

BOOKS OF THE RISEN SEA

Suzanne Palmer

Suzanne Palmer made quite a splash with her 2016 short fiction. Her novella, “Lazy Dog Out” won its category in the *Asimov’s Readers’ Award Poll*. Her novelette, “Detroit Hammersmith, Zero-Gravity Toilet Repairman (Retired)” took its category in *Analog’s AnLab Awards*, and her short story “Ten Poems for the Mossums, One for the Man,” is a current finalist for the Eugie Foster Memorial Award for Short Fiction. Suzanne lives in a very small town with an even smaller library that is the heart of her community, and she tells us she has learned this: “Libraries are always bigger on the inside than on the outside, they can take you anywhere in time and space, and they are our best antidote to inequality and ignorance. Whatever apocalypses come our way, if we can keep our public libraries alive for all of us, we might just be all right.”

The dark green band along the horizon had grown thicker and more ominous since the last time Caer had glanced over the roofline, past the jagged teeth of the shattered seawall. He set the page in his hands down gently on the drying bed and closed the lid, flattening the wrinkled and blotched paper. He’d already lost a third of it to the mold, but the words he’d salvaged were irreplaceable.

That was assuming the storm didn’t finish the job. His drying bed was proof against most rain, but when the wind got fierce enough, the water would find its way through even the tiniest cracks. There was room for another three or four pages before the bed was full, but he’d learned the hard way that rushing made for mistakes and sloppy work he’d regret later. There was always another sunny day to wait for.

If it was a big enough storm, it would also bring in a new wave of ocean garbage, which would be followed by scavengers and potential danger. His time now was better spent locking down what he could, making sure his traps were set and working.

The large skylight in the roof had been shattered long ago, probably as far back as the Wave. He’d rigged cover over the broken parts, leaving himself a hatch and a ladder down to the fourth-floor balcony below. Where the glass remained he’d kept it

clear as best as he could; light was a precious and fleeting resource inside. After one last check that the drying bed and other things on the rooftop—solar panels, his rigged-up hot water system, last year's attempt at building a medieval siege engine—were secure, he climbed through the hatch and locked it above him, then made his way down the long, sloping ladder lashed to the balcony rails below.

There were three balconies inside the abandoned library circling an open atrium. The lowest balcony was barely above the worst of the storm surges; the main floor of the building, once a graceful, arched space dedicated to community and love of the printed word, was now permanently awash in the runaway sea. On calm days, when the tide was especially low and the sunlight from above bright, he could make out bits of the ornate tile floor through the accumulating silt.

He thought of the fourth floor as his eyrie, mostly because he loved the sound of the word, picked up from a fragment of a novel he'd recovered from a lower floor about a kid who could teleport himself away from trouble. He'd taken over a small corner between the stacks for his nest, sleeping sandwiched between history on one side, archaeology on the other. In the winter, when the outer wall seeped chill into the air, he moved over to sleep among the thicker engineering texts, closer to the rail.

Rummaging through his pile of belongings, he took out his longknife and his backpack full of repair supplies, then slipped on the insulated raincoat he'd scavenged during his first dismal spring in the library.

He took the curving stairs down to the third floor balcony, skipping with practiced ease around and over the cracked marble treads that could spill an unwary person down the flight; he'd thought about trying to repair them, but they were a useful if minor defense, if it came to it. At the bottom of the stairwell an arch opened up toward the floor's stacks of poetry and classical fiction. Opposite it, in the outer wall, was a tall window with a matching arch. It was, somewhat unique to the building, still intact, although he had long since broken the lock on the left pane.

Pulling the half-window open, he took a minute to listen before he stepped out onto the wide ledge and shimmied his way along the building to the corner. Flagpole bases held the ends of the wobbly suspension bridge he'd made of cables and wood salvaged from the sunken remains of a marina. The bridge crossed the ten-meter span between the library and the roof of the parking garage next door. There were many buildings that he felt territorial about, but the garage and the library were the core of his life, his *home*.

Feeling always unsafe from watching eyes, he ran across the bridge as quickly as he could and took the driving ramp from the garage roof down to the level below.

The Wave had done an excellent job of rendering the garage virtually impassable, one giant debris-plug of jagged rusty metal and smashed glass thrown up against the shore-side wall, spilling over and filling the next ramp down. There was one sad-eyed black SUV squatting on top of a flattened Mini with a solid-looking hood, an equally passable roof; there was no other way in and out except over it unless you wanted to scale the crumbling cement exterior of the structure.

Caer clambered up on the roof, peered down at the hood, and then nodded in satisfaction. The rigging was still good. The weight of a grown person on that hood would drop anyone atop it like a trapdoor down through the carefully excavated engine cavity, and through the open sunroof of the mini underneath into its moldy interior. He also checked that the dried silt he'd spread thinly over the wall edge and downramp was free of footprints. He didn't trust people and he hated surprises.

Satisfied, he went back up to the roof. On the far side of the parking garage from the library was a half-submerged mall. The bottom floor was a murky, seaweed-filled pool like so many of the other buildings that had floundered in the hostile surf. Its food courts and wide halls now teemed with what fish and other sea life had found a way to survive in the toxin-saturated water. There was little there left of much use to

anyone but him, and even that last was starting to run thin. Still, he had a plank bridge over to its roof from the garage, made of pressure-treated decking and aluminum extension ladders from the sodden remains of the home improvement store.

The mall was dangerous to navigate, but also harder to protect. He drew back the planks first, then used the ropes to swing the ladders up and back. The effort left him sweating even in the cool air that was pushing in ahead of the storm.

Walking to the edge of the garage roof, Caer looked west at the remains of his town. There was a bright rectangle visible just below the brownish water, the original foundation of the Wintercove town hall. The rest of the building now stood, its gothic columns bright again in the afternoon sun, where it had been cleaned and re-assembled higher up in the greening hills. New buildings and streets, new shops and houses surrounded it, the town alive again, if reduced.

Between it and him were the places—and people—not considered worth saving; the rough gray of a hastily built cement wall drew a thin, but confident line to mark out where the town had officially cut its losses.

A network of wooden walks had sprung up between roofs of the sunken houses. New, ramshackle structures built from the skeletons of the old perched on top as if Victorians and Capes and gambrels were simply styles of ocean stilts. He glanced at the one that had once been home, then away again. He was self-conscious of letting himself look at it too long, self-conscious of avoiding looking at it at all. Too many memories he neither wanted nor could entirely let go of.

Above the waterline in the hills he could see the bright blue roof of the town grocery store, straddling the wall line between oldtown and new. The oldtowners—*drowntowners*, *rats*, *human flotsam*—were lazy, dirty, living off disaster relief checks rather than earning an honest wage, or so the rhetoric declared; that got little traction until it was further suggested that they might carry in their clothing the black mold that had been the second deadly tide to wash through the town. Now there was a mandatory dress code with sporadic enforcement by a town-formed watch group to keep out undesirables.

When he had to go, he washed first, then put on clean, rip-free clothes he kept for the occasion. He picked up his monthly relief check from his post office box—turning eighteen had simplified his life in many ways—and hit the grocery store when it opened just after dawn, before the newtowners were up and around. Burt Adams, who ran the store, would trade him what he needed for the check signed over, and help him get out again quickly. “We used to be a country that prided itself on fixing things,” Mr. Adams said to him, more than once. “Now we’re full of over-entitled whiners who insist on not having to look at all the things they’ve broken.”

He was elderly, and his head and hands shook, but he spoke his opinions like a man perpetually ready for war. Mrs. Adams would have him carefully relegated to the back office before business picked up late morning.

Sometimes Caer would find a few extra food items tucked away in his totes when he got back to the library. Chocolate, usually, or a wealth of expired items Adams couldn’t sell but Caer would gladly eat.

Between the DIY store and a sporting goods outlet he had a camp stove and enough propane to last him years, even if he cooked every meal. What he missed, though, were fresh vegetables. This storm would be a significant test of his plan to fix that.

The wind was picking up, the air carrying the taste of fresh, untainted ocean. Peering over the other side of the garage roof, he watched the choppy waves swarming over the remnants of the seawall, starting to pull apart the coagulated islands of floating garbage that had settled into place in the lee. No one would be coming in by boat, certainly not until the storm was over.

His stash of cinder blocks and pavers, originally hauled up here for defense or for testing his trebuchet, had long since been turned into raised beds. Bags of loam and manure

had proven bulky and arduous to move, and in turn seemed to add depressingly little volume, but he'd eventually managed to fill them. After, he'd covered the dirt with cut lengths of fencing to help keep the soil from being blown out. Tiny seedlings now sprouted up from between the diamond-shaped grid. Tomato. Cucumber. Carrots and radishes.

He carefully laid plywood down on top of the beds, setting his remaining pavers on the corners to hold the sheets down.

After one last look at the approaching storm, then back at the quiescent town, he ran across his rope bridge and slipped back through his window to home. There were books there, waiting for him.

* * *

... impossibly large man stood there, grinning at him, hand still raised.

"Sovo," he managed, still coughing and wiping beer from his beard. "I see you're still as gentle with your manners as you are with your drums."

The Ottish giant smiled wider. "Missed you too, Atras my friend."

Over the drummer's shoulder, Atras could see the rest of the company sprawled around a table along the far wall, where they had obviously enjoyed a good view of Sovo's ambush. Anor waved as Menok tipped his mug forward in a mock salute. Both were laughing.

"Where's Rat?"

"Stowing the gear upstairs. Got here just before the sunfall bell. We're here for the night, maybe two."

"Oh?" Atras ...

* * *

Caer carefully excised the last remaining bit of moldy paper with his knife, cutting between words if he could match a spot on both sides. Half-words were useless. He had, at the beginning, tried to cut off at whole sentences, but he had lost too much that way.

