

PALIMPSEST

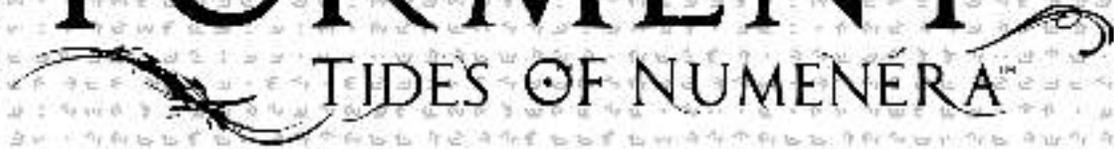


TORMENT
TIDES OF NUMENERA

MONTE COOK

Palimpsest

TORMENT



by Monte Cook

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Chapter 1

The Beginning

Varden's makeshift workshop lay in a cave not far from the hole in the universe he had made.

The young man worked feverishly. His neck and face still bore the wounds he'd received obtaining the last and most important part he needed for his creation to be complete. The closer to fruition he came, the faster he worked.

Varden was no tinker or builder. He created now out of necessity, not inspiration. With each turn of each screw, and each seal fused in pinpoint applications of heat, he neared the completion of his work. But the completion was not the end he sought—it was a step toward a bigger, more important end.

The desert cave was dark and damp. The air was cool and stank of lime to such a degree that it burned Varden's nose and mouth a bit. It stung his wounds. But it was better than the heat in the desert outside.

He'd learned the hard way not to touch the scratches and cuts with his dirty, salt-crusted gloves.

Varden's design was unimaginative, and he knew it. But he didn't care. He knew just enough about what he was doing to cobble the thing together. He wasn't interested in innovation. So it had the form of a human, more or less. He placed the sensory devices in what would pass for its head and its hands. He put most of the mechanisms that would control movement and coordination in its neck and ended up creating what looked very much like a spinal column that ran down what would be a human's back, if he were building a human.

The final piece, the one he'd stolen from the Weal of Baz itself, he placed in the deepest parts of its head. It was, after all, the closest allegory it would have to a brain.

There were certainly better configurations, likely more practical, perhaps more beautiful, but this would serve Varden's purposes just fine, he thought. Perceptive electric eyes. A couple of strong arms to hold a halberd. A quick wrist that could draw

out the ray projector he'd leave with it, should it need something that powerful. He was confident it would work.

Varden found a fairly clean cloth to wipe the sweat from his cold forehead, away from the still-painful gash. It would certainly leave a scar. He knew he was lucky, however. The automaton that had used the slugspitter had intended on putting that hunk of metal in his brain, not just scraping the side of his head. A cypher or two had gotten him well away from that strange mechanical city and its machine-god ruler. He felt grateful for that, and the fact that he'd never have to return there. No time to think about that now. It was like the old saying, It's easier to look backward than to look ahead. But he wanted to look ahead. He got what he wanted, and now it was fitted into the housing of his creation's oblong head.

He closed the doors atop that head, and they sealed tight with a magnetic click.

Magic warms the metal was another old saying. Probably had to do with the fact that a functioning machine's outer casing was warmer than one that didn't work. He didn't know where the saying came from, but it was time Varden added a spark of magic of his own. He moved around to the back of the machine—the base of the spine, more or less—and connected a pair of tubes to a receptacle. One began pumping thick red gel, and the other blue. He moved a synth plate down to cover the tubes and pushed the machine upright. He steadied it, moving the limbs so that it was more or less in a human sitting position.

Varden stood a few paces in front of it and looked down, surveying his creation.

The machine shuddered with the semblance of life. Tremors shook each limb, and the neck clicked into its proper socket as the head gyrated back and forth. Eventually, these spasms ended and the machine sat still. The smell of burnt air hung about them both.

The eyes—the receptors that Varden had positioned on its face like eyes—brightened with a glow and swiveled about. They found Varden and studied him.

“Well,” Varden said with a smile. “Looks like it works.” His shoulders relaxed. He breathed.

“Do I have a name?” The machine's voice was pleasant but oddly accented.

Varden took two hurried steps backward and slammed his head on the low ceiling behind him. His feet gave out from underneath him, and suddenly he was seated on the rough floor.

The machine stared at all of this but didn't otherwise react.

"It spoke," Varden whispered.

"Am I using this language correctly?" The machine didn't have a mouth. When it spoke, the voice just emanated from its head.

"I didn't put any kind of vocalization device in there," Varden said, pulling his hand from the back of his head. Blood. More blood. He put the cloth to the new wound, tried to stand, and failed.

"Can you understand me?" The machine spoke very slowly.

"Yes," Varden said, eyes closed in pain. "Just shut up a moment. I don't know what's going on."

Silence.

Varden groaned in pain and then spoke, eyes still closed. "So it can talk, that's okay. I can work with that. The brain core from Baz was just a lot more than I thought. It's okay." He sighed and put pressure on the back of his head, wincing even as he did so.

Minutes passed.

"Can you clarify how long you want me to be silent?" The automaton's voice was soft.

Varden opened his eyes and watched as the automaton got awkwardly to its feet. It held out one arm for balance and steadied itself with the other against the wall.

Varden addressed the machine with a loud, steady voice. "Tell me your status."

"I am more concerned about your status, to be frank," it said. "But to comply, my status appears to be functional on a rudimentary level. I'm not sensing any familiar external systems. Some of my current parts are not compatible. My configuration is substandard. But I seem to be able to move these appendages."

"Good," Varden said, closing his eyes again. "Good. Now, if I can just... no, never mind. It doesn't matter why you can talk. You're functional. You'll serve your purpose."

“I’m worried about your head wound. Or rather, wounds, plural. Can you call for assistance?”

“There’s no one else around,” Varden said. And then he opened his eyes again. “You’re worried? You can feel worry?”

“Of course.”

Varden sighed again. “This is what I get for stealing a brain from the Weal of Baz, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know that place reference.” The machine paused very briefly and then continued. “I don’t know any place references, actually.” Its inflection indicated slight surprise at this discovery. Perhaps annoyance.

“But you’re speaking the Truth. The language, I mean. It’s not some weird prior-world tongue no one understands anymore.”

“Again, I don’t understand any of your references, although I’m quickly gathering contextual clues. However, this is the only language I can currently access. I don’t know where or when the knowledge of it comes from. I sense that at one time I had access to a great deal more information than I currently do. Now, I know almost nothing.”

“But you’re set up to obey my commands,” Varden stated, although it was more a question.

“Yes.”

“You understand that I’m your creator.”

It made a motion with one arm as though testing the limits of its flexibility, but in so doing, almost lost its balance. It righted itself. “Yes.”

“Still, you’re not just an automaton. You’ve expressed emotion, sort of. And you asked for clarification of a command earlier. That’s all pretty far beyond what…” His voice trailed off.

The machine looked around the cave. Its gaze lingered on the exit and the brilliant white light of day coming from it.

“What can you tell me about yourself? What do you remember?” Varden asked.

“This is not my original body. Some of these parts are primitive compared to my central core.”

“I used what I had.” Varden waved one hand in the air, clutched the bloody cloth to his head with the other.

“I understand. Are materials scarce? Is there a manufacturing problem?”

“This is the Ninth World. When it comes to materials, we have what we can scavenge. And that’s it. At least, as far as the numenera goes. I suppose there are a few isolated clones that can produce their own materials here and—”

“The numenera,” the machine repeated, rolling the word around as if it could study the word by saying it aloud.

“Yeah,” Varden nodded and then winced.

“This is a word in your language that is akin to ‘magic,’ correct?”

“I suppose so. It’s basically anything from the prior worlds.”

“The prior worlds. The Ninth World. I think I understand.”

“What do you understand?”

“I am still attempting to gather context.”

“I asked you what you remembered, and what you know.”

“And I answered. Beyond what I can surmise about this body, and what I can ascertain from what you’re saying, I know nothing.”

“And yet you can speak.”

The machine made a strange gesture—perhaps an attempt at a shrug. “It’s a feature of my core. I don’t have the capacity for further explanation.”

Varden sighed. “I really wasn’t expecting to have a conversation with the machine I created.”

It took a few unsteady steps toward the exit, then stopped. “Can I help you with your wound?”

“I think... I think it’s stopped bleeding for the most part.” Varden pulled the cloth away and looked at it. “Just a bang on the head. Not my first. Probably not my last.”

“My question from earlier,” the machine said. “Do I have a name?”

Varden managed to stand. He stared at his creation and worked his jaw back and forth, the way he always did when pondering.

Finally, he said, “When the Aeon Priests need to write down their findings, sometimes they’ll just take an old book and scrape the pages clean so they can write over them. It’s called a palimpsest. That’s what you’ll be. We’ll overwrite whatever was there before with what you need now. You’ll be Palimpsest.”

“Palimpsest. That’s not a word in my current vocabulary. Or at least it wasn’t until now. I can add new information myself. I can learn.” It stated this with the emphasis of one that has just realized a fact’s importance.

“We’ll call you Palim for short.” Varden’s grin was broad. His eyes beamed. “You know, you’re even better than I’d ever imagined.”

“Why?” Palim moved its head awkwardly, like it wasn’t even a part of its body—like no human would ever stand.

“You’re just so... I had thought that you would just be a, well, a drone. An automaton.”

“What am I, then?”

“Well, I suppose the term ‘automaton’ is still generally correct, but your intelligence level is so... I don’t know. Beyond expectations. You seem to have some kind of self-awareness. Consciousness. Or a very good illusion of it.”

“I have no idea if you’re complimenting me or insulting me,” Palim said flatly.

“See what I mean? That’s exactly it.”

Palim said nothing.

Varden gathered some parts and tools that lay around the cave, placing them in a leather satchel. He stopped. “But I wasn’t insulting you, of course. Just the opposite.”

“I see.”

“You’re probably the second most amazing thing I’ve ever created.”

Palim paused and then asked, “Second?”

“You’ll see.” Varden smiled and went back to gathering tools.

Varden led Palim across the open expanse of desert. The Errid Kaloum's sun showed no mercy. Varden's scarred face was covered in sweat. Palim didn't seem to react to the heat, but its gait was still awkward and unsteady. The legs that Varden gave it appeared to be slightly uneven, but the automaton seemed to learn to compensate quickly.

Ahead of them, in the shimmering heat, stood a thin column of what might have been stone. As they grew closer, they could see that the column was a cylinder, about eight inches in diameter and about six feet high. A metal cap rested at the top. This close, the column seemed less like stone and more like ceramic carefully crafted to look like stone.

They stopped about fifteen paces from it. "There it is," Varden said with a nod.

Palim's head moved back and forth, up and down, as though the ground, the sky, and the rocky terrain in every direction were as interesting as the column.

"I call it the Arthenac. It's a word in my mother's language that means 'the hole.'"

Palim stared at the ceramic cylinder. "It doesn't look like a hole."

Varden smiled, betraying that that was precisely what he had wanted Palim to say. "Ah," he said quietly, "but watch." He took a few steps forward to where he had etched a line in the dirt. He reached forward and suddenly stopped, as if he touched something that couldn't be seen. The air around the cylinder flared to life with green and yellow lights. They formed lines, geometric shapes, and symbols.

The cylinder floated straight up and split into seven pieces. The pieces then moved to various places within the light and began swirling around in horizontal circles.

Varden looked at Palim. "Does any of this mean anything to you?"

"No. Although I find it aesthetically pleasing. Entertaining, even."

"The symbols and shapes?"

"No. They don't appear to have any meaning in any memory that I have. But then, everything is new to me."

"It's a conduit. A doorway to a world beyond this one. Another universe... one teeming with energy."

"I see. And you built it?"

“In the same way that I built you.”

“I see,” Palim said slowly. “Do you wish to leave this world, then?”

“No. No, it’s not a doorway that matter can pass through. Just energy. I want to draw the energy from the other world to this one.”

“Why?”

“I think that one day it could power a whole city. A city like those of the prior worlds. If I can gather the right devices, and maybe the right people, I can found a city that rivals any on Earth.”

“Perhaps there was once such a city here in the past.”

“Maybe so. I never thought about it, but you’re right. Maybe that’s why the Arthenac is here.”

“I do like that you gave it a name in your mother’s language. I like that you honor her that way. Why did she have a language other than this one?”

