time to react before it was upon her. One of its plated limbs shot out, pincers clamping around her torso and lifting her effortlessly from the ground. The pressure was crushing.

The creature pulled her close until its

monstrous face was before her. If it could even be called a face. A smooth, segmented shell encased its head, and beneath the surface a hidden force thrummed within its interior, pulsing and rhythmic.

As the burning eye flared, Vala saw thick, coiling tendrils writhing beneath it like the roots of an upturned tree. A thin, wavering beam swept over her, sliding slowly upwards from her feet. Struggling only made the plated pincers crush tighter. A high-pitched ringing filled her ears, and the world around her blurred at the edges as the beam lingered on her head.

A distant sound cut through the void swallowing Vala’s mind, like something calling from the bottom of a deep chasm. Then it grew louder, morphing into something raw and furious.

*Eldrid.*

The creature shifted at his presence, turning towards him as he swung his sword. The blade scraped against its armored plating, striking at the wrong angle and glancing off with a shower of sparks. It seemed like the attack had failed until Eldrid twisted his grip and drove the blade forward again with a snarl. It caught, jamming into the narrow seam beside the reddened eye, where the plating didn’t fully meet.

The reaction was immediate.

The creature convulsed, its frame locking with a violent shudder before its grip on Vala snapped open. She tumbled to the ground in a heap, gasping as air finally flooded her burning lungs. The creature’s entire body lurched, staggering backward in jerky, erratic movements. In a single wrenching motion, it ripped the sword from its eye socket and flung it aside.

The unexpected reaction wasn’t merely pain; that much was suddenly very clear to Vala. It had been defensive, an instinctual need for

self-preservation. Its eye wasn't just for sight. It was its *core*. It's weakness!

Though Vala's lungs burned and her body screamed in protest, she had no time to think of pain. The creature was still staggering, momentarily unbalanced. But for how long? If she was going to act, it had to be now.

Forcing her legs into motion, she sprinted forward, hurling herself onto one of its plated limbs. Her hands scrambled for purchase against the sleek shell, boots skidding uselessly. She nearly slid back down before her fingers caught the edge of a narrow ridge along the armor.

The creature jerked violently, trying to dislodge her by throwing its weight sideways. She slammed hard against the limb and nearly lost her grip before managing to hook one leg higher, locking it around a joint as the creature bucked beneath her. The muscles of her arms trembled as she clung on.

Another lurch nearly tore her free, and her boot lost contact entirely. Only raw desperation kept her anchored. Clawing her fingers into the grooves of the creature, she dragged herself higher, until coming face to face with its eye.

She drove her blade downwards with a sharp cry. The first strike skidded off the surface, but the second found purchase. The creature convulsed, its entire frame recoiling in a violent shudder. She struck again, forcing the blade deeper. A high-pitched, warbling wail erupted deep within its core and rattled her skull.

Before she could strike again, one of its plated limbs shot out, clamping a pincer around her. The ground twisted in a blur as the creature flung her aside. She collided against the hard floor, agonizing pain flaring in her hip. She groaned, forcing her palms against the floor

and pushing up with quivering arms, but barely made it to her knees before a sharp jolt of pain lanced up her side.

Eldrid staggered to her, one arm cradling his ribs. Extending a trembling hand, he helped pull Vala to her feet again.

Something passed between them as their eyes met. They were both drenched in blood, some their own, but most that of the dead. And though they were both battered and unsteady, they were still standing.

*The god of the Marrows does not rest.*

Vala turned back to the creature. It faltered, sparks flickering beneath its plating where her blade remained deeply lodged in its eye. If there was ever a time to flee, it was now.

And what would become of the village, afterwards?

No matter how far she ran, Urda's words would linger, gnawing at the back of her mind. Would another take the crone's place? Regardless, the creature would remain, and so would the threat.

"We have to kill it." She turned to Eldrid.

Their gazes held, and Vala saw everything they'd endured reflected in his eyes. There was no plea, or false hope. Only a quiet, unspoken acknowledgement of what they'd experienced together. If this was where it ended, at least neither of them faced it alone.

Eldrid exhaled softly, then moved. Before he could strike, a limb swept low, catching him mid-charge. The plated pincer clamped down hard, slamming him against the ground and pinning him beneath its weight.

Vala sprinted towards the creature just as its massive eye swiveled towards her. One of its limbs swept sideways towards her, but she anticipated the move. Dropping low, she let the slick floor carry her into a controlled slide beneath

the strike, grabbing a notch in the creature's armoured underbelly to halt her momentum. The beast lurched backwards, its enormous head swiveling downwards until they were face-to-face.

The blade still protruded from its eye.

Vala jerked it free and drove it forward once again.

It released a thunderous roar and scurried backward, dragging Vala with it as she clung tightly to the embedded blade. Its limbs flailed in wide arcs, thrashing in blind defense. One struck the ground beside her, narrowly missing her.

She clung desperately to the creature, bracing herself against its jerking movements as she drove the blade down again, and again, until its massive frame began to sink lower. Fearing it would crumple atop her, Vala scrambled out from under it, climbing atop its shuddering body once again. She slammed her blade down. The eye shattered with a loud crack to reveal a gaping hole beyond. At its end sat a circular organ, small and wrapped tight in sinewy tendrils.

Vala plunged her hand into the opening.

The tendrils coiled tightly around her hand and forearm, melting the skin away until the sickening scent of scorched flesh filled her lungs. She screamed, fighting the urge to withdraw. With a final, sickening snap, it tore free. The creature seized, its limbs locking before it collapsed with a deafening crash. Still. Lifeless.

Gasping, Vala flung the thing aside and stared at her trembling hand. It was a ruined mass of charred, blistered flesh. Barely recognizable as her own. She nearly lost her balance as she climbed down the creature's sloping carcass. The exertion left her reeling. Sweat slicked her body, making her feel chilled despite the still air. When her boots hit the floor, she bent

forward to fight off a wave of nausea, the room swaying around her.

Eldrid's voice broke through, low and breathless. "Are you alright?"