This paper was dry now, wrinkled but solid, saved. He took a sheet of acid-free paper from his box, laid the page portion atop it, and carefully traced its jagged edges. Then he expertly cut inside the outline, leaving just enough overlap to hold the partial page in its center, readable on both sides. There were other pages of this book in his box waiting to be sorted and trimmed, more yet to be carefully harvested from the puffed-up remains of its binding. Once it was as complete as it could be, he would rebind it with thread from the craft store; he had done two already—small books, admittedly—and as clumsy as the effort was, he was getting better at it.

It was fixing the blankness, repairing the holes in the stories themselves, that stumped him.

His lantern had dimmed to a dull orange; he wound it up again and double-checked his table. No more of Atras's story here. The rest was from another rescued book set in the future, space ships instead of horses, alien artifacts instead of a magic kingdom. He had three other partial stories going on his table, but nothing new to add to any. At last, admitting exhaustion, he dragged himself to his blanket-nest and crawled in, unwrapping the length of cloth he kept around his chest, and was asleep even before his lantern had faded to nothing.

The storm howled through the night and well into the next day, dying out in fits. By late afternoon the sky was a uniform gray, casting down its last, exhausted handfuls of drizzle. Caer checked the drying bed and his seedlings, both of which had survived without damage. He had remembered his binoculars this time, and carefully checked what the storm had brought.

The tangles of flotsam around his buildings were thicker now, bolstered with new debris from unnamed towns and cities up and down the coast; Wintercove had survived better than some, worse than others. At least there didn't appear to be bodies this time.

He peered out to sea. There were usually a few things caught up on the seawall,

and this time was no different. Something large, like a dock or raft, was caught on one of the cement teeth, a jumble of junk on top that glinted metallic.

Metal was often useful, always valuable. It wouldn't take long, once the rain ended, for someone else to spot it. He wasn't the only one who watched the ocean.

A large swell pushed the jumble of flotsam over the edge and it spun, dipping and rising, into the waters that milled restlessly over what had once been the town's sea-side park, adjoining the public library.

If he was fast enough, the remnants of poor visibility would work in his favor. The front of the library had an outdoor balcony facing the once-distant sea. At high tide, it sat barely a meter above the wavetops. Caer grabbed his ten-foot PVC pole, courtesy of the plumbing department in the submerged home improvement store, and clambered out onto the pitted, slick tiles. On one end he'd fitted a sturdy hook, and on the other a bright pink kids' inflated waterwing was tightly taped to the pole. Jani would have laughed at him, were she here, but it had kept him from losing the pole enough times that he no longer cared.

He leaned over the cast iron rail, bracing himself there, and waited for the debris tangle to come within its reach. Already his mind was drifting, back to Atras and his friends, to pages he needed to find. It was a moment after the flotsam finally drifted within reach of his pole that it sunk in that he wasn't looking at a metal tank or keg or other typical debris, but a face.

Caer blinked at it and it blinked, slowly, back at him.

"Uh . . ." Caer said. "You're a robot."

"Yes," it said. Its voice was static-laden, hard to understand. It was half-submerged, only its head, a portion of its thick chest, and one shoulder riding above the swells. "I am damaged."

"What's your function?"

"My primary operating designation is caretaker," the robot said. Was it Caer's imagination, or did it sound sad? "I was not adaptable to other functions, so I was discarded."

Discarded sounded familiar, at least. Caer stared down at it. "Are you trying to go somewhere?" he asked.

"It is my understanding that I am expected to sink, but I have not yet done so, nor have I put effort toward fulfilling that expectation. I do not wish to be trash."

"Can you climb up?" Caer asked. "If I pull you closer?"

"I can attempt to," it said. "If I do so, will you assign me the function of trash as well?"

"I will not. Hang on." Caer leaned further over the railing and used his pole to catch an edge of the flotsam tangled around the robot. With the waves pushing up against the building, it took effort to steer the mass of it toward the edge of the wall where an old gutter pipe still dangled. Caer wasn't sure it would hold the robot, but it should at least keep it from sinking further.

The robot shifted sideways, reaching up with one hand, then swung the other arm out of the water. It ended in a large, rusty, circular saw blade.

"Aaah!" Caer yelled, and dropped his pole in surprise. It fell, landing across the robot's chest, knocking it loose from the gutter it had just managed to cling to.

The robot clasped its normal arm across the pole, and hid the other under the water again. "I am sorry," it said.

"You said you were a caretaker!"

"That is my designation. I was modified outside my parameters, and I was unable to adapt," it said. It blinked up at Caer, then said, sadly, "I accept I am trash."

"Shit." Caer looked at the robot, noticed it was drifting lower in the water already. "Are you sinking on purpose?"

The robot did not answer, but instead closed its eyes.

"HEY! You! Stupid robot!" Caer yelled. When it opened its eyes again, Caer pointed. "Hand me back up my pole!"

It stretched out its arm, holding the pole up toward Caer. "Don't let go," Caer said as he grabbed it, trying to get leverage to swing the bottom end toward the building.

"I see no value to this endeavor," the robot said, but it held on.

"Yeah, well, no one told you? I'm the local patron saint of hopeless things." He tried to maneuver the pole and robot to the edge of the building, but had no luck. Finally, the robot let go. "Can you . . ." Caer said, trying not to sound too ridiculous. "You know. Swim?"

"It is not a regular function," the robot answered.

"Well, is *sinking*?"

"No."

"Then can you try? I mean, flail your arms, see if you can move?" He raised his arms, waving them in wide circles, trying to demonstrate.

"Where would I move to?" the robot asked. "I do not believe I could climb your structure, even if I were to reach it. I am damaged."

Caer scanned the horizon. The skyline was clearing, the rain down to the last few, scattered handfuls. It would not be long before the scavengers came out. He pointed to the garage, whose lower level walls were right now only a few feet above the choppy waves. "What about there?"

"I do not know," the robot said.

"Try! If you can't get yourself out of the water, people will come who will cut you apart for scrap," Caer said. The robot tried with its one good arm, propelling it in a circle. "Use both arms!"

The robot seemed deeply reluctant, but eventually swung its sawblade arm up out of the water and mirrored the motion of the other. It moved, albeit slowly. Caer reached out again with his pole and nudged it on a better course. "When you get to the building, the floor slopes up. If you hide among the wrecked cars, you should be safe until nightfall. Just don't try to climb over them, because they're full of traps."

He watched for a few minutes as the robot made steadier progress toward the garage, then went back inside his library and around to the far side to peer toward shore.

Two rowboats were crossing from oldtown. He was almost certain the one in the lead belonged to Jani's asshole of a husband, Trevor. Bad news.

He went over to the arched side window, the late stages of sunset casting feeble light over the sunken garage. He got there just in time to see the robot pull itself over the low wall and tumble into the wrecked cars on the far side with a crash. Then there was silence.

If he knew Trev, the man would circle the library and garage, looking for any signs Caer had already taken in a good haul, and if so try to steal or bully it out of him. He made sure the window to the outside balcony was sealed and barricaded, then headed back around to the front window and the small, peaked roof that once stood over the front entrance.

When the two boats came around an old, sunken convenience store, Caer was sitting on the roof, feet dangling, a pruning saw on a long pole held upright in the crook of his arm. Trev was in the lead boat with his best friend, Mike, and the boat behind him was the other half of his gang: Sutter and Steve.

Trev brought his boat up close to Caer's perch. "Seen anything good come in, *Carolyn*?" he asked.

"Fuck you, Trev," Caer said, and gave him the finger with his free hand. "There's nothing here worth your time."

"Yeah?" Trev said. "I saw something metal on a raft hung up on the wall."

"I saw it," Caer said. "Tipped off and sank when it went over the edge. You're welcome to go diving for it. I think it was one of those big church coffee urns." He rapped

the end of his pole on the roof tile. "Might even still be some good coffee in it, if you don't mind salt and fishpiss."

"Your father once offered me three months of his relief checks if I hauled your sorry ass back home," Sutter said. "He said you've been out here playing house too long, and you need to be back earning your keep for the family. Sounded to me like he was offering a dowr—"

Caer swung the saw blade at Sutter, who barely managed to duck as it whistled over his head. "Crazy bitch!" Sutter shouted.

"Two things to get straight," Caer said, through gritted teeth. "I'm not ever going back unless I wash up there dead, and you don't ever get to call me that again. So just take your boats somewhere else. It's getting dark. You know I have the strategic advantage here, and if you try to set foot anywhere in my territory, I will sink the whole lot of you like a stone."

"Yeah, and how would your sister take that?" Trev asked.

"Knowing how much you fart, probably as a relief," Caer answered.

Mike snickered. "She's got you there, Trev," he said.

"Get out of here now," Caer said. His face felt hot, almost stinging, and the gnawing anxiety in his stomach he always hoped he'd left behind was back as if it had never left. "Go home or else."

"Or else what?" Steve spoke up. "There's four of us, and one of you."

"Yeah, remember the last time you tried to pay me a visit? Gave you some good scars, I bet. This whole place is trapped, and now I've got a robot, too," Caer said. "With a big whirling sawblade arm. Saved him from the sea. You actually get far enough to set one foot inside and he'll chop it off for good."

"This is fucking useless," Sutter said. "Kid's got nothing but stupid daydreams and lies. It's getting dark out. We can come back in the morning and check the wall and shore. You know she don't care about anything but books, anyhow."

"Yeah," Trev said. He glared up at Caer for a while, then put his oar in the water. "Til next time," he called out. "You know your father's not going to let you stay here forever."

"He should just leave me be," Caer said. "What does that cost him?"

"His pride in his own unbreakable authority," Trev said. "I'll tell Jani you said hi."

"Yeah, you do that," Caer said. He waited on the ledge as they circled around and moved downshore, toward the mall and ruins beyond, before giving up and heading back to the sunken houses of oldtown. He watched through his binoculars as they tied up their boats in the last of the light, then vanished inside through a doorway bright with the yellow-orange light of warmth.