“She was from an isolated village. She left it, though, and learned the Truth when she met my father.”

“I see.”

“More importantly, though, I’m concerned about the Arthenac. I have to leave for a while.”

“It’s not portable, then.”

Varden shook his head, and then that same gesture became a nod. “No. And that’s exactly what I built you for.”

“I don’t understand.”

Varden pressed the air again in a certain sequence of gestures, and the lights flickered away. The pieces of the cylinder rejoined, and, once complete, it lowered to the position it had before.

“I need you to watch over it. Protect it. You don’t require food or water. Or sleep. Your energy reserves will last... well, longer than my lifetime, that’s for certain.” He laughed. “I’ve not had to justify a task to the machine I built it for before.”

“I didn’t ask for any justification.”

“So you’ll...” Varden shook his head. “That’s what you will do, then.”

“Yes.”

Varden motioned to his right. “There are some weapons over there.”

“Weapons?”

“Yes. I built you specifically so that you could hold a weapon and defend the Arthenac if need be.”

“Others want it, then?”

“At the moment, I don’t think anyone knows about it. But let’s keep it that way, understand? Don’t let anyone get close.”

“Yes.”

“Meanwhile, I’m going to go search for other things I need. I might be gone awhile, but like I said, I don’t think you’ll need anything. Just wait and watch.”

“Yes.”

Varden hesitated for a moment. “I suppose, in light of everything, you’re... well, you’re overqualified for this task.”

Palim said nothing but stared at Varden.

“I didn’t know you’d be so, well, sophisticated. I just wanted an automaton guard. ‘Pick up this. Do that.’ That sort of thing. You know? I mean, should I be feeling bad about this? I don’t know what to think. I’ll be back as soon as I can. There will be more interesting things to do later, believe me. Lots of interesting things.”

“I am grateful for my existence,” Palim said. “I am grateful to have a body of sorts that can perceive and interact with the world. I am grateful to be awake and aware.”

Varden didn’t know what to say to that, so he nodded.

“My name is Varden, by the way,” he said, shrugging. “You never asked, but... that’s my name.”

“I see.”

Chapter 2

Six Years Later

Varden walked with a limp. Each step across the desert was more difficult than those he'd taken to leave it, years earlier.

His steps gained a slight bit of energy, however, as he drew near. He looked forward to seeing the Arthenac. He remembered Palim with fondness and wondered how it would welcome its creator's return. Over time, the surprise of its sapience had become a bit of fascination.

A good memory for landmarks and direction led him to the spot he sought. The heat rose from the bare earth in waves, but through them he saw his destination: the Arthenac.

He saw the column, but at first he thought he was seeing double. Two slender forms stood in the middle of the open desert. In a moment, however, he realized that one of them was Palim.

"Palim! Hello!" He waved his free hand, the other holding his wooden staff.

There was no reaction from the figure, so Varden drew closer. Now he could make out details of the automaton's form. The crude—hasty, even—construction of its green and silver metal limbs, and its oblong, rust-colored head were not exactly what he remembered, but nevertheless it was Palim. It held a metal-shafted spear in its right hand, blunt end resting in the dirt.

"Palim!" He called out again. "It's me, Varden! I've returned!"

Palim didn't move as Varden got close. He was afraid that something had malfunctioned until it finally spoke.

"Hello."

Varden suddenly felt foolish. He'd assumed that this would be a welcome homecoming. Perhaps a reunion of friends, even. But Palim was just a machine. It hadn't missed him. It had stood here, in the desert heat, for six years because he had told it to.

“How... how are you?”

“Fine. You seem hale, although you walk differently.”

“Ah, yes. Yes. That happened, oh, about a year ago now.”

Palim stared at Varden’s staff. A golden device holding a red crystal topped it.

“Yes, I got a new toy, I suppose,” Varden said, taking his weight off the staff and gesturing with it. He got a far-off look that accompanied his broad smile. “I found this crystal... Oh, the sights I’ve seen. The world is so big, Palim.”

“Is it?”

Varden nodded. “How are things here?” He looked around.

“Fine.”

“Good, good.”

“Did you find what you were looking for?”

“Well, that’s an interesting question.” He wiped the sweat from his brow and neck. “Damn this heat, though. Let’s move into that old cave and talk. I need to eat something.”

Palim followed Varden to the cave where it had first been activated.

Once inside the cool darkness, Varden activated a glowglobe from his pack and then pulled out some food as well. He remembered that there was water at the back of the cave, and was grateful for it.

“Did you find what you were looking for?” Palim asked again.

“I learned a lot. Discovered a lot. I realized that there is a great deal more to my goal than I had first thought. I think I was a bit naive back when I last saw you.”

Palim said nothing.

“I certainly learned that you can’t trust people. I tried to find some partners in this plan, and, well, I guess as you can see, I’m alone.”

“Where did you travel?”

“You’re really interested?”

“Yes.”

“I still don’t have a handle on you,” Varden said, mouth full of dry bread.

“I don’t know what that means.”

“I don’t know how to interact with you. Are you a machine or a person?”

“Are those the only two options?”

“I guess I don’t know.”

“You were going to tell me about your travels.”

“Ah, right. Well, I made it all the way to the Steadfast, far to the west. Things there are a bit more civilized than out here. They call this region the Beyond. Anything that isn’t the Steadfast is the Beyond, I guess. Anyway, the Steadfast is on the other side of the mountains. The land is quite fertile, and the weather is more hospitable. I mean, in much of it. It’s quite vast. There are nine different kingdoms in the Steadfast.”

Varden continued to eat while he spoke.

“Anyway, I found my way to a city called Stirthal. It’s built in the side of a cliff. Well, more accurately, one side of a very deep chasm they call the Voil Chasm. Stirthal is lots of platforms and bridges, all crowded with people and connecting buildings of all different sizes, arranged vertically along the side of the rock wall. Some of the structures are made of wood, and others of metal or synth. Some of them are just scavenged sheeting from prior-world ruins. If anything, there are more ruins—or maybe more accessible ruins—in the Steadfast than in the Beyond. More of them have been found, or excavated. More of them explored.

“Well, so I push my way through the crowds, because that’s how you get around in Stirthal. There’s usually only one way to get from one point to another, and it’s always narrow. Thus, crowded. Eventually, I find myself a place to get a cup of tea and relax. I’m looking for some Aeon Priests to talk to about the Arthenac and its potential—there’s a lot more access to numenera lore and understanding in the Steadfast, I think. The priesthood, I think. They’re generally the most knowledgeable, and there’s just a lot more of them there. They’re more organized. They talk to one another. You see?

“I start talking to this woman who’s also drinking tea. Her name is Kemma, and it turns out she knows a lot of different people of importance and influence in the city. This includes more than a few experts on the numenera. I mention the priesthood but

state that I'm open to alternatives. I'm a seeker after knowledge, wherever it can be found.

"I know just who you should meet,' she says. 'There's a group called the Zirathu. They meet at dusk every twenty-third day. I'll figure out when the next meeting is and let you know.'

"And so I agree. Eagerly. And soon a messenger arrives at the boarding house where I'm staying, with an address and a time a few days hence. When the time comes, I find the place with a little effort. It's a small and lonely building near the lowest parts of the city. Although it's only dusk, down that deep it's as dark as night. There are some small, high-placed windows that show light inside, probably from glowglobes. A single sigil marks the door in a bronze plate, but I don't recognize it. Not knowing what else to do, I knock.

"The door opens, and a man with a sharp, angular nose is staring at me. His features are so birdlike that I wonder if he had in fact had some kind of modifications to make himself more avian. I had heard that such things were possible in some places, and wonder if such changes would be purely cosmetic, or if there is more involved. I don't have much time to speculate, however, as he speaks my name as if he knows me and ushers me in.

"The building's larger than I'd suspected, because a good portion of it is clawed out of the rock wall itself. Yellow and blue curtains cover most of the walls, making it seem less like a cavern. Within are eight more people, all wearing vestments of blue, except for one woman, who is dressed all in yellow. Each wears a sparkling headband, and a few have white paint covering much of their faces.

"The birdish man, who whispers to me that his name is Yenn Nombis, offers a bench near the wall for me to sit. I learn later that 'Yenn' is an honorific of some kind. Then he joins the others—who ignore me, it seems—in the center of the wide, empty room. The figures all don masks of synth and metal. The masks, in fact, appear to have been made of various machine parts fused together. Each is different, but all are disconcerting. I have no idea what's going on, but I don't mind telling you, I am unnerved by the whole thing. I want to ask some questions, but I'm intimidated when they all start chanting in unison. The chant is soft at first, and in a language I don't

know. It grows louder. Suddenly but silently, a door in the floor irises open in the center of the circle that the chanters have formed. Something rises up from below, and I can hear the soft sound of motors.

“The thing is some kind of very complex machine console, twice as tall as any of the chanters, and almost as wide as it is tall. It’s covered in glass panels and banks of lights and buttons. Most of them appear to still work, with the glass panels showing strange symbols that sometimes change and move. The chanting reaches a crescendo as the device finishes its ascent into the chamber.

“Next, the woman in yellow produces a worn book with a blue cover. She opens it and begins to read. The words are still etched into my memory:

Lord of Past Treasures and Inhuman Secrets,

Master of Metals That Cannot Be Pierced,

Duke of Energies That Give Life to the Unliving,

Prince of Understanding the Unseen World,

Hear our prayer.

We, the faithful Zirathu, seek your knowledge. Your blessing of power.

Teach us your ancient ways, Changing God.

Dispel our ignorance.

Curse our darkness.

Bring your light.

“With each line, she touches a symbol or two on a glass panel, and various lights on the device blink and change. Occasionally, one of the other participants does likewise, even though they all remain silent. Their motions are well practiced. I feel as if I’m watching careful choreography.

“Then, appearing in an image of light looming over the device, I see an inhuman face. Its too many eyes gaze around, but they seem to see nothing. The figures all bow before it, as though it’s actually there, but it seems to me to be just a recording of some kind. Either way, the face speaks with a voice like both thunder and lightning, but I cannot understand its words. The Zirathu seem to understand, however.

“I wonder if this has anything to do with me. Is it all for my benefit? Or did I just come at ritual time? It seems pretty clear that this is something they do frequently. Every twenty third day, I suppose, like Kemma said. When they’re done—and by that, I mean when the image of the face disappears and the machine sinks back down into the floor—they turn and come over as a group to where I’m sitting.

“They welcome me and seem pretty friendly. When I introduce myself, they nod and make it clear they already know who I am. Kemma told them I was coming, clearly. Which I don’t give two thoughts to, at the time. I try to use the familiar shibboleth ‘Iadace,’ but they just kind of nod.

“I ask them if they’re Aeon Priests, and that brings a few solemn head shakes and at least one smirk. I don’t know what that means.

“‘We are part of the Convergence,’ one of them says with great seriousness. I don’t know what that means either.

“They introduce themselves. Yenn this and Yenn that. I don’t remember all their names, but they all have the same title, except for the woman dressed in yellow. Her name is Eviamin—no honorific.

“‘What brings you to us, Varden?’ she asks me. ‘I understand you have come a very long way.’ Eviamin’s older than I, but with her glistening green eyes and lovely skin you’d never know it. When I look into those eyes, I spot tiny shapes within them, as though there are devices or creatures or something implanted there. She is both unnerving and fascinating at the same time.



“I seek knowledge. I know a little, but I want more.’

“Of course. Such is the way of magic. A small taste only leaves you hungrier still.’

“I nod. These people clearly have a lot of knowledge. They look at the numenera slightly differently than I do. It’s all more ritualized and mystical than my more mechanistic approach. Is that what I’m missing, I wonder at the time. Maybe they’ll have some insights for me.

“So I tell them my plans and ideas. I tell them about the Arthenac and what I think it might be used for. I explain how I want to build a city that rivals anything on Earth. They listen with great interest.

“Eviamin asks me where the Arthenac is. I tell her it’s a secret for now.

“‘Is it far?’ she asks.

“‘Yes. Very.’

“‘Where is it? Out in the Beyond, yes?’

“I don’t answer, of course. When she just stares at me—when all of them just stare at me—I try to change the subject. ‘Tell me more about this Changing God. How did you learn to communicate with him?’

