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ARRANGEMENTS FROM THE LIFE OF GAVEL HALLIDAY

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ABSTRACT

My creative writing thesis is a science fantasy novella with four chapters. Each chapter is a self-contained short story, though they all follow the same protagonist. My thesis is a take on the noir genre and an exercise in dynamic narration.

INTRODUCTION

I began my creative writing thesis, and became a Schreyer Gateway Scholar, as a way of giving myself a deadline for the novel manuscript I had been working on at least since my freshman year of high school. In my first semester at Penn State Berks I had about thirty pages done in my second draft of the manuscript, but by the summer of my junior year I had finished the manuscript with the final page count at five hundred and ninety-seven.

This manuscript was written in an experimental, first-person voice that eschewed many of the modern conventions of novelistic narration. As a result, my Thesis Supervisor and Honors Advisor, who agreed on most of their criticisms, and I had difficulties in seeing eye-to-eye when it came time to edit. After implementing their suggestions for about a hundred pages, during which time I came to understand the value of their criticisms, I decided to change my thesis and produce another piece of creative writing. I made this change because I wanted to work on developing my creative writing with my Thesis Supervisor and Honors Advisor on a piece where I could put aside some of my more personal artistic impulses, and thus openly engage with them on the text. I include these first two paragraphs here to make clear that what follows is not the entirety of my thesis work, but more so a culmination of it.

For my second piece of creative writing I decided to render the backstory of a side character I used to think of as throwaway, a prop for introducing a main character, in another manuscript of mine. My thesis is a novella of interconnected short stories based on the life of the work's titular character, Gavel Halliday. Genre-wise it is a science fantasy that examines, challenges, yet partially affirms tropes and prototypes within (neo-)noir. I put the "neo-" portion

of the genre in parentheses because I am a fan of interlacing the old with the new, so in the novella there are both noir and neo-noir elements.

Beyond mixing disparate genres, another one of my focuses as a writer is (my attempts at) translating visual rhetoric to the page. I appreciate texts that call upon my imagination and emulate them by typing out visually detailed settings and characters that I can picture in my mind. Although, heretically, I am often more drawn to various visual arts and am impressed by the ways in which they convey stories without words. While literature is the foundation of my writing—I like to think that I am self-taught in the intertextual sense—I usually find myself referring back to films, video games, and anime more than I do Dostoyevsky or Márquez. Along with mixing genres, another one of my postmodern tendencies is to discount distinctions such as "high" and "low art," instead mingling the two to create what I believe to be a unique blend of elements. For example, I feel safe in writing that no one before me has written a science fantasy novella of short stories that were influenced by the works of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Philip K. Dick, Umberto Eco, and James Abbott McNeil Whistler.

One of the main draws of learning for me is gaining material for my writing. I am an avid consumer of media, and this applies to my college curriculum as well, where courses served the metaphorical double-duty of fulfilling my degree requirements and acting as multi-part meals for my imagination. This held especially true for the courses I took that dealt with the arts and world cultures and histories. One such course was a survey of trends in Western art from the Renaissance to the mid-twentieth century. In that course I heard lectures about Impressionism and read about the Tonalist Whistler. From the former I drew inspirations for settings that would appear in the first chapter of my novella and from the latter I adopted his titling style for paintings. The painting commonly referred to as *Whistler's Mother* is actually titled *Arrangement*

in Grey and Black No. 1. Whistler was an artist who worked in one medium (painting), though aspired to the aesthetics of another (music). I feel a sense of camaraderie knowing that I am not the first artist to walk this path. Writing with aspirations toward visual aesthetics is my gait, but I travel down a worn trail.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| Abstract | i |
| Introduction..... | ii |
| Divertimento in Blanc..... | 1 |
| Serenade in Gris | 1 |
| Nocturne in Noir | 25 |
| Aubade: Gemini No. 2 | 40 |
| Appendix: Influential Works | 61 |

Divertimento in Blanc

"No."

With the missive opened and its contents read, an argument ensued between pa and progeny.

The only child shot up from his seat at the table, sending his chair sprawling. "With ma out of work, I have to pitch in, pa!"

Herr Halliday stared at the table, ignoring his son's glare. "Gavel, I can support this family on my own. Take it from me, the capital isn't a place for Goddess-fearing commonfolk like us."

Frau Halliday frowned. None of the fault lay with her, yet she felt for both her stolid husband and indignant son.

The kindling in the stove crackled as it broke and fell to ash. Gavel set about gathering his things. Herr Halliday laxed his jaw, but then decided against sharing his mind. The Forester was more at home in the weald than under his own roof.

As Gavel stood in the threshold of his small stead, he glanced over his shoulder for one last look at what he would be leaving behind. His pa had not looked up since he read the missive. Flames danced along his steepled fingers. His ma, seated beside his pa, seemed quite alone. Shadows pooled in the furrows of her cheeks. Gavel regretted not asking his ma her mind.

Northlaw, the burning white capital of the Great Kingdom. Like greedy fingers the buildings reached skyward toward Injabulo, the Red Sol. The hands of the cityscape reflected the

rays of that dormant deity as they tried to close around Him. Or, at least, it seemed that way in the squinted eyes of the young man from the countryside.

The missive which summoned Gavel to the capital had been sent by the Wardens of Northlaw. It entreated him to enlist with the military police of the Mages College. Lucre was lucre, and his family needed to eat, but Gavel worried if he would be able to conscion working under those who opposed the Goddess.

At the end of the missive was a name, "Green Bell Tower," and directions, which led Gavel to imagine the name belonged to a place. An official looking seal took the place of the sender's signature at the bottom.

The white buildings towering over Gavel seemed not entirely solid. At their peaks they swayed, though not due to any breeze. Roofs extended up and outward as if to catch the sollight. The rays that spilled through dappled the sidewalk a gentle red. Gavel was so taken with this display that he did not see the oncoming column of pedestrians before they knocked him over.

A kind passerby cushioned the young man's fall by softening the sidewalk and then inflating it like a bubble in pie crust. Gavel fell more slowly than he had expected. Having deflated, the pavement popped beneath his head. Gavel ran his fingers through his locks. No blood. He sighed after realizing that he had not been shot. Those passing scoffed or rolled their eyes at the yokel spread out on the sidewalk as if it were the bed of a forest, though even upright his attire drew attention.

Gavel brushed the dirt off of his beige corduroy overcoat as he got to his feet. It had the look of an heirloom, but was no worse for wear. Shifting from his pa's gift to his ma's handiwork, Gavel inspected his twill trousers. Green as the boughs of the weald.

Green Bell Tower. Green Bell Tower, Gavel thought to himself after stumbling back on to his intended course. He had memorized the directions to the place mentioned in the missive, or at least, he would have sworn that he had. A tricorn swept from someone's head swelled with a sudden gust, drawing Gavel's eye toward the traffic above. Overhead, citygoers were being ferried through the air in flying carts and in the stomachs of metal beasts that skittered along suspended rails. Perhaps it was the spectacle of urban life that preoccupied Gavel's mind, dislodging the last few directions with the dazzle of modern technomancy.

Gavel searched fruitlessly for a notice board. *With no map I'll just have to ask someone for directions.*

Out of a baker's dozen, he managed to hook the ears of three passersby.

"Excuse me, could you tell me how to get to the Green Bell Tower?"

The pale elf who stopped took Gavel aback with his powdered wig and face. His blanched visage was like that of a stately specter.

"You?" was all the pale elf said before continuing on.

"Please, Frau, could you direct me to the Green Bell Tower?" Gavel asked another pale elf.

The pale elf seemed not to appreciate his question for she promptly snapped shut her folding fan and drubbed him over the head with it.

"Bloody Gehenna, do you know how to get to the Goddess-forsaken Green Bell Tower?!" Gavel asked the thirteenth pale elf.

"Aye," the man said, tapping his cane as punctuation for his monosyllabic response.

The flush in Gavel's cheeks faded. "How do I get there then?"

"You were correct in referring to that establishment as 'Goddess-forsaken.' What was once a holy sanctum has become a pit infested with those who would commune with daemons."

Mages. A bead of sweat rolled perpendicular to a set of gritted teeth. "I have a job interview there. I think."

"Don't sign yourself over to Shedima, son." The pale elf tapped his cane before him, about to depart. "However," he began, not yet fully turned away, "you need not worry. For they would never allow a lucreless bumpkin such as yourself into their company. Good day."

Gavel wanted to acquaint his boot with that haughty pale elf's powdered rear, but decided to set that impulse aside. He pressed his forehead against the side of a building.

Well, now I'm in a real fix. Ugh, how do I get from here to the Green Bell Tower?

Answering his thoughts, the white wall bled color until it settled on the composition of a map.

"So that's how it works. No intonations, just think it and the city delivers. Technomancy sure is something."

With the last few directions memorized, once again, and hovering street signs overhead, Gavel made his way to the Green Bell Tower.

Long was the shadow cast by the stone skeleton. Piercing spires, vaulting arches, and a looming bell tower enwreathed in ivy gave shape to the fallen cathedral. Rather than laying the house of worship to rest, the mages had dressed its corpse with ritzy neon letters spelling out "GREEN BELL TOWER."

As Gavel stepped into the converted cathedral's shadow, he grabbed his sides and crossed his arms to hide his hands from the cold. This warmth was fleeting, though, for a hand as cold as a buried man's gripped his shoulder.

Gavel turned around rigidly. A bald man of considerable size was the possessor of that icy grip. The shadow of the Green Bell Tower trilled blue, but the shade of this man hummed violet. Frost covered the grassy island in his violet wake.

"Gavel Halliday?"

Gavel nodded.

"Swell." He released Gavel from his icy grip.

The man was a pale elf, like many of the other citygoers, his pointed ears said as much, but he lacked the powdering of the ones who had verbally and otherwise assaulted Gavel. However, the pale elf of considerable size was not lacking in striking features. Gavel withered under the intensity of his scrutiny, the man's pupils appraising coals in white hearths. The pale elf's stubble reminded the young man of the grass in an unkempt churchyard.

"Gonna gawk at my kisser all day?"

Before Gavel could respond, the man had thrust a cloak at him. He had not noticed until then, but the pale elf was wearing a similar black robe. In it Gavel saw the firmament of night. Twinkling points seemed to emanate, not from any sequent, but from far away as if the fabric was deeper than its thread count.

"Wait, this is the garb of the Mages College! I thought you were a W—"

"A bull? Aye. And Balart to you."

Gavel heaved relief.

"Why meet here though? Couldn't we have met at the station?"

"Too many shifty eyes and perky ears. Eggshells in general, but especially with the brass. Nae, the station isn't safe, not right now at least. I want to vet you somewhere without any observant eyes or ears." Balart paused. "Are you a Goddess-fearing man?"

Gavel nodded without hesitation.

"Peel off that ratty coat then," Balart ordered. "It'll be hot enough in there already without you layering up."

Gavel handed Balart back the black robe. *How many Hallidays have worn this?*

He hung his family's overcoat on the branch of a sidewalk tree.

"Be gone by the time we're back." Balart said.

"Then I hope they make good use of it."

The beginning of a smile curled one edge of Balart's lips before he shook his head and the expression away. He crossed the street and Gavel followed while throwing on the night sky cloak.

Once Gavel caught up, Balart mumbled, "Most of my partners don't last too long."

Gavel looked for any signs of sarcasm yet came up empty.

"Meaning they get new partners, right? Right. . . ?"

A robot bouncer stood between the two cloaked men and the converted cathedral's bronze threshold. The bouncer stood guard on a pair of stilt-like legs. Balanced atop them was his squat, semi-spherical body. A helmeted head domed this metallic mass. The bouncer's arms were proportional to his body, but his serrated fingers scraped the sidewalk. Red optical sensors glared down at Gavel and Balart.

"Greetings," Balart said to the bouncer. "I'm Lecturer Melchiron and this is one of my pupils, Apprentice Agrippa."

"Need your IDs if you're wantin' to get in," the bouncer buzzed.

Gavel gritted his teeth as he listened to the robot's synthesized speech.

"Of course. Here are our school IDs," Balart said as he handed the bouncer two talismans carved from bones. "Even before the taps begin to flow Apprentice Agrippa tends to lose track of his school ID so for this eve I have been charged as its keeper."

Eldritch Runes, the language of the Old Gods and their latter-day disciples, were etched into the occultic IDs which swayed from mundane lanyards as the bouncer gave them the once over.

From his vantage point the bouncer could not see the two men's faces beneath their hoods, but their names were on the College's registry, and their IDs were ninety-five percent authentic according to a diagnostic scan. The script of the runes matched those on record and the bones upon which they were etched had belonged to daemons. The bouncer gave a static huff and handed back the IDs to the man calling himself Lecturer Melchiron. He was not paid enough to care about five percent.

Parting the bronze clouds, angels, and ascended saints of the Green Bell Tower's threshold, Gavel and Balart entered the mages' nightclub.

Cavorters robed in the cosmos sat around tables, drinking and laughing, where before the penitent would have filled pews, kneeling and praying. Dusk had not yet settled in over Northlaw, yet the nightclub was quite dim. Silk drapes covered the stained glass windows spanning both sides of the converted cathedral while glowing purple stalagmites provided lighting enough for the mages to see their drinks and the faces of their peers and colleagues.

As Gavel and Balart walked from one end of the nave to the other, the young man from the countryside heard a groan he imagined originating in the bowels of a beast with steel strings for innards. He turned toward the choir. A tiny, pipeless black organ with the luster of a beetle's

carapace sat above, playing itself. Even Balart could feel the heat given off as Gavel's face reddened.

At the other end of the nave was the bar, a brimstone altar resplendent with spirituous decoctions and tinctures. Some were capped off with green wax. Others had crowns of gold foil. A crystalline bowl of citrus fruits awaited the knife.

The barmaid who stood behind the resplendent yellow slab looked on listlessly as Gavel and Balart approached. Instead of an altarpiece, a massive looking-glass stood behind the bar. The whole interior of the Green Bell Tower could be seen reflected in that silver-skinned surface. Gavel and Balart took their stools.

Her eyes were languid, her gaze favored nothing, and her face was indifferent. The barmaid was not so much watching as she was facing the display of magecraft occurring before her and reflecting behind her. In the looking-glass, Gavel saw a stuntman riding a unicycle across a tight rope that was attached to nothing but itself. Upon closer inspection he realized that the stuntman was not cycling around a tightrope, but atop the back of a flying serpent that was devouring its own tail. More catching to Gavel was the distant barmaid.