She heard his unsteady steps as he approached. "Fine." Forcing herself upright, she turned to look at where the orb had landed nearby. It pulsed irregularly, like a sickly heart. She staggered forward. "We need to destroy it."

Eldrid moved to stand beside her. "You think it's alive?"

"I don't know. But I'd rather not risk it."

Eldrid's gaze swept across the chamber until spotting his sword amidst the scattered bodies. He limped toward it, his breath ragged as he bent to retrieve the weapon before returning to Vala's side and dropping to his knees beside the orb.

The pulsing quickened, as though sensing its end. Without hesitation, he drove the blade into it. After a few pulses of lingering life, the ambience faded completely.

For the first time since entering the Marrows, Vala breathed freely. It was over. Despite the destruction, or the proof of struggle that marred their flesh, a life still waited beyond the temple. The thought was as foreign as it was miraculous.

The calm lasted only a moment.

The tall pillars along the chamber's ring pulsed suddenly in rapid rhythm, their intricate patterns seeming to writhe as the ground began to rumble. Vala's gaze swept their surroundings. Something was happening, was *about* to happen.

"What now?"

Eldrid's shoulders had stiffened, but his tone was deeply exasperated. Vala understood. She was just as tired of the temple's constant calamity. She helped him to his feet, anxious to leave the quaking place. "We should hurry,

before it falls around us.”

The temple’s violent shuddering nearly sent them both sprawling as they rushed past the flickering pillars and towards the passageway. They entered the chamber beyond, where flashes of colored light pulsed along the smooth panels embedded in the walls.

Another deep tremor rattled the floor as they reached the entrance. Vala slammed her palm against the illuminated circle, and the wall split open with a low hum, parting smoothly to reveal the swirling mist of the Marrows.

She would have never imagined she’d be glad to see that desolate, unyielding place again, but in that moment, it looked like salvation. One of the wagons was gone, along with the coachmen and the few wounded guards who’d remained behind. They must have fled after seeing what lay within the temple.

They stumbled outside as the ground heaved beneath their feet, splitting apart with violent force. Through the chaos, a sharp, frantic whinny pierced the air—miraculous and familiar. Vala’s head snapped toward the noise. It was Pil. The mare stood just at the edge of the Marrow’s, hooves stamping against the trembling terrain.

Vala veered toward her companion just as a jagged crevice tore open across their path. Stone crumbled away, and a plume of sickly green vapor burst upward, heavy with the stench of rot. They scrambled around the widening fissure, more fractures erupting nearby as they closed the distance to her mare, each one venting thick clouds of the noxious mist.

Climbing into the saddle proved harder than expected. Vala struggled to pull herself up with only one hand, and the pain in her hip and leg had grown as well. Noticing her struggle, Eldrid dropped to one knee beside her

and braced himself to offer a boost. After a few attempts, Vala managed to scramble up before reaching down with her good arm to help haul Eldrid up behind her, both of them crying out as their injuries protested from the strain.

Once they were seated, she urged Pil into a gallop. Only when they’d reached a safe distance and the ground no longer threatened to swallow them did Vala pull back on the reins, slowing to a canter, then a walk. She guided the mare in a slow circle, turning to face the way they’d fled.

Eldrid gasped behind her. “What madness is this?”

*The temple was rising.*

The earth split wider as it lifted, jagged structural roots tearing free from the soil with a sound like grinding stone. Streams of luminous green fluid poured from them and splashed onto the ruptured ground below. That liquid... She’d seen it inside the temple, suspended in the cylinders.

“It’s been poisoning the Marrows.” Vala realized. “Seeping into the soil and killing the land. Your crops, the water supply...*everything* is connected.”

Eldrid’s gaze remained fixed on the rising structure, the weight of truth pressing down on him. “I have to tell them.”

Would they even believe? Urda’s influence had run deep. But perhaps it didn’t matter anymore. The temple was leaving them behind, and its god was no more. The days of sacrifice had ended. What came next would be uncertain, but at least no more blood would be spilled for false salvation.

Nudging Pil forward, they headed into the Marrows. ❖

# “CLIFF’S NOTE”

by WALT TRIZNA

The winter of 1889 was a harsh one, but Piedmont, Virginia took it in stride and the nightly Tuesday gathering, a gathering for telling stories, at Johnson’s General Store, was not hampered a bit by the wind, the cold or by the copious amounts of snow covering the ground.

At the center of the store, a potbellied stove provided warmth. A battered blue enamel coffee pot occupied the top of the stove, lending its bouquet and also providing beverage to warm the bellies of those sitting in old wooden chairs gathered around the wood fire. Every Tuesday night, a group of men would journey to the store to scare the hell out of one another.

Homer Johnson, the store’s owner, did not mind and even enjoyed the gathering. He constantly pestered them to buy something, which rarely resulted in a sale. He had to keep up the image for his business. In reality, he honestly looked forward to the story-telling nights, especially during the cold of winter when few customers ventured out. The men were company and he considered himself one of their brotherhood. He was a listener, although he never shared that with the group, but they knew Johnson enjoyed the meetings.

All the men present, and only men were allowed into the group, a sign of the times. They wore the standard uniform of the rural area, flannel shirts of varying colors and patterns and bib overalls. Work boots complimented

the outfits. All were of middle age; the time and circumstances at time set that at anything above thirty. With exposure to the sun, during a day of hard work, their skin was browned to a coarse leather. Strong, determined men tempered by turning the wilderness into a livable environment. They were men of the earth and ready to escape their daily toil. After working the fields of Virginia, they looked forward to a break and a few hours with their friends.

The group was divided in two, there were the listeners, never telling a story, coming solely for escape and male comradery. And then there were the tellers, who of course, told. They told tall tales masked as truth, the taller the better to set the mind tingling and make the walk home both frightening and an adventure.

The size of the group would vary, usually from three to eight attendees. Never more than eight was an unwritten rule, more than eight would take up too much room in the small store. However, this rule rarely needed to be enforced during the dead of winter. But if number ‘nine’ should show up they were told that attendance was closed for the night. If a teller, he might leave, saving his story for the next meeting, or stay and pretend to shop along with any surplus listers who might also been late comers. No matter which category fitted ‘number nine’, the following week he was most likely to be one of the first to appear.