“They don’t respond. Blindingly quick, that guy Nombis produces a knife, and before I know it, it’s at my throat.

“‘Answer her questions,’ he says through clenched teeth. ‘Tell her where this thing is.’

“The look in his eyes doesn’t leave very much doubt in my mind that he’ll kill me. The whole thing was a setup. I must have been betrayed by Kemma. I also don’t have much doubt that if I give them the location, they’ll go and lay claim to the Arthenac, even though it’s very far away. These were serious people, and the Arthenac is just the kind of thing they’re interested in. I start thinking of a plan. Maybe I can give them a false location or tell them the truth but then beat them back to it. But I know they’ll probably hold me until they can verify my words. Or just kill me either way.

“‘Hey,’ I say to Eviamin, ‘it doesn’t have to be this way, does it? I mean...’

“‘Tell her where it is,’ Nombis says. The others haven’t drawn weapons, but I have a sinking feeling they all have them.

“Where did you get that machine?’ I ask, still trying to get their minds off, you know, killing me.

“‘The Changing God revealed himself to me after I was cast off,’ Eviamin says, with a look like she’s being generous to me. And I don’t know, maybe she is. She has a voice like Astaria silk. It’s distracting. I’d have been really captivated by her if I didn’t have a knife at my throat. ‘The Zirathu have served as his emissaries in this world for generations. They serve me and my goal.’

“‘What is your goal?’

“‘To relearn all that the world has forgotten.’

“The rest of them are nodding and kind of closing their eyes with reverence. This is a holy mission to them. Their life’s calling.

“That’s when I start thinking. These people aren’t killers. They’re cloistered... religious... I don’t even know the word. Ritualists? They’re tinkerers and lorekeepers. Inventors. Scholars. I mean, I think they will kill me if I don’t tell them what they want, but this isn’t something they do regularly. At least, that’s what I tell myself to get up the courage to act.

“‘How did the Changing God first reveal himself? What does it mean to be cast off, as you say?’

“Eviamin scowls. She knows what I’m up to. But the others—at least some of them—are distracted by the topic’s importance, the way that only religious people can be, in my experience. I don’t know if Nombis is distracted or not. He’s moved behind me. But Eviamin’s expression tells me I won’t get another chance.

“I reach up and grab Nombis’s wrist and force the knife down and away. He’s not as strong as I feared, but he’s faster and less distracted than I had hoped. Instead of slicing my throat, he slices across my chest and arm. The cut’s not too deep, but I don’t spend time figuring that out right then. Instead, I run. I bolt for the exit. There are shouts and movement behind me, but I don’t pay any attention.

“I slam against the door, and it opens. That’s probably the only reason why I get out of there alive. If it hadn’t opened, they’d have grabbed me. But I practically fall onto the walkway outside the building and stumble into the dark of the night. My head’s

swimming, but I know I need to get away. Without a destination in mind, I will myself down a wooden walkway alongside the stone wall.

“That’s when I hear a low sound behind me, followed by a shrill shriek. A flash, and suddenly my leg flares with pain. They shot something at me. My leg suddenly can’t hold my weight. I crash to the platform. There’s movement behind me. A shout. But there’s movement ahead of me as well. Light. I force myself to my feet, and fall again. A voice behind me—I can tell it’s Eviamin. She’s telling the others to get back inside. They’re letting me go? Why? I brace myself against the stone wall and get halfway to my feet. Stumble forward, toward the moving light.

“Suddenly, there are two armored figures before me. They’ve each got two swords, but I don’t know why. They’re shouting at me. I can’t bring myself to say much besides a mumbled plea for help, which I don’t think they even hear. But they are Thyrn, the city guards loyal to the local governor, I learn later. They drag me away from there, and I eventually find safety.

“Anyway, that was about a year ago. My leg never fully healed right from whatever it was that they shot me with. Some kind of application of raw force in energy form. I don’t know.”

Varden had finished his meal at this point and sat on the floor, back against the cool cave wall. His eyes half-closed.

Palim stared at the floor for a few moments. “The world is a confusing, dangerous place.”

“That’s just one of many lessons I learned. I have many more stories, but thankfully most of them don’t involve me almost dying, or result in a permanent injury.”

Palim nodded. The automaton’s gestures had become decidedly more human in the last six years.

“But you still haven’t told me much about you, or this place. Things haven’t changed in the time I’ve been gone. Nothing’s happened?”

“No.”

“No one’s even come through here?”

“Well, yes, that did happen.”

“What? Who?” Varden’s tired eyes were wide open again.

“Some travelers. People attempting to make it across the Errid Kaloum, fleeing a city called Lhauric where they were persecuted for—”

Varden shook his head and held up both hands. “When?”

“Two and a half years ago.”

“And they came here. To the Arthenac. What...” His voice trailed off into an exasperated sigh.

“They were crossing the desert. They didn’t want to approach the Arthenac. They didn’t know what it was, but they feared it. They did not covet it. However, they said that they kept seeing it in their dreams. When they tried to bypass it, they took a wrong turn and wound up coming straight to it.”

“That sounds unlikely.”

“While I understand that point, I ended up believing them. I spent the few days they camped near here talking to a woman in the group named Guara off and on.”

“They were here a few days? You were supposed to keep people away from the Arthenac.”

“They never approached it. They never expressed any interest in doing so. As I said, they seemed to have an aversion to it. Guara said that it was an intelligent thing—she referred to it as a ghost. They never once suggested it was a hole or a doorway to another world. I tried to keep to the spirit of my assignment by not correcting them. I never even had to state that I was guarding it. Guara asked why I was here, and I told her only that this was where I’d been told to remain. She didn’t question it further.”

“And when you were talking to the woman, no one tried to use that distraction to get closer to the Arthenac?”

“No. You are misunderstanding the situation. These people were quite sincerely afraid. They felt as though the ‘ghost’ was drawing them to it, and they wanted to break from its pull.”

“So no one got close.”

“As I have said.”

“And they haven’t been back.”

“No one else has been here since then. Until your arrival today.”

The next day's heat reached Varden in the cave where he slept. He ate a bit, changed his shirt, and went outside to see Palim standing beside the Arthenac. It seemed a familiar position for the automaton, like a tree having returned to its place in the woods after being uprooted for a short while. He breathed a sigh of relief at the sight.

Varden walked to where it stood, wincing a bit in the oppressive sunlight. He nodded. He found comfort in the constancy of the sentinel's unchanging nature.

The heat shimmered around them both.

Palim spoke as soon as Varden was close enough to easily hear. “I think I should have a gender.”

“Excuse me?”

Palim didn't repeat itself. Electric eyes just stared at Varden.

“You... you don't have a gender,” Varden stammered. “That doesn't make any sense.”

“It makes sense to me.”

Varden motioned wildly with his hand. “You're a machine. You don't... have any sexual parts.”

“Gender does not seem to be tied to body parts or sexual activity, in my estimation. It's more a frame of mind. I don't want to be an 'it.' I am not just a machine. I possess a conscious mind. I should have an identity. Part of identity is gender.”

“And you learned this from talking to... what was her name again?”

“Guara.”

“Right. She put this idea in your head, am I right?”

“I did get the idea while speaking with her, yes. She told me about herself and her mother. She thought the Arthenac was the ghost of her mother, if I understood her correctly.”

“That's just superstitious nonsense.”

“It does seem unlikely that somehow the consciousness of her mother survived her body’s death and took the form of a device out here in the desert, yes. But I have no doubt that she was being sincere.”

“Lots of people believe lots of different things. Like the Zirathu calling upon the Changing God, who provided the effects of their machine. It’s common. I think I even remember you saying when we first... I mean, after I built you. The very words ‘numenera’ and ‘magic’ are pretty much intertwined.”

“Yes. Which would make me, in some people’s estimation, a being of magic.”

“I suppose so. But we know that’s not true.”

“The matter seems fairly academic to me. To your people, the science of the past is magic. If that’s their definition of magic, are they wrong in referring to it as such?”

“No, it’s not so much a matter of nomenclature as understanding. Ghosts, spirits, gods... that’s not really what the numenera is about. You’re not a demon. You’re an automaton. I know how you function, the same way that I know that rain is pulled to the earth by gravity and that the sun will come up in the morning because the world is turning.”

“But you have no idea how my brain functions. That was a surprise to you.”

“Well, true enough. Your brain was a module I found in the Weal of Baz. I thought it would be the driver for a much less sophisticated... machine.”

“And thus back to my request. I’ve had more than two years to think about it since I spoke with Guara. And I thought about it more after listening to your story yesterday. But I wanted to talk to you first. Because you built this body.”

“And you want me to build you—”

“I don’t need changes made. I wanted to know if you had intentions along these lines when you built me.”

“No, I just wanted something to watch over... no. No, I didn’t.”

“Yes, that’s clear now.”

Varden looked away. No exchange with Palim ever went like he expected. He kicked at a stone, and Palim watched, and followed the stone’s trajectory with its gaze. It studied where the stone landed.

Varden continued to look at the horizon. “What gender were you before?”

“Before what?”

He turned back to look at Palim. “You know. The brain module I used came from a preexisting machine intelligence. Your consciousness existed before I built you. Did you have a gender before? Is that what this is about? Are you remembering things?”

“No. I don’t have memories from before the cave where I first awoke. If I had an existence before that, it’s gone. I don’t know if I had a gender, or if the concept was even relevant then. Guara told me that I might not have even been designed by humans originally. These are parts you built, scavenged from other machines. My original form might have been much different from this.” Palim held both arms forward, palms up. “Both of these points seem very likely. But that doesn’t matter now. My gender’s not a relic of the past—it’s my observations and feelings about how things work in the present. In the human world. I am female.”

“Well, fine. This really doesn’t seem to have anything to do with me. It’s your decision. Your feelings. It doesn’t change anything for me. Or for the way you and I interact. I mean, do you need me to do something?”

“I need you to know.”

“Why?”

“You’re my creator.”

Varden spent the rest of the day resting, still exhausted from his travels. The next day, however, he made preparations to leave again. Palim joined him in the cave.

“You’re leaving.”

“Yeah, I am. There’s still a lot to be done.”

Palim adjusted her head with her hand. It was a bit loose and leaned ever so slightly to the left. Varden hoped he would remember to fix that at some point.

“I see.”

Varden shoved his remaining food into his pack.

“You came back here to check on the Arthenac? Or me?”

“Well, yes. Both. It had been a while. Plus it was on the way.”

“On the way to where?”

“Well,” Varden said, taking a deep breath, “the story I told you a couple of days ago, about Eviamin? It’s actually more complicated than that. You see, after I got away from the Zirathu, I left Stirthal, but I didn’t go far. After a couple of weeks of laying low in a nearby village, I went back. I found out where Eviamin lived.

“I don’t know what I was after. Revenge? Restitution? Maybe she just captivated me. Maybe I didn’t know the answer myself. It’s hard to explain.

“So I go to her home and watch it for a while. I figure out that she’s there, and I wait until I’m certain she’s alone. When I’m sure I’m not going to get ambushed, I knock on the door and confront her directly. She sees me and smiles. Doesn’t react with alarm. Instead, she welcomes me inside. Offers me tea.”

“‘You were going to kill me a few weeks ago,’ I say to her.

“‘You might be right. And yet here you are, back again. And I could kill you again, if I so wished.’

“I don’t like the sound of that, but I try not to let it show. ‘But you know what I need to know. You know how to harness the power I have access to. I can’t turn my back on that.’ And that’s when I pull out my own knife. ‘And you’re going to tell me.’

“And she laughs.Laughs. ‘Put that away. I’ll tell you how to take the first step on your journey.’

“I don’t put the knife away. ‘I’m waiting,’ I tell her.

“She starts in on a long story. Most of it doesn’t matter. What does matter is this: she says she’s one of many castoffs of the Changing God. Although I’m never clear as to what that actually means. She claims she’s hundreds of years old, even though she looks no older than me. She’s from someplace far to the east ‘beyond the Beyond,’ she calls it. Sagus Cliffs. Somewhere there, lies a vast, living creature called the Bloom. It reaches into other worlds. ‘If you can find the cultists who worship the Bloom,’ she tells me, ‘you’ll find out what you need to know about your device and what can be done with it.’

“So that’s where I’m headed now. To find these cultists. They call themselves the Extremities of the Great Devourer, if you can believe that.”