"Two slugs please," Balart said to the barmaid.

"I don't drink," Gavel protested.

"You will if I have any say. And if you won't listen to me, then someone sorer will convince you to take it up after they introduce your mug to the pavement."

"I'm already well-acquainted."

The barmaid poured two drams of liquor then set them on the bar.

Balart tipped his slug back. Like a leaping flame in a hearth, his eyes widened for a second then relaxed. Gavel thought of his stead. Balart tapped the brimstone with two fingers to ask for another dram.

"Where I'm from machines don't talk."

"Well they do here. Think, too."

"Why make things that serve under you feel your heel digging into their backs?"

"Machines don't serve under *our* heels, Gavel. It won't do if your button gets bright red every time we see or hear a robot. Today's not the last day you'll be rubbing elbows with them. Lucky for you, I'm a "Lecturer," so I can teach you how to relax."

Balart pulled out a pack of cigarettes from his starry robe, tapped one out, and offered it to Gavel.

"I don't smoke either."

Balart shrugged, and with a whispered incantation lit the cigarette with a small flame that danced from his fingertip. "You will in time. Aye, in time." He puffed at the stick of nightshade and other poisons.

"Your pa and I used to beat the pavement together. Great Warden. Maybe too good at his job. Cared more than he should've." Balart tipped back his second slug then tapped for a third.

"Said he'd move to the countryside, become a Forester, and start a family. Halliday couldn't stand cleaning up the mages' dirty laundry. Most can't." Balart took another puff from his cigarette. Smoke billowed out from under his hood.

"I'm sure whichever stretch of wood he's watching over is the safest in the kingdom. . . . That's why I sent you that missive. Your pa's character. His skill. If Halliday taught you half of

what he knew, then you're twice as ready as any rank and file Warden for what we're about to do."

"My pa's never been the kind to hold hands. I picked up some from watching him in the weald, though nature was a better tutor. Nurturing when I was attentive. Punishing when I wasn't. I know at least thirty different bird calls and I can track with the best of them, but I don't know how much of that will help me in Northlaw."

"Instincts are the hardest thing to teach," Balart responded before tipping back his third slug. "You've got promise, Gavel, but I need you to level with me before I spill any more details."

"What do you need to know?"

"Why did you accept my missive? Why come to this city?"

Gavel's shoulders tensed. He appraised the slug before him. After the warm dram had crawled down his throat, Gavel loosened up.

"Ma was a master seamstress. After the industrial textile workers marched off of those manufactory lines in Northlaw she was put out of work. Devoted most of her life to the trade, and because men with money wanted more they commissioned cheaper labor. She just couldn't compete. Pa makes a pittance as a Forester, so I came here to support the stead."

Cigarette in hand, Balart nodded. His dull gaze reflected back at him in the looking-glass.

"What did you see when you first came to the city?" Balart asked Gavel.

"Hands reaching toward the Red Sol."

"Spotless fingers, calloused palms, broken wrists. Mages, commonfolk and pale elves like me, robots. . . ." he paused, for the drink put many of his thoughts just out of reach. "We're going to unseat the Mages College from their ruling roost. You've got venerable blood running

through you. I'm asking treason of you, for the sake of our kingdom. If we're caught, they'll skip the birdcage and send us straight to the Executioner's block. What say you, Gavel, son of Mathúin?"

"WH—" Gavel began before being silenced by Balart.

"—Mu'uoan ookfaeva," Balart intoned in the tongue of the Old Gods.

Gavel felt the fissure that was his mouth seal shut. He began to scratch at what used to be an opening before Balart froze him with a stare.

None of the mages paid the two men any mind.

"The time of the Old Gods and their followers is passing. The Mages College means to summon a daemon duke from Gehenna to usurp our rightful King. I mean to dash their plans and expose them for all to witness. Are you with me?"

Gavel looked at the barmaid then back at Balart.

"Khata, nae, don't worry about her. She's with the Wardens, at least with those of us still loyal to the King. Kata's an undercover op."

After staring at Gavel for a moment Balart remembered to undue his magecraft, "Biohce ookfaeva."

With his teeth and tongue freed, Gavel tried to say something—anything—but found himself at a loss.

"You're a Warden now. Either I'll see you tomorrow at the Mages College or I won't." Before leaving, Balart placed three things on the yellow bar: Gavel's badge, his pack of cigarettes, and a sleeve of Light Bringers, a brand of white phosphorus matches.

"You're shaking," Khata noted of Gavel.

Despite the black robe, his trembling was apparent.

"Listen. Balart's a cold bastard, there's no disputing that. But he's one of the few men who still thinks that the law is meant to protect people. I pity him. Those cigs and lights are his way of saying sorry, for whatever that's worth. If he could learn to use words, he might not be on the outs with his wife all the time. The old-timer spends more nights in his cot at the station than in his own flat. Speaking of which, my shift's almost over. I'll show you to the station when I'm done here. You'll be able to pick up the rest of your gear there and pass the eve with a roof over your head."

Gavel picked up his badge and squinted at his distorted reflection on the surface of the shield pendant. He glanced up at the looking-glass for a better view of himself and immediately regretted it. Gavel was small and alone, with only a pack of cigarettes, a sleeve of matches, and the words of a woman he had just met to comfort him.

The young man from the countryside had been reared under the thatch roof of a man who substituted things for words, but this did not stop the tears from welling up in his eyes.

He would have to repay Khata for her kindness. *But with what?* he thought.

— Silvertongue

31st Day of Hema in the 373rd Year of the Third Sanguine Age



Following Khata's instructions from the prior eve, Gavel took an aerotaxi to the gates of the Mages College. Perched atop Ecclesia, the highest point in Northlaw, the institution of Eldritch learning was closer than any other to the red rays of Injabulo. This prominence allowed the mages to look down on everyone else in the city, even the pale elves who powdered their faces. Even the King.

The buildings of the college were fixtures in a garden of glass, transparent shrubs and trees. Gavel saw that they were filled with students milling about and shelves of tomes. Silicon vines covered these glass floras, transporting energy taken in by the solar cell. A clump of clouds rolled behind the Mages College like atmospheric hills. Before the college's gates Gavel felt as if he were vermin trying to sneak into a celestial nursery.

As he approached the foot of the gate a familiar figure appeared. It was Balart, out of his disguise and in his uniform. Gavel and Balart wore matching peaked caps and button up shirts which bore their ranks on either epaulette; Sergeant chevrons and Private saplings. Hefty electro-conductive pistols hung from their duty belts. Black trousers and boots anchored them to the lofty ground.

"Where's your badge?" Balart asked Gavel between drags on his cigarette.

Gavel patted the front left of his duty belt where the shield pendant was pinned.

Balart shook his head. "Nae. Pin that to your shirt where you can quickly reach it in case we get into a dust-up. If we're breaking the furniture, your hands are gonna be on your heater, next to your chest, not your duty belt. Don't know why they keep telling rookies to pin those things to their belts." Gavel repositioned his badge.

The two Wardens waited until a mage emerged from the nearest shrub. A bandana decorated in eye-like patterns hung from the mage's hood, covering his face.

With hands clasped, one over the other, before his waist, the mage gave a slight bow. "I'm Lecturer Melchiron. Am I to assume that you are Sergeant Balart and Private Halliday?" the mage said through his veil.

"Aye," Balart said, answering for them both.

Lecturer Melchiron whispered an intonation and the gates separating them sunk into the ground. Balart flicked the butt of his cigarette into one of the sunken holes before it and the rest leveled off.

"Your warrant was processed earlier this morn, though your request to investigate the campus without a minder was denied. I'll attempt to accommodate your requests and guide you anywhere within *reason*," Lecturer Melchiron said over his shoulder as he guided them to a great glass trunk.

Transparency gave way to translucence once the three were inside the tree-shaped building. Cloaked figures floated through the halls above, but their features were obscured by more than refraction.

"Apparently, someone was impersonating me and a pupil of mine at the Green Bell Tower yesterday," Lecturer Melchiron remarked. "As if I would waste my time socializing or on libations when the Eldritch secrets have yet to fully reveal themselves!" The Wardens' minder stopped, and turning toward them said, "Which direction shall I point you in so that we might make the most of wasting each others' time?"

Once Lecturer Melchiron had turned to face them, he found a pistol being shoved into his mouth. "Scream and I fit you for a wooden overcoat. These pistols might not pump metal, but

they can still rub-out if used incorrectly. Now, I'm going to pull my heater out of your box, and ask you a few questions. If you don't answer them satisfactorily, I'll feed you more than a few amps. Got it?"

Lecturer Melchiron nodded slightly. Balart took his electro-conductive pistol out of the mage's mouth, but kept it leveled at his head.

"Where's the main summoning room? How do we stop Duke Drohtin from entering our world? And if we can't stop that how do we pop him?"

"Imbecile, once the duke crosses over from the Void, you won't be able to halt his march or that of his many legions. But why would you wish to? He'll pass down centuries' worth of the Old Gods' teachings once he assumes the throne."

Balart whacked Lecturer Melchiron's left temple with the butt of his pistol. His bandana darkened there.

The mage touched his bleeding temple tentatively. "Very well, I'll answer your questions. The main summoning room is on the fourteenth floor of this building. The stairs will only take you halfway. You'll have to pass through a series of extradimensional doors to reach the main summoning room. I'd tell you which doors to take but where each leads is relative from moment to moment. . . ." By his tone, Gavel could imagine the acquiescing smile behind the bloodshot bandana.

"What does that mean? So each time we open a door it'll lead some place new?" Gavel asked.

"Go on," Balart goaded.

"If your aim is to stop Duke Drohtin, you'll have to destroy the Void portal before he emerges from it. The main summoning room has been soundproofed so no intonations will reach

the ears of the Old Gods from within it. Unless either of you possess metal from Gehenna, you won't be able to so much as scratch the duke once he's transmigrated to Northlaw."

"Swell, then we better get going. So long," Balart said as he shot Lecturer Melchiron in the gut. The mage fell to the floor.

"Sh-should we hide the body?" Gavel asked Balart.

"Body? He's not dead, Gavel. Time we fade." Balart took for the glass stairs at the other end of the lobby and Gavel followed.

On the third flight Gavel asked Balart, "Why'd you trust him about the doors? Couldn't he have been lying?"

"When you put the screws to someone they're inclined to sing the tune you're asking to hear. Why would he try and grift us with a tale that was bound to make us sore? Either way, we'll see in four flights."

In four flights the Wardens saw that the stairs led to a landing with a pair of wooden doors. These doors were inscribed with runes and arranged like side-by-side lifts. Gavel took the one on the right and Balart the one on the left.

Gavel opened his door unto an auditorium where a cloaked menagerie were being lectured. The starry robes he recognized, but the heads topping them belonged to a motley assortment of animals. *Were these students transmogrified into animals or animals being educated as students?* Gavel closed the door and felt through the brass knob that if he opened it again another tableau would greet him.

Balart opened his door unto a library of musty tomes, likely located somewhere on the campus. "Look for a door on the other side," he called over to Gavel. "We've got intel on what the door to the main summoning room looks like. Its big. If you see it, you'll ken."

On the second pull, Gavel opened his door unto an observatory. The room was a giant mechanical eye with mages running around it, directing the pupil to probe the stars, then scouring the data for arcane wisdom. One observant mage noticed Gavel standing in the extradimensional threshold and started for him. Panicked, the younger Warden quickly slammed the door shut.

On his second pull, Balart found a fractured dimension with planes that crossed and cut into one another. It was like gazing into a smashed looking-glass, for he saw himself in as many pieces as the stars in the sky. Dread bade the older Warden to look upon a different scene.

Gavel's third tableau put before him a beast of newsprint that reared its head up from the shredded paper grass upon which it had been feasting. The flat beast enlarged, forcing him to perceive that it was closing in on him. Gavel rushed to rejoin the door with its frame.

Balart opened his door for a third time. What played out before him was an argument between pa and progeny. The stove in the background crackled as the kindling inside broke. Balart looked to his right. The door there was ajar. Gavel was nowhere in sight; no longer in the Mages College.

The fourth opening had lead Gavel into the vault of an ancient civilization. In the center of the mausoleum was a pedestal topped by an impossibly dazzling glove. A series of pictograms carved into the stone walls depicted an immemorial cleric reaching aloft and grasping a star in his gloved hand. After stealing into the vault, Gavel slunk to the pedestal and, under the yoke of an alien avarice, pocketed the glove. "Gavel!"

Gavel emerged from the ancient mausoleum and shut the door behind him to cover his tracks. Balart's eyebrows straightened like steel beams as he gauged his partner. He shook his head dismissively. "Keep looking."

As Balart opened the door on the left for a fourth time, he spotted what they had been after. "Never mind," he said to Gavel flatly, calling off his search.

"We found the door?! That's a good thing, isn't it?"

"Good? Take a look for yourself." Stepping aside for his partner to peer through the door, Balart lit another cigarette.

Gavel shuffled toward the threshold hesitantly. With one hand braced against the door jamb, the younger Warden peered through.

A beast with countless backs, a conglomeration of fervent flesh. Daemons of all persuasions stabbed and gnashed at each other as furtive mages sat along surrounding theater seats, scratching down notes. In the sweaty whorl, Gavel saw a daemon with a face on its nether in addition to the one on its head. The mouth of its second face was sewn shut yet the teeth protruded. There was a daemon with crystal skin and chronometer features in place of facial ones. A daemon with a vertical maw that bypassed its throat wore a pot for a crown. All of this upon a thirteen-legged mass which resembled a glade with a brook of chlorine running through it and a single dead tree. Gavel looked to Balart.

The older Warden stomped out his cigarette. "Did you happen to notice what's on the other side?" Wincing, Gavel looked back through the door.

Beyond the orgy of daemons and note-taking mages was another threshold. Grand, or as Gavel thought, *Big*.

"We're gonna creep around the gams of that glade-looking dingus to get to the door. If we rush in gats sizzling, we'll be overwhelmed. We can't count on the cavalry coming to rescue us until we nix that Void portal. We're the gambit after all."