The unofficial leader of the tellers, and therefore the group, was Cliff Bonner. Tall, lean and weathered, Cliff had a natural ability to tell a story, painting a verbal picture and taking the listeners on a journey. He had the imagination to create the best and most horrifying tales, scaring the hell out of the men present.

On one particularly cold January night Cliff came racing into Johnson's Grocery, later than usual, shouting, "You're not going to believe what just happened to me."

Cliff, trying to control his emotions, poured himself a steaming cup of coffee. The group noted the slight shake of his hand, attributing it to create atmosphere for the story they were about to hear. Cliff repeated, "You won't believe what just happened to me. This isn't a made-up story. It really happened."

"The not believing part, you got that right," said Jerry Klug, a usual listener and, on rare occasions, a teller.

Waving away the comment, Cliff continued, "Seriously, I'm not making this up. It really happened on my way over here."

At this point Cliff realized that no matter what he said, the group would not believe his experience. So, he decided to say, "This is a story you can believe or not, the choice is up to you but I'm telling the truth. you can judge that for yourselves. You could call this a unique experience." The men all looked puzzled by 'unique experience', but no questions were asked. They all huddled around the stove, ready to be entertained. "Okay," Cliff said. "Here goes, believe it or not, here's what happened."

As members of the group nodded their heads and muttered, "Sure, sure. Here we go," and settled back to hear another of Cliff's stories. They knew Cliff was ready and primed with a beauty, trying to make his story believ-

able. His story telling was the best and he did everything possible to make his tale appear as the truth.

Switching to his usual story-telling voice, he said, "This really happened on the way over here. Why do you think I'm late? Am I ever late? I'm lucky they didn't take me, although I sort of asked to go."

"Okay," said Joe Conger. "You've got us primed. Now tell us your story. And who the hell are they?"

Cliff began, "I know you won't believe this, but after we're done, I'll show you proof that this is not a story,"

Once again, they all muttered, "Sure, sure," and settled back to hear a real doozy.

Shaking his head, Cliff started into his tale. "I left my house around 6PM, as I usually do to come here and join you fellas. I know, my stories are pretty tall, and I enjoy telling'em, and I reckon you fellas enjoy hearing 'em. Well, I was half-way along my thirty-minute walk when I saw this fast-moving light in the sky. Thought it was a shooting-star, but it wasn't."

The group leaned closer and everyone thought the same thing, "He's got us." They all wanted to hear more.

"The light got brighter and brighter and closer and closer and began to take shape. Damndest thing I ever saw. It was round with sort of flat were the top and bottom and glowed like a son-of-a-bitch. Then it sat down on the ground. After a little while fellas came out, although calling them fellas would be a stretch and an assumption on my part."

The men looked at on another, shook their heads, but all had a twinkle in their eyes, ready to be frightened. They had been down this 'tall tale' road before and enjoyed the hell out of the journey and waited for the rest of Cliff's 'true

story’.

“There were about five of ‘em, but all tall, taller than me. The tallest must have been seven feet, or more. They had large heads, larger than normal, but then again, what the hell is normal when they come down from the sky? As far as their faces go, they had big black eyes and just a couple of holes where noses should have been, and strange as hell, no mouth. Don’t know how the hell they ate.”

Thanks to Cliff’s vivid description, the group followed his story as if they were there.

“They were a sort of purplish-green color. Now, I don’t recall if they were wearing anything or were naked. Come to think of it, I didn’t see any balls. If they were wearing clothes, they were skin-tight. Maybe they weren’t guys. But with the skin-tight clothes, if that’s what they were, didn’t see any sign of female equipment either, if you know what I mean.

“They walked up to me and stood in a kind of circle. Then the damndest thing happened. They talked. Talked without moving their lips, of course, they didn’t have no lips because they didn’t have any mouths. Just stood there, yet I heard them. And more unusual, I understood them. Knew what I was saying too. At first I talked, just like normal. Then I just thought what I wanted to say. Seemed easier that way for them and me.

“Damned if they didn’t say they were from another planet, not one belonging to our sun. How many planets belong to our sun, damned if I know? Anyway, said they were rounding up human volunteers, along with some of our animals to start a colony on their planet. Seemed like a hospitable attitude on their part. Asked if I would like to come along. Said I had time to think about it, they were full-up for this trip. Be back in two weeks, they said. Same time, same

place, with room to take me, if I wanted to go.” There was definite sarcasm in his voice to add to the attitude that he definitely wanted to go.

The group looked at one another, with varying degrees of a smile. Bill Turner, one of the listeners, was perhaps more caught up in the story than the others, and asked, “Well, Cliff, you going to go?”

Cliff thought that fact had been registered in his voice and said, “Know what, I just might take them up on their offer. With Martha gone, God rest her soul, and my son and me constantly feuding, and now not talking; I have little tie here. I just might take them up on their offer. I’ve got two weeks to ponder on the subject.”

“So, how does this story end?” asked Bill Turner.

“Well, they got into that round thing, there was a bright flash, and they were gone.”

“Not much of an ending,” grumbled Joe Conger.

“Told you, Joe, it wasn’t a story. It really happened. He knew they accepted this as just another story, and that was fine. Then Cliff, thinking about his offer to show the group where the thing landed, said, “If it wasn’t snowing like a bastard now, I’d take you out to see the melted spot on the ground where the thing landed. It was the size of a small barn, it was. But I’m sure all signs are hidden by now. It’s started snowing again, damn it.”

“Well, that’s too bad,” said Joe Conger. “That melted spot would have been good evidence for your ‘true story’”

“Oh hell,” said Cliff. “I don’t give a damn if you believe me or not. I just might have me an adventure in two weeks.” And what the group thought added to theatrics, Cliff stormed out of the meeting, but everyone knew he’d be back.

\* \* \*

The following week, the group was seated around the stove, ready to hear stories and add excitement to their routine lives. Cliff arrived, and had a ghost story ready for the group. No one mentioned the previous week's offering. Cliff was at his best with the story he told, knowing the previous week's story held perhaps the promise of a truth none of them really expected.