“Why would she help you then when she wouldn’t before?”

“Well, she’s a schemer. Really intelligent. The kind of person who’s always got plans within plans. See, she told me that when I find these cultists, I have to share everything I learn from them with her, and everything I can about the current situation in Sagus Cliffs, which she left more than a hundred years ago. In particular, she wants to know about the Changing God and any other castoffs. See, she wants to reunite with this being somehow, and she’s searching for a way to do that.”

“And you agreed?”

“Well, I told her that I did.”

“It would have been simple for you to lie.”

“Yeah.”

“But she would know that. What would make someone so intelligent certain that you would return?”

Varden looked away. He sighed. “It’s difficult to explain. She was very... captivating.”

Palim stared with eyes that were also lights.

“I don’t mind telling you, I kind of wanted to stay. She was just that way, you know?”

“No, I do not.”

Varden shrugged and went back to packing. “I can’t really explain.”

“And what do I do?”

“I need you to stay here and watch over the Arthenac, as you have been.” He looked up. “You’ve been doing an excellent job.”

“It is not really much of a job.”

“It’s important, Palim. I need you to do it.”

“I understand.”

Chapter 3

Eleven Years After That

Varden returned on a rare overcast day. It seemed likely that a storm might be coming. But he wasn't alone. He returned with a companion. A woman.

About his age, with skin just as worn by the sun and wind of the road as his. Black hair beginning to show a little white. Practical traveling clothes.

The two of them approached the sentinel watching over the Arthenac. She stood there just as Varden left her. He was grateful for the touchstone of familiarity. He waved as they approached. The woman followed suit, but with less enthusiasm.

Varden shouted a greeting. "I've returned!" His grin was broad.

"Hello," Palim said.

"I've returned and come bearing treasures!" Varden motioned to the woman. "Palim, this is Accurana. Accurana, my dear, this is Palim, who I've told you about."

"He has said much," Accurana said, holding out a hand in greeting. "Iadace, Palim."

Palim assessed Accurana. "Have you come to work with the Arthenac?"

"I'm certainly interested in observing it."

"Palim, so much has happened," Varden said. "I've seen so many wonders." He smiled, eyes shining like a child's. "And shared so many of them with 'Rana."

Palim nodded.

"But," Varden continued, "how have you fared? How is the Arthenac?"

"As you can see," Palim stated, "nothing has changed."

"No more visitors?"

"About four years ago, there were two 'visitors.' Two bestial creatures walking upright, wielding weapons, but with little to say other than grunts and growls."

"Abhumans," Accurana said. Varden nodded.

Palim continued. "They seemed to believe they would intimidate me. They did not. I buried their bodies not far from here."

Varden and Accurana stood speechless.

“You killed them?” Varden said quietly.

“Yes. You left me weapons. You told me specifically that you gave me hands to hold them.”

Varden nodded. “Well, I’m... sorry that you had to do that.”

“It’s my task.”

“Yes, but I’m sorry it came to that.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I don’t want harm to come to you.”

Palim stared for a moment, illuminated eyes unblinking. “Have I misinterpreted my task?”

“No. No, not at all. It’s just that, in the years since I created you, I’ve begun to think of you less as a, well, a guardian. More of a caretaker. Frankly, I’d sort of forgotten about the weapons and the dangers you faced out here. I mean, one doesn’t think about the dangers a machine faces. But then when we speak, you’re obviously more than that, and... it’s all a little confusing.”

“Indeed,” Palim said.

“You’re clearly extremely capable, Palim,” Accurana said. “Varden chose... built you well.”

“I don’t know if you are complimenting me or him,” Palim said.

“Both, I suppose.”

“Thank you, then.”

Varden smiled awkwardly. “You did well, Palim. Exactly as I wished. Those abhumans likely would have just tried to dismantle the Arthenac to pry a few shins away.”

Palim stood a little straighter. She nodded curtly.

“I wish I knew more about the world,” she said after a moment. “If I knew more about abhumans and other things, I could possibly carry out my duties more efficiently.”

“That’s understandable,” Varden said, then glanced at Accurana. “But right now, let’s get to the cave. It’s been a long journey.”

“I understand.”

“I spent most of that time far to the east,” Varden said as he brought water out of his pack. Accurana rolled out a woven mat for them to sit upon. “In a region called the Sagus Protectorate. It’s not on any map I’ve ever seen or even heard of, but that certainly doesn’t make it unique. It’s a big world, and most people don’t travel more than a few miles from their town or village in their lifetime.” He laughed. “I’m a bit of an oddity.”

Accurana laughed and squeezed his upper arm. “That you are. But I’m glad.” She removed a pair of matched metallic plates from her pack. She pulled them apart and even though they were not physically attached, they remained in the position she left them in, parallel with a gap of about four inches between them. Steaming hot paste suddenly appeared in that gap, but she was ready with a large bowl to catch it before it spilled across the ground. Then the plates snapped back together. She put the wooden bowl between herself and Varden. The action had a great deal of familiarity—like a routine.

The two began to eat from the bowl. Palim remained closer to the cave entrance.

“Would you like to sit with us?” Accurana made a show of making room for Palim, if not on the mat, then at least near it. Varden raised his brows in surprise. Palim clumsily crouched. Her legs weren’t well designed for the position.

“Guara and her family invited me to sit with them when they ate.”

“Who?” Accurana asked.

“People who came here years ago.”

Swallowing his last bite, Varden said, “So, as I was saying, I was headed to a place called Sagus Cliffs, looking for something called the Bloom, when I met...”

“That is a horrific story,” said Accurana. “You don’t want to talk about that.”

“What do you think, Palim? Do you want to hear the story?” Varden’s grin betrayed that he had no intention of refraining from telling it.

“I am grateful for any information about what happens in the world beyond this place.”

“Fine, then,” he said. “See, I was on my way to Sagus Cliffs, like I said. I approached from the west, and the journey had been long. Most of the time, there had been no roads or even a path to follow. I suppose you could say that really I was just sort of wandering east.

“So I’m on one of these stretches where there’s no road, no village, no sign of civilization to be found. Scrub-covered hills made my progress slow. I’ve finished making my way down a slope and stand amid some trees and brush around an almost completely dry creek bed. And then I hear it: a kind of droning sound. I think, at first, that it’s a machine of some kind—which can be a sign of civilization itself, or a potential danger reaching out of the past. But it is neither. Insects.”

“But no ordinary insects,” Accurana added.

“No. Not by anyone’s definition. I see the first one emerging out of the trees. Now, the landscape is dry, and the grass brown, but it seems like an area normally quite lush. Just in a dry season. And it’s hot. Did I mention that? That late summer heat that can be quite relentless. Not unlike the sun here, really.”

“But that’s not seasonal,” Palim said. “It is dry and hot here all the time. Every day.”

Varden continued. “So I see this insect. It has an inherent wickedness to its appearance, like a hornet or a wasp. Something that just broadcasts that it is a danger. It’s as long as my forearm, wings quivering like oil in a heated pan. Bright yellow and red. And it’s got far too many legs. And they’re oriented in different directions, as if it’s designed to land sometimes on the ground, and other times on a ceiling. In either case, it never needs to change orientation. You see what I mean?”

“And then I see another insect. And another. And I know I’m in trouble. Time to retreat back the way I came. But they follow me. I crash through some brush, looking for cover or somewhere to hide, and burst into a horrific scene. More of the things buzzing and crawling about in a rocky clearing and a murky, muddy pool. Next to the pool lies the body of a beast—some kind of quadrupedal mammal I’ve never seen before. It’s alive, but barely moving, as if it’s drugged. One of the insects crawls casually atop it.

“Suddenly, there’s sort of a... blurring of the creature’s flesh where the insect perches atop it. I have to admit, I give an involuntary shout of surprise and horror as I watch the side of the prone beast flow like water at the insect’s touch. Each movement of its legs shapes and stretches the unmoving beast’s flesh. The insect, I realize, was building a nest in the still-living body of the beast.

“There’s no blood loss or anything like that, because the insect-shaper-thing is totally in control of every bit of the beast’s matter—flesh, bone... everything.

“I stumble backward trying to get away, but my cry has already alerted them to my presence. Two of the creatures dart toward me like daggers with wings. I frantically try to bury myself in the brush, but I catch my pack on a grasping branch. I struggle to free myself while keeping my eye on the insects. They loom closer and closer with every moment.

“By the time I pull my pack free, I’m on my back, and my staff has fallen out of my reach. The insects are upon me, the droning of their wings reaching a terrifying pitch. I fend off one with the only thing I have in my grasp—the leather bag. I figure if I can just get deep enough into the prickly brush, they can’t get at me—the branches and leaves will keep out their sizable wings.

“A sudden sharp pain in my shin tells me I didn’t move fast enough. My leg—my good leg—still sticks out of the brush, and the other insect lands on it. It jabs me with its curved stinger, the size of a small knife. Hurts like fire. I try to pull my leg back, but it’s already too late. The muscles in my leg feel like water, seeping into the ground. Or rather, like burning oil seeping into the ground, for I can still feel the stab just as much as ever. I’m losing all control of my muscles, but my nerves still carry the pain just fine.”

“I think this is when I come into the story,” Accurana said.

Varden nodded, pursing his lips slightly, then listened as she continued to tell the story.

“I lived in Sagus Cliffs, but I spent most of my days seeking information and relics from the Tabaht civilization. They were a warlike people, gone now, but they had a great command of the numenera in their time. I and many others worked to reclaim some of their knowledge and their relics.

“I was following up on the rumors of a Tabaht cache in the wilderness when I heard a man’s voice cry out, obviously in pain. The wilderness, of course, is full of dangers, and I thought perhaps someone had been set upon by bandits or abhumans, or perhaps a ravage bear. Fortunately, I was prepared for threats, having recently found some Tabaht weapons at another site.

“I tried to follow the sounds of the cries, which were ongoing, and almost ran directly into one of the huge hornet-things that Varden told you about. I think I surprised it as much as it surprised me. But I already had one of the Tabaht weapons in hand. This was a sort of round device with handles on it that absorbed negative emotions and projected them as a concentrated burst of pure force. I didn’t give the insect the chance to react to me—like Varden said, the danger inherent in the creature was obvious. I activated the weapon and directed it as best as I could at the insect. I’d never used anything like it before. I felt my fear, anxiety, and loathing drain away. The few remaining bits of the target were battered away a few dozen meters or more, I’m certain. That one use drained my weapon of energy, however, so I stowed it and dug in my backpack for something else. I saw that there were more of these hornet-things about and chose a new device. If I’d known what I was running into, I would have used this new choice in the first place.

“It was a set of three nested cylinders, activated by extending and turning each of the three sections in a specific way. Issuing forth from holes now revealed in the cylinders was a swarm of spiders made of what looked like liquid metal. They coated my flesh and bonded together to create a sort of shell around my body that moved as I did. Even my head and face were covered, but somehow I could still hear and see. And breathe—although every breath carried with it a metallic tang.

“I ran forward, but by the time I was suitably armored, the sounds of the man’s shouts had stopped. Not a good sign. Two of the insects flew at me, swooping in to sting, but when each hit the armored shell of liquid spiders, they burst into flame. The heat projected only outward—I didn’t feel a thing, although I winced all the same both times—repelling and burning the creatures. The Tabaht knew their numenera weaponry.

“I should point out that the Tabaht took the numenera they recovered and gave it beautiful casings and intricate ornamentation. They fitted each with usable handles

and controls, which aren't always found on such devices. You know a Tabah weapon due to its—"

"Perhaps you should get back to the story," Varden said with a laugh. "I'm dying, remember?"

"Oh, right, I still need to save you."

With a grin and a sidelong look at Palim, she continued. "I couldn't hear the cries of pain anymore. I began searching here and there for him, calling out as I did. 'Hey! Hello! Where are you?'

"My shouts drew more of the hornet-things, but the armor repelled them, as did the smoke. Oh, yes, the smoke! You see, my plan wasn't as foolproof as I'd thought. A few of the liquid spiders escaped and scurried away. If there was a way to prevent that from happening, it was unknown to me. Regardless, they were still emitting intense heat, catching the nearby dry brush and grass on fire!