On their hands and knees, Gavel and Balart began making their way around the thirteen-legged daemon. They were in the shadow of the glade beast and away from the inquisitive eyes of the note-takers. Balart was forced to crawl beneath the daemon for a stretch to avoid the spilling outlet of the chlorine brook. Gavel's chest heaved like a bellows as he made his way along. Concave, the motion stopped when a spindly daemon with a corkscrew nose and an unopened bottle of wine leaned over the glade beast's edge and asked, "Rtbiaei biuva, ixmuaeit aei o'opymu ovaean obiyit?"

Gavel slammed the flat of a fist against his badge, generating a luminous coat of hard light around him. The spindly daemon clucked, uncorked the bottle of wine with its nose, and poured the contents over the younger Warden. The rosé bubbly boiled and hissed as it vaporized against Gavel's coat of light. The scratching of fountain pens stopped abruptly.

Balart donned his hard light armor and sprinted for the door, squeezing off concussive shots at the bewildered daemons and mages from over his shoulder.

Gavel scrambled to his feet. Before running after the older Warden, he tucked the spindly daemon in with his service pistol.

The Wardens made it to the looming wooden door inscribed with runes. "Quick, clamber up my shoulders so you can reach the handle. Once we're through and close it, where it leads to on this side will—"

Accustomed to climbing, Gavel was standing atop Balart before the last word left his mouth. As the younger Warden wrapped both arms around the handle, the older Warden stepped out from beneath him and started pulling his legs. The big door opened, Balart ran inside, and after dropping down, Gavel did as well. After repeating their trick on the other side, the door to the main summoning room closed.

It's like a cave in here Gavel thought, in awe of the space. Cavernous did not denote the scale of the main summoning room justly. A sizeable cave would have fit comfortably inside the space.

Gavel and Balart disengaged their badges, pounding them with their fists, and struck out for the other side of the room. A golden mandala of a solflower ornamented the floor, though its petals did not reach the walls, instead, a glass ring encircled the holy metal blossom. The mandala seemed large enough to serve as a shield for one of the Old Gods in some cosmic campaign.

On the other side of the main summoning room was the Void portal, fortunately for the Wardens, still slumbering. A sweet scent of putrefaction wafted into their noses, a familiar scent to Gavel. Two massive eldwood trees sprouting from the glass ring formed the arches of the Void portal. Gavel and Balart gazed down at their roots.

The younger Warden knew from his days in the weald that eldwood trees were a necromantic affair, that their seeds had to be planted in the bodies of great persons to take root. Below the section of the glass ring atop which they stood were a pair of jewel-encrusted jötunn skulls. The craniums had been cleaved from the giant royals' skulls for the eldwood trees to sprout from their calcified minds. A king and queen perhaps, a fitting audience to welcome a duke.

The bark of the king's eldwood tree shone white and was bespiked with black thorns. The bark of the queen's shone black and was bespotted with white buds. The buds of eldwood trees emerge from their plate armor-like bark as thorns due to its toughness. "Even if we had axes, we wouldn't be cutting these trees down," Balart remarked.

Gavel looked toward the top of the Void portal. The crowns of the king and queen were entangled in a sacred knot without beginning or end. Eldritch runes hummed to life from the crown to the root of both eldwood trees. Not carvings, but runes painted in ash that burned with the intensity of their former lives. Gavel and Balart suddenly covered their ears when a piercing white noise issued from the crowns of the eldwood trees. Accompanying the earsplitting sound, a rain of stardust started falling from the entangled crowns above. The Void portal was tuning itself to another dimension.

"Put me wise if you've got any brilliant ideas," Balart said to Gavel.

After taking a moment to survey the situation Gavel did have an idea, maybe even a brilliant one.

"Balart, take off your shirt."

"Gavel, look, I've got nothing against experimentation but now is neither the time nor the place!"

"What, . . . no. I'm going to start a fire with these, but I need something to burn." Before Gavel took off his shirt he took out the pack of cigarettes Balart had gifted to him the prior day.

Balart began unbuttoning his shirt. "I ken, but, nae. How's a fire kindled from our clothes going to burn down the Void portal?"

"Just trust me and give me your trousers while you're at it. Hat too, but not the duty belt or boots. Those won't burn well."

With the clothes piled at the base of the king's eldwood tree, Gavel struck one of the white phosphorus Light Bringers then threw it, along with the rest, into the pile.

The two Wardens stood on one side of the Void portal before a meager fire in nothing but their briefs while Duke Drohtin awaited for the threshold to open so that he might lead his legions into Northlaw, banners of conquest flapping at his back.

The stardust was coalescing into a dark tableau. Duke Drohtin's grim visage began to take form on Gavel and Balart's side. When the regal daemon observed the puny pale elf and commonfellow in their state of undress, he blinked rapidly, thinking something amiss with the connection of the Void portal. He struck the arches on his side as if to test it, and this shook the eldwood trees.

"What're we waiting for here, Gavel?!"

"It'll happen any minute now, Balart. Get your pistol ready."

"Ready for what, Gavel?!"

The rain of stardust coalesced into a waterfall and froze, connecting Northlaw and the Void at a single point. Bellowing laughter came through first. "THIS IS YOUR BEST ATTEMPT TO HINDER ME, MORTALS?! HAHA, IT IS NO WONDER THAT YOUR KIND CALLS UPON ME FOR A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF THE ELDRITCH AND ARCANE!"

Eight wings emerged from and gripped the edges of the Void portal. Wings feathered by lapping tongues of fire. A gaunt visage surfaced, matted with unshorn hair. Sitting atop his skull, a proud jade throne. Two flaming whirlpools stared down at the Warden pair. Each of the jagged teeth that filled his maw was larger than any of the city's skyscrapers.

A hooved tree shot forth and struck the golden mandala.

And then a small crack appeared. The plate armor of the king's eldwood tree was breached, cracked like a nut in a hearth. It crumbled at first, then a sizeable chunk of white bark

fell to the floor. Beneath its tough exterior was a squishy pink interior. Gavel and Balart drew their electro-conductive pistols and pulled. The small crack splintered up the height of the eldwood tree as it convulsed. The white shell shattered and the soft innards flailed until they gave and fell to the floor, limp. With the flow of stardust interrupted, the extradimensional properties of the Void portal were compromised.

Snuffed out, the eight wings fizzled to charred bones. Decapitated, the gaunt head fell to the floor, the matted hair trailing behind like the burning tails of a comet. Clattering, the jade throne burst into green shards. Felled, the foreleg resounded tremorously.

"You did it. . . . You actually did it!" Balart hoisted Gavel into the air and embraced him.

After being released and regaining his wind, Gavel asked, "What now?"

Balart acknowledged his question with a nod before turning away. He whispered an intonation and then turned back to Gavel. "Now we wait. Either the Wardens show up first or the mages do. Either way, we've done right by this kingdom."

"If the mages show up first I guess that's the end of both our stories."

"Aye."

"But if the Wardens show up first we'll be living legends. I've never been in the yellow sheets, Balart! You think they're going to ask me to do an interview?"

"Aye."

"I've already got my opening line in mind. No matter what they ask me first, I'm going to respond, 'The law is meant to protect the people.' "

"Aye."

Balart smiled, a gesture his mouth was unaccustomed to.

— Silvertongue

32nd Day of Hema in the 373rd Year of the Third Sanguine Age

Serenade in Gris

"The papers are on the counter. Sign them before you leave for work."

Halliday had been married to Khata Tuladhar for twenty years before she filed for a divorce. The part of him that woke up first each day was surprised she had waited that long. The other part was thankful she had still made him coffee, or java as he had taken to calling it.

Halliday nodded as he sipped his java. Nodded both at what his soon-to-be ex-wife had said and at the fact that she had still made him java. Khata always woke up first and so she had always made coffee for the two of them. He always appreciated that, but never thought to mention it to her.

The front door of their flat closed. "No goodbye?" Halliday said half-jokingly. Khata had not said goodbye to him in over ten years.

Java in hand, Halliday dragged his feet to the kitchenette counter where his flask and a stack of papers awaited him. Atop the divorce papers was the bill for Khata's second miscarriage. He did not blame her. Even in Northlaw these things happened.

Halliday had nothing to say to his wife either time. He sat outside the hospital room until the doctor brought him to his wife. When Khata delivered the news, her husband simply nodded like she had handed him a cup of coffee. He wanted the first and second child as much as she had, but. . . .

Khata just wanted her husband to say something, anything. Words of sorrow, of comfort, of regret, even of anger. Halliday had grown more withdrawn over time, but that he would have nothing to say about the death of his second child. . . .

"I've got to serve a warrant," Gavel said to Khata. The second thing on his mind was having to pay Khata's medical bill.

"You walk away from this and we're through, Gavel Halliday!"

Halliday left to serve the warrant.

As eve crept over Northlaw, the streetlamps flickered on. Halliday walked through the mist, his fists jammed into the pockets of his trench coat. It was no corduroy overcoat, but the city was colder than the countryside.

The mist was not thick, but it shown in the light of the streetlamps. Halliday passed among the pyramids of soft light as he wandered, trying to remember what he and Balart were doing that night.

In the distance Halliday spotted a crouched figure. On approach he realized it was a mendicant bum collecting alms. Halliday stopped in front of the mendicant bum, not out of love for the Church, but because the need to smoke had struck him. He lit a cigarette and inhaled.

"Care to donate to the Church?" the mendicant bum ventured.

"Nope."

"But with a prayer to the Goddess I can work a miracle for you."

"Can the Goddess convince my wife to shred our divorce papers?"

"Some acts are beyond even Her, my son."

Before moving on, Halliday tapped the ash at the end of his cigarette into the mendicant bum's alms basket.

Wanting to know the goings-on, Halliday tuned the building facades to the news as he passed by them.

"With government reports of increases in drug trafficking and related violence—
—Parliament has passed a measure expanding the capacities of the Watchers—
—to respond to this growing epidemic. One dissenting MP commented that,—
—'This measure is simply a legalization of what any civilized society would—
—call extrajudicial killings. My colleagues in the majority have said that those—
—of us who cast Nay votes are advocating for the drug dealers, but I contend—
—this line of thinking, it's absurd! I don't want our children falling prey to the—
—drug dealers, but I also don't want them to trip over their corpses on the sidewalk.' "

The broadcast switched back to the feed of the newscaster. A box to the right of her head showed images of suspected drug dealers slain in the streets. Black bars had been added over their eyes.

One image stood out to Halliday. The slain suspect was skewered with multiple greatarrows, each the size of a javelin. His body was wrapped in duct tape and stapled to his chest was a sign that read, "I sell drugs to kids".

It was not until Halliday read the sign that he realized this was not an image airing on the facade of a building. He turned the broadcast off and walked over to the body.

Halliday knelt before the suspected pusher and began pulling greatarrows out of his cold skin. Only the Watchers, the secret police organized by the reestablished Parliament (which was overly represented by powdered pale elves), used greatbows and arrows.

Next, Halliday set about pulling off the duct tape. As he tore away the silvery adhesive, hair and bits of flesh came with it. The sign came too when he pulled off the band of duct tape it was stapled through. The suspected pusher's eyes were wide and there were traces of nose candy under his fingernails.

Halliday hoisted the body over his shoulder and thought, *Got to find an Executioner. They'll know what to do with you, pal. You got a raw deal, but I'll make sure you don't have to sleep on the street tonight.*

Walking through the mist with a mangled body over his shoulder, Halliday searched. A city square was a likely place to find an Executioner. His Excellence, Gaultauros I, decreed that all capital sentences be carried out in public by a class that was to be accustomed with death. Executioners were relegated to passing their days in gutters or the shadows of the city's walls, only to see the light when they took the lives of their fellow citizens. Although with Executioners sight was always a metaphor.

Carrying a victim of Parliament's crusade against dope, Halliday strode until he found what he sought, though in finding an Executioner he also found a Pardoner. The Pardoner, and his throng of adherents, stood between him and the Executioner.

It was illegal to use the city's technomancy within a hundred spans of an official of the Church (another one of the Parliament's measures). Halliday did not mind cutting up when it came to how he handled his work, but the Church and its birds were not ones to ride. Rather than make a bridge over the crowd, he pushed through.

"Donate your lucre to the Church, and the Goddess shall remember! There are many in this world, but not all can enter into Canaan! Would it not be better for the Goddess to remember you in light of your charity?! Think of each lucre as a rung on your ladder to Canaan! Canaan is far, but it can be reached! Yours sins can be escaped!" the Pardoner shouted to his adherents.

With arms spread wide, his purple vestments trimmed in gold had the silhouette of wings. The Pardoner lacked talons or a beak, though an oblong stone mask adorned his face.

As Halliday emerged from the crowd, the Pardoner called out to him, "Hold, Herr! Where are you off to with that corpse?!"

Halliday flashed the Pardoner his tin.

"Ah, an officer of the law, my apologies. I'm Pardoner Greihart, might I ask where you're off to with that corpse, Warden. . . ."

"Halliday."

"Halliday?! As in *the* Halliday who brought down Duke Drohtin and made it possible for the powers that be to expunge the Mages College from this great city?! We of the Church are ever in your debt."

"What if I come to collect?"

"Excuse me?"

"Nothing, Pardoner. You get back to shaking down these swell folks, I've got to see to my pal here. He's hard up for a place to rest his head."

"I'll keep you in my prayers, Halliday."

Halliday crossed the square to reach his goal, the Executioner. Executioners, as a class, were brought up in their trade from a young age. The one standing before him could not have been in her teens, for she was all lank and rags. The Executioner's head was shaven, probably to avoid pate pests, and she wore an ashen ribbon across her face to cover her put out eyes. She gripped a sword longer than she was tall. It lacked a point.

The Executioner was waiting for the eve's convicts to be brought to her, for her sword was still unblooded. "Executioner, I'm a Warden," Gavel said, holding out his tin for her to examine as she had been taught to.

The Executioner played her fingers over the shield pendant to confirm the veracity of Halliday's introduction. She smiled when she judged his words to be genuine. "How might I help you, Herr Warden?"

"A man died today."

"Many did."

"Yes, well, I came across this one and wanted him to have a proper burial. You know the sort of people who could arrange that, right?"

"I do. When I speak with the Gravedigger next, I'll let him know he has more work."

Halliday set the body down beside the Executioner. "Thanks, and here," he said as he placed a lucre coin in the Executioner's hand. "Use that to buy yourself a nicer dress, little señorita."

"Thanks, Herr Warden, but I'm a boy."

"Oh, uh, sorry for the mix-up, I—"

The Executioner took one of Halliday's hands into both of his. "Might I read your palm?"

