

The Rulemaster - Wargames

by Aaron Williams

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“There’s a lot more skill to this calling than you think,” said Archon Darkstorm, raising the poorly-fired clay cup to his lips. “For instance, say you’re running a game for your customers, and the dice go poorly for one sad fellow. How do you handle it?” He let the brew go down his throat unimpeded, knowing full well he may regret it in the morning. He’d seen the distillery, which looked like it had weathered the apocalypse merely by being too stubborn and rusty to fall apart.

Shanna Bunsen thought for a moment. “Doesn’t it just suck to be him? It’s a game, and there’s winners and losers, right?”

Archon thought he felt the “beer” reacting with something in his stomach, which wasn’t unwelcome, given that the meals this flophouse served could probably use some help being broken down for digestion. “That’s what you appear to be selling, of course, and there’s nothing wrong with weeding out players in a natural fashion once the session has been underway a while. But sometimes, the story is what makes the game, and failure can be a part of that story.”

Shanna brightened, catching on. “Instead of a character dying, they’ve added new difficulties to the plot.”

“Just so. Now they need to be rescued, or they’ve alerted the villains to their presence, that sort of thing. It’s not all just making sure everyone who has a bad turn winds up with their heads popped off.”

She nodded, sipping her own drink, which looked to Archon like cloudy wine, but with an oil slick on the surface. It was served in a dented metal goblet with “World’s Fair - 2075” in raised characters on it. “You get repeat business that way as well, I bet.”

Archon shrugged and pretended to let out a long sigh, which was actually pressure release from the chemical reactions going on in his belly. “There are also the Plot Tokens to help when luck turns sour. They’re almost a second currency in some places, you know. They’re well worth it to have in hand when a character that’s been in the family a few generations is about to die for good.”

“Do you get a lot of those kinds of players for your games? Ones with characters that are heirlooms?”

“Mostly in the larger settlements, or when we hold important tournaments or other events, Miss Bunsen. We Rulemasters provide not just entertainment for the players and onlookers, but an ongoing legend that they get to see crafted before their eyes.” He thought about it and raised a finger to announce a correction. “The eyes they use in their imaginations, of course.”

She shook her head, smiling. “The legacy of the Rulemasters is almost a legend unto itself. Who would’ve thought that traveling storytellers with heads full of rules and pockets brimming with dice would be so sought after?”

Archon wasn’t entirely sure his reply was fully true, as it was handed down to him from fellow fabricators of fancy, but it sounded true, which was usually all that was important. “Before the war, in the Old World, games were everywhere. Machines played games with people, or they helped people to play with and against each other. Those electronic brains could keep track of entire worlds for you, letting you be a hero, an observer, or someone who guided the fate of the very world itself. The games we offer were the ones that came before these machine-aided ones, where words and rolling dice brought wonder and magic to those who

played. Some say they were preferred by those who craved settings that were more responsive, as the machines weren't terribly creative most of the time."

Shanna drained her cup. "I'm sure there's no professional pride coloring that statement." She gave a wry smile.

"It's quite possible, but in any case, we of the book and tabletop survived the bombs, the fires, the mutations, and every other way the world changed. There must be something of value to it, or I'd likely still be in the place I was born, scavenging scrap metal from the rubble in San Loose."

She gave a nod. "Much like the people trying to grow things out there. One of them told me they had a duty to restore the land to the farming paradise it once was. They've got their work cut out for them."

Archon was still trying to feel out why this woman had sought him out, apart from an interest in his work as a Rulemaster. Traveling the wasteland to bring diversion and epic adventures into the lives of the humans, mutants, and anything that would trade things of value might sound appealing to some, he admitted. He thought there was more to this Shanna than conversation over what were technically drinks.

She had been in the audience of his latest game, one that had earned him a few odd-looking coins, some working electronics, a few small solar components for his cart, and an old memory drive that looked like it might be functional. The guild paid well for those, in the hopes of finding new stories, images, or works of wonder to dazzle audiences with. Actual information was often of lesser value, though it could be sold to the occasional historian. The wise historians knew they could get the best bargains by not making a habit of "correcting" any Rulemaster's games about the way things *really* happened with pesky "facts."

After his player troupe of people, some with leaves growing out of them, returned to their work, Shanna had approached him and offered to buy him a drink or three in exchange for tales about his vocation. Hints at being hired for another game were dropped. He had some time yet before his next appointed destination, and the possibility of an additional job would make up for some of the leaner takings he'd had in previous months.

He set down his cup, the clay giving an ominous noise as if a fissure inside it had widened by a hair. He looked out of the foggy transparent window set into the mud brick wall. Humans labored in the fields alongside beings that looked to be fusions of men and trees. "I suppose the tree people gave this territory its name: Oak Home."

A twelve-foot-tall specimen with bark-covered skin hefted a load of stones in its limb-like... well, limbs, joining a few other rock-bearers to take their loads to a nearby stream. A small dam was being erected, diverting the meager flow into a rudimentary irrigation system.

Shanna ran a finger around the lip of her cup. "Is it true the walking trees can't leave here?"

"Some can," said Archon, "the ones that aren't fully covered in bark and leaves. The strain of NanoGel that made them as they are is a thing of the Old World. They were made as they are to tend crops and nurseries. Part of this service gave them something, an instinct, or a compulsion, to remain here, until their work was complete."

"What work? For who?"

"For some long-forgotten master or merchant. Whoever changed them. They just had the misfortune to survive the war along with their tasks. Their offspring inherit this obligation. The ones that aren't fully... tree'd, as it were, they can go their own way if they desire."