"Flames were all around me. I had no idea if the armor protected me from fire, but I pressed on. This, of course, spread the flames even further as more of the creatures scattered with each step. I came to a shallow pool fed by the trickling creek. I didn't see any of the insects, so I crossed the murky water. It sizzled around me, creating steam. The suit dissipated entirely at that point, liquid spiders struggling in the mud and then dissolving into the water and steam. I didn't know if that should make me worried or relieved. On the other side of the pool, the flames all behind me now, something caught my eye. I saw a boot sticking out of the brush. I moved a bit closer, and then I saw the boot—or rather the leg in the boot—shudder. This must have been the person I'd heard calling out.

"I reached him and pushed the brush aside. There was an injury on his leg like a stab wound, and his shin was swollen so much that I thought the top of his boot might burst. His whole body was as limp as I've ever seen. I tried to rouse him and could see that he was conscious, but he couldn't move beyond sort of shaking a bit. Drool ran down the side of his mouth.

"What I was worried about, however, were the flames. If they reached this bit of brush, he'd be burned alive with them. So I tossed away the now-inoperable shield-generator device and tugged at him. He was entirely dead weight, but thankfully he

was a thin fellow without much in the way of gear. It took all my strength, but I pulled him out of the brush and down into the pool. He floated, mostly, although the muddy water was shallow enough that even with him on his back, his mouth was above the water line.

“Since the flames hadn’t yet reached us, I waded back out and went to where he had lain. I had seen a leather bag near him and thought it might hold something valuable. When I reached it, however, I saw something even better. A staff topped with a crystal device lay in the brambles not too far away. Probably his. I grabbed it and the bag and went into the water.

“The pool was our lucky break. I got low alongside the man—who of course I would later learn was Varden—to avoid breathing smoke and to keep out of the heat. The wildfire spread quickly, but it went out fairly quickly as well. It burned through the little area around the creek bed but never went much farther.”

Varden interjected, “By the time the fire’s mostly out, I get a little bit of control over my muscles again and rise out of the muck.”

Accurana shrugged. “Soon thereafter, filthy with mud and soot, we made our way out of there.” She laughed a little.

“And there was no sign of any of those flesh-shaping insects anywhere.”

She smiled. “And that’s how we met.”

“My savior.”

Grinning at each other for a heartbeat, the two finished the moment with a kiss.

“You remained together after that day,” Palim stated.

“Yes,” Varden replied. “Once I could talk, I told Accurana all about my mission. She knew of the Bloom, of course, and the people I wanted to meet. She helped me a great deal. And she knew so much. She had a mastery of so many areas of lore that were completely new to me.”

“You wanted me just for my knowledge,” she said with a laugh.

“No, I was attracted to your knowledge. I stayed because of your many other charms.”

“Palim, your creator is a man of crafty words.”

“Indeed.”

“You might remember,” Varden said, “that I was looking for a group called the Extremities of the Great Devourer, who knew about the Bloom, a living—”

“I remember your mission,” Palim said.

“Oh, right. I just thought since it has been quite a while...”

“I have perfect recollection of everything that’s happened since you created me. Another group of cultists, worshipping another machine. Is that common in the outside world? Do you also worship machines?”

“Well, no,” Varden said with a furrowed brow. “And I’m not certain I’d characterize the Zirathu as ‘worshipping a machine,’ exactly. They chose to see the effects of an impressive device as the work of some kind of a godlike being.”

“I don’t know who these people are,” Accurana said, “but it sounds as though you’re splitting hairs.”

Varden continued talking to Palim. “And while the Extremities of the Great Devourer do worship the Bloom, it’s not accurate to refer to it as a machine. It’s a living creature.”

“Probably engineered,” Accurana said.

“Or hailing from another universe.” Varden added.

“Or both.”

“Whatever the case, it extends itself into other universes as well as our own. It creates a connection. But not really the way the Arthenac does, I don’t think. The Bloom is a physical thing, creating physical gateways. The Arthenac is about energy.”

Accurana nodded thoughtfully. Palim adjusted her head and neck with her hand.

“In any event, the Bloom Cult, because that’s what they really are, turned out to be mad for the most part. I didn’t get much information from them. And in fact, they wanted to feed me to the ‘Great Devourer,’ which is what they call the Bloom. Needless to say, I didn’t spend much time in their company.”

“But having traveled there,” Palim said, “and having met with the cult, you next return to Stirthal, to meet up again with Eviamin?”

Varden stopped with wide eyes. His mouth opened wordlessly.

“Who?” Accurana asked.

“The woman in Stirthal who told Varden about the Bloom and Sagus Cliffs in the first place.”

Varden shook his head. “I haven’t thought of her in a long time.” He turned to Accurana. “She was a member of the Zirathu in a city far to the west. Their leader, actually. She sent me to Sagus Cliffs when I was seeking information.”

“So you’re not going to return to her?”

“I.. I don’t think so.” Varden shifted his feet.

“Why not? Didn’t you have an arrangement?”

Accurana cocked one eyebrow. “Palim, I think I get what’s going on here. At this point, I can read this man like the lettering on a scroll. This Eviamin might have been interesting to Varden for reasons other than pure knowledge. But things have changed. He and I are bonded now.”

“I see.”

“Do you know what that means?” Varden asked.

“I can gather its meaning through context.”

Accurana studied the automaton for a moment. “Palim, does that bother you?”

Varden looked at her in surprise. “What does that mean?”

“Let her answer the question,” Accurana said, putting her hand up. She focused on Palim. “Unless you don’t want to.”

“No. It doesn’t bother me. I was surprised, but I have adjusted.”

“Why would our bonding bother Palim?” Varden’s face narrowed.

Accurana patted Palim on her metal shoulder affectionately, smiled, and nodded, but said nothing.

Palim looked at them both. “What are your plans now that there are two of you? What shall my duties be as a result of this turn of events?”

“We can’t stay long,” Varden said. “I’m only just checking the status of the Arthenac. I have a device here that will take some measurements of the energies involved. After that, we’ve got to go again.”

“I see.”

“Still no change here, though, right?”

“Only one.”

“Really? What’s that?”

“I wanted to ask you if it would be appropriate to worship the Arthenac.”

“What? Why?” Varden said, mouth agape.

“It’s more than you think it is. You think it’s a doorway. A hole. But it’s more than that. The people who come near here—even the abhumans who came here—it seems to speak to them. Something draws them toward it.”

“It’s never spoken to me,” Varden said.

“And there’s more to it than that.” Palim’s voice grew more intense. Almost passionate. “While you were gone, I thought about what you said about Eviamin. When you were here last time, you talked about various qualities that she had, which you seemed unable to entirely articulate. And she worshipped the Changing God and was very interested in the Arthenac.”

“Like I said, I don’t think it’s a fair characterization to say ‘worship’ in that context.”

Palim continued. “I’m just trying to fully appreciate the relationship people have with gods. The Zirathu revere the Changing God. The Bloom Cult worships the Bloom. It seems, at least through context, that there are many other examples in the world.”

“Yes, but that doesn’t have anything to do with the Arthenac,” Varden said.

“Of course it does. Whether it ‘speaks’ to you or not, you always come back here to check on the Arthenac. You always come back.”

Varden nodded. “Of course I do. But that’s not because it’s calling to me. And it’s certainly not because of some kind of religious or spiritual feeling. I come back because it’s my creation. It’s important to me.”

He turned to Accurana, who nodded, as if encouraging him.

“And I come back for you. You’re also my creation. You’re important to me.”

“You’re important to me, too.”

Chapter 4

Seventeen More Years

Varden and Accurana arrived on a windy day. Their aneen pack animal walked slowly, covered in sweat. Accurana rode on its back, and Varden walked, its reins in one hand, his staff in the other. He leaned more heavily on that staff than ever. His hair was almost completely gray now, and his face showed long years of travel like a network of roads all its own.

Despite their weariness, the travelers' eyes were wide in surprise. The area was not as they'd left it, years before. Not at all.

They saw buildings of stone and mortar with roofs of thatch. People and animals moved along streets between these buildings, although judging by the number of houses and the number of people, most were inside to stay out of the hot winds. Or they were simply elsewhere. A few children stopped playing at a game with a ball and some sticks to watch their approach.

Varden saw a well on the edge of town, near a small pen that held some wooly gamatras.

The town must have been the home of at least two hundred people.

They entered the town wordlessly, their heads turning this way and that. A man looked up from where he scrubbed at something in a large metal basin filled with sand. A woman carrying a wooden cask paused to let them pass.

They made their way to the center of the town, where they saw the Arthenac, at the heart of the town's central plaza. It was not activated and appeared the same as when they'd left.

"You can't get so close—" a woman said, coming out of a nearby building. She had her hands up and a look of real concern on her face.

"That's all right, Tymone." The voice was familiar. It belonged to a figure coming down the street to their left.

"Palim!" Varden cried. "There you are. What's going on here?"

“Hello, Varden. Accurana. It is good to see you again.”

“Palim, who are all these people? What are all these buildings?” Varden’s voice cracked.

Upon seeing Palim, the woman named Tymone returned inside with a nod.

“People came. They built the town around the Arthenac.”

“Yes, but why?”

“They were drawn here. Most were trepidatious, but compelled nonetheless.”

“Drawn here? By what?”

“Visions. Dreams. If you remember, I tried to explain that to you long ago.”

A man came out of yet another house, holding a shovel like a weapon. “Everything all right, Palim?”

“Yes, Fig, everything is fine.” Palim gestured to the building closest to the Arthenac. It was the largest of the structures, with a sturdy door. “Perhaps we should go inside. You can tether your mount here, or we can take it to a corral if you’d prefer. Either way, it will be perfectly safe.”

Varden helped Accurana down off the tall beast and wrapped its reins around a post near the door. The two of them went inside as Palim asked Fig to get some feed for the animal. He did so with a smile and a nod.

The inside of the house was clean, decorated with a variety of animal shells and bones in collages on the walls. There were a couple of chairs and a table, but few other furnishings.

“Please sit. You must be tired. I have no food to offer you, but I can have someone bring something.”

“Palim.” Varden did not sit. “Tell us what is going on here.”

Accurana did sit. “I’m sorry, Palim, it’s just that so much has changed. We’re a little surprised by all of this.”

“I understand. Please, Varden, sit. I’ll answer all of your questions.”

Varden finally sat. His knees creaked as he did so. He leaned his staff against the nearest wall. “Why don’t you start with telling us who all these people living around the Arthenac are.”

“Of course. They first started coming about five years ago. Travelers. Farmers. Herders. Builders. Craftspeople. Each of them has seen the vision of someone from their past. Someone dead. Mothers, fathers, lost siblings, mentors, friends. Each of them says that they either understood—or in some cases were told by those very visions—that the Arthenac was responsible.”

“Ghosts? You’ve got to be joking.”

“I didn’t say ghosts. Although that is what the vast majority here in D’Arthenac call them.”

“D’Arthenac?”

“The town eventually grew substantial and populous enough that it needed a name. It was my idea.”

“The people here, they seem to defer to you.” Accurana said.

“They see me as the guardian and keeper of the Arthenac. It affords me some respect. Some of them even refer to me as ‘keeper’ as though it were a title.”

“Where did they come from?”

“All around. New people come every year. Each time, from farther away. The reach seems to be almost three hundred miles now.”

“The reach?” Accurana asked.

“The reach of the Arthenac. The distance at which it can cause people to see their dead.”

“This makes no sense. That isn’t what the Arthenac does.”

“The people of D’Arthenac would differ.”

“Palimpsest, you were supposed to protect the Arthenac.”

“The Arthenac is secure. No one has touched it. There are strict laws to that effect here, although they almost never need enforcement. People are afraid of it.”

“Then why do they come?”

“That puzzled me at the beginning as well. Initially they called it an unnatural compulsion, but as I understand it, it’s really more the hope of gaining another vision. Some people will do almost anything for even the briefest glimpse or touch of someone or something they’ve lost.”

Varden started to speak, but then stopped. He leaned back in his chair, deep in thought.

“We need to investigate the Arthenac,” Accurana said. “See what it is that is causing this. It’s quite fascinating, really. Once you get over the shock.”

Varden just nodded. He looked out a window that was clearly placed to give a full view of the Arthenac.

“Tell me of your travels. I always look forward to hearing of the outside world,” Palim said.

“You didn’t give up on us?” Accurana asked.

“No.”