His fickle stomach growled.

Caer went back inside, setting a string of cans across the windows, and trudged up to his eyrie. He rewound his lantern, then held it up over the returns cart he'd turned into his mobile pantry. He still had half a box of free crackers from his last visit to Mr. Adams' store, edging toward stale but still filling, salty. He cracked open his jar of peanut butter and spread tiny dollops on top of a half-dozen, then added a second cracker on top. He drained the liquid out of a can of carrots and ate those, trying not to think how mealy the texture was. Soon he'd have fresh carrots and these cans could sit until winter locked him in.

He was too tired to work on his stories, and instead pulled a book out from under one edge of his blankets and opened it to the page he'd marked with a torn-out subscription card to some long-dead detective-story magazine.

19th Century Painted Eggs, it was called, and there was something about the exacting and almost fetishistic frivolity and meaninglessness of the art inside that was comforting in a world that no longer had time for any such things.

One or two pages in, his lantern started to falter, and rather than wind it again,

he tucked the book back where it had been and curled up under his thick pile of blankets, willing them to warmth.

In the morning he would see if he could do anything for the robot.

* * *

Unsurprisingly, the robot did not want to go back in the water. "I have finally dried out," it said. "I am happy to remain here."

"Here" was leaning against the pile of wrecked cars, head tilted sideways on a rusted-out Ford like it was a pillow, while the faint pinkish glow of dawn rose behind them. In daylight, the robot would be visible to anyone looking closely from shore, and impossible to miss by someone boating past the garage. "You'll be found," Caer said. "And if not, you'll still get wet from storms."

"Rain water does not contain salt," the robot said. "It is less corrosive."

"Have you tested the pH and chemical composition of the rain lately?" Caer said. "I wouldn't count on it being any better, but you pick your poison. Although if you stay here, it won't matter—you'll be cut up and melted down long before either would become a problem."

"Where would you have me go?" the robot asked.

"Inside the library." Caer pointed. "It's mostly weather-tight and a hell of a lot safer than here."

"A library? With books?" The robot perked up, then immediately seemed to slump again. "I read books when I was a caretaker. Before I was discarded."

"Well, you can read books all you want," Caer said. "But I need you to swim over there, and we need to do it before the sun's fully up, or we're both going to have trouble."

The robot heaved itself up with its one good arm. "I do not wish to make trouble for you," it said.

"Good. How much do you weigh?"

"When not half-full of seawater, approximately one hundred forty kilograms," the robot said.

Caer snorted. "Whoever programmed you was way too optimistic. This is the still-twitching corpse of America. We let the world end before we gave in to the metric system."

"Three hundred and ten pounds?" the robot said.

"Okay." Caer hoped it would be lighter, but he could still make it work. "I'm going to go up to the roof and cross. Can you get yourself back down into the water? You remember how to swim?"

"Yes. I saved that memory."

"Good. Once you reach the place where we were last night, I'm going to lower down a ladder for you to climb up. You can do that?"

"I can try," the robot said. "Having one inadequately functioning arm reduces my ability to precisely answer in advance."

"Once we're on that side of the building we can take more time. Also, I have rope if we need it," Caer said. He glanced back at the brightening sky. "I'm going over now."

He clambered back over the cars, avoiding his car trap, and returned to the roof. Glancing back at town, he saw no signs of anyone moving yet, much less out on the water. He let out a breath he didn't know he was holding.

The low, booming *splunk* as the robot dropped over the wall into the water was loud enough that Caer had ducked into a crouch before he realized what it was. *Stupid stupid*, he told himself. He should have been explicit that it should get back in the water *slowly*.

Crossing his bridge, he saw the robot in the still-choppy water; it was reluctant to use its saw arm, despite the disadvantage. Still, it was moving in the right direction.

He climbed out to the balcony rail. He had carried a heavy aluminum extension

ladder out here to some effort and several mashed fingers, and now carefully lowered one end down, having to fight with it as the current tried to sweep the ladder sideways. When the end hit the thick sediment accumulated against the foundation it finally stopped bucking and settled in place. To be sure, he used one of several bundles of rope he'd brought to knot it tightly to the rail.

The robot bobbed into view below, listing sideways and half-submerged again. Its face was a passive, dulled metal mask, but when it saw Caer, something seemed to shift and it looked somehow hopeful. "Can you grab the ladder?" Caer called down.

It made it to the edge, caught the ladder with its good hand as the current tried to carry it past, and hung on. After a few moments it seemed to get itself upright and tried to climb. Letting go of a rung to reach higher, it nearly fell. "Lean against the ladder!" Caer called, and after a few attempts it managed to climb high enough that Caer could almost reach it.

He looked at the other rope in his hand, then down at the robot. "Um," he said, "can I put a loop over your head? Or will that kill—I mean, damage you?"

"I have a reinforced infrastructure," the robot said.

"Okay, then." Caer made a fast slipknot and expertly dropped it over the smooth plate of the robot's head. He hesitated only a second before pulling, tightening it up, and then running the rope over the top rung of the ladder so he could pull it taut against it. "Climb slowly and I'll try to keep you stable."

The robot lurched up another step, grabbing hold of the rung above more easily than before. The strain on Caer's arms as the robot let go and tried to move up, and gravity tried to pull it back down, was something he knew he'd suffer for later, but Caer was not going to let go; he'd stubborned himself into worse hurt many times before this.

Finally, the robot could hook its saw arm over the railing to brace itself. Caer stepped in to free his rope, then backed up against the library wall as the robot managed to heave itself over the top of the ladder and railing to land on its side on the balcony. Water poured out between its metal and plastic plates and ran in thick streams down the slight decline of the roof back into the sea.

"Do you have a name?" he asked it.

"Yes. Orchid-Iridium-Zero-Hexagon," it answered.

Caer barked a laugh. "Seriously?"

"It is a self-designation," the robot said. "I chose it after my initialization. It was a privilege to be given that choice."

"Oh." Caer felt suddenly like an asshole. "I didn't mean—"

"It is okay. There is understanding and not-understanding, always."

Now *that* was truth. "Are you mostly done leaking?" Caer asked, eyeing the widening puddle around the robot. He was thinking now about the worn carpets inside the library's upper floor, so carefully kept dry as a bulwark against the pervasive mold always trying to creep in.

"Mostly," the robot confirmed.

"I don't want to leave you out here, but you need to dry a bit before you come inside."

"I detect a strong decline in barometric pressure," the robot said. "I do not think I will have time to dry completely."

"What?" Caer said. The sky was bright and clear. The wind, though . . . it was picking up again, and it smelled sharp and salty. For a moment Caer stood looking out over the old park and the harbor that once lay beyond, remembering its last, frantic hours as the ocean raced in to claim it. Was there now, after all, a razor-thin line of black on the horizon?

"This could be bad," he said at last. "Okay, then, Orchid-Iridium-Zero-Hexagon, let's get you inside. You're going to have to sit on a plastic tarp for a while, but it's better than floating in the ocean."

"You said there are books?"

"Lots of books."

"Then it is definitely better than floating in the ocean," the robot said, and heaved itself back to standing with its one good arm.

* * *

Night fell faster than it should have, dragged in under heavy clouds by wind that seemed to rise in an instant and never relent. The robot had sat down on the plastic tarp Caer had spread out for it and announced its need to shut down and recharge moments before going completely still.

It was odd how something not alive could suddenly seem dead, and after catching sight of it out of the corner of his eye and startling himself, Caer went over and crouched next to it, studying it.

Shiny personal robots had gone out of vogue the last decade or so before the Collapse and the Wave; there had been brief fads of colors, and a disastrous attempt by one hapless manufacturer to make them flesh-toned. Despite its age, Orchid-Iridium-Zero-Hexagon had a fully articulated frame, and its remaining original hand had fingers that should be almost as capable as Caer's own. The robot had seen rough times, though; beyond the obvious dents and gouges and the massive, crude saw that had been grafted onto the robot's left arm, he could see several seized joints and exostructure plates that no longer fit together properly, and its once silver exterior was now largely a dull matte.

He didn't know if he could fix any of its problems. If there were any sort of practical repair manuals here, they would have drowned with the lowest floor of the library.

Using a broom, he swept some of the puddle water into a dustpan and dumped it over the railing down into the restless water two floors below. It was, for now, all he could do.

He had brought down the contents of the drying beds on the roof, certain this time that the storm would find its way through. Leaving the robot where it sat, he went over to his table and began to shuffle through the pages, looking for more of Atras's story.

* * *

—uproar at the court," Anor said. "The Prince was in a rare rage, threw everybody out of the castle. And I mean everybody, even the court musicians—they were nearly beside themselves, being tossed out with us commoners as if there was no distinction."

Atras chuckled. He could imagine it. Only during the six-day Festival of Aman were unsanctioned musicians given an opportunity to play for the nobles, though they were strictly limited to the historical Chronicles. The court musicians resented the competition, brief as it was.

"With four full days left in the festival? Must have been quite—"

* * *

The words from there were a lost cause on this page. He trimmed carefully around the good paper, still able to faintly smell the denatured alcohol solution he'd used to kill the mold, and wondered if somewhere else on the battered coast there was another abandoned library, another person living there rescuing what they could, and maybe just now salvaging the bottom half of this very same page he could only save the top of. He could put notes in bottles, call out to End Of The World Librarians everywhere. Or if magic was real, as in his favorite stories, he could reverse the damaged, swollen, fused-together books in time, returning them to their original condition with a spell . . .

Barely audible over the wind howling around the library, he heard a sound, like something crashing through glass. Caer leapt off his stool, his paper knife falling to the floor, and raced over to the railing. He could feel a draft of wet, chill air that shouldn't be there.