"Go ahead," Gavel answered, still somewhat baffled.

"Your hands are rough, well-acquainted with iron."

Huh, could've guessed that knowing I was a Warden, Halliday thought.

"Your hands are warm, they belie the heat of your inua. You care deeply about the few who are close to you, though you can only channel that heat physically, violently."

Halliday tore his hand away from the Executioner's probing fingers. "How'd you come up with all that from rubbing on my hand?!"

Before the Executioner could explain, the Pardoner, with a prodigious sack of lucre at his side, approached and charged the boy with a question. "What sort of heretical magecraft are you performing, Executioner?"

"No magecraft, Pardoner Greihart. I'm just sensing others' inua through my fingertips to learn and relate things about their general nature."

"Fine then, read my palm, boy," Pardoner Greihart ordered, extending his hand to the Executioner as if offering a reward.

The Executioner ran his fingertips along the dry riverbeds and valleys of the Pardoner's hand. The boy's pinched brow indicated to Halliday that he was not having much luck finding any redeeming content in those lines and folds.

Then the Executioner spoke. "I see a man who came from humble beginnings and rose through the ranks of the Church through intense study and . . . vehement speech. You saw the power of words, especially those aimed at impassioned hearts, and loosed your arrows so that waves of lucre might spill at your feet. You've never taken any for yourself, but large amounts of money give you satisfaction akin to—"

Pardoner Greihart dropped the sack of lucre, and with his free hand eclipsed the Executioner's ribboned face. "Not. Another. Word."

With the Executioner still in his grasp the Pardoner tread back to the crowd which had not yet fully dispersed. "Good citizens! Faithful citizens! Aye, faith is what I have returned to you all to discuss! A stain has been made upon our faith, upon my faith! This urchin, this Executioner, has accused me of misappropriating your generous donations to the Church! Imagine! And who is this Executioner to speak so of me, of us?! Executioners are the ones who

kill our friends and relatives. The Watchers and the Wardens keep us safe, but what need do we have of this heretical filth?!"

The adherents cheered at the Pardoner's ardent speech and as he dropped the blind boy to ground. Pardoner Greihart, and a few members from the crowd, advanced on the boy. Though the first one to be seriously injured was the Pardoner.

Halliday dry-gulched him from behind, sending his head careening to the pavement. His stone chin chipped and blood dribbled from the slit for his mouth. Now he was the one advancing, and the adherents who had stepped forward were in retreat. The Executioner ran back to his post.

"Have you no principles?!" Halliday questioned Pardoner Greihart.

"Aye, I do. Even Shedima has principles, my son. But principles that cannot bend are bound to snap, good or ill."

He raised his fist to strike the Pardoner. Before he could respond to the masked man's words a laser leash braced his arm. The lasso-like construct of hard light led back to a dark elf Watcher who had joined the proceedings without anyone in the crowd noticing. She pulled and Halliday found himself looking at the starless city sky. The Watcher reeled him to where she sat, the Executioner's block. He looked to his right and was face-to-face with his wide-eyed pal. He looked up.

A bead of mist dripped from the bill of the Watcher's forage cap and rolled down her azure rain cape. The string of a greatbow pressed against her mist-soaked chest while the composite arc crested her shoulder.

"Halliday, was it worth it? Assaulting an official of the Church over some trivial talk?"

"I was saving the boy from that Pardoner!"

"Did he ask for you to save him? He might seem frail, but Executioners are trained to protect themselves, are they not? You weren't 'saving' him, as noble as that sounds, you were just pretending to be a hero again, old-timer."

Old-timer? Halliday gave the dark elf woman another look. In elven years, the Watcher was probably no more than a few solar revolutions past than him when he first came to Northlaw. " *'Pretending to be a hero!'* " When it came to wanting to hit people, Halliday did not discriminate.

The Watcher glanced at the suspected pusher's mangled body and shook her head with disdain. She rose from the Executioner's block, revealing that the boy had been crouching behind her, and offered him one more critique, "Laws aren't meant to protect the people. People are meant to protect the law." The laser leash loosed its grip on his arm, allowing Halliday to stand.

As Halliday got to his feet he surveyed the city square. Pardoner Greihart and his adherents had cleared out. With a mind set on violence, he wheeled around, only for his fingers to lax at what he saw.

The Watcher stood with the Executioner, patting his shoulder supportively as she listened to his account of what had occurred. She gave the boy her ear and warm words. All Halliday had given him was a mangled body and some change. Shoulders slouched, he walked away.

Before leaving the scene, he picked up one last snippet of their conversation.
"Executioner, please take care of this man."

Halliday was a man who always tried to act as he felt was right. To do otherwise was a mystery to him.



Halliday had remembered that he and Balart were serving a warrant as he rode a railpede Downtown, but the who or what of it still escaped him like a specter in the mist.

The skittering industrialized beast started slowing down when the elevated track ahead of it began to spark. Recoiling its pincers, the metallic insect came to a stop. Passengers getting off in that part of Downtown disembarked the hollow compartments of the railpede. The sidewalk rose to meet them, then sank back down so that the passengers might part ways.

Downtown was a place farther from the light than most, or so Halliday thought. He glanced over his shoulder to see if the Red Luna, Usizi, would greet him. Alabaster fingers blocked whatever light She would have reflected on that lousy burgh.

In getting to know Halliday, Balart learned that his partner's memory was nothing to write home about. Rather than just giving his partner an address, the old pale elf also reminded him where to get off the railpede and told him to look for a rowhome with solflowers planted out front.

Halliday patted one of his pockets in search of his flask. He had forgotten that dear vessel on the counter in his flat. Without its warming spirits, the thickening of mist into fog became all the more apparent. Clouds of breath fled between the rapid open and close of his chattering teeth.

Houses of hash, those for flopping, and the kind built in rows. Halliday, bundled in his trench coat, passed by the first and second until he reached the third. Stoops drooped, railings leaned, awnings sagged. The rowhomes languished in the shadows of Ecclesia.

Some aerocars putted and chugged along between the Downtown rooftops. Most were company vehicles. A few were not. Halliday saw no prowling aerocars.

Feeling a chill, he turned up the collar of his trench coat. Peering over the adjusted neckline he scanned the city's dank underbelly. Robot children off from their work at the manufactories played a pickup game in the street.

A foul winged Halliday, striking his left shoulder. *That's going to leave a bruise.* He bent down to pick up the "ball." The robot children were playing their game with a chunk of pavement wrapped in cloth and twine.

One of the robot children called over to Halliday, "Herr, throw it here!"

Halliday had a mind to throw their "ball" through a window across the street and watch the robot children scatter, but he decided to toss the cobbled clump to the robot child. He could still recognize an honest mistake. After all, he thought himself a reasonable man. Halliday might bend the law, but it would not bend him.

Solflowers. "Solflowers. Solflowers," Halliday remembered and then chanted like a mantra to keep from forgetting again.

He passed by a handful more rowhomes before coming across one with a windowsill garden. A gathering of yellow petals and disks greeted Halliday. "How'd you dames afford such nice feathers living in a place like this?" he quipped, complimenting the solflowers.

"Calm down, tomcat."

The remark came from a man with a slick dome who sat on the bottom step of the rowhome's stoop. His pointed ears were exposed, pale. This did not surprise the man's partner. Halliday knew the old pale elf from over two decades working alongside him. Balart hardly changed. The old-timer still had the disposition of a mountain peak.

Of the two Wardens, only one puffed clouds.

"Cold? Swell. You'll need a cool head for what we're about to do," Balart said to his partner.

"What type of warrant are we serving again?"

Balart glared at his partner. Halliday tugged at his upturned collar.

"Property from Inagaki Heavy Industries. There's just a pa, a ma, and a tyke in this joint. I know how you get, so don't go off the track."

Halliday was not entirely sure what his partner was talking about, but decided it would be fine if he let Balart take the lead.

Balart stood and, after fishing it out from his trench coat, took a nip from his flask. The old pale elf noticed his partner's lingering gaze. "Forget yours, Halliday?"

Halliday nodded.

After screwing the cap back on Balart tossed him the silver-plated vessel.

He took a swig and felt the grog flash through his bloodworks. Buoyed, Halliday handed the flask back to his partner. The two Wardens summited the stoop.

Balart wrapped his icy knuckles on the askew door. The thud that came out the other end of the grain was equally cold. "They're in there," Balart said assuredly.

"Hello, I'm Warden Balart. My partner, Warden Halliday, and I are here to serve a warrant from Inagaki Heavy Industries. We're not in a position to negotiate with you. Open the door or we'll have to force it open."

No response.

Halliday readied his shoulder, but then Balart pulled the door off its rusted hinges with a yank on the doorknob. He propped the dislodged door against the railing to his left. Both sagged.

The two Wardens entered the rowhome. None of the lights were on, though even before his eyes adjusted to the darkness, Halliday knew his partner was right. They were not alone.

Hands at their sides, expectant, the Wardens parsed the dim interior. To the right of the doorway Halliday found a lamp. He altered Balart before pulling its chain.

Light cut diagonally across the room. Crouched at the other end of the space, at the bottom of the slope of light, were ma and tyke. Fear plastered their faces like ganef's caught in the act. *Where's pa?*

Halliday's hand passed over his electro-conductive pistol and slid to the iron girded on the small of his back. "Balart, cover the door."

Balart, halfway between ma and tyke and his partner turned to Halliday.

"Halliday! If you're going to pull your piece at least draw your damn service pistol! There's a child in here for Goddess' sake!"

"We can bump gums later, Balart. Just give me a light."

The two Wardens switched places. "Odpugi," Balart intoned.

Halliday had the nose of his multi-barreled pepperbox revolver on the crouched ma when the darkness beyond was lifted. When his eyes crawled to the ceiling, the grip on his cannon faltered.

The pa was clung to the ceiling by his fingers and toes, and his head was turned around the wrong way. Pa was about to pounce. *They're androids?*

Halliday took a step back, but his heel caught on a jutting floorboard and sent him sprawling. Pa pounced.

Balart, drawing his service pistol, cried out to his partner, "Your badge!"

Halliday, not mint, but still fresh, was quick enough. He leveled his cannon and plugged pa in midair. The decommissioned android fell onto him, leaking sham blood on his trench coat. Heaving the meat machine off his chest, he sat up.

His pepperbox exhaled a smoky line. "Shit, Halliday, you've done it now."

Halliday blew away the line dividing him from the ma and tyke. Both remained crouched, but ma was missing a part of her pipe. He gripped his own neck.

The tyke stared at Halliday through a reddened sticky mop.

Honest mistake. . . ?

Halliday turned to his partner. Balart had drawn his electro-conductive pistol. He on the floor ducked and the tyke behind him screeched. The shrill note rose up like noxious steam from a sewer grate. His guts somersaulted. The hair on the back of Halliday's pipe stood up as the juice from Balart's piece shot across the room. The android tyke slumped into his decommissioned ma's lap.

"I'm going to have to call this one in. Go wait outside."

Halliday nodded as he got up. He drug his feet to the rowhome's stoop and planted his can on the bottom step. Once Balart had contacted the station, he joined his partner outside.

"Why didn't you grab for your badge?"

"Androids. . . ."

"You forgot. That tyke's the property we're serving a warrant for. Child laborer owned by Inagaki Heavy Industries. Goddess, they'll have to wipe his braincase and reprogram the whole thing. You know how much that's going to cost? At least the parents weren't under contract."

"I was going to let you take the lead. . . ."

"But then your instincts kicked in. If it had been me there when the lights came on instead of you. Well, forensics would've had to bring three body bags."

Dazed, Halliday's eyes wandered back to the windowsill garden. "How do solflowers know to turn and face the Red Sol?"

"They don't, at least not as flowers. Common misconception. As buds they know how to track Injabulo, but once they mature they lose their solar compass. It just becomes a habit which way they face, like you or me going to sleep with the Luna and waking up with the Sol."

Halliday looked at his partner quizzically.

"Had to find a habit after my wife left me. I recommend gardening."

"I signed a stack of divorce papers this morn. Gardening, really?"

A building chorus of sirens began to cut through the fog.

"When did I start forgetting to look for the light? Have I just been going through the motions? Met a Watcher today after pasting a Pardoner. She told me, 'People are meant to protect the law.' " Gavel Halliday looked down at his hands. "I wish these calloused palms could grip her meaning."

Before Balart could offer a response the chorus arrived at the scene.

— Silvertongue

21st Day of Shis in the 398th Year of the Third Sanguine Age

Nocturne in Noir

"Boxcars! Boxcars! Boxcars. . . !" Having thrown the dice, the gink who lost his job working the rails put his kismet in white and black facets.

The dice bounced off an alley wall and landed on the laid out cardboard.

"Serpent eyes. Pay up, motorman."

Giacomo Audoin, still in his old uniform, hadn't a lucre to his name. Hadn't for many lunas.

The other gambler left the alley without collecting, but before he emerged from that narrow he spared the gink who used to work the rails a Northlaw solset. His neck bled the color of Injabulo at the end of a long day.

Halliday pounded the rain-soaked streets of Midburrow as it fell hard over Northlaw. The sky ran black, drumming on the brim of his lid to the tune of a dirge.

Got to get out of the rain or I'll be meeting the folks again sooner than I'd like, Halliday thought. He'd just got back to the city from burying his ma and pa. Halliday had to hitchhike to the funeral and back aboard a caravan to cross the boiled wastes. Northlaw had been cut off from the countryside when Parliament made a blood covenant with Injabulo, sacrificing the great lake surrounding the city and most of its people to the Red Sol for His protection from the rest of the Old Gods. In his youth Halliday got to Northlaw on a raft.

The hard rain enameled the street in inky quicksilver. Sore storm clouds passed by Halliday's gum-soled shoes. He counted the groundswells as they flashed and crashed. A streak from the sky below shined on Halliday's dull mug, lighting his taped up broken nose, courtesy of

the sexton who socked him for something he'd already forgot. *What was it? I never sent any missives with the remittances, but he wouldn't of known that. Or was it that I didn't visit enough? Got tough to make the trip after the mooring came up. Something I said at the service? No, probably something I didn't say.*

Halliday sneezed, his septum burned, a bent bar of pain. He was getting to the age where, even with his job, pneumonia was more likely to give him a chill than lead poisoning.