“That’s a lot of faith you have in us. In Varden, really, since you’ve known him the longest.”

“I’ve known him, from my perspective, forever. He told me he would always return, so I knew that he would.”

Accurana looked at Varden, who still stared out the window. “How does that make you feel?” She seemed hopeful, as if Varden needed that kind of positive reinforcement.

“What?” Varden shook himself out of his reverie. “Sorry, I... What did you say? Sorry.” He sighed. “There’s just a lot to consider.”

“I was asking about tales of your travels,” Palim said, sitting in one of the chairs far more gracefully than she seemed capable of before. Her head was still clearly too loose on her neck, however. “You were gone a long time.”

Varden sighed again. “Yes, yes we were.”

“Tell her a story of the world, Varden.”

Varden looked around. He considered carefully, and then finally said, “I never told you how I got this staff.”

“You’ve had that staff for a long time,” Palim said. “You didn’t get it on your most recent travels.”

“Do you want to hear about it or not?”

“All right. But first, I’ll see to getting you both some warm food.”

While Palim went to the door, Accurana gave Varden a deep stare, but he looked away, taking in the house, which obviously belonged to the automaton he’d built so long ago. Palim spoke to what appeared to be a small crowd of people gathered outside. She returned. “All right. That’s taken care of.” She took her seat again.

Varden sighed yet again. “Very well. So I was on my own back then. I hadn’t yet met Rana, but this was after I’d been to the Steadfast. There’s a mountain range to the west known as the Black Riage. I was crossing it coming back this way. Terrible. Took me weeks. I had no idea the snows could come that early.

“So a terrible storm is coming, and the snow is getting heavy. I try to find some shelter, maybe an overhang or something like that. But at the same time I’m working my way to a lower elevation, too, hoping that maybe I’ll get to a place where the snow isn’t so bad. I mean, it’s not going to get worse. Anyway, I’m well off any path, if I was ever on one, and I’m quite lost. The snow is coming down so hard and in such big flakes that it’s not just lowering visibility in general, it keeps gathering on my eyelashes, making my eyes want to close.

“As luck would have it, though—because not all luck is bad, right?—I almost literally stumble into a cleft in the rock wall. I make my way in and find that it’s a nice bit of shelter from the snow borne by the northerly breeze. I figure this little cleft is going to be my home for the next few hours, if not longer, so I try to make myself comfortable. I brush the snow off myself—I must have looked like a walking creature of ice—and then hunker down. It takes me a couple of minutes, though, to realize that in the back of this cleft, there’s an area that I thought was just in shadow. Which it is, except that those shadows are hiding a cave.

“Or at least, I figured it was a cave at the time.

“I lift my tired bones—oh, but that was a long time ago. I was tired, sure, but now I know I didn’t know what tired was back then. It’s a terrible thing to get old. I advise against it. Anyway, I get up and go take a look. Sure enough, it’s a cave, and it goes deep

into the dark. But what's really caught my eye is the regular, smooth lines on the walls just inside the cave. I pull out my last glowglobe to get a better look. It's not a cave at all, but an ancient structure."

Varden laughed. "Now, even back then I wasn't entirely stupid. I knew that a relic of the prior worlds like that was dangerous. But I knew that it might have a cache of numenera to be discovered as well. What was this place? I wanted to know." His eyes lit up and his gestures became more emphatic.

"So I take my globe and I go in. No, that's not right. First, I activate the only cypher I have at the time. It feels like an electric shock, but I know it actually enhances my nerves for a time. Worth the brief jolt of pain, I figure, if it helps me later. And it did, I believe. But let me get to that.

"Inside, I see the cave is really just some space between a natural rock wall on my right and a clearly artificial one made of a whitish-blue metal on the left. I make my way along the metal wall and find a low doorway. The floor beyond it is a short drop down, and I toss the globe gently inside. It looks like an empty chamber, although the floor's got a fair bit of dirt and debris covering it, particularly near the doorway. I slip down and retrieve the light. Now I'm exploring the interior of the ancient structure itself. Beyond that first room, there's no more dirt or anything on the floor. Not even dust. Here and there, the walls are coated in patches of some kind of dark, oily slime, but it appears harmless.

"I find a pentagonal chamber with an open hatch in both the floor and ceiling. There's a body dangling down from the hatch in the ceiling, and another trapped in the hatch in the floor, as if the hatch had closed on it. Both are in some kind of sealed suit or armor. I can see the one in the floor better. A humanoid, long dead. There's a kind of transparent synth shield around his head, connected to the armored suit, but it's cracked. Inside, I see an ancient skull not quite human but not so very different except for the eyes. It has sparkling red crystals growing in its eye sockets.

"I move in closer. There's a lot of that oily slime on the corpse's suit and helmet, and all around on the floor. There's an odd smell that I can't quite place. I decide to try to pull the body up all the way into the room and begin tugging. It's hard because he's caught fast.

“That’s about when I notice that the corpse in the ceiling above me—also in the same kind of getup—begins to move. His dangling legs shudder a bit. Maybe that one’s not dead. I can’t actually see his head or helmet, just his legs. ‘Hello?’ I call up. Nothing. No reply, and no more movement. I look around for something long enough to reach up to him, but there’s nothing. I call up a few more times, wait a few minutes, but there’s no more signs of life.

“I turn back to my friend trapped in the floor hatch. I give him a good tug, putting all my might into it. He slides up about six inches, but there’s some kind of device strapped to his leg that catches on the hatch. I realize that the hatch is pressure sensitive somehow. Even after all this time, it’s closing on him, so even though I’ve pulled him up, now it’s closed on his legs. I look up, and there’s no sign of change on the body above me.

“And then, suddenly, the corpse in the ceiling hatch moves up farther into the ceiling. The hatch closes on it and catches on something attached to the suit’s thigh.

“Is someone watching me and mimicking my actions? That seemed unlikely. How could they be so precise? The armored corpse above me is caught in precisely the same place as the one I was pulling on. Precisely.

“‘By the aeons,’ I whisper out loud as I get an insight into what’s happening. The corpse above me is the corpse below. The hatch in the ceiling is the hatch on the floor. But there’s a short time delay between the actions I take here and what happens above me. I rack my brains for some bit of knowledge, some tidbit that I’d read somewhere to help me in this situation. Anything at all similar. But I come up with nothing. Is the hatch a doorway to another universe, like the Arthenac, but to a universe running so similar to this one that they run almost in parallel? No, I think. This is all happening right here in this universe. There’s some sort of bend in time and space here.

“To confirm this, I try to move to a place where I can look up through the hatch in the ceiling and catch sight of myself, but there isn’t space enough to do so. So I try to peer down instead. I can see a bit of the room, but not myself. There just isn’t much space—the hatch is clamped tight around the bulky suit.

“I shout down through the hatch, calling out my own name. Only then do I remember that I shouted up earlier and did not hear my own voice. I wait for the time delay but still hear nothing. I have no idea why, still to this day.

“I consider throwing something down, but there’s nothing I want to part with and dismiss the idea. Only much later do I realize that if it worked as expected, I’d have lost nothing. If I tossed a shin down, I’d have a shin drop down to me. Anyway, I figure that I’ll finish pulling up the crystal-eyed corpse and then try to just open the hatch. Wishing I had something to keep the hatch pried open, I hold the fellow by the arms and pull. He’s held tight. I wish that jolt had enhanced my strength rather than my reflexes.

“I pull and pull, in the end putting all my weight into it. It finally comes free and I fall right on my backside, still holding on to the corpse so that it lands mostly on top of me. The synth helmet strikes the floor and shatters. The skull inside snaps off, falls to the floor, and breaks in two. One of the crystal growths in the eye sockets comes loose and lies on the floor between the two halves.

“The hatch slams closed.

“I push the body off of me and look up. By that time I can see the legs move a bit as my counterpart—well, if my theory holds, as I, a few minutes behind the current me—begins to tug. I shout up again. Words of encouragement this time. Why not? Of course, even if my voice did reach his—my—ears this time, it would happen later.

“I look down at the closed hatch and wonder how I’m going to open it. I look around for some kind of switch or lever, realizing that I probably should have done that in the first place. It’s easy to think of things to do now, when I’m telling the story. It’s easier to look backward than to look ahead, the saying goes, right?

“I don’t see anything, and eventually I catch a glimpse of the legs of the corpse above me getting pulled up and into the ceiling. The hatch seals.

“Immediately, there’s a shudder in the floor. The walls begin to quaver. A disharmonious droning sound—high pitched and slightly wavering like a tuning fork but off somehow—comes from all around me. I can feel it run down my spine. I can feel it reverberating through my bones. I realize I’ve got to get out of there. I don’t know what’s happening, but I’m in danger.

“I also don’t know what possesses me to think of it, but as I grab my glowglobe to light my way out, I also snatch the bit of red crystal that had been in the eye socket.” Varden pointed at the crystal at the top of his staff, which leaned against the wall.

“The noise is growing louder. The vibrations in the floor and walls grow more intense. It feels as though the air itself grows thicker—that it, too, is wavering. I’m trying to retrace my steps, but it’s not easy. The noise and movements are disorienting. I don’t know how else to describe it, but it’s as though the space within the structure is snapping closed, starting with the area where I was and moving outward. I can feel and hear it like doors slamming closed. But maybe it’s not space—maybe it’s time. Time inside this place is freezing up. If I don’t get out, the effect is going to reach me. I don’t know what that will mean, but I’m certain it’s not something I want.

“I rush as fast as I can, my heightened reflexes allowing me to not only race through the rooms but turn and move rapidly as I retrace my steps. I just barely find my way out and back into the snowy cleft in the rock when I feel the effect slam shut within the structure behind me. After I catch my breath, I look back. Nothing has changed that I can see, but the sound and the vibration are gone. With my back against the rock wall, I move back to the low entrance into the structure, but it’s as though there’s a black barrier there now. I can’t reach into it. My light doesn’t penetrate it. Has space within it ceased to exist? Time? I have no idea. But I look down and see the crystal is still in the palm of my hand.

“It’s not until much later that I have the crystal set into the top of the staff that I’ll use as a walking stick on the rest of my journeys. It’s a memento, but it’s more than that. When you look through the crystal, you can see a specific moment in the past that you concentrate upon. But you have to know the precise moment. It’s a reminder that I keep with me at all times.”

“May I try it?” Palim asked.

“Of course.” Varden grabbed the staff and passed it to her.

Palim gazed through it, looking at Varden. “I am looking at you from just a few minutes ago. You’re telling your story. How interesting.” She pulled it away from her face. “And you have no idea what happened there? What was going on in the structure, and how it relates to this crystal?”

Varden shook his head. “That’s the way of the numenera. Not everything can be fully understood. The prior worlds will always be a mystery.”

“I’m of the prior worlds,” Palim stated. “Originally.”

“An excellent case in point,” Varden said with a chuckle. “The more time goes on, the more you are a mystery to me.”

“And yet, I am of this world as well.”

Varden nodded thoughtfully.

A few days later, Varden and Accurana examined the Arthenac and recorded some findings in a notebook. A few of the townsfolk watched them, but at a respectful distance. The people obviously felt it strange at first that the two newcomers were exempt from the rules about touching or activating the Arthenac, but Palim had explained that Varden was the one who, more or less, created it, and created her as well. This had prompted a lot of questions about ghosts and dead spirits, but Varden just dismissed them all. He grew more sullen with each day.

Finally, Palim approached him and asked if he had found anything.

“It’s a conduit to another world. Another universe. Only energy can pass through it. Just as I’ve always said. There are no ghosts or anything like that.”

“Then what have the people here experienced? Some of them—very occasionally—continue to experience the visions. They see their dead loved ones. What does it mean?”

Varden waved off her questions. “I have no idea.”

“I see.”

They stood silently together next to the Arthenac. Varden cleared his throat. “Well, it could be some kind of triggering of one’s memories. That is to say, it’s not really a ghost, but a memory of someone you lost in your past. The visions come from within one’s own mind, not the Arthenac.”

“But the Arthenac is triggering this?”

“Maybe.” Varden shrugged. “I don’t know. That’s the whole problem. The whole problem. I don’t know.” He stared at the ground.

Eventually, Palim asked, “What is the next step in your plan to harness the energy?”