"No no no!" he cried. Could the storm have broken a window after they had held through so many others? Or was he under attack? He bypassed his suitcase of tools

and materials and instead grabbed his baseball bat from where he kept it at the top of the stairs. Above the handle, its surface was covered with an angry mosaic of screw nuts, gears, and protruding nails. He had been uncomfortable making it, more so now holding it, but defense came before all else.

He moved down the stairs quickly and quietly, listening intently for any clues of what might be happening. There was a low, irregular thud, as if a large piece of debris or a boat was knocking against the outside of the building.

As he came around the curve he could see the broken window, glass scattered wide on the stairs, and an arm fumbling through the break in the glass for the latch.

The awkward angle made it difficult, but he whacked the arm with the bat, not as hard as he wished. "Owwww!" someone yelled, and the arm pulled back. Moments later a face hovered in the window, and Caer held the bat end-forward like a spear, ready to ram it through the hole in the glass.

He recognized the face. "Mike?" he asked. "Come to see if I'll make good on my threat?" He waved the end of the bat close to the break in the window, to make his point.

Mike scowled. "Jesus fuck, you're creepy," he said. "Now help me get this damned window open!"

"No!"

"I've got your fucking sister out here, you little shit!" Mike yelled.

". . . What?" Caer let the bat waver.

"She's hurt. Raiders came in just ahead of the storm, and are busy working their way through oldtown stripping it of anything worthwhile."

Caer glanced through the intact glass above Mike's arm. There were a lot of lights out toward shore. Too many. "Is oldtown on *fire*?" he asked.

"One of the raider boats. That's how we got away," Mike said.

"Where's Trev?"

"Busy. Help? Please?"

Please was not a word Caer expected Mike to have in his vocabulary. He undid the latch and opened the windows, sending a fresh shower of glass down onto the floor. Mike disappeared.

Caer leaned out the window, his head enveloped in the driving rain. Mike was back in the boat, using a pole to push it closer to the building again. He'd wedged it up against the library where the building provided some shelter from the worst of the ocean drag, though it rose and fell against the stone with each swell. At its highest it was about a meter and half below the window frame, at its lowest nearly three. In the bottom of the boat, hauling tightly on a rope that was slung around a flagpole base, was Caer's sister Jani.

"I can lower a rope!" Caer called down.

"She can't climb a rope!" Mike yelled back.

"Can you tie one around her and I can pull her up?"

"No!" Both Mike and Jani yelled at the same time.

Caer turned and stared around the library, looking for anything he could use. His one free ladder was still out back on the balcony, and it was big enough that he'd have to heavily damage the window to get it through. A smaller ladder . . .

"Fire escape!" he yelled down to Mike and Jani. "North side of the building. It's trapped, so give me a few minutes to make it safe."

Mike stared up at him in disbelief, then shook his head. "Got it!" he yelled back, and began untying the boat.

Caer ran up the stairs to the third floor, hauling stacked boxes of books out of the way as fast as he could, then put his hands on the door bar and shoved. The door didn't budge. He threw his shoulder into it, kicked it, and it remained jammed. How long would it take Mike to get the boat over? "Open, damn you!" he shouted, kicking it again.

"May I assist?" a voice asked behind him, and he jumped from the sudden shock. The robot was standing now, awake, still on its tarp.

"I need to get this door open," Caer said. "Quickly."

The robot moved with surprisingly little noise for its size, though stiffly. It put its good hand against the door as Caer pressed the bar in, and pushed.

Screaming in protest, the door gave way. "Stay back," Caer told the robot, and got down on his hands and knees and leaned out over the side of the metal grating. Two thick wires ran almost invisibly along the underside and disappeared into a box he'd attached beneath the platform and painted black. Below he could see Mike just now trying to fasten his boat to the bottom of the ladder.

Caer had to find the two wingnuts holding the side of the box on by feel; rain had plastered his hair across his forehead like a wet mat, and he dropped one of the two down into the seething waters. It didn't matter; he had spares inside, and time later to find them. Inside the box, he unclipped both wires from the marine boat battery nestled inside and slipped rubber caps, left in the box when he built it, over the ends of both leads. He put the lid back on and had the one remaining wingnut spun down just as Mike called up from three floors below.

"Is it safe?" Mike shouted.

Caer brushed the soaking hair from his forehead. "Safe now!" he yelled back down. "Stop before the second platform, though!"

It was Jani that came up the fire escape first, hunched over and wrapped in so many layers she seemed twice her usual size, and moved as if twice that again. At the second platform she paused, looked up, her eyes wide and red. "Don't step in the center!" Caer called. "If you can step straight over onto the next ladder up, do it, otherwise you're going for a swim."

Mike was behind her and gave her a helping hand over, then waited as she climbed up the rest. Reaching Caer, Jani turned. "Mike!" she called. He was already back down in the boat.

"Going back," he said. "Gotta get the women out. You'll be safe here, if anywhere. After all, your *sibling* has a killer robot!"

"Be careful, Mike," Jani called down. "I'm counting on you to keep Trevor and the others safe, and yourself, too."

"No promises," Mike said. He pushed off in the rowboat and disappeared past the corner of the library with the swell.

Jani turned away from the door, then stopped in her tracks, stifling a scream. "What?" Caer said, and whirled around in alarm.

Orchid-Iridium-Zero-Hexagon stood there, and after a tiny hesitation hid its saw hand behind its back.

"Uh, Jani, this is Orchid," Caer said. "He's safe."

"Safe? He's got a goddamned saw blade!" Jani backed up. "What the hell have you been up to, all alone out here?"

"I saved him from the ocean," Caer said, hating explaining himself like a child.

"I am no danger," the robot added.

"Sure," Jani said. She pointed across the open atrium. "How about you just back up, like way over there where I *know* you're no danger?"

The robot dutifully turned and walked around the library to the far side, where it sat upon the steps. After a few more seconds of watching it, Jani let out a long, sharp breath and shrugged awkwardly out of her coat. The bulk remained.

Caer stared.

"Yeah," Jani said. "In a couple of months you're going to be an . . . um. Uncle?"

"An uncle! Why didn't you tell me?"

"It's not like you come visit," she said.

"It's not like I'm welcome," Caer answered. "You're hurt?"

Jani pushed up her sleeve, showing a long jagged cut along her forearm encrusted in blood.

"Did you get any floodwater in that?" Caer asked.

"Yeah, getting into the boat."

Caer took her arm, ignored her grunt of complaint as he poked gently around the cut. "I don't think it's too deep," he said at last. "We've got to wash it out, though. Right away." He glanced briefly up at the roof, the sound of wind and rain against the library. "There may still be some hot water left in the system. There's a large tub in the bathroom on the top floor—do you remember where those were, from when we were kids? I'll come help you in a few minutes."

"There's no *tub* in the bathroom," Jani said. "It's a *library*."

"There is now. Pond liner."

"Oh," she said.

Caer called over to the robot. "Orchid, could you stay and watch the door? If anyone else shows up, shout for me? . . . You can shout, yes?"

"I CAN!" the robot thundered.

Caer winced; his sister put her hands over her ears. "That'll be more than sufficient," he said. "If anyone tries to push past you anyway, tell them you have instructions from me to push them out into the water."

"Is that your instruction?" the robot asked.

Caer met Jani's angry gaze and sighed. "No. But lie and *tell* them it is," he said.

"That is good, because I do not like the idea of pushing a person into the ocean. It is a contradiction to my primary programming."

"And lying is not?"

"Mis-stating facts sometimes serves a necessary protective function."

"Yeah, well, remember that necessary protective thing if someone tries to come in with a knife or a torch," Caer said.

The robot stared at him expressionlessly. Caer let out another long breath and followed his sister up the stairs. *One thing at a time*, he thought. He wanted desperately to hook back up the battery under the fire escape, but if Mike or Trev came back . . . *It'd serve them right*, he thought bitterly, then shook his head. Mike had saved Jani, whatever else might be said about him.

His sister was staring at the peanut-shaped black pond liner in the middle of the bathroom floor, both hands folded across her expanded midsection. "Really?" she said.

"Really," he answered. He reached up to where he'd rigged a hose down through the dropped ceiling and turned the spigot he'd affixed to the end. Water came through, not as hot as it would be in daytime, but still warm. "Not too bad," he said. "You want a full bath? With bubbles? They're watermelon-scented."

Jani stared at him, not too differently than the robot had. He suddenly felt incredibly self-conscious. "Never mind," he said. "Just pull your sleeve up."

Jani didn't move. "How . . . ?" she asked.

"There's a big water tank on the roof and a series of crisscrossing pipes to warm the water in the sun, that then collects down into an insul—"

"No," she said. "Not that. Though I haven't had a bath since we were kids. Before the Wave. Ma used to throw us in together. Remember that?"

"Yeah," Caer answered reluctantly.

"What I meant was, how did you become such a stranger?" She rubbed at her eyes. "But I know the answer to that, and I don't want to argue about it, so forget I asked. I would die for a warm bath, but not now. I can clean my own arm up, and I'm going to have to take my shirt off to do it right, so you have to get out. No boys allowed."

"This is the boys' room," Caer said.

Jani laughed, an exhausted sound. "Not right now it isn't. Go. See if you can see what's going on in oldtown."

Caer wound his lantern up again and left it with her, then headed back down the dark stairs to where the robot stood sentry. "This human," Orchid asked, its voice startling in the quiet, "she is in a manufacturing cycle?"

"What?"

"Inside her central body chamber."

Caer laughed. "A baby? So it seems."

"You two are batchmates?"

"If you mean siblings, then yeah. Family." He snorted.

"Family is good, yes?"

"Sure, in picture books for little kids along with the tooth fairy and other fantasies. In the real world, you get what you get."

He went to the door, crouched down on the damp floor inside it, and peered out. Oldtown was burning.

The smoke rose orange in the light of the flames, and against it he tried to make out shapes—standing houses, boats, anything—to no avail. He could hear shouting across the water, but it was all haze and shadow in the distance. He resented more than ever that the early looters had gotten all the night scopes from the sporting goods store. "I wish I could see," he complained.