An ex-Warden, Halliday lost his tin in 398th Year of the Third Sanguine Age. One day the Church's hero, the next a bum baser than any alms beggar. Gavel Halliday had been a man anyone in Northlaw would've toasted to. Halliday was a man most would rather douse with their booze, an android-bounty hunter. A man who eked by on the fear of the least privileged and his willingness to soak iron in sham oil.

Pa taught Halliday how to shoot straight. Balart tried to correct his aim. The old-timer would've made it to his friend's funeral if he hadn't been blown down on the beat. Robot with expired work permits julienned him like some crazy stir fry chef.

Rounding a block, Halliday spotted a wedge of lighted glass, the corner of his watering hole. A dive of a diner really. Cheap service and java, both were thick, so the java was more like mud. If it would warm him, Halliday didn't mind wallowing.

The proprietress, Maggie, knew Halliday's shadow as it fell over the counter. He doffed his soggy lid and gave her a nod. Maggie winked at the wet frame as he shambled to the booth in the back with a broken light. If Halliday wanted to get stewed he would've sat at the counter. Mud and unlit solitude were on the docket. His bones ached.

As Halliday made his way to the booth with a broken light a host of elbow-height mugs ignored him. Wardens before, between, and after their patrols. Balart and Halliday had

frequented Maggie's diner in their day. One had passed on, the other still kicked around their old haunt. Halliday sidled into the dark booth, and felt like any bird could stare right through him until the proprietress poured him some mud. Maggie smiled wearily at the old regular, striped by the lamplight pouring in through the blinds.

Hearing the mud splat against ceramic, Halliday turned. He shifted his jaw back and forth, as if it was rusty and needed oiling. Throat dry, Halliday tried to thank Maggie but the words didn't come. She nodded, knowing what he meant. Maggie left for the counter, thinking along the way, *Should I fix that light? He seems to like it that way.*

Halliday dipped his bill in the black pool. The form under the trench coat warmed. Aching bones numbed.

Refreshed, he set his peepers on the street again. The hard rain was still trying to drown the pavement, but sewers were foiling the job.

Among the swells, under a streetlamp, was a dame of a bird. She wore a plastic poncho over a little black number which showed a lot of gam. Neither Halliday nor any of the Wardens who'd noticed her moved to see what was what. Even a lug with some scuff on his shoes could spot a confidence game when it, or she, presented.

Though, of course, there was one shiny-shoed rookie at the diner. When the young Warden spotted the drenched looker he stood bolt upright, whacking the table with a bulge on his duty belt, almost repainting the booth with mud. Shiny-shoes squeaking, the rookie rushed out into the rain.

Halliday sighed. The young Warden meant well.

He roused himself. As he passed by the counter he dropped lucre for both him and the rookie, not knowing which, if either, would be able to come back and pay.

The downpour cascaded Halliday's once broad shoulders. He skulked through the hard rain to where the young Warden and drenched looker were flapping lips.

The dame had a sultry air about her, but Halliday didn't pick up pace. One feature in particular slowed his steps. A shiv scar traced her kisser. Probably from a past sugar daddy, doubtless he got it back worse. The rookie wasn't just caught in the rain, he was in a real jam.

Halliday spat into a sewer. He was sorer at the rube than at the widowmaker. She was making ends meet while he was going out of his way to play the fool. *Yeah, she's playing him real swell, even picked out his part for him: Naive Flatfoot.*

As Halliday approached, the widowmaker pulled a slim chopper from her garter and held it on the rookie. It was the type of gat that spat pills as fast as any quack would prescribe the kind for pain.

"Your badge!" Halliday called out to the young Warden.

The rookie slammed his fist against his tin, enveloping his person in hard light. Halliday drew the iron he'd been packing, but was forced to duck behind the young Warden when the widowmaker started burning powder. Rain and a hail of lead evaporated off the young Warden.

Halliday took aim, lining up his shot over the rookie's shoulder. Terminal wasn't on his mind, he wanted to get that chopper out of the widowmaker's paws. With the iron sights and her gat yoked in his eye, Halliday pulled. Nothing.

His pepperbox revolver didn't fire. Halliday indexed to the next shot. Another dud. The loads in his heater must've gotten wet since he left for the funeral. *Not enough time to reload.*

Halliday drew the hand cannon behind his head and hucked it like a brick. His piece caught her in the temple, adding another mark to her kisser. She crumpled to the edge of the lamplight.

"Thanks, Herr."

"Not Herr. Halliday."

"As in *the*—"

"Nope. Coincidence." Halliday stepped off the curb to get back to his rapidly cooling mug of mud.

"Wait, what about her?"

"She was about to chisel or knock you down. Leave her out to soak. Nobody in the diner'll raise an eye."

The young Warden disabled his hard light armor then reached for his wrist irons. Halliday gave him the up-and-down. The rookie was a pale elf with huge ears and the sort of mug that got poked and prodded at. The widowmaker twitched.

Halliday leapt at the young Warden and wrested the service pistol from his duty belt. He drilled the widowmaker before she could grip her chopper. She flopped like a caught fish before nodding off. "Pinch her with those cuffs before she gets up again and pops us," Halliday wheezed.

The young Warden did as he said. With the unconscious dame on his back, the scuffed-shoed rookie followed Halliday back to the diner.

As Halliday drifted to the unlit booth in the back he got the sense that he wouldn't be finishing his mud in peace. The young Warden squeaked after him.

Solitude shattered, Halliday slurped down the cold dregs from his mug as the rookie stared at him from the other side of the dark booth. The young Warden beamed even as the cuffed widowmaker who'd tried to ice them both slumped on his shoulder.

"Dust, kid. Got nout for you."

"Name's Andrew Langsam, and you do have somethin' for me. Everythin' that's up here."

Andrew tapped his temple with an index finger. Halliday glanced at the same on the widowmaker. It had started to crust crimson-black.

"Maybe I have something, but nothing worth passing on."

Halliday fished a deck of cigarettes from his trench coat, and lit one with a Light Bringer. Three shades sambaed as the trio sat solemn. He thought of his dead partner as he looked at the pale elf across from him. *Did you look this green when you were his age?*

Halliday strode to the condo of his dead partner. Frau Balart, no . . . Frau. . . . She'd been using her maiden name since they split; asked to meet with him at her ex's place.

992. With the condo number scratched on a shred of paper Halliday buzzed to be let in. "One moment," a voice scraped through the intercom.

A beep then the condo complex's gate started to rattle open. Impatient, Halliday went through the entrance sideways before the gate finished rattling.

Ten flights later and he stood before 992. Halliday went to ring the doorbell, but the door flew open first. "Frau. . . ."

"Mayappo. And please, Halliday, you knew my ex-husband for years."

"We used to sip out of the same flask."

"Yes, that's why I asked you to come here. But let's not discuss this in the doorway, please, come in."

Mayappo closed the door behind Halliday. He hung his lid on the hat rack to his left. The trench coat stayed on.

"Anything to drink?"

"No thanks, Mayappo."

With Halliday following, the two walked out to the condo's balcony.

The view looked out across Midburrow and into the depths of Downtown. The ethereal red anchor that protected the city refused the horizon. Even the Red Sol was hidden from sight when not at His zenith.

While the balcony was small Balart had made the best of it. Pots hung from the balcony above and sat on the floor against the railing. Solflowers sprouted from each.

To Halliday's right was a wrought iron table with a single chair. To his left was a child with a small plastic watering pail tending to the solflowers. Géricault Balart II.

"Junior, this is Herr Halliday. You remember, daddy's friend from the force?"

The pale elf boy turned his head while still watering the flowers. The pail strayed, watering the floor. "Your aim's off, Junior," Halliday said.

One of Junior's big ears twitched as he picked up the difference between watering soil and stone. The boy turned back to the pail and, with both hands, put it down beside the potted solflower he'd been tending.

"So, Mayappo, what'd you want to talk about?"

"Would you like to sit?" Halliday glanced at the wrought iron chair.

"Standing's fine. A story'd be swell."

"Right, yes. It hasn't been on any of the news broadcasts, but the yellow sheets have been covering it."

"Haven't picked up one of those rags in years."

"I understand the sentiment, but this isn't the usual sensationalism that they peddle. I'm afraid the government's censoring it."

"You mean the Parliament. And what is it?"

"The serial killings."

Halliday gave Mayappo a cockeyed look.

"Mayappo, I'm not a Warden anymore. Have you tried contacting the nearest station."

"Yes! The nearest station, every station in Midburrow, and even some in Ecclesia! You know what they all told me?! That I was delusional. Some of them even directed me to psychiatrists. I'm worried about my son! That doesn't make me mad!"

Halliday reached for the sliding door to the balcony, but Mayappo grabbed it and held fast with a strength he didn't expect. Junior tottered over to his ma. "Mommy, is something wrong?"

"No, sweetie, everything's all right." Her voice was kind, but the strength of her grip never wavered. Halliday knew he was beat and let go of the door.

"What do you expect out of me? I might look like a private dick, but I ain't."

"You have connections in the Wardens, right? You used to be a big deal. . . . Sorry."

"Thanks. And no, I haven't had any connections in the Wardens since your old flame got snuffed out." Mayappo flinched as if she'd been slapped. Halliday bit down on his tongue.

"Mayappo, I work for Inagaki now. I hunt down runaway androids for bounties. Just the other day I clocked out one of a pair of androids packing heaters and calling

themselves bounty hunters. Forced it to jump from a rooftop into the traffic below," Halliday laughed. "Metal bastard ground up real swell. Nothing but scrap and oil hit the street." Mayappo, caught in Halliday's stare, covered Junior's ears.

"The one who slipped me had a red face plate. When it saw its partner reduced to parts I almost thought I saw tears roll down that maroon steel." Halliday grinned. "This is the type of man I am. I'm no knight who gallops after evil with damsels on the brain. I'm just a licensed thug."

"Géricault never saw you that way. Even after you were fired he said that you had a just heart."

The old-timer never said as much to me, he thought.

A quiet moment passed in the balcony garden.

"Details. If I'm going to track someone down I'll need everything I can get."

Mayappo's lips pursed. With closed eyes she nodded.

Mayappo withdrew her hands from Junior's ears. Halliday had seen them before, but when he saw the boy's ears again it was as if for the first time. Big. Balart had big ears too, though he had a big bald head to go along with them. I guess you'll grow into your ears one day too, Junior. Halliday grinned.

"They call him the Engine Driver. . .

After laying all his cards out on the table for the pale elf Warden with big ears, Halliday put out his cigarette in the booth's ashtray.

"Okay, that was a lot to take in all at once. You asked me what I knew about the Engine Driver, and I said I'd fill you in if you told me why you had to know. I'll spill in a second, but

first I wanna know why the Frau's livin' at her late-ex's joint. Weren't they divorced before he passed on?"

Halliday nodded. "Balart bought that condo after Mayappo kicked him out of their flat for good. Her and Junior made due on their own there for awhile, but then the rent got hiked up. It wasn't an eviction notice, though it might as well have been. Ecclesia's moving into Midburrow. Polishing away the rougher streets and their residents to make way for the powdered gentry. You won't see that on the news either.

"It was in the will. Balart left Mayappo his condo. There was only one condition: that his garden be looked after once he'd passed on."

Halliday looked at the gritty residue smeared in the ashtray's basin.

"I know I asked you to, but are you sure you want to stick your pipe out for me?"

"Wardens are blood. You used to be a Warden. That's good enough for me."

"So you already know a bit about the Engine Driver. I know a bit more. The Colonel of my precinct briefed us a week ago about him. Every Warden in Midburrow must know about him at this point, probably every Warden in Northlaw. We're all under a gag order though.

"The Colonel was told to keep everythin' mum by his boss. He didn't say if the gag order came from his brass though. If I had to guess. . . ."

"You'd guess it didn't come from the brass, but from the top brass. The courts don't throw around their weight like that, so that leaves Parliament and the King."

"The King would never cover the tracks of a serial killer!"

Halliday nodded. "And media suppression seems like something those powdered pale elves would pull. They always plan their moves in backrooms. For better or worse the King always makes his wishes known. But why's Parliament tiptoeing around to keep all this hush?"

"One of the reasons the Colonel gave us for buttonin' our lips was minimizin' public panic."

"How so?"

"Oh, right, he said this hadn't got into any of the yellow sheets yet. The Engine Driver kills his victims by crushing them with railpedes."

Halliday's mouth fell open. "Yeah, I can see the public panicking over that. The thing pa rides every day to work and ma takes to pick up junior from daycare is being used as a murder weapon by a serial killer. This is hinky, but I'm starting to see why Parliament put out those gag orders. What's their next play?"

"A sting with the Wardens and Watchers workin' together. We're closing down streets and air traffic in a twenty-five block radius with barricades and a mandatory curfew. After the Wardens sweep the streets and make sure everybody's inside, we'll be using technomancy to seal off all of the doors and windows until morn. After that comes the Watchers. They have some kinda bait cooked up to lure in the Engine Driver. Once they're in place some part of the barricade's supposed to lift to let him in and then close again after he's through. Not my precinct's section so the Colonel didn't fill us in on that. Doin' things this way might not seem great, but I think it's for the best. Citizens don't need to know everythin' we do for 'em."

Halliday sat silent, striped by lamplight. Most would've been satisfied with that explanation. Mayappo had nothing more to worry about if the Watchers took out the Engine Driver. But he wasn't satisfied. Like the itch of an old wound that can't be scratched, Halliday's instincts flared.

"Mentioned bait. What kind of bait are the Watchers using to lure him into the sting?"

"Don't know. That part's on their end. Wait, why're you askin'?"

"Andrew, I need you to get me through the barrier after the Wardens finish their sweep."

"WH—"

"Hush your trap!" Halliday hissed.

A few bulls looked their way. When they saw Gavel Halliday fuming in his patched trench coat they snickered and went back to their conversations. The bulls all had bigger fish to fry, he knew.

Halliday turned back to Andrew. "Aren't you too old for somethin' like this?" the young Warden protested.

"Want to know how I lost my tin?" Halliday asked in response, ignoring Andrew's complaint.

"You killed those two androids on that Inagaki job."

A wry grin bent Halliday's mouth.

"That should've been the reason. No, I got kicked off the force for pasting a Pardoner. Pop ma and pa, who cares? But oh, ruffle some feathers with a love tap and . . ." Halliday's eyes fell to his lap.

He looked up, his eyes pinning Andrew's. "I'm not one for words. I won't teach through telling. You get me through that barricade, and you'll learn something, whether it's splashed across the front pages of the yellow sheets in black or coating the news broadcasts in red.