The next week, that fateful week, seated around the roaring stove and ever-present pot of coffee, the group waited for Cliff, sure that he had another story to scare the hell out of them. As the cut-off time approached, Cliff had not made an appearance. They all knew that without Cliff, the meeting would be short and dull. In all honesty, Cliff could show up anytime he wanted and be welcomed.

Joe Conger told the others, "I'm going to take a walk to Cliff's place and see what the hell is going on. Maybe he's having some kind of problem. Anybody coming?"

They all put on their heavy coats and hats and started out. Their work boots made crunching sounds on the frozen layer of snow and ice covering the ground as they made their way down the trail leading to Cliff's place. Their breath formed a white cloud as they walked. The sky was clear and star-lit, the air, bitter cold.

Walking just five minutes, they were all blinded by a flash the likes of which they had never seen. They looked up and saw a tremendous glow move at a fantastic speed, grow small and then disappear. Hurrying along the trail, they had no problem finding where the flash originated. Slightly off the trail, in a meadow, was an area melted in the snow about the size of a small barn.

Everyone shook their heads in disbelief. Could Cliff had been telling the truth, when

all along they thought that it was just a story he told two weeks ago? They stood in the field, gazing up at the sky. After a few minutes the cold began to get to them.

Joe Conger said, "I don't know what to think, but I'm going back to Johnson's to warm-up and have me a hot cup of coffee."

They all agreed that that was the thing to do and were about to leave when one of the men spied a piece of paper flapping in the wind, lodged under a rock. He picked it up, read it to himself, and shook his head and looked up to the sky and read the note to the group.

The note said, "Hope to see you guys again. And when I do, I'll be ready to tell you all a story that I know you'll believe now. ❖"



# “THE TRILLIONAIRE’S HOUSE”

by NEIL PULLEN

Three weary hunters trudged along hard-packed, baked earth, knowing they couldn’t go on for much longer. *Seven* days! Odi shook his head in shame. Everyone back at the tribesplace would be wondering where they were. And *still* empty-handed.

Odi the First dragged his feet along, kicking up dust, head low and spirits lower. His companions, Tramel the Second and Halric the Third lumbered along in single file behind, lean undernourished muscles on display, handmade spears trailing along the barren soil. Hungry, exhausted, and with nothing to show for it.

Odi couldn’t go back. He just couldn’t; not without meat or carcass. This was the proving hunt, their first after coming-of-age, the measure of their worthiness. Returning after so long with nothing? Unthinkable. He swatted buzzing flies away from his lank hair.

“Wait,” Tramel said. He pointed a bony finger ahead. “What is that?”

Odi looked up, squinting against the sun.

A chaotic spread of bleached bones were scattered across the track, picked clean of any meat. A young gazelle, from the size of them. Beyond, on a raised crest of earth and flanked by tall razor grass, stood a stubby, shiny *thing*. It looked like a kind of lopped-off tree trunk with a duo of straight branches at its head. Not a tree, though—most definitely not. Its reflective, solid material shone like silver.

Odi came to a cautious halt. His companions brandished spears in a defensive stance.

The thing waited without motion. Sunlight gleamed against precise edges.

Odi recognized the substance as metal—the same shade as the antique knife blade corded to the edge of his spear haft. Not a natural entity. No, the shapes were too perfect, the lines too straight.

*Manufactured?* Odi thought. But that could mean only one thing...

“I know what this is!” he said. “Remember Grandwarden’s stories, recounts before stupid-climate and stupid-war?” Odi had spent many hours listening to the historic accounts, stories of cities and cars, food and skyscrapers, economies and thinking machines. He beamed and spread his arms wide. “This is *technology!*”

Unconvinced, Tramel glanced at the animal remains. “I don’t know...”

Odi snorted. “*Think*. It’s just the sort of thing Grandwarden described. This was made by the hands of our ancestors. We’ve found a miracle of history!”

Eyes glinting, Halric nodded. “I think Odi’s right. They call it *tech* and it can do many things.”

“Well, grand,” Tramel said, unmoved. “What now?”

A conundrum. “Does it speak?” Odi wondered.

Halric's smile was white and wide. "Let's see." He carefully put his spear down, kept the smirk and cautiously walked towards the metal tree.

Odi watched with wonder. All those tales of marvels and impossibilities, and they could actually be true? His heart banged with excitement.

The metal tree made a loud double clacking sound. A handful of birds took flight from some nearby brush.

Halric faltered and looked back to the others. Odi shrugged. Grinning, Halric mirrored the motion, then advanced again. He cleared his throat. "Great and fabled ancestors," he said, "I bid you greeting~"

The silver branches swivelled and a single powered shot of superheated energy flashed out. Halric's body exploded in a red mist of blood. Skin, organs, bone and viscera blasted all around. Tramel cried out and sprinted away.

Odi stood there, dumbfounded, spattered in blood. His spear fell to the ground.

#

Odi eventually found Tramel behind a spiky thicket, brandishing a flint knife and trembling. He grasped his Second by the shoulders. "Tramel."

Tramel stared into the middle distance, eyes blank.

Concerned, Odi reached for his goat's leather water-skin and passed it over. It held a scant few sips of brackish puddle water. Tramel gulped the brown liquid down, grimacing at the bitter taste. He passed the waterskin back. "Halric..."

Heavy with sadness, Odi slumped onto a felled tree trunk. "Yes."

"But what happened?"

Odi had no answers. He'd never seen any-

thing like it. "The technology brought death. Some kind of weapon."

Tramel shook his head sadly. "He was my friend."

*A friend to all.* Odi remembered playing around the camp with Halric when they were children. The memories scooped out his insides, leaving a hollow, aching hole. "He'll be mourned on our return."

"*Death does not stop the hunt,*" Tramel quoted.

"We go on."

Tramel's empty gaze remained unfocused. "Disagree. This is the end. We go back to the tribesplace."

A hard will of stone formed within Odi. "Tramel, no. Only shame and disgrace waits for us there. More so now Halric is gone. People are starving. The elders, the children. We have to bring food, and prove ourselves."