"I can see," Orchid said.

Caer glanced up. *Right*, he thought. *Robot. I'm an idiot.* "Tell me what's happening?" he asked.

The robot moved closer and peered out above him.

"There are two boats that are painted matte black and hard to fully discern, but I can extrapolate their shape as they appear to be identical to the ones the raiders who discarded me used; it is entirely possible they are the same boats, in which case there will be a fortified barge further off shore waiting for them to return. There are three houses on fire, of which one is fully involved. Four more are producing smoke. I see people struggling and can hear sounds of conflict, but cannot make out specifics at this distance. It appears the raiders are moving through from north to south."

"Do they . . . kill people?" Caer asked. *Dumb question.*

"If there is resistance, yes. Also there is a particular violence they often commit against females. Their primary objective, however, is to take whatever people have of value, that they've saved from before the Wave or pulled from the water. They do not like it when their victims impair their efficiency at doing so."

"Yeah, well, you can bet Trev and crew are getting in their way but good," Jani said, coming down the stairs behind them. "Dumb stubborn assholes better not get themselves dead. And you! You better not let them!"

"What am I supposed to be able to do?!" Caer retorted.

"You with all your tricks and traps and stuff, there has to be something! And your killer robot!"

"I am not a killer," Orchid said.

"Everything I have is defensive," Caer said. "I just wanted to be left alone."

"You were alone!"

"And I liked it!" Caer roared. "Why the hell didn't Trev and the others come with you, to start with?"

"Trev wouldn't ever abandon Pa," Jani said. "Pa calls him the son he never had, and Trev feels the same."

The son he never had. Right, Caer thought. But to hell with the son he did. He

knew the bottomless pit of that conversation all too well, knew the futility of throwing any more of himself into it. "Orchid, do you know anything about raider tactics?" he asked, as much to change the subject as anything else.

"I witnessed only a portion of one such excursion," Orchid said. "They used four boats. Two were used to block off the town from any help from, or escape to, shore, and the other two went in to perform the collection of valuables. I was brought to menace the townspeople, but my loud and repetitive declarations that I would not hurt anyone were found to be unacceptable 'mixed signals' and myself a wasteful encumbrance upon available space, and as such I was shortly thereafter pitched overboard."

"There are nearly thirty houses inhabited in oldtown," Caer said. "Two boats per side can't possibly watch them all?"

"If a few people successfully flee, but are still forced to leave their possessions behind, this is not considered a problem. The goal is profit, not mayhem, and as long as the number of escapees is small and their flight harrowing, the credibility of the raiders as a threat is not negatively impacted."

"Can you see Mike's boat?" Jani asked.

"I cannot determine either way," Orchid said, "but I only got a partial view of it when you arrived, it is very dark out, and there are many obstacles. However, there is a boat of similar size approaching the tiered structure to our north."

"What?" Caer exclaimed. "The parking garage?!"

"Yes," the robot said.

"How close are they?!"

"At their current pace I'd estimate they'll reach the structure in approximately six min—"

Caer took off running, taking the stairs up two at a time. "Stay here!" he shouted behind him. "Keep my sister safe!"

The roof was wet, and he had to slow to keep from slipping, but he dared to only barely. Once he reached his suspension bridge he raced across it to the garage and to the town-facing side. He could hear the creak of oars and the voices of people carrying up over the sound of the waves against the building. "Mike?" he called down. "Mike!"

"Caro—" Mike's voice came up out of the dark a moment later. "Is that you?"

"Garage is trapped, you can't get in!" he called down.

"I've got the Gresmeres with me," Mike shouted back. "They need shelter!"

The Gresmeres were two sisters who lived one sunken house over from where he grew up. Sometimes Caer's mother would send him or Jani over with leftover food, when they had any, when their father wasn't watching. Less and less often toward the end, but always the Gresmere sisters were grateful. Later he understood how much of it was desperation.

But this is my sanctuary, he thought, and felt immediately ashamed of himself. "Can they climb up the fire escape into the library?" he asked before he could find some excuse not to offer.

"No, and your library isn't safe either. You and Jani need to get out too. I heard Sutter tell the raiders you had all the valuable stuff. They're going to be coming your way!"

"What?!"

"They were gonna cut on people for info," Mike yelled. "You've got all your traps and shit, and you're good at hiding. And you told us you had a robot!"

Caer stared down helplessly at the darkness.

"Come on! We're freezing down here, and I need to go back for others while there's still a chance!"

He forced himself to shake off the fear. "Go to the mall," he said. "Old loading dock in the back, there's a hole in the overhead door. Be careful; the edges are sharp and the swells can push you up into it. Once you get inside, row into the old food court.

You should be able to get up to the second level from there and find somewhere to get under cover. Don't drink any water you didn't bring in with you."

"Okay. Uh, Elena and Michelle say thank you," Mike shouted up. Caer could hear him setting the oars again. "You get going too!"

He could hear the boat moving away against the waves. Along the far shore, flames had spread; he could see the shapes of people running on the walkways in between, but couldn't tell if they were oldtowners or raiders. Higher up, on shore, he could see glints of light along the wall that separated the abandoned half of town from dry land and he wondered, if it came down to it, if the wall was being held just against the raiders, or anyone fleeing them as well.

So far, there did not seem to be any movement toward the library, although it was hard to see.

He went back across his makeshift bridge to the library roof, thinking furiously; were his traps enough? As he came down the stairs and saw his sister in silhouette near his worktable, he considered how much more was at stake, and how he resented being called on when no one ever gave a rat's ass about him.

Almost no one. Jani looked up. "Caer," she said, her face relaxing in relief. "Where's Mike?" "Dropping off the Gresmeres over in the mall," Caer said. "There's—"

"I was reading what you got here," she said. "There's a lot missing."

"Yeah," Caer said. "We need to—"

"Atras is a prince, right? Older brothers try to assassinate him, he runs away and becomes a traveling musician, everyone thinks he's dead—"

"How do you know that?"

"I read this when I was a kid," she said. "I read some of it to you, too. Funny. Always about runaways, isn't it?"

"I don't remember it at all," Caer said. "How could you?"

Jani laughed. "Unlike you, I haven't read all that many books. None since you left, of course, 'cause they're all gone."

"Gone? I didn't take even a third."

"Pa threw the ones you left behind in the sea." At Caer's pained look, she briefly hung her head. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have told you. He thought it must've been from books that you got the idea that you . . . You know."

Caer knew, felt the stab of a new loss in his gut.

Orchid leaned forward slightly over the table, and began to read.

* * *

. . . swung his legs slowly over the side of the cot and managing to stand with a minimum of wobble. He slipped his trousers on, tied the strings, and lifted the bolt on the door. Sovo pushed his way into the tiny room. The drummer was back in his grays from the night before, his massive head of hair combed back into a neat ponytail, a silver clip holding it in place that must have cost him half a year's performance money. "Festival is back on. We need you," he said. "We're good without you, but you make us great. We need to win a commission."

"No," Atras said. "I'm sorry, but no. I will not play the court."

"Why?" Sovo sat on the cot beside him, looking stricken but not surprised.

"My family had dealings with the court, years ago, and it ended poorly."

"But you won't play for *either* court, not for either Prince Korol *or* Danar." Sovo wrung his hands. "Menok's worked for a commission for years. He makes us practice the Chronicles until we're so sick of them that we begin to loathe music itself! This festival is the only chance us common musicians get to play for the nobles. You know we won't make it without you."

"And if you do with me, what then? I become trapped there, where I least want to be."

“So much so that you would rather forage in the wilderness, feigning retreat, whenever we play the court? Yes, I’ve seen. I know. But I had to try to persuade you, for Menok.”

“I know,” Atras said, and patted his friend on the shoulder. “Ask anything of me but this.”

* * *

The robot stopped reading as abruptly as the page ended. “There is more?” he asked. “Some,” Caer said, passing a hand above the pages he had laid out. “It was a big book, but the whole last fifty pages or so were just one giant block of mold. I saved what I could.” He looked over at his sister. “Do you remember how it ends?”

Jani laughed. “I don’t think it really did. Beginning of some endless series, I bet. There’s a dryad and they fall in love and there’s a lot of running around in the woods and sword fighting and magic and stuff. You loved the fighting. Always did.”

“I *hate* fighting,” Caer said, then stood up straight in alarm. “Shit!”

“What?”

“You two distracted me. It’s not safe here any more. We need to get you over to the mall.”

“What?!” Jani put one hand on her belly. “I’ve seen that fucking plank you’ve got a million feet off the ground and there’s no way I’m crossing it.”

“It is twenty-seven point six feet off the average water surface at low tide,” Orchid said, “which is in turn approximately eleven feet from the sea floor beneath.”

“Whatever. I’m not going,” Jani said. “And what do you mean get ‘me’ over there? What about you?”

“I’m not leaving here,” Caer said. “If the world hadn’t gone and fucked itself up so thoroughly I could have had a real life somewhere else. This is all I’ve got, and I’m not letting anyone wreck it.”

“Then defend it, and us,” Jani said. “I trust you.”

“I don’t!” Caer said. “I built my traps to keep Trev and his buddies out, the occasional local looter, and father after he said he’d rather see me dead than leave me be. Not an entire gang of experienced coastal raiders with weapons!”

“So what are you going to do?”

“I don’t know!”

“Then figure it out,” she said. She pointed at the robot. “You! Can you help?”

“I can try, within my parameters of non-violence,” Orchid said.

“Great, that’s useful, then. You two go do that. I need to lie down now.”

“Uh, I have some blankets upstairs—”

“Not going upstairs. I’ll just sleep on the floor.”

“I’ll bring you down some,” Caer said,

“Sure. Because being comfortable while my entire life burns down outside is at the top of my list.”