“It hardly seems to matter now.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I tried, Palim. I really did. I’ve traveled to every great library I’ve heard of to do research. I’ve spoken with experts, Aeon Priests, and even madmen. But it’s all just too much. I haven’t found my answers. And some of what I have found has been beyond me. I’ve never been as good with the numenera as I thought I was.”

“You made the Arthenac.”

“I put some pieces that I found together. At best, I repaired the Arthenac. Someone else—someone in the far distant past—created it.”

He flung his hands at her. “Just like you. I’m not your creator. At best I’m a handyman. With delusions of grandeur.”

“I don’t think I agree with you.”

“I have to accept that I might never be able to achieve my dream.”

“Does that mean you no longer want me to watch over the Arthenac?”

“No. I still need you here. With all these people here? I need you now more than ever. I’ve promised Accurana we would return to Sagus Cliffs one more time. She thinks there might still be an answer there.”

“I see.”

Chapter 5

Fourteen Years Later

Accurana, alone, stepped out of the pod. The fungal tendrils detached from her forehead and folded back into the pod's recesses. Spores settled around the outer shell of the pod, finding purchase in the ground all around it, even as the pod itself began to wither, blacken, and collapse inward. Accurana gave none of this any attention and instead looked around the streets of D'Arthenac.

The town had grown. The buildings in the central portion—nearest the Arthenac—had been replaced with larger structures, some with two stories and metal roofs. One was a tall tower looming over all the others. The streets were fairly busy, although her sudden appearance in a teleporting containment module made of fungal fibers had brought everything around her to a standstill.

A woman yelled for the guardians. A man shouted, "Is it happening again?" Another replied, "We all see her."

Accurana held up her hands. "I'm looking for Palim," she said in a feeble voice. The heat and dry air were worse than she remembered.

Only a few people had actually heard the old woman, but one of them asked "What? What's she talking about?" Murmurs undulated through the growing crowd. Two men and a woman dressed in light armor and carrying spears pushed their way through the others. "Coming through," they shouted. "We'll take care of this."

The three armed figures stood before Accurana. One of the men sized her up and said, "Where did you come from?"

She didn't answer. Instead, she just restated, "I'm looking for Palim."

The three of them looked at each other quizzically.

Finally, someone in the crowd said, "She means the Keeper."

"You mean the Keeper? You're here to see the Keeper?" The man spoke with the practiced condescension of a constable.

"Yes, please take me to the Keeper."

“You can’t just show up in town and make demands of the Keeper. I don’t know who you think you are, but—”

Someone in the crowd said, “She just appeared in some kind of... thing. A cocoon or something. It disappeared, but she just appeared. She’s a witch!”

“Is that true?” the constable asked her. “Do we have ourselves a sorceress? You know, we don’t take well to sorcery around here lately.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Accurana said. “I just want to see Palim.”

The guardian shook his head. “Take her to see Eviamin.”

“Eviamin?” Accurana said aloud. “I know that name.”

Eviamin looked ten years younger than Accurana, though, if what Varden had said about her was true, she was far older. She wore loose-fitting garments that didn’t belie her thin, delicate frame, and a great deal of jewelry. They met in a plushly decorated room on the second floor of the tower that Accurana had seen when she arrived. The town’s so-called guardians had searched her for “dangerous magic” but found nothing.

“You’ve been brought to me,” Eviamin said, “because they don’t trust magic here, but they trust me, and I know a great deal about magic.”

“I know who you are,” Accurana told her calmly. “I know about the Zirathu. What I don’t know is how you got here. Or rather, why you are here.”

“How do you know me?”

“Varden.”

Eviamin’s brows raised. She laughed. “Your answer is my answer.” She laughed again. “I am here because Varden led me here. Inadvertently. A tracking esotery is a minor thing.”

“You came here for the Arthenac.”

“Of course. That’s why anyone comes here, one way or another. I’m sure it’s why you’re here.”

Accurana didn’t answer.

“What is your name, dear?” Eviamin smiled and made a subtle gesture that Accurana noticed but did not recognize.

“My name is Accurana, and if that’s some kind of Steadfast witch-sign, I don’t know it. I’m not from there.”

Eviamin smiled again and cocked one brow dramatically. “Where are you from?”

“Sagus Protectorate, same as you, I’m led to understand.”

“Well, then, we are both far from home.”

“I told you, I know who you are. Varden told me about you. Told me you’re one of the castoffs.”

“Where is Varden?”

“He’s... gone. He passed away a few months ago.”

Eviamin nodded. “I am sorry to hear that.”

“No, you’re not. You threatened to kill him years ago if he didn’t tell you where the Arthenac was.”

Eviamin shook her head. “An exaggeration. We were not really so violent as all that.”

“His lifelong limp suggested otherwise.”

“He and I made our peace. He came to me again, after that. Did he tell you?”

Accurana didn’t reply.

“We enjoyed a few weeks together in Stirthal. We had many long... conversations. In fact, it was I who told him to seek out the Bloom and Sagus Cliffs. Why, I strongly suspect that you would never have met him were it not for me. He was driven by his dreams of utilizing the Arthenac to build a city. And, well”—she gestured out the window—“look what he got.”

“This isn’t his dream. His dream was that the Arthenac would be a source of limitless energy.”

“True. Yes, that’s interesting.” Eviamin walked to the window, turning her back to her guest.

Accurana took the moment to look around the room. A few divans with embroidered covers, tapestries on the wall, richly colored rugs on the floor, and a black iron staircase curving up to higher levels in the tower. This was a long way from the cave that Varden had used.

Eviamin turned back around. “We could work together, you and I, to bring Varden’s dream to a reality. We could transform this primitive place to a city of wonders.”

“I want to speak to Palim first.”

“I don’t know that that will be possible.”

“Why not?”

“The Event changed everything.”

“What event?”

“That’s just what we call it. It’s why the people of D’Arthenac have a good, healthy fear of magic.”

Accurana waited for more.

Eviamin waved her hand. “We don’t talk about it. Suffice to say that the Arthenac became dangerous. Very dangerous. For everyone in the city. Poor Palim took the brunt of it. But I saved her. And I put an end to the Event.”

“How? What was—”

“I stopped it. When you agree to work with me, I’ll explain more. But no one understands the Arthenac as well as I do.”

“But then why would anyone stay here after that? Why wasn’t the Arthenac destroyed or dismantled?”

“Because of Palim. As one of her final public acts, she was able to convince people that it would never happen again, and that one day the creator of the Arthenac would return and use it to make everyone’s lives better. Now, you and I know that such a promise can’t be fulfilled exactly as described. But we can still give them Varden’s dream.”

“You’ve got to tell me what happened to Palim.”

“Again, once we start working together, pooling our knowledge, you’ll know everything.”

“What do you mean, pooling our knowledge?”

“You need to tell me everything you know—everything Varden told you—about the Arthenac. He told me everything he knew, but that was... decades ago. I’ve learned much in that time, and I’m sure he did too. In fact, I suspect that’s why you came back here today.”

Accurana looked at the floor. She studied the patterns in the rug at her feet. Finally, she said, “I’m tired. My trip was taxing. Is there somewhere I can rest for a while?”

Eviamin smiled broadly. “Of course. Forgive me for being a poor host.” She picked up a hand bell from a table near the stairs and rang it. The female guardian who had been among the first three to confront Accurana came up the stairs. “Take our friend to pleasant quarters. Give her every comfort.”

Accurana ignored the quarters. She needed no comfort or rest. She wasn’t tired from her trip—it had been all but instantaneous. The spores released upon her arrival would fruit a new pod in about twelve hours. So she had some time. She was in a long, low building not far from the tower. The shadows already grew long outside, as the sun set in the distant horizon.

When she first asked Eviamin about Palim, the woman’s gaze had darted momentarily to the stairs up higher in the tower. Accurana was certain that was where Palim was. Perhaps the automaton was a prisoner? She had to get to her.

The woman that escorted her to the room still stood by the door. On the way there, Accurana had asked her, “Why do you do what Eviamin tells you to? Who is she to you?” But all the guardian would say was, “I’m sure she’ll be happy to answer all your questions tomorrow.”

In her room, Accurana reached into her pocket and pulled out a bit of synth cloth, about nine inches square. It could easily be mistaken for a handkerchief. The guardians that had searched her earlier believed it to be such. When she unfolded it on the bed in her room and pressed the sensors in two of the corners, however, it

revealed its true nature. It extended its size into a third dimension to become a synth cube about nine inches to a side, open on one side. From this box, she pulled four objects.

“Time to figure out what resources I have at my disposal,” she whispered to herself.

Three of the four objects were the latest cyphers she had obtained. The first was a tube with a potent healing salve. “Hope I’ve no need of this,” she said. The next was a small coil of thin synth rope with an oblong control device at one end. The last was a weapon—a metal rod coiled with tiny wires and fitted with a wooden handle bound in brass. It bore the markings of the Tabah. She put the tube and the weapon back in the cube, reverted it to a piece of flat cloth, and poked it back into her pocket.

The fourth object was the red crystal from Varden’s staff. The staff had broken long ago, but the crystal was still intact. It had a leather cord tied around it that she looped over her neck, sliding the crystal under the front of her shirt.

She went to the small window in her room. It faced away from the tower and the Arthenac. Accurana took a deep, courage-gathering breath and slid open the window. It was too small to fit through, even for her slight frame, as it was likely just for light and ventilation. However, she wrapped the short rope around herself, saying, “I never knew if this would be of much use. Not just a curiosity after all.” She activated the end and gasped—a small shock, and then a tingling sensation traveled throughout her body.

The rope dropped to the floor, gray and dead. The tingling turned into a strange vibration, and she looked down at her hands, watching them spread out and become translucent. Her body was breaking down into its component particles, but she was still in control. In fact, she felt more in control of her own body than she’d ever felt before. She willed herself up, and she floated upward. She thought about going down, and she descended. By this point, her body had lost all trace of its former size and shape. She was more an elongated cloud than anything else.

With a thought, she drifted out of the window and up into the air. Even without eyes, as such, she still could perceive around her with something that her mind interpreted as sight. Lights were being lit in homes across the town, and few people

were on the streets. No one noticed a puff of mist floating above in the dim light. She made her way to the tower, slow but steady.

The tower had plenty of windows, but none of them were open. She had not counted on that—there was no way for her to force one open. She could not exert any force in this form. However, Accurana also knew she needed to hurry. The transformation was short, and in fact she already felt a bit more substantial even as she hovered outside the structure.

She floated up to the top of the tower, where she noticed a small opening. A vent? She willed her form into it and felt warm air pushing against her. She had to really focus to move against the current as she wound through a metal duct less than two handbreadths across. The sensation became stranger still as she pushed her particles through a slowly turning fan and came into a dark room.

She was in what she assumed to be the top of the tower. Even without illumination, she could tell that machinery filled the room. An audible hum reverberated, and the machines gave off noticeable heat.

Accurana suddenly felt dizzy and nauseous, which, she realized, were decidedly corporeal sensations. The effects of the device were wearing off quickly. There seemed like little to do other than accept it. She remained close to the floor and concentrated all her focus on her own body's shape and appearance. She didn't know if that was necessary, but in such a situation, better safe than sorry.

Slowly, her body coagulated. She could feel the hard surface of the floor beneath her and the warm air around her. Drenched in sudden sweat, she lay on the floor, the beating of her own heart reverberating in her ears. The shock was great, and her first action as a solid creature again was to heave her lunch onto the floor.

“Is someone there?” a voice asked quietly.

“Palim?” Accurana asked, wiping her face with her hand.

“Accurana, is that you?”

A dim light grew gently, illuminating the room. As Accurana had thought, it was filled with machines. At the heart of it all, however, in a nest of wires that resembled a tangled spider's web, lay Palimpsest. Or at least, her head. The wires connected to

various sockets that had been drilled into her head's casing. Her body was nowhere to be seen.

"Palim, what's happened to you?" She got unsteadily to her feet.

"My body was dismantled."

"Why?"

"Eviamin didn't want me to protect the Arthenac anymore. I have failed at the task I have been given. Eviamin, if you remember, is—"

"Yes, I know who she is. I've already encountered her downstairs. Somehow, she's taken control of D'Arthenac. I'm going to want to hear that story at some point soon. So much has happened. Oh, Palim."

"Varden is dead."

"He is. How do you know that?"