Tramel scooped some grit and threw it into the wind in frustration. "What use is proof and honor to Halric?"

Anger building, Odi stood. "I'll not let people go hungry. And I'd rather die than go back in humiliation!"

"You may well yet. So, what then? There's razor grass for miles around and our supplies are low. We can't walk around the metal killer."

Odi refused to listen. Nothing would be achieved if they abandoned their spirit. "Things are never hopeless, we just have to *think*. The technology is mighty and frightening, yes. But what of its purpose? Why does it kill?"

Tramel huffed. "How should I know?"

He could be so *dull* sometimes. Odi took Tramel's arms and shook. "It guards!"

Tramel squirmed aside. "All right, be calm. It stands sentry, obviously. For what?"

Odi thought. Something precious or valu-

able, surely. Why else construct such a weapon? “There must be a prize beyond. Perhaps worthy of a hunt—perhaps worthy of the *greatest hunt of all time.*”

Buzzards cawed and screeched overhead, gliding in great crescents on hot updrafts. Tramel glanced skyward. “We’ll end up like Halric.”

Odi paced back and forth. Dust puffed around his heavy tread. “We have to make something of this, or his death will be pointless. If you want to run home like a scared jackrabbit, then go. I’m staying. I’m getting past this guard and taking the rewards.”

“Jackrabbit?” Tramel said. “Huh. You know I won’t leave you. But nor will I fight against something that kills in an eye-blink. I like to live.”

“So do I,” Odi said. “Don’t worry, there’ll be no fighting. We are *smart*. We can work something out. Glory awaits us, Tramel, I swear to you. Already I have an idea.”

Sighing, Tramel took hold of his spear and rose. “My sister always said I was a fool. All right. For Halric. Let’s hear this idea.”

#

The stocky weapon stood guard at its post, flanked by swathes of sharp-edged grass rippling in the hot, stale breeze. Bones, twigs, branches, and pebbles gathered in an unordered mass at its base. A stone sailed in, clunked off the metal, and dropped to join the rest.

Odi rubbed his aching shoulder. He and Tramel stood amongst various detritus they’d found and gathered from a nearby arid basin; animal remains, vegetation, dried-out tree barks and armfuls of stones and rocks. He’d thrown many items at the impassive sentry, trying to goad a reaction. So far, no response.

“Nothing triggers it,” Tramel said.

“Nothing *yet.*” Odi bent down and grasped a rock, bigger than his fist, jagged and dense. The largest so far.

“Let me try,” Tramel said. “I’m the stronger thrower.”

Odi accepted the statement without comment and passed the rough stone across. Tramel wasted no time. Muscles bunched, he pitched his arm forward and the rock launched with a blur. Aim true, it shot towards the machine like a cannonball.

The sentry swiveled and a blinding flare snapped at the dry air. The rock disintegrated with a deafening crack and a puff of white dust. A sharp clap of energetic discharge echoed across the fields.

Odi blinked in muted shock at the sudden violence. He patted ringing ears and then smiled in delight. “I was right!”

“So you were,” Tramel said. “It evaluates threats.”

Odi bunched fists. “We have its measure. Separate out those larger rocks.”

Together they picked out the heftier stones from their gathered treasures and formed a separate, easy to access heap. *Ammunition.* The sight pleased Odi.

Tramel regarded the stack uneasily. “Are you sure about this?”

*Fearful as ever.* Odi strode to him and smiled heartily. “This is my choice and my responsibility. I am the *neesa*, the First.”

“Of course.”

Odi focused himself, then crouched into a tense runner’s stance. He gambled that a stream of incoming projectiles would register as a higher priority threat than a single man skirting along the edge of the track.

A guess. A hope.

“One after the other,” he said, “right at the

enemy. It's our prey—strike it true.”

Tramel grasped the first rock. “Ready?”

Anxious, eager, full of unleashed energy, Odi mentally prepared himself. He mouthed a brief, silent prayer to his forefathers. “Go,” he commanded.

Tramel hurled the first of the volley.

Odi sprinted alongside, head down, near the track's edge. The weapon clapped out its dazzling report and the rock disintegrated.

Brow creased, Odi kept his gaze straight ahead and powered on. If the sentry were to shoot him, now would be the time—

Another stone flew at the machine. It instantly swiveled and stabbed out a pulse of lightning.

*Well done Tramel!* Relief filled his body with charge. He pumped his arms, ran fast, and came up level with the guard.

Another rock and another shot. Stone splinters burst out from the epicenter of the blast; one slashed across Odi's shoulder blades. Savage pain lanced through his flesh. He recoiled, stumbled, and blade of the tallest razor grass swiped across his calf like a slicing knife.

He fell down fast and heavy, toppling to the packed dirt. He rolled over in a wash of fine grit. Gagging, he cried out to Tramel in desperation. “Throw, throw!”

Eyes wide, Tramel scrabbled for the next rock. His ankle caught on a stray pebble and he slipped onto the pile, hands forward, face warped in dismay.

Odi choked back horror. No more cover—he was dead.

He instinctively cradled himself into a fetal huddle, making himself as small as possible. He shut his eyes and waited for the inevitable ray of deadly fire from the murderous sentry.

Seconds passed.

He still drew breath. He still lived.

Gradually, he opened his eyes and stared towards the metal guard. It stood placid as ever, unmoving, aimed down the trail towards Tramel.

“Odi!” came Tramel's voice, laced with worry. “Are you there?”

Cautiously, Odi got to his feet. He remained in a squat position, still within range of the weapon. A thin trickle of warm blood ran from his leg and his shoulder stung as if he'd been bitten by a hornet. He ignored the sensations and fixated on the guard.

“Odi!” Tramel cried, emerging from the rock pile.

“*Shh!*” Odi hissed.

The weapon made no move.

Curious now, a little braver, Odi stood to his full height and side-stepped round to the back of the sentry. Small mounds of sun-hardened hare droppings littered this side of the track—but not a single animal corpse.