Caer opened his mouth to apologize, realized he would end up yelling, and instead turned his back and stomped upstairs without looking back. The robot began to follow, but he pointed toward the window. “Go see what’s happening, please, Orchid.”

His own blankets were in bad need of a wash, but he had a small extra stash for deep winter and pulled it down from the shelf where he’d tucked them. They were dusty, but he decided that wasn’t his problem. Remembering the constant mildew on everything in his childhood bedroom back in Oldtown, he didn’t expect Jani would complain either.

She was sitting, her legs looking awkward under the bulk of her abdomen, and Caer was surprised to realize she’d been crying while he was gone. Her face now, turning toward him as he came down the stairs, was a mask of determination.

“Here,” he said, and set the blankets down. “It stays warmer if you sleep in between the stacks. Do you want me to help—?”

"No," she said. "I can do it just fine. You have stuff to do."

"Yeah," he said.

He left her to it, and joined Orchid by the window. "What's going on?" he asked, keeping his voice low.

"Most of the fires are out now," Orchid said. "I do not see much activity, although there does appear to be some movement between the walkways and raider boats, suggesting the hauling of material."

"There isn't much worth taking," Caer said. "Food, I guess."

"They will take anything they think they can sell or trade," Orchid said.

"Do they take people? To sell?"

"The ones I was with did not because they felt it was too much trouble. They will, however, recruit anyone fit enough that they think would adapt to and come to enjoy their employment with them. It is a life with more immediate material rewards than in many of the shore towns, if one does not mind danger."

"And dishonesty."

"The people who mind the latter are much rarer," Orchid said.

"I'd accuse you of cynicism, but you're a robot and you're not wrong," Caer said. "We've got maybe three hours until dawn. You think they'll come before then?"

"They will want to be moving off before the sun is fully up. Daylight emboldens people."

"That's what I was afraid of," Caer said. "Well. I've got a few traps on the fire escape, but they only work when they're a surprise. I can pull the ladder back over from the parking garage, and there are traps there that will take out another one or two if we're lucky. After that, there's not much to stop them."

"It would be advisable to keep them from reaching the library, if you have a deterrent that functions at a distance."

Caer laughed, no humor in it. "If only!" A moment later he added, "I have a trebuchet I built on the roof, but nothing to throw with it. I chunked a few cinder blocks out over the sea wall when I first made it just for fun, but cinder blocks are heavy to cart up there and too useful to waste. And there's nothing else here."

"There are books," Orchid said.

"NO!" Caer shouted, the word flying past his lips before he could even half-form the thought. Jani poked her head out from between the stacks, eyed them for a few minutes, then retreated. "No," he said again, more quietly. "I won't."

"There are books here that are too damaged—"

"I haven't tried everything yet!"

"There are books still underwater."

"They'll disintegrate as soon as we touch them. I've tried."

"The second floor—"

"That's where all the good fiction is!" Caer couldn't help but cast a stricken glance at his worktable. The lower shelves had been completely swamped in the first wave, but the upper ones had fared better, at least until the mold began to creep in. Everything had long-since dried, but it was as if the books on the lowest shelves had melted into one colossal pulpy sponge. More than once he'd stood there and managed to find a title he wanted desperately to read, but the words on the spine were now just immobile mockery.

He sat on the floor and put his face in his hands. The library was quiet, the faint sound of the water outside against its walls and a tiny ticking, whirring sound that came from the robot itself. Jani's breathing was slow enough that he was sure she was asleep, or close to.

He resented, in that fraught peace, all those books about time travel where someone could freeze a moment forever, or rewind and fix all the ways everything went wrong. But outside he knew the raiders weren't going to stop for him, the ocean

wasn't going to retreat, the country wasn't going to put itself back together whole again, and all he could do was waste time he couldn't afford. "The second floor," he said, quietly, feeling the words shatter the illusion of standstill. "I'll need your help."

Orchid dutifully followed him down.

Caer walked to the start of the stacks and ran his fingers along the spines there, despairing in the utter lack of movement among them. They had fused long before he ever could have saved them, but he found the idea of letting go almost unendurable.

Not quite as much as that of letting go of the library itself.

"If we can find a way to pull these apart into blocks heavy enough to throw, maybe we can convince the raiders we're not worth the effort," Caer said. "Can you see what you can do?"

"What approximate parameters are you needing?"

Caer held his hands out, about a foot apart. "Much bigger and they'll be hard to lift."

"I can carry," the robot said.

"If you find any books that are still salvageable . . ."

"I will be mindful."

"Okay. I'm going up to the roof. Bring some as soon as you can." Would he even remember, later, how many volumes smaller his world had become, what titles he'd committed to the risen sea forever? He didn't want to think about it, and when he heard the faint whirring of the robot tentatively starting up its blade arm, he ran.

The siege weapon stood where it had for more than a year, a big double-triangle with a long boom suspended in between, a thick mass of cabled-together cinder blocks on the short, thick end pulling the longer, tapered end up nearly vertical. A thin steel cable swung gently in the wind along it. To load it, he'd have to pull the long end down and raise the counterweight up; it was the drop of that weight again, when released, that threw whatever missile had been attached to the cable on the end of the boom. He'd stumbled across the plans in a mechanics magazine, of all places, long after having concluded from actual medieval warfare texts that no designs for such things still existed.

It had been fun, in all its enthusiastic impracticality. Now it seemed ominous and somehow complicit, a dark skeleton waiting poised against the faint gray of the sky.

Turning to oldtown, he could see the faint glow of where fires still burned, an undulating orange on the pre-dawn water. That same water carried to him, like an unwelcome gift, the low thump of boats against the dock piles, the unsteady beat of booted feet, and rough, unintelligible voices. They would not be long in setting out.

"Pardon me." The robot's muffled voice came from the skylight opening, and Caer turned to see a chimneystack of cut book blocks rising vertically out through the skylight behind him. "I am unable to climb the ladder while encumbered."

Caer crouched at the edge of the opening and took the ragged-edged blocks, one by one, and set them aside on the roof. Despite himself he caught fragments of titles on mangled spines, and knew exactly which section of shelf they had come from. *Goodbye, Cordwainer and Doc*, he thought, and set them so that the lettering was facing away.

Once all the paper blocks had been stacked, the robot disappeared back down for more. Caer glanced at the blocks, considered, then after a quick glance toward oldtown—no boats heading into open water yet—went back inside and rummaged through his boxes of supplies. He didn't doubt the blocks would hold together if thrown by hand, but the stresses of being flung at the end of a fast-moving chain were another matter, and raining loose fragments of old, moldy, torn science fiction down on the raiders was not likely to give them pause.

He found plastic strapping he'd salvaged from the home improvement store and carried it, the clips, and pliers up, and set to work wrapping one tightly around each bundle. It would also give the hook at the end of the trebuchet's chain something to haul on.

Orchid had carried up nearly two dozen blocks before Caer stopped it; the light had grown just enough for him to witness the first of the raiders' boats pushing off from oldtown. He rested one hand on the trebuchet frame. "I'm going to need your help to aim this," he said. And, remembering how badly he'd thrown out his back the last time he'd used it, he added, "and to pull the boom end down and set it. We need to test the range."

"I will need you to demonstrate," the robot said.

There were three boats, one towing the badly burnt shell of the fourth behind it. The lead boat was not quite halfway across the span of water between oldtown and the library when the first of the paper blocks plunked itself into the ocean. It was far enough short of its mark, in the bad light, that he was sure it hadn't been seen, but it had definitely been heard. There was a shout of surprise.

The robot picked up the next paper block. "Seven ounces lighter," it declared as it hooked it to the cable. Then it wrapped its saw-arm elbow around one leg of the trebuchet frame and its fist around the other, and with a loud groan shifted the trebuchet slightly to the south and barely a centimeter forward. "You may try again," it said.

The second bundle also fell short but was right in line with the lead boat, and all of them pulled up their oars and drew closer to one another. He could hear urgent conversation floating over the water as a solitary gull dove across the waves where the block had sunk, looking for a possible meal.

The boats pushed back from one another and drew apart, oars were set again, and they began to pick up speed.

"It is perhaps insufficient deterrent," the robot said.

"Yeah." Caer had expected as much. He connected up the next block, then pulled a bottle of lighter fluid from his pocket. He soaked the paper brick and then stepped back, hating the feel and smell of it on his hands. "Can you set the boom again?"

Orchid pulled the boom down, raising the counterweight, and set the release. "Now you should reach within approximately ten meters of the lead boat," it said.

"Thanks," Caer said. He waited.

After a few moments the robot added, "There is an increasing danger of striking the boat, rather than merely deterring with proximity."

"Yeah, that's what I was thinking too," Caer said. He pulled a small matchbox out of his pocket, struck one, and threw it at the bundle at the same time as he yanked the release cord.

Fire was not evident as it arced over the waters, but it struck the prow of the center boat and burst into a thousand dancing flames. Caer could see the occupants of the boat scrambling to put them out. "Stop there!" he shouted, and when they did not hear him, he tilted his head toward Orchid. "Tell them to stop there. Loudly?"

"STOP THERE!" Orchid boomed, and this time the raiders heard.

Caer prepped another brick with lighter fluid and made sure it was ready to throw before he stepped over to the roof edge and cupped his hands to either side of his mouth. "There's nothing here for you!" he shouted.

Someone stood up in the lead boat. In the growing light the raiders didn't look much older than he was. "That's not what we were told!" the leader shouted back. He kicked a dark shape in the bottom of the boat and Caer heard Sutter's voice protest.

"He's a liar!" Caer shouted back.

"He said you had the most valuable stuff in town!"

"Yeah, I do! Books!"

He could now see the raiders more clearly; the outer two boats had five men apiece in them, and the lead ship four men and two people hunched down in the middle. He could see the first few strains of daylight glinting dully off a knife one raider held over the two in the bottom. *Sutter, and who else?* Caer wondered.