Halliday bought a pack of dry pills from the gunsmithy while the Wardens swept the dragnet. The hard rain accompanied him as he made his way to the appointed place at the appointed time.

Andrew was the only Warden in sight. Halliday peered left and right, high and low. He scuttled across the ink enameled street between bursts of lightening.

Hard light armor active, Andrew stood like a watchtower beacon as the sky fell all around him. Staring straight ahead, the young Warden didn't look at Halliday as he scurried under the barricade.

The streets were empty. So were the skies. The lack of aerocars in Midburrow was an eerie sight. *Is that cold sweat on the back of my neck or the rain? Could be both.*

"They call him the Engine Driver. . .

The white facades were black in the dead of night. Every door and window had been covered over. It was like a hood had been thrust over each building. *No witnesses. No escape routes.*

"because he wears the uniform of someone who operates railipedes.

Halliday looked up. Elevated rails ran between and around the upper floors of buildings on either side of the street. No railipedes. *I'm looking for this Engine Driver, but I don't want to see any of those damn metal beasts.*

"I'm worried about Junior because all of his victims so far have been children.

The rain pounded Halliday as he searched. He got out his flask. Halliday's hand shook as he unscrewed the cap. *This cold is killing me.* Balart was cold, but he wouldn't have shook if his partner were by his side. As Halliday put the silver-plated vessel back his mind drifted to the metal at his side. *Huh, I traded out Balart for a heater. You aren't doing such a swell job of keeping me warm, partner.*

"They say he crushes them to death and then harvests their bones."

Bawling. It lanced through the downpour and right into Halliday's eardrums. *Can't be more than a block,* he thought, sprinting to the source.

There she was, a little girl dressed in yellow oilcloth, sitting in the middle of an intersection. There he was, the Engine Driver, half a block down. Even with the serial killer's staggering gait he would make it to the bawling girl before the sprinting sexagenarian.

His head hung back as if his neck were broken, eyes staring into the deluge. The Engine Driver's legs stuck forward with each step like he was being pulled along. He seemed a body possessed to Halliday.

The Engine Driver stopped next to the child and rested a hand on her lid. Halliday tripped and fell three wheels away from them. Soaked inside and out, he found his feet. "Where're your pals, chief?"

The gink's head flopped forward. Too far though as he was staring at the street. His neck cranked up one vertebrae at a time until his lifeless eyes were level with Halliday. "Who are you?" Halliday doubted his peepers for the first time in his life.

The mouth that spoke wasn't the one on the uniformed man's mug, but the one on his neck. It looked like someone had slit the gink's throat then jammed in a row of triangular teeth above and below. "Gavel Halliday," the stunned android-bounty hunter answered.

"Gavel Halliday? As in *the* Gavel Halliday?" the throat asked.

Halliday nodded dimly.

Tearing at the edges, the throat burst into wide-mouthed laughter. "Kismet. This must be kismet." The uniformed gink wiped a tear from one of his lifeless eyes.

"I'm Gargande and this is Giacomo Audoin," the gink pointed to himself. "We're the Engine Driver, or at least that's what they've taken to calling us. A being of two bodies and one voice, mine specifically." The throat chuckled.

"Giacomo was a bird who worked the rails but lost one too many times at craps. After shooting dice in a back alley without any lucre to his name, a fellow gambler carved him a second mouth across his neck. It rained that night. Seeking shelter, a small daemon with a taste for children slithered into the bird's recently opened inn. Hauled back from the light at the end of the tunnel, a serial killer was born. I'm not in total control though. The gink pinned his last hope on a game of chance. Traces of that desperate fix linger, so I must work within their confines."

Giacomo's hand pulled a fistful of something from his vest pocket. The hand presented what it held to Halliday. Dice.

But they were no ordinary dice. Halliday had seen their like once in a backwater curio shop. These dice were made from bones. Little ones.

The gink's hand rattled the bone dice before casting them to the pavement. They splashed then settled. A fury of metal howled in the distance.

Charging with the force of a bullet, a rogue railpede fired off an elevated rail at Halliday's back. The industrial insect landed behind the Engine Driver and the girl. As it ground to a halt screeches and sparks flew from the pavement.

"These dice are our compromise. Giacomo wants to craft a winning die and I want to eat crepes. We use these dice to control the railipedes. I might be small but, as a beastmaster, I can bend the knee of a colossus. You wouldn't guess it by looking at me now, but I led one of Duke Drohtin's legions before you slew him."

"Any chance we settle this without throwing lead? Give me the girl and we part ways. We walk away not crushed and you walk away not full of holes."

"Right, I forgot about the little one. Thank you for reminding me, Halliday." The gink's body bent so that the nose could sniff the little girl.

Halliday drew his pepperbox revolver and let off two shots. The railpede rushed to coil around the Engine Driver, shielding them from the lead with its metal exterior. Having deflected the shots, the industrial beast uncoiled itself.

"This one won't do it for me," Gargande said. "Stinks of android, not to my taste. But I can throw Giacomo a bone. Hers are synthetic, but you can still make dice out of them."

An android. They used an android as bait. Figures. Kismet he says. Yeah, sounds about right.

"So you're the type of gink who won't come to the table. I see your kind every day, or at least whenever I shave. Well, how about a game of chance? One throw of the dice to decide our kismets. You want odds or evens?"

"Why would I do that when I have you at a dis—"

The Engine Driver's head drooped, as if looking down. Gargande gritted his teeth and the upper part of the throat twitched.

"No, Giacomo— No, listen— I get that. Why should we? —Bastard."

Giacomo's hand pulled a fistful of bone dice from his vest pocket. "Your con's piqued my partner's interest. When he gets like this I just can't talk him back from the edge. But don't think everything's gonna go your way, Halliday. I'll be picking out the die, and because there's two of us and only one of you I think it's fair that we get four faces while you get two. One through four and we get to crush the girl and then you. Five or six and we'll let you shoot us in the head and then take the girl."

"Five or six and I'm shooting you in the teeth, daemon. But fine, I'll take those odds."

The hand lowered the fistful of bone dice to the throat. Gargande chuckled before clamping his triangular teeth around the die of his choice. Giacomo returned the rest to his vest pocket.

"What kind of die is that?!"

The die Gargande held between his teeth wasn't a cube, but a rectangular prism. It was like a log with four flattened sides. On each of the long faces was a number from one through four.

"How's that supposed to land on the five or six?! Do the short faces even have numbers on them?!"

Gargande spat the die into the air. "If it lands on one of the short faces you'll see."

The long die tumbled through the rain. Halliday's mind raced as the tiny log fell to the ground. *That's it!*

The long die hit the street and bounced. When it came back down a piece of the pavement jutted up to catch and prop up the long die on one of its short faces before receding back into the ground.

Totemic, the long die stood firmly upward even in the downpour. "WHAT! Halliday, you cheated!"

"Didn't agree I couldn't cheat."

A hundred arcs sprouted from the rooftops surrounding the four. The Watchers nocked their greatarrows.

If the railipede does what it did before to protect the Engine Driver this whole intersection is going to be showered in shrapnel.

Halliday ran.

But not away from the Engine Driver.

He ran toward them.

Really toward the girl. The android girl.

Gargande caught wind that he was about to be blown down. The railipede, clacking its pincers, reared its back.

Halliday dashed for the android girl in the yellow oilcloth. Three wheels. Two wheels. One wheel. He scooped up the android girl then started to run the other way.

Gargande noticed, but if he had the railipede crush them it would leave an opening in his defense. *I'll weather this first volley and then call in more railipedes to deal with these archers,* Gargande thought. *For now, you two can tire yourselves out running. I'll come to collect what's mine when I'm done here.*

Halliday ran until he heard the thwack of a hundred drawstrings. He hit the pavement, covering the android girl with his body.

The railpede swirled around the Engine Driver. Each of the hundred arrows caught its metal hide and broke, sending thousands of splinters every which way.

Dozens, large and small, skewered Halliday. His trench coat kept out the cold and rain well enough, but not these. The wooden rivets pierced his skin, muscles, and sinews. The inside of his trench coat was already damp, but it got heavier as his blood welled around the splinters and was mopped up by the lining.

Halliday felt like a fish caught under the net of his own trench coat. The widowmaker passed through his mind briefly.

Another choral thwack. Same result. Halliday looked down at the android girl. Blood rolled down his forehead and onto hers. *I'll be more wood than meat if this keeps up.*

Halliday glanced at the scene behind him. The Watchers were preparing for another volley. The Engine Driver had thrown down more bone dice to call more railipedes. *The dice.*

"Cover your ears," Halliday told the android girl. He reached for his partner.

Four bone dice burst.

Halliday reloaded his hand cannon and dusted six more dice.

The railpede swirling around the Engine Driver started teetering. It deflected all of the third volley and Halliday felt it.

He reloaded his partner a second time. *These last six'll have to do.*

Six pulls and six less dice. The original fistful were all gone at that point. From teetering to tipping over, the railpede charged into an adjacent building and flipped onto its back.

A hail of one hundred greatarrows nailed Giacomo to the ground. The heads of the greatarrows crushed the rest of the bone dice the Engine Driver had cast.

The gink's throat shuddered. Gargande slithered out of his host. He reminded Halliday of the wads of hair he used to pull out of the shower drain when he lived with Khata. While alarming, at least those weren't filled with teeth.

As Gargande slinked away from the Watchers, Halliday grabbed him. He squeezed but nothing came of it. The daemon sliced at his hand with an array of teeth.

With effort, the android girl crawled out from under Halliday. She walked over to his heater and picked it up. The android girl held it by the barrel like a club.

As Gargande tore into Halliday's hand, the daemon didn't espy the android girl creeping up behind him. She brought the butt of the hand cannon down on one of his teeth, shattering bone with iron. The android girl clubbed the daemon until he was nothing but dust. In the downpour that dust became sludge and washed away.

The heater clattered to the rain-soaked street. She crumpled to the ground and cried. Halliday patted her on the back.

The android girl hugged him about the neck. It was cold, mechanical, but heartfelt.

The Watchers started dropping down from their rooftop perches.

"Laws are meant to protect lawmakers and those wealthy enough to influence them," Halliday told the android girl. "Maybe you already know that, but when I was your age I didn't. When I learned the world wasn't just I couldn't accept it, I couldn't move forward. Keep that in your braincase, little bird, and even if no one else peeps it, you'll soar."

She wiped the tears from her eyes. "I know life isn't fair. I know who you are. What you did for this city. What you've done to my people."

The android girl stared at Halliday.

"Thanks though. If you hadn't lived so stubbornly, I wouldn't have gotten the chance to soar."

She almost thought she saw tears roll down his worn face.

— Silvertongue

12th Day of Vasa in the 416th Year of the Third Sanguine Age

Aubade: Gemini No. 2

Two men sat at the diner counter.

To most, the Gumshoe seemed senile. He was, however, just the type of man who said what was on his mind, often to his detriment. The Gumshoe would fall into that haze of age in a few years, but only if he lived that long. For him, retirement was work, android-bounty hunting to be exact. The way he carried and clothed himself caused people to call him Gumshoe, as if he were a private dick.

Andrew Langsam, the second man, was one of the few people acquainted with the first, knowing so much as his actual trade, but even he still called him the Gumshoe. Some of the other Wardens who frequented that diner knew the Gumshoe for what he had been, but Andrew was the only one to give the android-bounty hunter the time of day.

"Frau Waitress, pour me two slugs of the usual hooch."

"Drinking before the Sol comes up? What a wastrel you are, Herr Gumshoe."

"I ain't paying for your cutesy lip, señorita," the Gumshoe said, his discontent tempered by the imminent toast.

"Gumshoe, why the booze? Like Maggie says, most people are still asleep and you're already hittin' the sauce."

The Gumshoe waved his hand dismissively as if dispersing a lingering stench. "No, these slugs are to celebrate. One for you and one for me. . . ." The tip of the old-timer's tongue tried to spear the words which were to follow, but it missed its marks.

"What're we celebratin'?" Andrew asked calmly, noticing the Gumshoe was getting hot under the collar. By then Maggie had placed the two shot glasses on the counter and was pouring the usual liquor. The pair of slugs sat expectantly, waiting for the Gumshoe to remember.

Maybe senility had set in early, or perhaps the Gumshoe's expiration date was closer than previously thought. Either way, the mechanisms of his upstairs were coughing up smoke and obscuring his mind's eye. A boxy bulge in his trench coat teased the answer to a riddle.

Toast. Celebration. Box.

His neurons, lost in the smoke, couldn't make the connection.

The Gumshoe cased the diner, believing that some element in the greasy spoon might jolt his memory. Unpolished chrome rounded the counter and booths, cracked red and white tiles waited for customers to trip on them, and fat from the fryers caked the window drapes. The lift generator of a prowl aerocar cut through the sea of mist beyond the window like the underside fin of a brimwyllf. The regular bulls were slurping at their mud and gnawing at their glazed and frosted fried doughs. Nothing inspiring came to the Gumshoe as he ran his eyes over the staff. Lousy striped uniforms that hurt to look at and smiles that were cheaper than the coffee.

There was one tramp that stood out, though, sulking in his jacket in a corner booth. His hunch and high-collar hid most of his features but two imprinted themselves on the Gumshoe's mind: the tramp's skin was gray and a constellation of freckles played across his lips. Fragments of a memory—memories—jived at the edge of his mental smoke. They weren't the memories the Gumshoe was looking for. The jiving fragments were of earlier times, but who was the gray tramp and how did he figure into anything? Was he a tail or—

"You gonna bite an egg, Gumshoe, or are you on one of those liquid diets?" Andrew joked.

Derailed without a second thought, the Gumshoe jumped at the baited hook. "I'm not some counterculture anarchist juicer and I'm certainly not some infernal oil-guzzling automaton! I'm old, I eat when I'm hungry, and that isn't often."

Andrew smirked. "Diets aside, you asked me to remind you of a prior appointment you had. I'm assumin' that's the reason you're sharin' the city with us late shifters and the ladies of the night." This wasn't the first time the Gumshoe had borrowed Andrew's brain for storage space.

"Right, I'm—" the Gumshoe trailed off before continuing in a whisper, "heading to the gunsmithy. I wanted to pick up my order just as the doors opened."

"New ordinance? Wait, why are we low-talkin'?"