A jolt of understanding slammed into him. *Of course!* He laughed openly and beckoned to the deadly technology. “I'm here! Hello!”

“Odi, don't!” Tramel said, anxious and pleading.

Brimming with sweet relief, Odi heaved a wheezy chuckle. “Open your eyes and see—I'm on the safe side! It guards one way only!”

“Well, celebrations to you!” his Second called. “But what of poor Tramel?”

“Poor Tramel who tripped when he was needed?”

“Sorry about that! But how will I get across? You'll have to find more rocks to throw!”

Giddy with elation, Odi ambled further down the track to explore. The path's incline grew, headed in an uphill direction, though the land fell away either side to form crumbling

cliffs.

How had such a thing formed naturally? He shaded his eyes from the sun and viewed ahead to the distance. The path went higher until it reached a far-off crest. What was over that apex? A tantalizing thought.

The cliffs either side of the track dropped to ravines full of overhanging slate and rubble. *Perfect.* Odi slid down. Crushed stone and boulders heaped at the foot of the cliffs; no throwing rocks, though. A weighty boulder nestled at the edge of the rise.

A plan sparked into his mind in an instant. *That could do some damage...*

He gripped the hefty boulder and heaved it up to his collarbone. Taut but comfortable, he waddled up the slope and back down the trail to the sentry and his waiting Second.

“Odi, no,” Tramel called when he saw what his First carried. “Be sensible!”

Odi was done taking Tramel’s advice. His Second still lurked only a few paces away from Halric’s rotting remains. The sight of them twisted Odi’s feelings into a dark, scathing hatred, and he knew with certainty his scheme was just and right.

The ruthless sentry waited silently for its next victim. Odi approached from the rear. It didn’t register him at all.

With righteous fury, he used all his might and lugged the boulder above his head. Blood roared behind his temples. “For Halric!” he cried.

He brought the boulder crashing down. The metal trunk shuddered upon impact and the dual vanes bent out of shape with a renting screech. Something inside its housing crackled—a jittery, popping fizz.

Buoyed, Odi took a firm hold of the boulder and lifted it again. His lungs heaved and

sweat dripped down his back, making his cuts sting. He dropped the weighty stone down on the machine.

The sentry buckled sideways and its bodywork dented, exposing tied cabling and glinting green boards within.

In a hot fervor, Odi reached in and grabbed whatever he could. He tore, ripped, and pulled until components and wiring sprinkled out onto the ground. Sparks flashed and dissipating clouds of blue smoke streamed from the device’s innards. Odi put his heel to the trunk and heaved back on a thick root-like cable. It dislodged and clear fluid sprayed from the holding.

Tramel watched on, half fearful, half curious.

Growling, Odi ripped aside a final panel, tossed it aside, then surveyed his work.

The smashed sentry lay in ruins, its once-precise bodywork reduced to bent and buckled panels. Metal fragments and plastic coils spread from gouged wounds. A waft of smoky mist drifted from its core.

Odi stood proudly over his prey, bathing in a wash of victory. He raised a joyful fist. “Worthy after all, no?”

Tramel paced over, peering at what was left of the technology. “You could have killed yourself.”

“I live on,” Odi said, “and it is defeated.” He kicked at the scrap.

“Yes,” Tramel agreed. “Halric is avenged.” He gestured towards the rising track and the unknown space behind. “Nothing between us and that now. Do you still think riches lie beyond?”

“Let’s find out. Race you.” And like a springbok, Odi turned and ran.

Shouting after him for caution, Tramel followed and together they jogged up the incline,

past the heat-cracked cliffs and to the top edge of the track where Odi was sure they would find a miracle.

#

A shallow valley eased out before them, a verdant place of greens and plants and life. A vast oval of grass, cut with millimeter-precision, awaited them at the foot of the slope-but not the usual dried, yellow, brittle stalks they were used to. This pasture boasted a lush, healthy emerald color, watered and fed, cut into intricate patterns and swirls. Beds of overflowing flowers skirted the spirals of green, blooms of bright scarlets and honey yellows and rich lilacs.

Odi stood dumbfounded, never having seen plants of such health and color before.

A huge curved edifice rose organically from the earth itself; a monument of white marble veined in gold and glinting diamond, with broad elliptical windows and archways for entry.

Breathing fast, Odi knew he'd been right. The work of the ancients laid out before them. Prior to stupid-war, when technology ruled the world. Prior to stupid-climate, when the world fought back. A spectacle from history!

Spurred on, he marched down the slope. "Incredible!"

Tramel trailed behind, mute, gripping his spear.

They reached the soft, cultured grass. Odi marvelled at the sensation of walking across the cottony surface. He stared at the bushes and blossoms, smelt the fragrant flowery scents and admired their beauty. Insects buzzed around the flora, slinking from one to the next in search of pollen.

"What is this place?" Tramel said.

Memories from the old stories tumbled over in Odi's mind. "A garden, I think," he said, hoping he'd remembered the right word. "A

managed plot of land~"

Something circular and jet-black glided onto the edge of the lawn and purred its way towards them. Tramel raised his spear, ready to cut it down.

Odi quickly lifted his hand. "Wait."

"It may kill us."

More of the imparted knowledge flowed through Odi. What Tramel said felt wrong. "No, look. See how it tends the grass."

Tramel arched a brow, watching the machine work. "It's constructed, like the sentry."

"Yes, of limited intelligence."

The disc-like device hummed along, slicing and gathering grass as it went. It reached Odi and halted. Tramel, anxious, kept his weapon ready.

"Hello," Odi offered.

The device pivoted, skimmed around him, then went on its way, efficient and uncaring. More recollections came to Odi. He saw the Grandwarden speak the words, recount the tales, and they coursed through him. "A robot. A Little Helper."

Tramel relaxed somewhat as the disc rotated away from them, cutting the intricate spiral patterns into the grass. "If this is a garden," he said, "then what is that?"

The curved edifice waited patiently, its minerals glinting in the sunlight like a vast marbled jewel.

"Gardens were attached to dwellings," Odi stated. "Houses."

"A dwelling?" Tramel said incredulously. "Of that size? For how many people?"