“You’re going to a lot of trouble to defend just a bunch of books!” the leader shouted back.

“I also like my peace and quiet!” Caer retorted.

“You saying you got nothing else?”

Orchid walked up to stand beside him at the roof edge. “I’ve got a robot!” Caer yelled.

The raider laughed. “Yeah, I recognize that robot. We threw him out! He’s not going to help you fight us, you know.”

“Hello, Martin,” Orchid called out, waving, just as Caer sent another flaming bundle of paper sailing over the water. The leader had to duck, and it hit somewhere in the back of the boat and sent the others chasing after the flames.

“You don’t want to fight us!” the leader shouted.

“No, I don’t! I want you to just go away and leave me alone! But I will if you make me!”

“Over just books?!”

“Over just books! Ask Sutter the truth, he’ll tell you I’ve got nothing else.”

“Yeah, Sutter. Don’t be an asshole,” the other huddled person said.

“Mike?” Caer called.

“... Yeah.”

“His hands appear to be bound,” Orchid said.

“A friend of yours?” the leader called. “He didn’t behave for us. Maybe you’d trade for him back?”

“Let him go, and I’ll let you get back out to sea without firebombing the shit out of you on your way past,” Caer said. “More than that I’m not sure I like him enough for.”

“You think you could hold that hunk of shit building against us by yourself?”

“The whole place is trapped. How much are you willing to lose for a bunch of moldy paperbacks?”

“Is that true?” the leader asked Sutter.

When Sutter didn’t answer, the leader kicked him harder. “Yeah, yeah!” Sutter said. “Traps everywhere. She’s a fucking psycho. Runs in the whole goddamned family.” He hunched further down into the boat.

“Martin!” A raider shouted from another boat. “Call from Josh. There’s a patrol coming up the coast! We gotta get moving!”

“Right,” the leader said. “Tell him we’re on our way, and to mark this dump down on the map as Doesn’t-Have-Shit-Town. Next—Aaah!” He stumbled back and fell into the bottom of the boat as another flaming brick soared right over his head. It struck the man behind him with the knife, who dropped it and began flailing at the swarm of embers crawling over his chest.

Mike leaned over, and Caer could see the brief flash of the knife before he stood up, dropping cut fragments of rope behind him, and leapt into the water.

Caer loaded and hooked up another brick as quickly as he could, as Orchid stood and tried to adjust the angle of the frame to match the boats’ renewed, rapid movement forward.

“Let him go!” Caer yelled, “or I will burn your boats down to the water!”

“Yeah? And what then happens to your other friend here?” Martin kicked Sutter.

“Let him swim for it too!”

“No, fucking hell, no,” Sutter said. “I don’t want to go back. Anywhere’s gotta be better than here. Can I go with you, please?”

Martin held up his hands and shrugged.

“Fine, then, you can keep him! Just go now,” Caer said.

The leader signaled, and his boats pulled together and away from where Caer could see Mike struggling in the waves. “He’s not going to make it,” Caer said to Orchid.

The robot nodded. “I have continued to retain the memory of swimming,” he said, and then with all the grace of a boulder falling off a cliff toppled over the roof edge toward the ocean below.

The sound of him hitting the water was no less impressive. The raiders all startled in their boats, pointing toward both the water and up at the roofline where Caer stood, still caught in surprise.

One boat veered toward Mike, who was barely moving. The water was cold, and Mike's soaked clothes would be heavy as lead, dragging him down. "Ah, no, you idiot, don't give up!" Caer said, not loud enough for anyone to hear, gripping his fists so tightly closed his fingers were starting to go numb.

Suddenly there was something shiny in the water, close enough to reach out one hand and snag Mike; the other raised up briefly with its sawblade, and the boat turned sharply astern to avoid it.

"Yeah! Go Orchid!" Caer shouted, jumping up with his fists in the air. He ran to the open skylight and shouted down as loudly as he could. "JANI! I NEED YOU!"

He raced back to the edge of the roof, grabbing a paper bundle as he went, prepared to throw it by hand down on anyone approaching. The three raider boats were passing the library now, closer than he would have liked, but not so close that they were an immediate danger. He saw someone point him out, and hoped that his presence was sufficient to keep them moving on.

Jani's voice floated up from below. "Caer?"

"I'm on the roof," he said. "Can you get up here?"

"Probably not if my life depended on it," she answered.

"What about Mike's life?"

Her groan was audible even from the roof edge, and about half a minute later Jani's head appeared in the opening, her hair a tangled muddle, her face pale. "What are you doing?" she said.

"The raiders are going past. I need you to make sure they don't change their minds and decide to stop here after all," Caer said. "I have bombs."

"Of *course* you do," she said. She made a face, then managed to climb far enough up the ladder to crawl out onto the roof on her hands and knees. "Help me up?"

He cast a worried glance at the raiders—had they slowed? Had they edged slightly nearer?—and then set down his block and hurried to help Jani up. She joined him back at the edge a moment later. "There's a patrol boat coming, so they either need to get out of here or get under cover quickly. I need you to convince them there's no practical way for the latter." He pointed out the paper blocks, then handed her the bottle of lighter fluid and his matches. "There's enough liquid for three or four more bricks, more if you're sparing with it. Try not to burn yourself. If you can, wait until they get close enough to land it right in their boat."

Jani smiled. "My pleasure," she said. "Where's Mike?"

"He went overboard. Orchid is bringing him in. They'll both be so waterlogged they won't be able to get out of the water on their own. That's if they don't sink entirely before they get here."

"Then fucking go," Jani said. "I can drop bombs on these assholes just fine on my own."

"Yell if you need help," he said, and then climbed down the ladder and raced down to the second floor, where he climbed out the window onto the balcony. The ladder he'd used to haul Orchid in was still there, and he carried it across the library and out onto the entryway roof facing oldtown. There were brackets along one side, originally for colorful flags and holiday decorations, and he lashed the ladder to them as best as he was able.

He couldn't yet see Orchid and Mike in the water. *What if it's too late?* he wondered, feeling sick. "Orchid! Orchid, the balcony!" If the raiders heard him . . . well, Jani could get the drop on them from all four sides of the library. He went back into the library and grabbed a six-foot length of pipe, just in case, and his ten-foot pole with the hook. He hung the hook pole over the railing.

“Caer!” Jani shouted down from above. “They’ve gone over the sea wall and they’re heading out!”

For a heart stopping moment he thought she meant Mike and the robot, then he took a deep breath. “Okay! Keep an eye out until they’re completely gone! Can you see Mike and Orchid?”

“They’re heading right toward you,” she said. “I . . . they’re barely above water at all.”

Caer took off his shoes and socks and rolled his pants legs up past his knees, already grimacing from the cold. He tested the ladder again for stability then climbed down until his feet were barely above the reach of the waves. “Orchid!” He yelled again. “Mike!”

At last he saw something in the water, moving feebly and intermittently. He reached up and grabbed his pole from the roof and tipped it out, trying to snag the bundle of sodden clothing without hurting Mike. Just when he thought it was a lost cause, a shaking hand reached up and wrapped itself around the pole, and Caer hauled as hard and as fast as he could. When Mike was close enough Caer let go of the pole, leaned out, and grabbed a big handful of wet jacket. Straining, he pulled Mike the remaining few feet to the ladder.

Mike’s face was pale, shaking, blood still encrusted over one swollen eye. At first his gaze was vacant, then his eyes found Caer, and he smiled. “Carolyn,” he said.

“Fuck you, Mike, and help me get you out of the goddamned water,” Caer said. He tried to haul the man upright, but it was as if he was a ton of dead weight. “You still got your pants and shoes on?”

“Shoes . . . ?”

“You’re too heavy. Take off everything you can.”

“C . . . cold.”

“Your clothes aren’t making you any warmer. There’s blankets inside. Come on, Mike!”

Mike hunched over in the water, and then moments later nodded. “Those were my favorite boots,” he said. “My only boots.”

“Yeah, well, if I see the fishes wearing them around I’ll ask politely for them back,” Caer said. He pulled again, and this time Mike managed to get both hands on the ladder on his own. “Don’t let go,” Caer said. He shifted to one side of the ladder, one foot on a rung and the other in midair. “Go up past me. You only need to get inside and then you can rest. You hear me?”

“Hear you,” Mike said, and began to haul himself up the ladder. He had ditched both pants and shoes, but kept his socks and a ragged pair of boxers. His legs were pale, almost blue.

Halfway up the ladder Mike stopped, and Caer was afraid he was going to let go. He got back on the ladder under Mike and put his shoulder up into the man’s ass, shoving. “Keep moving!” he yelled. “You can’t stop now!”

At last, Mike managed, with a lot of shoving from Caer, to topple off the ladder onto the slate tile roof. “This is good,” he mumbled.

“No, it’s not. You’re gonna slide right off again. You need to get inside and get out of those wet clothes.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” Mike said.

“No, Mike, I fucking wouldn’t,” Caer said, his face reddening with anger. “I could just roll you right back off this roof and save myself a shitload of aggravation, and no one would ever know.”

“He saved the Gresmeres,” Jani said, from the roofline above.

“Yeah,” Caer said. “But he’s got to get his own ass inside now, or I’ll just leave him here. Cause of death? Being a massive asshole and more stupid than dirt.”

With a groan, Mike pushed himself up onto his hands and knees, then stumbled awkwardly upright on the slanted roof. “That’s more of a Sutter way to go,” he said,

and pulled himself through the window and in, where he immediately collapsed again on the floor. "This good enough?"

"Good enough for now," Caer said. He looked back at the water. "Where's the robot?"

"It sank," Mike said. "Got me as far as it could 'til it was so full of water it was worried it would pull me down with it. Apologized, then let go of me and was gone."