The Gumshoe didn't answer. He had misplaced the reason. After checking his wrist chronometer, the Gumshoe toasted himself with the two slugs, poured them into his mug of mud (that he had ordered at some point), and then downed the baneful brew in one uninterrupted gulp.

"With all the drinking and smoking I do, the skin from my teeth to my intestines is practically cured leather." The Gumshoe got down from his stool and started to beat it.

"Hold it, Gumshoe! Do you really think you can dine and dash at a diner full of Wardens."

"Don't ride me, Maggie. Just put the drinks on my tab."

"You know this place doesn't have a tab, señor." At the moment, he didn't, though her tone indicated that he should, that, and the threat that she might vault over the counter and dust-up with him."

The Gumshoe skipped out on his tab. Maggie didn't run him down only due to the density of the mist outside, which shrouded his petty escape. None of the Wardens lifted a finger, except to slurp or gnaw. Andrew paid the Gumshoe's "tab" before leaving for his morn patrol.

Not yet jiggered, the Gumshoe could feel blood leeching from his organs to the edges of his skin. Warmth, though illusory in this case, was otherwise hard to come by in Northlaw. The mist's icicle teeth sank in. Like several hard numbers before him, the Gumshoe carried a shield named booze into battle. He ventured a hand from his trench coat to scrape his chin. An adhesive tape was affixed there, to the side. The last metallic joker he ran down had pasted the Gumshoe across the jaw before being fully subdued. Every android was a lug who could, and would, fight until the last. The men, the women, and the children too. The Gumshoe's job never got easier. Age brings wisdom, and it brings bodily ruination too, the decay of the mind. The Goddess is pitiless in that way. What use is sagacity in a vessel that losses touch with the reality that sculpted it?

The Gumshoe snuck along the sidewalk. Wardens in hard light armor shined through the mist ahead like shuffling light houses. The achievement of Northlaw was hard to appreciate in its usual weather. The civil brass had the power to change it, the weather that is, but for some reason they preferred the veil. *A screen for their dealings*, the Gumshoe thought.

A Light Bringer match cast his rusty shadow large on an undulating edifice—somebody else must have been having a bad night too. The Gumshoe added a puff of gray smoke to the rolling waves about him. Smoking and drinking were the only things that never quit on him, unlike his no-good heater that jammed when he was breaking the furniture with the last android he brought in. Right, that was why he was heading to the gunsmithy, so he could slide some lucre to "Graver" Cho for his replacement partner. It was new, and while the Gumshoe didn't care for new, "Graver" Cho had slashed the price just for the Gumshoe.

The Gumshoe was waiting for the elevated railpede to skitter by so he could hop on and take the industrialized beast Downtown. Downtown mist made way for fog. That was where the heaviest of it settled.

The sidewalk below the Gumshoe started playing an ad. The sudden blast of noise sent him out of his gum-soled shoes and made him pee a little. The Gumshoe canceled the ad by stamping out his cigarette on the warbling bird's mug, cutting her jingle short.

Crawling around the corner and hanging upside down on its elevated rail, the metal transit insect came to a stop. The sidewalk beneath the Gumshoe started to raise, but this didn't startle him, his mind had told it to. Electricity sizzled on the tracks in front of the railpede's pincers. Before it had been sparking the railpede's ass to send it skittering along. As the sidewalk lined up with the trunk of the metal transit insect, the ground beneath the Gumshoe solidified. He boarded the furnished innards of the industrial beast and took a load off on one of the garishly colored benches. The membrane windows provided a vantage of Northlaw as it rotted before the Gumshoe's judging eyes.

Downtown. The automaton projects and a few belowboard businesses. The gunsmithy had some grift going on, but as long as the Gumshoe wasn't conned he was fine with "Graver" Cho's malpractice. He knew that to make it in the city your elbows either had to be powdered or greasy. The Gumshoe respected men with slick elbows, even if they chose to set up shop among machines.

Automatons come in a few loathsome makes and models. Homunculi were the first to be created. The Mages made beings in their own image, but they were unable to mix inua into their creations. To the Gumshoe's knowledge there were no Homunculi in Northlaw, though some powdered politician might have one as a display piece. Robots were the second group of

automatons to be fashioned. Outdated, clunky junkers who weren't up to snuff with the current technomancy, robots, at least in the capital city, were replaced with androids. Androids are superior to comparable robots in every way, and this is why they have largely replaced their predecessors in the automated economic sectors. Android-bounty hunters were tasked with sniffing out runaways and returning them to their manufactory lines. They had taken good commonfolk jobs, The Gumshoe wouldn't abide them skipping out on the work that had once sustained his people.

Had the Sol risen yet, He still wouldn't have reached Downtown. The shanties that made up the automaton projects had become gray and withered after being denied solar power by the towering edifices of the moneyed pale elves in Ecclesia. Lacking resources, the buildings turned into unresponsive hovels that were no longer pliable to the automatons' minds. Downtown was stuck as it was. No one could see it as anything but a collection of unchanging husks.

The Gumshoe remained vigilant as he strode through the fog-swamped projects. The few streetlights that hadn't been broken shined disjointedly on a whole host of metallic reprobates. Some were sozzled on malware, others were necking and petting in crashed aerocars. The Gumshoe was certain machines couldn't love, what surrounded him was cheap imitation, programmed echoes of passion. Once he was out of the beast's den with his new partner at his hip, he would head to a bar and get stewed to his hat to forget the sexing robots. Hooch made him feel warmer, and it made the world seem simpler.

"Extree, extree, hear all about it!" a newsbot hollered as he sped into the Gumshoe's shin from out of the fog. The capped newsbot rounded his leg as if nothing had happened and continued, "The Sage's Council has unanimously decided that—"

The newsbot was interrupted when the Gumshoe whirled around and gave it a swift kick in the hindquarters that sent him and his cap skipping down the shrouded sidewalk. A few of the robots that weren't grinding gears turned toward the Gumshoe. Runoff from the city's mooring curled red through the impoverished street. "So even scum get territorial about their garbage," he quipped as the automatons staggered toward him. He reached for the gun that was no longer there, but the gesture was enough. The Gumshoe had a reputation in Downtown. He was the kind to shiv when his back was turned, not when he was drawing.

Almost to the gunsmithy, something the newsbot had said reverberated in the Gumshoe's brain. " 'Sage's Council.' " *Give 'em a span and they'll take a country mile*, he thought.

The Sage's Council had begun as the automaton judiciary of the Great Kingdom when those with inua and those without were governed by different sets of laws. However, their efficiency in jurisprudence caused them to outmode the pale elf High Court. Once the nine android judges took the legal thrones of their pale elf counterparts they merged the two legal systems, leading to somewhat better treatment of their automated ilk. The rules had changed but the way the game was being played hadn't, and wouldn't as long as people like the Gumshoe skulked about the capital of technomancy.

Shoving his way through the bullet resistant glass front door, the Gumshoe entered the gunsmithy. Black barrels crowded the walls and the scent of gun oil filled the air, a welcome substitute to the fog in his book. "Cho."

The greasy-elbowed man who ran the gunsmithy was a commonfellow like the Gumshoe. He sported a tracksuit, though based on his physique anybody could see that he didn't get much practical use out of it. "Graver" Cho's hair was gathered up in what the younger generation might have called a man bun.

"If it isn't my favorite keyhole-peeper. Gumshoe, how ya been?"

"Swell, Cho, been swell." The Gumshoe paused, his brain sputtering. "I'm not here for guff. I've got the lucre. Show me that gat again."

From under the counter, "Graver" Cho pulled out a pistol case. He set it on the bullet resistant counter, which had a few pills lodged in it, spun the case toward the Gumshoe and unclasped it. "Show me the lucre."

The Gumshoe reached into his trench coat, withdrew a hefty sack, and plunked it on the counter. "Graver" Cho pulled at the drawstring, and after peering at the lucre opened up the pistol case.

Nestled inside the case was a mean-looking machine pistol with a monitor display where another handgun might've had a scope. Toting this, the Gumshoe would be a real iron man. He took the roscoe and the armor piercing ammunition that came with it, placing the spare magazines in the ammo holsters he wore under his trench coat. The Gumshoe loaded his new partner.

"Pretty good weight for a cannon like that, right, Gumshoe?"

"Yup," the Gumshoe said nonchalantly, instead focusing on the heater's mounted display.

"I got it from somebody in your line of work for a steal. An android bounty hunter, said it was originally part of a pair."

The Gumshoe, not really listening, asked, "What's the display for?"

"Graver" Cho reached across the counter and flicked a switch on the side of the display. The screen flickered on, filling the darkened shop with a green sea of light.

Pollux Boot Sequence: . . .

"It can give you all sorts of info," the owner of the gunsmithy answered.

"Such as?"

"Remaining ammo, a layout of your surroundings. . . ."

"Is Pollux the name of the pistol?"

"Uh-huh."

Having traded his gold for steel, the Gumshoe left the gunsmithy satisfied. He parted the fog with his rigid frame and, lousy with swagger, decided to roam his hunting ground.

Strapped, the Gumshoe wanted one of the robots to give him a reason to pull. He couldn't stand them chewing each other's face plates and fumbling around. One look would be enough for the Gumshoe to start throwing lead. His dead partner and the tail from the diner were the only ones who had witnessed the true depths of his automaton-triggered psychopathy. Automaton were the sole outlet for his unfiltered aggression. Society would not accept his wrath being wrought upon any other group. The Gumshoe never had any tykes so, in spite of his age, he was floating with testosterone.

The Gumshoe slunk past a bordello. Fast girls crooned from the windows while a gunny on the stoop below hollered at them to shut their metal traps. He had sent the last tomcat who ran that joint up the river, he wondered who ran it now, another decommissioned robot or an android on the lamb probably.

Just then, the fog hemming the Gumshoe began to glow bright green. *Where's that coming from?* Left, right, up, no, down. The source of the light was holstered at his side. Drawing his new partner, the Gumshoe examined the blaring display.

Castor Online: . . .

Please Await Connection Protocol: . . .

Connection Established Between Castor and Pollux.

Send a Message?: Y / N

"Yes," the Gumshoe said, mottled eyes affixed to the painfully green display. Something wasn't on the level.

Pollux Establishing Audio Uplink With Castor: . . .

Audio Uplink Established.

"What's this all about?! Is this a setup?! What are you and Cho playing at?!" The Gumshoe began heading back to the gunsmithy.

"I'll save you some time. Cho's already closed up shop for the day. You won't see him again, Halliday. Ever."

The Gumshoe stopped short and stared down at the display. In the bottom right corner of the screen was a monochromatic green street view of Downtown he recognized immediately, the map was centered on him, on Pollux. A pulsing blip represented his new partner on the street view.

"Who are you and why do you know my name?!"

"That's my gun you're holding, you know?" the voice at the other end said. "I'm holding onto my late husband's half of the pair. My name? Doesn't matter anymore. If you need something to call me, Castor will do. After I put you in the ground I'll discard that name too. Don't plan on taking another afterward."

Castor's voice had transfixed the Gumshoe's ears, but the appearance of a second blip at the edge of the map demanded his eyes. It was slowly approaching, though along an adjacent street.

Sweat beaded the Gumshoe's forehead. "Some hard number I am," he said under his breath. With a swig from his flask tucked away, he found the nearest alleyway connecting the two streets and headed for it.

The alleyway was awash with green. Pressed close to the display, the Gumshoe watched what he could only assume was the blip belonging to Castor stop a ways away from the mouth of the alleyway. Based on the street view he guessed Castor was hidden in some doorway or just below a window in one of the buildings across the street. Gritting his teeth, the Gumshoe made a tactical retreat. He was a hunter. Filling the role of prey got him real sore. Although he had been in worse jams, it took a lot more than that to crack a hard number like him.

"Where you going, Halliday? I thought we'd settle this once and for all. Or are you getting too old for a fair fight? I'm standing on the sidewalk opposite that alleyway you just crept back out of. I'll wait here if you grow a spine in the meantime."

No, no, no something's queer here! Who's Castor?! They said "late husband", but I've never rubbed anybody out! I'm clean on that account, at least. The second blip remained stationary, inviting the Gumshoe to cut up. He hadn't dueled anybody so squarely in decades. The Gumshoe had convinced himself that it was still honorable to send androids back to their employers even if he snuck around and plugged them in the back in order to do so. He knew he

could still take a robot head-on, but an android was a whole nother beast. If the Gumshoe knew one thing, it was that he didn't want to die in a place where the Sol didn't shine.

The first blip ran from the second.

The second blip gave chase to the first.

The fog wasn't doing the Gumshoe any favors. His old bones ached where they had been broken on past jobs. He ran past the bordello, the gunsmithy, and through the red runoff to get back to the railpede stop. The Gumshoe checked his wrist chronometer harriedly. The next railpede wouldn't be there for another half-hour. No dice. Castor was nearing Pollux, but the map read the second blip as passing through the buildings that the Gumshoe had just passed by.

No, not through. Castor was passing over the buildings.

Instinct told the Gumshoe to roll, and he did.

Another ad appeared on the sidewalk, only to be blasted to oblivion by Castor, who the Gumshoe glanced in silhouette jumping from one rooftop to the one behind him. The ruptured state of the sidewalk indicated that the other half of the pair was loaded with armor piercing ammunition too. There was no use hiding, what with the maps on the displays and all, so the Gumshoe kept running in the hopes that something would come to him.

The Gumshoe sprayed Pollux over his shoulder to cover his escape to a nearby above ground parking garage. Once inside he darted for the stairs.

Across the street Castor loaded another magazine and fired on the parking garage. The bullets traced the Gumshoe as he sprinted up the stairs. His trench coat went to tatters, but he managed to get to the top level. The Gumshoe was finally above Castor, it was his turn to get the drop on the other blip. As he was about to check the display a dripping sound intruded his thinking.

The dripping was coming from the Gumshoe. He peeled off what remained of his trench coat. He drew blood from his lower lip as he watched all his booze and testosterone leak out of his riddled torso. The Gumshoe faltered, his legs and arms had also been ventilated.

The street view. The second blip wasn't across the street anymore. Where was—

In that instant something crashed onto the top level of the parking garage. As the dust settled, the Gumshoe looked on, the silhouette of a person standing up clear amid the airborne pavement.

The Gumshoe trained his new partner on the silhouette and pulled the trigger.

"You're out of ammo," Castor said through the settling dust.