"Because his ghost came to me."

"What?"

"But why are you here?" Palim asked. "And how did you get into this room?"

"I don't know how much time we have—"

"I don't believe we're in any danger of being discovered. I'm left alone here at night."

Accurana quickly described the meeting with Eviamin, her placement under guard nearby, and the numenera device that allowed her to get to the top of the tower.

"And why," Palim asked, eyes still shining as brightly as always, "did you come back?"

"It was Varden's wish. I came back for you. He always came back, you once said. Well"—her voice choked—"he can't now. So I'm here."

"I see you have his crystal."

Accurana reached up and felt that the cord had pulled the red crystal out from underneath her shirt. She caressed it with a finger. She choked back a sob, feeling it catch heavily in her throat.

“He never used it, you know. He never looked through it. ‘It’s easier to look backward than to look ahead,’ he would say, ‘but I always want to be looking ahead.’ That was Varden.”

“All this time, you two were together. Traveling the world, still? Researching?”

“Varden pursued his dream until the end. He had such vision, but we just couldn’t find the knowledge we needed to make it a reality. The Arthenac is a source of unlimited power, but there is no way of accessing it.”

“You have no children.”

“There was never any time.” Accurana paused. Stared at Palim and smiled. “You know, sometimes, when he spoke of you, Var would do so almost as if you were his child. He missed you, particularly in the end.” Her voice drifted off, but then suddenly returned. “You said something about seeing his ghost?”

“Well,” Palim replied, “not really his ghost. As Varden himself surmised, the Arthenac doesn’t summon the dead. It looks into your memories and finds someone who is passed. Even if you don’t know they’ve passed away, apparently.”

“What did he say?”

“Just that I should continue to protect the Arthenac from misuse. He used exact words and phrases that he had used with me before. I think that’s the way it works.”

“What was the Event that Eviamin was talking about?”

“I am not the storyteller your husband was, but I will try to explain. It happened shortly after Eviamin arrived. She was friendly and helpful, and claimed to want to help fulfill Varden’s dream. But she wanted to access and study the Arthenac. I wouldn’t allow it.

“One day, she did something to me—I’m not sure what—that shut down my systems. I collapsed. I lost consciousness for the first time since Varden activated me. When I awoke, my body was gone, and I was hooked up to some of these machines. Eviamin stood over me, saying she had saved me by restoring my energy before my memory was wiped again. The Arthenac was activated behind her.

“But it was worse than even that. There were people from the town standing around the Arthenac, arms upraised, silently staring. Others were on the ground, lying in the fetal position in the streets.

“‘What’s going on?’ I asked her.

“‘Show me how Varden closed the Arthenac,’ she demanded.” When Palim related Eviamin’s words, her voice almost perfectly mimicked the woman.

“‘You must stay away from it,’ I said. ‘I have strict orders.’

“‘Damn your orders, they don’t apply now,’ she said. ‘I’m overriding those commands. Tell me how to close the Arthenac or we’re all doomed.’

“Conflict tore at my consciousness. I wanted to honor Varden’s wishes, but I knew I’d already failed him. Eviamin had activated the Arthenac, and had done... something. The Arthenac appeared to be adversely affecting the townspeople—and those were people who meant something to me. They respected me and looked to me for guidance. On the one hand, I was a child, and on the other, I was a parent. And I was failing in both roles.”

“Oh, Palim,” Accurana whispered.

“Finally, I made a decision. I altered my voice and told her that I was speaking on behalf of the Changing God. That he was drawn by the immense power surge and channeled his consciousness through me. I told her that if she really wanted to be reunited with me, she had to heed my words exactly. I made up words and gestures she had to perform, but in them incorporated the correct shutdown sequence I had seen Varden use. And then I told her that if she ever activated the Arthenac again, far worse things would happen to the town, and to her, and that we would never be reunited.”

“And that worked?”

“Yes. Eviamin did as I told her. With the doorway closed, the people eventually returned to normal, but complained afterward of bizarre images and horrific, incomprehensible visions they had experienced. Eviamin put me here and began experimenting on me by attaching me to different machines. She wanted to summon the Changing God again so she could speak to him. And always, always looking for a way to safely open the Arthenac and tap into its power.”

“Why didn’t you continue to convince her that you spoke for the Changing God? Manipulate things into getting yourself free?”

“Even that very first time, with the stress of everything that was happening, I sensed that she was on the cusp of disbelieving my ruse. She’s a very intelligent, perceptive woman. I don’t think I could have pulled it off, and if she was certain that she hadn’t been told by the Changing God to leave the Arthenac alone, she would use it again.”

Accurana laughed. “That’s brilliant. And amazing. Even in that situation, you found a way to obey Varden’s original commands.”

“Obey?” Palim said. “You mistake loyalty for subservience. You see obedience where there is, in fact, gratitude.”

Accurana paused, mouth agape. “I’m sorry?”

“I was never Varden’s machine carrying out functions he had input into me. I was... his daughter. I was honoring my father’s wishes.”

“You’re right, of course. Sometimes we can’t see what is so plainly before us.”

“What shall we do now?”

“I’m afraid my brilliant plan didn’t go much beyond finding you. I have a way for us to leave here, if that’s what you want. That’s why Varden wanted me to return. He wanted me to free you from your obligation. So you could leave here. Live your life and find your own way in the world.”

“My body is in a trunk by the wall.”

“I don’t know how you’re put together, though. My fields of study weren’t...” Her voice trailed off and she shook her head.

“But wait. Palim, do you know exactly how old you are? To the minute?”

“Yes. I know I’m exactly 48 years, 35 days, 16 hours, and 43 minutes old.”

Accurana pulled the crystal away from her neck and held it up to her eye. She concentrated on that exact moment in time, thinking about the nearby cave where the man she loved had crafted the automaton that he would one day think of as his child. She felt things in her mind seem to shift into place. And then, through the red tint of

the crystal, she saw the cave. She saw it filled with various metal and synth pieces, tools, and the accoutrements of a crude workshop.

And she saw Varden. She had, of course, never seen him so young. He entered the low cave straight and tall, his body thin but muscular. But he was also clearly injured. A bloody gash ran across his forehead. He ignored the wound, however, and gently cupped something in both hands. Placing the object on a makeshift table, he crouched next to a metal and synth structure that would clearly one day be Palim's head.

The object was her central core. Her brain. It was, in effect, Palim herself. Or at least, the original, before it was overwritten with her current self.

She watched him open up a panel in the head and then carefully place the core inside it. Accurana watched him give birth to Palim.

She sighed. It was enough. The connections she had watched him make told her what she needed to know. "Goodbye, my love," she whispered, and reluctantly lowered the crystal from her eye.

Through the crystal of his staff, Varden had told his last story. With that knowledge, Accurana could give Palim a second birth.

"Do you think you can give me my body back? We should have the entirety of the night, undisturbed."

"I would be honored to try."

By dawn's first light, not only had Palimpsest's body been restored, but various aspects of it had been improved. Joints that were stiff now moved freely. Her head was solidly attached to her neck.

When they left the tower, Accurana was exhausted. "I'm an old lady now, Palim," she said. "I haven't stayed up all night in years."

Palim held the Tabaht weapon in her right hand. "I built you specifically so that you could hold a weapon," she said as they walked out the door.

"What?" Accurana asked.

"...and defend the Arthenac if need be."

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand.”

“Nothing,” Palim said. “Never mind.”

By the time they had crossed the plaza to the Arthenac, Eviamin and two of the town’s guardians hustled toward them.

“The Keeper,” one of the guardians said in awe.

Townsfolk starting their day looked on in surprise. Some of them hurried over to see. “Keeper,” many of them said. “She has arisen from her deathbed,” others murmured. “She’s returned to us.”

“Palim,” Eviamin clucked. “You aren’t well. You shouldn’t be up and around. What has this witch done?”

“I am the defender of the Arthenac,” Palim said. “That was not my original function. Not my original life. But that life is gone now. Long gone. Overwritten. I was given a new life forty-eight years ago in a cave not far from here. But like you, I have free will and consciousness. I can make my own decisions—my own assessments about what I can and should do.”

“Of course, Palim,” Eviamin said. “Let’s discuss this in the tower. We can figure out what Varden would have wanted for you.”

“The Arthenac is not what he thought it was.” She looked right at Accurana. “Not what you think it is.”

“Is it intelligent?”

“It is alive. Or rather, what lies on the other side is alive. Varden was right, it is a doorway to another universe, filled with energy. But that energy—that universe—is alive. If it is intelligent, it’s an intelligence we can’t really comprehend or even interface with. Varden was right to put a guardian here. I think, however, that the only way for me to carry out his instructions to safeguard the Arthenac is to destroy it. I have thought that for a very long time, but never would have considered it while he was alive. But I saw his ‘ghost.’ In all the years of my remaining here, with others seeing visions of passed loved ones, I never saw anything. Because I didn’t have memories of a loved one who had passed. I didn’t have memories of anything. But when my father came to me, as I lay trapped in that tower, I knew what I had to do.”

Palim pointed the weapon at Eviamin. The woman took a step back. “Stop her,” she commanded. “The Keeper is ill. She’s gone a bit mad.”

No one moved.

Palim turned toward the Arthenac and activated the weapon. Lightning coursed from the tip of the metal rod in bolts and sheets of furious power. Eviamin screamed. Others screamed. Without exception, everyone backed away from the heat and brilliance of the weapon’s discharge. For a moment, it was as though a bit of the sun existed on Earth.

When the spots cleared from their eyes, everyone could see that the column that had been the Arthenac was reduced to slag.

“I am the Keeper of the Arthenac,” Palim said to the crowd. “And as such, that was my right, and my duty. My father is dead, and his dream is dead, but he’ll not leave a legacy of danger. He’ll not have empowered people like Eviamin to inflict another Event upon you.”

The crowd’s attention turned to Eviamin.

“What have you done?” Eviamin asked. She seemed genuinely crestfallen. She looked to Accurana. “We could have worked together. This is your fault. You’ve allowed this... machine to destroy Varden’s dreams.”

“My father’s dream was that there would be a fabulous city here one day. And now there is. He dreamed that the power of the Arthenac would be harnessed, but not by the likes of you. He wished me to protect his creation, and I have.”

“And eventually,” Accurana added, “I now understand, once he fully realized what he had made, and that Palim was not a creation, but a daughter, I imagine he dreamed for her to come into her own. To become something new and wholly herself. And that dream is very much alive.”

Eviamin reached into a pocket.

“You should restrain her,” Palim said, pointing at Eviamin. “She’s dangerous.”

Before Eviamin could react, the guardians behind her grabbed her arms.

“She attacked me, instigated the Event, and held me prisoner for the last two years. But you’ll have to decide what to do with her.”

Palim motioned toward Accurana's fully grown transport pod. "I wish you all the best, but I'm leaving. I care about you all and the community we have built here, but I must go. Perhaps I'll return. Whether I do or not, however, don't live ruled by fear of magic or the unknown. It might be easier to look backward, but try to look forward. Build upon the old and make something new. And better.

"For myself, I have remained in one place too long. I'm going to explore this world that I've only heard about in stories. Stories well told, but still just stories."

Accurana walked toward the pod.

Before joining her, Palim added, "It's only fitting that I see it for myself. It's as much a palimpsest as I am."

About the Author



Having worked as a professional writer for almost 30 years, Monte Cook can honestly say that he's never had a real job. As a game designer, he's worked on hundreds of products, including as a codesigner of D&D 3rd Edition, and designer of Heroclix, Return to the Temple of Elemental Evil, Ptolus, Arcana Evolved, Numenera, and so much more, including a number of Planescape products, Call of Cthulhu d20, Monte Cook's World of Darkness, a whole bunch of d20 stuff, and-going way back-products for Rolemaster and Champions.

As a fiction writer, he has published numerous short stories and two novels, The Glass Prison, a heroic fantasy set in the Forgotten Realms, and Of Aged Angels, a modern day conspiracy and paranormal tale. He attended both the prestigious Clarion West SF&F writer's workshop and the NASA-funded Launchpad workshop. As a comic book writer, he has written a limited series for Marvel Comics called Ptolus: Monte Cook's City by the Spire, as well as some shorter work. As a nonfiction writer, he has published the wry but informative Skeptic's Guide to Conspiracies.