Odi grinned. "Let's see" he said, and strode towards the sinuous marbled superstructure.

#

The lower level of the house opened up like a private gallery; expansive, hushed and radiant.

The floor was constructed of a single, uninterrupted plane of marble, its pale veins flowing like frozen silk beneath gentle lighting.

Odi peered up and around at the unfathomable construction. The air inside was cool and controlled, a welcome respite from the fierce heat outside. A huge window of tempered glass darkened in response to the brush of the sun's rays. Tramel pressed his hand against the color-shifting surface. "Sorcery."

"Technology," Odi corrected, voice echoing through the chamber.

To one side, low custom furnishings in cream and champagne anchored a spacious lounge area. Brass and gold-framed glass tables seemed weightless against the stone floor.

Entranced, Odi wandered through, running fingers across sleek smooth stone and velvet upholstery.

The central atrium flowed naturally from the lounge, a monumental living space unfolding without walls. Columns clad in polished stone rose sparingly, and warm gold-leaf trimmed edges caught concealed shimmering light. The ceiling floated high above, white and pristine, decorated in carvings of clouds and edged with threads of sapphire and pink diamond, giving the space a sense of quiet power.

Awe settled upon Odi; *through* him. It was as if he peered up at the infinite night sky. "This is a house of the Gods."

Tramel nodded an assent. "Let us hope they welcome us."

Lifting his spear, Odi cried out lustily, "Greetings to all!"

Long seconds passed. Only a peaceful, regal stillness answered him.

"Deserted, perhaps?" Tramel wondered.

"Let's explore."

And so they did. They ascended a wide

stone staircase through each floor and discovered rooms upon rooms upon rooms. One had a cut-lake of turquoise water scintillating in golden light; Tramel scooped up a mouthful and screwed up his face so much at the bad taste Odi nearly fell over laughing. They found a room with many chairs and screens of mystery, rooms with devices that could make hot rainfall, rooms with projected images from the before times, and a room with a soft round sleeping bed and a balcony overlooking the grounds.

Odi drifted through each extraordinary chamber in a dream-like haze, enthralled with wonder after wonder, astonished at the impossible sights and sounds.

But it was only when they descended to the subterranean floor that they discovered real treasure.

#

The lowering staircase opened out into a long cavern. Lighting eased on, reacting to their presence, and glossy stone reflected the muted glow. The temperature lowered to a biting chill, as if the air itself formed a block of cold.

"They control the very atmosphere," Tramel said, his breath misting.

Odi nodded. "Remarkable."

Steel ribs arced overhead, carrying brilliant light across a cavernous pantry. One wall presented chilled fruits and vegetables behind crystal panels: apples gleaming with frost, waxy citrus fruit, suspended leafy greens and root vegetables stacked in geometric crates. On the opposite side, choice cuts of meat hung on rails, bearing marbled steaks, shoulders, ribs and shanks sealed in translucent membranes.

Odi could scarcely believe what he saw. So much food. So many colors, textures and scents. "Great Gods. Enough to feed the entire tribe."

"Truly," Tramel said. "And all fresh. How is

this possible?"

"A miracle." Spirit dancing, Odi swept himself over to the fruit and plucked a deep red apple from its holding. He raised it aloft, inspected the perfect curves, then took a deep, satisfying bite. It tasted sweet and delicious. He grinned as a trickle of juice ran down his chin.

Tramel advanced down the pantry. His expression turned from wonder to suspicion—and then open disgust.

Odi saw his friend's demeanor. "What's wrong?"

"Down here."

The far end of the pantry presented markedly different conditions. Chill could only do so much to keep time and decay at bay. Spots of flowering black mold sunk into bananas, mangoes, marrows and kiwis. Fluffy white fungi spread across skins and consumed fruit flesh from within. Plastic packaging had split and rotten meat spilled and dripped from the packs, congealing on the floor in sticky pools which gave off powerful vinegary, decaying smells.

Stomach turning, Odi covered his nose. "All this food is left to spoil," he said, unable to fathom the concept. Such precious gifts, ignored and left to rot?

"We must face facts," Tramel said. "There's no one here to eat it."

"Grandwarden always said the climate and the wars killed everyone."

"Yes. Why should this place be any different?"

A procession of three Little Helpers hovered in, split in perfect synchronized movement, and tended to the mess either side. Fouled vegetables were shunted into crates and stacked, rancid meat was swept up and sprayed with a strong-scented diffuse liquid that made Odi's nostrils tingle.

Disheartened, he watched the display. "The waste. When I think of how many have died from hunger."

The Helpers twisted and hummed away down a side corridor, smaller and seemingly not designed for people.

Odi's curiosity grabbed hold. "Let's follow," he said, intrigued by the devices and their mysterious workings.

The two ducked into the narrow channel and crouched through a service passage which sloped upwards and then came out via a smooth cave-like entrance to the rear area of the grounds—outside once again. Odi stepped up onto a curb to give a better view of what waited in store for them behind the house.

#

Fields upon fields of bounteous crops were laid out in precision squares four rows deep. Slim irrigation channels ran between the planted columns, and teams of Little Helpers with thicker treads crawled between areas, inspecting, harvesting, filling plastic boxes with produce and marching back ant-like to their stations where hoppers gathered the food.

Grasslands with grazing animals—Odi could see buffalo, goats, sheep and cattle—opened up beyond the crops, along with corrugated sheds filled with presumably more livestock. "It's a whole farm," he said.

"Look at the Helpers. They run everything. You said their intelligence was limited."

"Limited, but clever!"

Tramel tapped him on the arm and pointed to the distance. "More sentries."

Sure enough, at regular intervals on the outskirts of the grounds, sentries stood at watch, ever vigilant.

Odi shrugged. "I don't blame anyone for wanting to guard this heaven."

The lapping sound of water drew their attention. A deep blue river had been dammed beside the house by stark concrete blocks. On one side, the splash of running water, the fluttering of insects amongst lush green lily pads; on the other a cracked, dry river channel of broken twigs, dirt, and sand.

An angry flush arose in Tramel's cheeks. "That should be flowing down and through to our camp," he said. "All this water for a single dwelling!"