The Gumshoe tore his gaze from the silhouette to Pollux's display. At the bottom left of the screen was a set of numbers.

00/100

"Go ahead, reload. I'm not going anywhere."

Castor stood in the splintered pavement before the Gumshoe. The dust finally settled. Morose laughter was all he could muster at first.

"So you're an android bounty hunter. Ha, I was told you were an android-bounty hunter."

The one calling herself Castor (for the time being) wore fatigues. She held her machine pistol at the ready. Green optical sensors gleamed menacingly out of a red face plate at the Gumshoe. "Do you remember killing my husband?"

"No, but I don't remember much these days." The Gumshoe reloaded Pollux.

"Let's just get this over with then. One last bit of gunplay for the both of us."

The Gumshoe drew first. He knew she had let him, but it was her loss. The Gumshoe couldn't die without another smoke or drink.

A burst of bullets charged toward Castor and completely missed the android. Her optical sensors followed the projectiles with ease as they flew by her head harmlessly.

Castor turned her head back toward the staggering Gumshoe only to see a flash of light emit from the palm of his free hand. "Adiós."

With the Gumshoe's one-liner delivered, the bullets from his new partner were electromagnetically pulled backward, passing through Castor's head in between. He caught the bullets in his photon glove and playfully tossed them into the air before catching them again.

The Gumshoe scattered the deformed projectiles over the android's body before he started limping toward the stairs. *At this rate, I might have to consider an actual retirement.*

A hundred geysers of red mist erupted from the Gumshoe's torso. There were no words left, at least none his tongue could reach. Head craned over his shoulder, the Gumshoe watched disinterestedly as Castor rose from the splintered pavement. Her lower jaw hung askew, and it seemed as though she wanted to say something but couldn't. Maybe her voice chip had broken on the bullets' return trip.

The Gumshoe collapsed onto his back. He couldn't feel a thing. When the Gumshoe joined with the pavement he lost control of his neck, causing his gaze to shift from the lack of a sky to his discarded trench coat. Huddled under the coat like a stray animal was the charred remnants of a box. *Who was that for again?*

Castor approached.

Oh, right, it was for Langsam. Today's his birthday. I wanted to celebrate it with him so I got him a . . .

Castor stood over the senile man with skin like dull iron and mottled yellow eyes. They stared at each other for what felt like a long time.

You won't be needing this anymore, and it seems useful so I'll take it, Castor thought as she bent down to take the Gumshoe's photon glove. *Don't think me a cheat, though. I'll trade you it for this.* The android placed Castor, her late husband's machine pistol in the Gumshoe's free hand, completing the pair. The Gumshoe let out his last breath and died Downtown, where the Sol didn't shine.

She without a name walked over to what remained of the Gumshoe's trench coat to examine his final effects. There was a box which, based on its appearance, had likely contained a present not too long ago. This the android threw over the wall of the top level. Beyond the box there were three items: cigarettes, Light Bringers, and a flask with some booze in it. She took the last two items back to their owner.

The android unscrewed the cap of the flask and emptied its contents on the Gumshoe, dousing him in his own hooch. The emptied flask met the same kismet as the box before it.

She without a name knelt over the man she thought might as well not have had one. The android tore off the Gumshoe's fingers and pulled out each of his teeth. She ground them up in her steel hands and spread the gory confetti around. Cho had ensured that Castor and Pollux would never be traced back to either of them.

Striking a match and setting it with the others, the android tossed the pack of Light Bringers onto the Gumshoe. He made a swell pyre.

She bet that no one would remember the old android-bounty hunter.

But she was wrong.

— Silvertongue

4th Day of Gris in the 428th Year of the Third Sanguine Age



With no next of kin the coroner contacted his ex-wife. Khata Tuladhar arranged for her ex-husband's wake and funeral to be made open to the public. She knew he wouldn't have cared for final rites, but then these things weren't meant for the dead.

Khata was also curious as to who'd show up to see Gavel off. He and Balart had saved Northlaw from certain destruction, and Gavel helped catch one of the worst serial killers the city had ever seen.

Gavel had also killed and terrorized his fair share of robots and androids. Khata always knew him to be a quiet, but gentle man. *Quiet. That was the problem. If you hated so much you should've said something*, she thought as she buttoned her black suit in the looking-glass. Khata was not in mourning, but this was a part of the ceremony as well.

She walked to the mortuary as it wasn't far from her flat. Khata didn't need a hat as the forecast was uncharacteristically clear for Northlaw. No mist or rain to speak of. If someone else happened to attend the wake and the topic of weather came up in their small talk it wouldn't be so dreadful for once.

Khata was greeted as she entered the unassuming mortuary. After signing in and receiving directions she walked to the room Gavel was in. When Khata opened the door she stopped for a moment before going into the room. There weren't one or two people but five. Six if she counted herself.

The mortician had set up a great many folding chairs, as was standard, not knowing that the man lying in wake had no friends or family. Khata frowned as she walked toward the front of

the room. *It's sad to see so few here, but I'm not surprised. Rather, I'm shocked that even this many still remember him. If he were here would he remember them?*

Khata approached the closed casket. A hologram of Gavel shined atop the varnished surface. It was of him and Balart. Closing her eyes, she placed a hand on the casket and said a prayer for the man inside. Khata added a line for his partner before opening her eyes.

As she went to take a seat, Khata recognized a face in the second row. "Junior, is that you?"

"Frau Tuladhar?" Géricault Balart II stood and walked over to Khata. With a backlog of several decades the two hugged for what seemed like minutes.

When the embrace ended Khata noticed that Junior was wearing his patrol uniform. He tracked her gaze. "Oh this, aye, couldn't don the formal wear to see him off sadly. Would've too, but I'm actually supposed to be pounding the pavement. And it's such a nice day outside! Herr Halliday must've kenned it. Decided to call it quits so he wouldn't have to see such nice weather!"

To hide the fact that this made her giggle, Khata brought a balled hand to her mouth.

"I'm glad you came, Frau Tuladhar. I'm sorry things didn't work out for you two in the end."

"Don't be. Relationships come and go. Every love isn't meant to last a lifetime. I'll always regret parts of the relationship but never the whole thing. Never. But enough about the past, how're you and your wife getting along?"

"Swell all things considered. Guess I didn't pick up too many things from my pa. My wife's been talking about adoption. Seems she was inspired by you and Herr Halliday. Sorry, was that offensive?"

"Don't worry, Junior, it's all in the past. That's wonderful news. Balart would be so proud of you both."

A dark elf woman in plain clothes in the third row leaned forward. "Sorry to interrupt, but did you say Balart? As in Géricault Balart?"

"Yes, I did," Khata answered.

"He was my pa. Did you know him?" Junior asked the dark elf woman.

Khata took her seat in the front row. As he turned to speak with the woman in the third row her attention was drawn to his ears. *They've always been big. You've grown into them well, Junior.*

Of the other five attending the wake, only one knew the dark elf woman for what she was. A Watcher. "I didn't know your father, though I was a fan of his. Of him and Herr Halliday. I've been a fan of theirs ever since they saved the city from Duke Drohtin. Herr Halliday especially. He really inspired me with that line, 'The law is meant to protect the people.' "

Junior laughed good-naturedly at that. "That happened before I was even born. Goddess, I was still a tyke when the Watchers and Herr Halliday took down the Engine Driver. Ma used to swear she was the one who asked him to do it!"

"She was," a middle-aged pale elf in the fourth row broke in.

"Who're you, pal?" Junior asked. Khata and the dark elf woman shifted in their seats to get a better look at conversation's newcomer.

"Sergeant Langsam of the 88th precinct. I've seen you around. You're Private Balart, right? The Colonel'd be pissed if he found out you ducked in here durin' your patrol to see off the biggest disappointment in the history of the Wardens."

Dumbstruck, those in the first three rows stared at the pale elf man in the fourth.

He continued. "I mean, we can't even get a look at his mug. After two days in the city he was more myth than man. I guess this's what's left after the myth's worn away."

Khata stared with half-drawn lids, not sympathizing but trying to understand. Junior white-knuckled the back of his folding chair. The dark elf woman glared.

"If you were so sore at the guy why'd you bother showing up to his wake?!" Junior asked Sergeant Langsam.

"He was supposed to teach me!" the man in the fourth row snapped back. "That was the deal! I wanted to be like him. . . . The old-timer was a good man! Halliday was capable of so much, and he wasted it. I could've carried on his legacy. . . ." His eyes glazed in frustration.

"You're wrong. He wasn't a good man, but he did many good things." The voice didn't come from anybody sitting down. It belonged to a young android woman leaning against the back wall of the room, opposite the closed casket.

Without waiting for a response, she left. The Red Sol smiled down at the young woman who'd just purchased her freedom and chose to spend her first moments of liberty inhaling air laced with embalming fluids. The young android woman smiled back.

If it had been raining she might've worn yellow.

"Sergeant Langsam, thank you for coming today. I don't know you, so you must've known Gavel in his later years. Thank you for being there for him when we weren't."

"What're you thankin' me for, Frau? And how do you know I was there for him?"

"Just a guess, but out of everyone who came here today you're the only one to have shed a tear," Khata answered affably.

Sergeant Langsam turned away from those in the first three rows. Everybody in the room heard him snuffle, even the gray-skinned man with an auspicious arrangement of freckles on his lips. Costumed as a reporter, the neutral observer decided it was time for him to enter the picture.

"Frau Tuladhar, the Argent Chronicler," the reporter stuck out his hand. "I'm working on an obit for Gavel Halliday, and I was wondering if you could give me a quote."

Khata shook the reporter's hand gingerly. "—The Argent Chronicler, not the Argent Chronicle?"

"Oh, did I misspeak? My apologies." The reporter smiled esoterically.

Khata guessed the gray-skinned man worked for one of the yellow sheets by the reporter's notebook in his left hand and the garish orange suit jacket hanging from his shoulders. The ill-fitting ice pop colored jacket was also frayed at the edges from overwear.

"What do you want to know?"

"Whatever comes to mind first should do fine."

"Hmm. Gavel was like anyone else, he just stumbled into the spotlight more often than most. His mistakes hurt those around him, and probably him too, though he never said as much. But his successes seemed to only help other people."

"Many have called him a hero," the reporter noted.

"Would you?" Khata asked him.

"Between you and me? I can't really decide whether or not I want to write him as a hero or an antihero. Oh well, in the end it'll be up to the readers to decide. If they like him, if history likes him, the good'll outshine the bad. If they don't, his'll just be another name in a book that nobody knows."

"A book? Don't you mean the yellow sheets?"

"Right. What'd I say?"

Khata turned away from the reporter to consider the closed casket.

"Sorry, sorry. Actually, if I could have another moment of your time I'd really appreciate it."

"Hey, Frau Tuladhar, is this lug bothering you?" Junior asked, eyeing the reporter.

"No that's all right, Junior. Thank you for your concern. Yes, Herr Reporter, what else can I do for you?"

"I scratched out some ideas for headlines. If you could give me your take on them that'd be swell." The reporter shoved his opened notebook under Khata's nose.

Gavel, 75, Son of Mathúin, End of His Line.

A Young Man from the Countryside Who Grew Old in the City, 75.

Gavel Halliday, the Twice Hailed Hero, Finally Rests at 75.

Halliday, Android-Bounty Hunter, Dies at 75; Off the Streets for Good.

Old-Timer, Dead at 75, Leaves Behind Nothing But Bodies

75-Year-Old, Gumshoe Finally Retires.

"I think any of them would work well."

Khata was the last to leave.

Before exiting the mortuary she went over to the front desk. "May I see the sign-in sheet for Gavel Halliday's wake?"

The man behind the desk recognized Khata and slid her the sign-in sheet. Only the first five names interested her as the sixth was hers.

- 1) Géricault Balart II
- 2) Zola Cadwaladr
- 3) Andrew Langsam
- 4) Y-3986
- 5) Silvertongue

— Silvertongue

8th Day of Gris in the 428th Year of the Third Sanguine Age

APPENDIX: INFLUENTIAL WORKS

- Abreu, Alê. *Boy & the World*. Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2016
- Bethesda Game Studios. *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*. Bethesda Softworks, 2006
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- Dahm, Evan. *Order of Tales*. www.riceboy.com, 2016
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- Eco, Umberto. *The Name of the Rose*. Harvard Books, 1994.
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- Hammett, Dashiell. *The Maltese Falcon*. Orion, 2005
- Le Guin, Ursula K. *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Ace Books, 2000
- Nagai, Tatsuyuki. *A Certain Scientific Railgun*. Funimation, 2009
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- Manet, Édouard. *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*. *Readings in Art History: The Renaissance to the Present*. Pearson, vol. 2, no. 3, 1984
- Monet, Claude. *Rouen Cathedral, West Façade, Sunlight*. www.nga.gov, 2016
- Preminger, Otto. *Where the Sidewalk Ends*. Twilight Time Movies, 2016
- Reed, Carol. *Odd Man Out*. Criterion Collection, 2015
- Supergiant Games. *Bastion*. Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment, 2011
- Supergiant Games. *Transistor*. Supergiant Games, 2014

Vidor, Charles. *Gilda*. Criterion, 2016

Welles, Orson. *The Lady From Shanghai*. Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2015

Whistler, James Abbott McNeil. *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1*. www.musee-orsay.fr,
2016

Whistler, James Abbott McNeil. *Nocturne: Blue and Gold – Old Battersea Bridge*.
www.tate.org.uk, 2016

Yoshiura, Yasuhiro. *Time of Eve*. Crunchyroll, 2008

Walker Webb

Education:

- Penn State Berks, Set to Graduate May 2017
- Bachelor of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences in Professional Writing
- Concentration in Global Studies
- Dean's List Fall 2013 - Fall 2016
- Schreyer Honors College Gateway Scholar

Work:

- Tutor at Penn State Berks Writing Center, Spring 2016 - Spring 2017

Activities:

- Desk Editor and Contributor for the *Berks Beat*, Fall 2014 - Fall 2015, Spring 2017
- Vice President of the Berks Chapter of the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA), Spring 2014 - Fall 2014
- Staff Writer for the *Berks Collegian*, Fall 2013 - Spring 2014

Experience:

- Training in writing center studies, Fall 2015 - Spring 2017
- Launching and Designing a campus news and lifestyle magazine, Fall 2014 - Fall 2015
- Writing for both the *Berks Beat* and the *Berks Collegian*, Fall 2013 - Fall 2015, Spring 2017