"Shit," Caer said. He went back outside, shivering and soaked through, and climbed back down the ladder to where he could reach his pole, bobbing against the side of the building. Holding the end with the floatie, he shoved the pole down into the opaque waters, hoping against all odds that he could find and hook onto the robot, manage to pull him up somehow. The pole slipped into emptiness, over and over.

"Caer?" Jani called again from the rooftop.

Caer didn't look up, didn't want his sister to see tears on his face. "I'm trying to find the robot," he said. "Raiders are gone?"

"Yeah. Just saw the patrol boat go by."

"Mike needs to get out of his wet clothes and wrapped in blankets to warm up. Can you get down from the roof by yourself?"

"Yeah, I think so," Jani said. "You okay?"

"I'm fine, just go inside, all right?"

She disappeared from the edge. Caer swept the pole around in the water, finding nothing. At last he gave up, stared down at the waves for a few more minutes, then with a deep, long sigh he tossed the pole back up onto the roof and climbed up after it. Inside, he shut the window with enormous regret.

Mike was no longer curled up on the floor directly inside. From the echo of voices through the open space at the center of the library he guessed Jani had managed to get him up one more floor, which was smart; it stayed warmer up there, farther from the water.

Caer went up to the third floor, set up the camp stove, and put a pot of clean water on to boil. Tea would do everyone good, and he didn't have much else to offer that wouldn't leave him starving. If most of oldtown had been relieved of their food supplies, there were going to be tough times ahead for a while.

Jani was sitting next to Mike, who was sound asleep under a thick pile of blankets. "He got Sophia, Izzie, and Maria over to the mall too, but they caught him going back for a third trip," she said as he handed her a mug of tea. "Told him they were gonna break his arms and then dump him out at sea to show him how being brave never did anyone any good."

"I'm glad he got some people to safety," Caer said.

"He told me they hurt Trev and Pa too, he's not sure how bad, and Steve is dead," she said.

"I'm sorry."

She stared at Mike a little longer. "I hate everything," she said. "Why is it always so awful?"

"I don't know," Caer said. He shivered, sipping at his own tea.

"You need rest too," she said. "I'll keep an eye on things for a few hours, then we can figure out how to get us all back to oldtown."

"Yeah," he said, and stood.

"I'm sorry about your robot," she said.

"Yeah."

He went up to the fourth floor and crawled into his own blanket pile, and despite certainty that sleep would be far away and hard to come by, barely remembered getting himself settled down before he was out.

* * *

He slept for a long time, waking up as the sun was starting to set. His whole body

was stiff and aching, and he almost decided to go back to sleep. But there was stuff that needed to be done.

Downstairs, Jani was standing at his worktable. "I found the next page in your stack," she said. "It's almost completely whole."

He leaned over her shoulder and read.

* * *

Anor was carefully unpacking the last of his bells and chimes, hanging them with precise movements on their frame. Atras sat in the still-dewy grass, finishing his tuning, mind and attention fully on that one task.

"Atras," Rat hissed at him, and he realized the others had gone very quiet. He twisted the last peg into position and looked up. Standing before them was a tall man, with a small moustache and sun-yellow hair swept up into a ponytail. The man wore a white tunic with gold trim, gleaming even in the indirect sun of the day, setting off the dark, hard eyes.

Prince Korol, his half-brother.

With a shock, Atras almost dropped his xitar. He caught himself and managed a bow with the rest of his company, his heart racing madly.

"Welcome." The prince addressed the entire band. Behind him, a small group of nobles attended him, looking on with barely disguised boredom. The Lady Olia was standing on the central dais. Her eyes were locked on the Prince's location, a frown on her face. Beside her stood a thin, older woman with the same bright hair as her son, looking over the courtyard as if all around her were merely livestock at a show. The Lady Oresia.

"Your Highness," Menok bowed lower than the others. "We are at your service."

"Indeed," the Prince said, just as the sunhigh bell rang out from the castle tower, echoing

* * *

The page ended where it ought, for once, and he flipped it over and read the other side. Would the prince recognize his half-brother, presumed dead at age nine? What he had here didn't get far enough to tell. "I think I have the next page too," he said, and turned toward his box, then stopped mid-step. "Do you hear thumping?"

Mike looked up from where he was hunched in blankets against the stacks. "I do," he said. He pointed. "From that way, I think."

That was the direction of the window and entryway roof. Caer realized he'd left the ladder in place, where anyone could just climb up. If the raiders had come back . . .

He ran to the window, and saw to his relief that there was no one on the roof, at least not yet. His boots were still there by the opening, and he slipped his feet into them and stepped out onto the slate, picking up the length of pipe he'd left there as well during the dawn chaos.

Peering over the edge down the length of the ladder, he saw a metal elbow crooked over a rung dipping in and out of the waves, the top of a shiny dome head, and a fist reaching out and knocking, politely but persistently, on the building itself. "Mike! Jani! I need your help!" he yelled. "Grab the rope!"

Mike appeared on the rooftop, still in his bare feet, and tossed the end of the rope down to Caer. When he saw the robot, he smiled. "Hey, it made it!"

"Almost," Caer said. He got close enough to make a light rap on Orchid's head, and the robot turned his face upward in the water. Caer slipped the rope around his neck, then backed off up the ladder to the peak and braced himself. He and Mike began to pull.

Ponderously, Orchid raised its normal hand and grabbed the ladder, then unhooked its saw arm and moved it up a rung. Water streamed out from its joints. After a moment, it repeated, and little by little they got it up to the ladder. Jani joined in pulling the rope and Orchid tumbled at last onto the roof, cracking the slate tiles beneath it as it fell.

Caer glanced at the dusky sky. "Should be dry for a while," he said. "You stay here and stop dripping, okay, Orchid?"

"That is okay," the robot answered.

Caer smiled. "Good to have you back."

"Yes. I prefer this to underwater."

He followed Mike and Jani back in through the window.

Mike still looked like he was barely keeping upright. "I should try to get the people in the mall home again; they're probably scared and hungry. You, ah, have any extra pants or boots that might fit—? No, of course you don't. Steve was about my size. I'll check his stuff, if Sutter and his new friends didn't take it all."

"You sure you're up to this? You can stay until morning."

"No, but I'm going to anyway. Can I borrow your boat?"

"Yeah, as long as you bring it back."

"I will," Mike said. "Jani, you want first ride back?"

"Yeah. I'm worried about Trev and Pa." She tilted her head toward Caer. "You okay here?"

"I'm always okay here," he said.

"I'll send word when the baby's born."

"Thanks. I hope everything goes smoothly," Caer said. "Gotta take good care of my nephew."

"Or niece," Jani said. "You never know."

"Only the baby will," Caer agreed. "Uh, if you remember how the rest of that story goes . . . I don't think I'll find much more of it."

"So what?" Jani said. "Fill in the missing pieces yourself, and write your own ending. It'd probably be better than the original was, anyway! Magic rings and wizards and warring kingdoms and all that cliché stuff. You could do better. I liked the prince, though. Atras. Make sure you give him a happy ending. Someone deserves one."

She pointed a finger at Mike. "Your blanket is slipping," she said, and as he hastily wrapped it around himself again, she smiled back at Caer. "Thanks for watching out for us," she said.

"Yeah, no problem," he said.

Mike coughed. "Boat?"

"I'll show you where it's tethered," Caer said.

* * *

It was nearing midnight, and the robot had come inside at last, though it stayed on its tarp in case it still had some water inside. It had shut down to recharge, and sat there like an inert statue, alien and comforting at the same time. Caer really was glad to have it back. Have it *home*, he corrected himself. The robot had asked if it could stay and read books with him, and he'd readily agreed. He told himself it was because the robot would be useful and could help him with some projects that had been out of his reach before, but really, it was nice to have the company.

There is understanding, and there is not understanding, the robot had said, but even more importantly there was not having to explain.

He looked at the last page of Atras's story he'd been able to find.

* * *

—door. Sovo looked down at his shoes, then back up. "Where will you be heading? Back into Baulor?"

"The mountains are nice in the spring," Atras said. "I was thinking of heading north, spending some time in Taug Nekarr. I have friends there I have not seen in some time."

The Ottishman nodded. "Enjoy yourself. I must say that I hope you will join us for the Valmetat Festival, but as long as I see you again, and play with you again,

I care not where it is. I wish I knew what drives you away yet again, but you will tell us in time, yes?”

Atras gave him a fast hug, patting the giant man on the back. “Perhaps. Take care of yourself, Sovo, and the others. You really do not need me.”

“There you are wrong, my friend, but I will say no more. Enjoy the hills, and I will see you again.”

Sovo ducked out the doorway and ambled away. Atras watched him go, feeling sad, feeling satisfied. *At least we’ve parted well*, he thought. *Friends*. He flipped the room key in his hands a few times, then with a deep sigh he slung the bag and the xitar over his shoulder and left.

* * *

Easily two-thirds of the book was missing, much more than he’d thought. Jani had hinted at a little bit of the rest, but the words themselves were gone. There were other books, many of them whole, just waiting for him to get to them, but he felt no hurry toward them. They were safe. There was an anxiety toward the broken books that he couldn’t shake, couldn’t fix.

Before she’d left, Jani had left a blank sheet of paper and a pen on his worktable. He stared at it, not touching either.

Behind him, he heard the small pot of soup he’d put on the camp stove bubbling away, and got down off his stool to stir it. “How do you write a story that’s not yours?” he mused out loud.

Without moving or opening its eyes, the robot said, “If you tell it, it is yours. Just as when you read a story, it is also yours.”

“Easy for you to say,” Caer answered, but the robot did not respond. He poured his soup carefully into his bowl, watching the steam curl up into the air in front of his face. It smelled wonderful, full of flavor and promise of a full stomach.

He turned off the light by his desk and settled down on the floor to eat, listening to the waves outside in their endless slow parade. Some stories could, after all, wait until tomorrow.