"It is shocking," Odi admitted, but he couldn't help but marvel at the industry on show. "Just think though, Tramel-how many years have the Little Helpers farmed here? How many crops harvested?"

Tramel spat on the ground. "All to waste. Pulped."

Odi slapped Tramel on the back to lift his friend's mood. "Come on-we've seen enough. Let's get something to eat and drink, and wash. We'll feel better."

Face darkened, Tramel nudged him aside.  
#

The swollen sun coasted across a lonely sky, marking the passage of the lingering afternoon.

Overwhelmed with the sights of the day, and with bellies satisfied after an extended trip to the pantry, Odi and Tramel sat on the lawn in the waning heat to take stock. Bees hovered between nearby blooms and whirring Helpers scooted around the flowerbeds.

Tramel watched everything in silent contemplation. "We can't tell anyone about this," he said at last.

Odi jerked in surprise. "What?"

Tramel waved away the appalled tone. "We should package up as much food as we can carry, salt any meat, and be welcomed as heroes on our return to the tribesplace. The worthiest. It'll

be everything you ever wanted."

"But why keep the discovery a secret?"

"Because we can repeat this trip for future hunts. Each hunt as a duo, return here and fetch as much food as we like. Think of our reputations-we'll be legends of the tribe. *More* than heroes."

Scratching his ear, Odi considered Tramel's words. He couldn't fault the logic. A hunt this successful, repeated, would elevate them both to the pinnacle of the tribesplace order. They'd be celebrated as kings.

"You'll have all the respect you've ever craved," Tramel said.

Odi flushed at the thought. His heart's desire, ripe for the taking! And so easy.

*But-*

His conscious twanged at him. Another path laid out in his mind, in perfect clarity. "Yes. Or, we could guide the tribe here. Why not? A new home, plenty of food, water, shelter. That's our way to herodom."

"For a short while, granted. But memories fade. Soon this will be the norm and our participation forgotten. There'll be no glory in the long run."

Odi looked at Tramel warily. "You've never mentioned glory before. I didn't know it was a concern of yours."

"You sound accusatory."

"This doesn't seem like you."

Tramel issued a deep sigh. "You're a canny one sometimes, Odi. Truth is, I don't like it here."

Odi guffawed. "Don't *like*? It's paradise!"

"Seemingly," Tramel said. "Yet I can't ignore that all this excess and technology led to the stupid-war. It's what *caused* the downfall, don't you see? And, really, we don't understand how any of it works."

“We don’t have to. It runs itself.”

Tramel’s stern, sad gaze settled on Odi. “This isn’t where we belong. It’s too much. It’s from a time gone by. Let’s take the spoils and leave. The tribe can cut its own path in the world.”

A deep, moral sense within Odi rose up. “The most important thing we can do is survive. The whole tribe. This magic place gives us a chance. Think of the people who’ve died from failed harvests or dirty waters. The young children.”

“I know you’ve lost family...”

A tight knot of grief squeezed Odi’s heart. *Don’t think of that. Not now. You are the First of a hunt and this isn’t the time.* “Everyone’s lost people. We can stop it ever happening again.”

“An impossible proposal,” Tramel said.

Odi looked to the blossoms. “Maybe. But this dwelling and its grounds can at least help. We bring *everyone* here to share the glory. That’s my decision as the First.”

“You can’t be swayed?”

“No. We pack as much food as we can, return to the tribe, and tell them to prepare for a pilgrimage.”

Odi saw it all. The tribe, in procession, shuffling along the dusty track-until they spied this oasis in the desert, this gem in the dust. The elation they would feel, the cheer, the relief that the daily, agonizing struggle to survive would be coming to an end.

Swelling with gratitude, Odi got to his feet and stretched. “Come on. Let’s prepare the food for the walk back. We’ll leave soon.”

Tramel gave a curt nod. “As you say, then. Together.”

#

The two friends, laden with animal skins of wrapped, treated meat and root vegetables

strode across the lawn and to the edge of the house grounds. They took a pointed look back, reflecting on the incredible events of the day. They shared the same hushed feeling of veneration at the view and the marvels they’d seen.

They paced down the familiar dirt track, past the destroyed remnants of the sentry and the remains of their friend; just bones now, scavenged of any meat. They bowed heads to show respect and continued on their way, gratified, but with stabbing pains of grief for their lost colleague, and knowing that their world, and that of the tribe, was about to change forever.

The house systems continued their clockwork machinations. Helpers shunted crates of unused food to compost pipes, picked fruits and planted seeds, replenished animal feed buckets, cleaned and polished floors and rooms, all under the guidance of the central core’s algorithms. Toiling, ever toiling, yet mindless with it.

In time, the expanding sun lowered to meet the vast sepia horizon.

Two bulkier, caterpillar-tracked chrome Helpers emerged from the house and trundled across the garden, passing over the edge of the pristine estate, and down the earthy path to the sentry’s messy grave.

Jointed arms with welding tools, buzz saws and screw guns danced around the smashed components, reforming, remolding and repairing. New replacement parts stored within the Helpers’ bulk were plugged in and sealed where appropriate.

But not exactly as before. The security algorithms, recognizing the boundary breach, upgraded the sentry. A quad-set of guns, mass drivers with far greater range and lethality.

The Helpers attached panels, soldered control boxes and welded body parts. Crack-

ling phosphorous sparks blew into the evening air like dandelion leaves. It took time, but the machines neither slowed nor tired, and just as darkness fell they completed the work.

A brand-new sentry, taller, broader, with four deadly gun barrels stood proudly to attention, silhouetted against the fading light. A Helper poured shells into an ammunition hopper. The rounds whirred and clicked into place, and the sentry scanned the horizon from left to right and back again, forever patient and watchful.

The Helpers turned and trundled back to the house. The core algorithm noted the finished job and shunted it from its task list; not with satisfaction, never that, but with a cold sense of finality at a job finished and the knowledge that the house was secure once again. It logged the completion of the work, then turned without complaint to the next task on its unending list. ❖

**END TRANSMISSION**