A look of realization crossed Shanna's face. "So they're almost a part of the land, a resource that wants to be used."

Archon shrugged. "Wants? I don't know if I'd say that. They're eager for word from other lands, just as any people are. They enjoy my trade, especially if I include gardens in it or villains that are defeated for spoiling the land." He gave a sidelong glance at the blasted horizon, the skeletal fingers of a former city peeking through the dusty haze. "Not that such tales are hard to conjure."

That earned a small laugh. "How do you know things were so good before," she gestured to the outside, "the world got like this? Isn't this all you've known? The Old World may as well be one of the places with dragons and aliens you offer up for your events."

Archon smiled. "I believe that misery as well as happiness can be found in most circumstances, apart from the ones that involve pain as a constant. As for the Old World, we have some of its wonders to behold, and, unlike the places I invoke for spectacle and contest, it existed." He imitated her gesture towards the lands beyond the window. "I would find it very hard to believe that having yonder city intact would make the world a worse place to be in."

His brow furrowed a bit, and he realized he'd lapsed a little into his banter normally reserved for his role-playing games. It was that flowery language of the storyteller that audiences loved but sounded strange in polite conversation. It took a moment to realize Shanna was speaking to him again.

"...may not be what you think, and I'd like to show you. I'd have to guide us, as it's a bit off the beaten path." Her next question sounded like it was spoken too loudly for mere conversation to Archon's ear. "Would you let me hire your services?"

Reflexively, his inner accountant overrode his judgment, likely with the help of whatever had been in his now empty bottle. "I would be honored. We should leave in the morning, yes?"

He found himself on his feet. He didn't recall standing, but there he was.

Shanna shook her head. "It's not far at all, and I can promise you a private room as a bonus to your regular fees."

Archon thought he saw one or two knowing smiles in the meager crowd, but he ignored them. Shanna wasn't unattractive by any stretch of the imagination, unless human-shaped people weren't appealing to the beholder. He was having trouble judging her age. Now that he looked at her, the griminess of her hands, face, and hair appeared to be false, applied like a disguise. Somehow, he thought he saw someone unaccustomed to looking like a typical resident of these parts.

He was trying to compose some clever questions designed to ferret out what she was really doing when he found himself in his cart. It was moving. His oxroach, the armored multi-legged beast that pulled the former van that carried his Rulemastering gear, was bearing them down a weed-choked road he didn't recognize. He noticed Shanna was in the passenger seat.

"Just a little further," she said. "You'll want to turn left at the plane. You know what a plane, is right?"

Archon didn't remember answering yes, but he thought he had. The next thing he knew, the sky was darker and he was passing a corroded metal bird-shape affixed to a stone plinth, so it appeared to fly low over the growing vegetation. Some kind of red and yellow vines grew through the pitted construction, its trumpet-like flowers following their passage like suspicious eyes.

He later remembered a metal gate. A voice conversing with Shanna's. A hand guiding him to a bed. Darkness and a sensation of falling. When at last the fall ended with a jolt, he sat

upright, breathing heavily. He was still in the same clothes he'd worn the day before, and everything was still in its place, assuming his cart was nearby. He was thankful for at least not being robbed.

"Instead," he grumbled, "everything I own, including myself, was stolen. That's so much better."

"I'm sorry for deceiving you, but it was necessary." Hearing Shanna's voice coming out of nowhere made him jump higher than waking up had. As he thumped to the floor, the ceiling brightened until it gave off a soft yellow light, enough to read by, had he anything to read.

If his cart and its books were damaged, he thought, he might do things everyone would regret... until he was subdued, which wasn't difficult. He relied on his Rulemaster status to protect him most of the time, and it worked... most of the time.

"Are you all right?" Shanna asked. "That sounded like you might have hurt something."

Archon followed the sound to a barely visible grille on the wall. He had similar devices mounted on his cart for playing musical pieces during his games.

He rubbed his knee and let his bruised bottom be comforted by the mattress. "I'm fine, the floor broke my fall." He saw he was in a very plain, windowless room with a sturdy-looking door on one wall opposite the bed he'd slept in. The door looked as strong as the bed was comfortable. He found it a little depressing that the best bed he'd used in years was in a place where he was apparently a prisoner.

"Good. I'll come in shortly and explain. Please be patient with me. I was honest about wanting to hire you, and you will be paid."

That actually cheered him up more than she knew. He kept his pleasure hidden, since that would be detrimental to the eventual haggling over expenses. He was in a clean, well-painted room with Old World lighting, a bed fit for a king, attached to a place with enough resources to maintain it and orchestrate his kidnapping. Surely they'd be able to afford to part with quite a lot of quality compensation.

She entered the room and sat down on the bed next to Archon. She also left the door open, which he thought was to put him at his ease. He figured it just meant he couldn't get far if he decided to run, but he humored her and put on his best "I'm a bit put off by being kidnapped, but apparently I'm free to go, so do tell me about the points of local interest before I pretend I can leave" face.

Shanna was now wearing a uniform of some kind. It was an Old World one-piece garment, with several handy pockets on the breast and legs. A belt cinched at the waist, and a few small, square pouches adorned it. One arm had a piece of thick tapestry in the shape of a shield attached to it. It bore the symbol of a metal hand holding a bolt of lightning. Another strip of machine-woven cloth was over one breast and read "Bunsen" in all capital letters. Her boots looked shiny and new, and the fabric of her outfit was made up of several earth and plant colors that shifted like drifting clouds. He was certain the uniform was made up of tiny, self-maintaining machines, distant cousins of the ones that helped mutate most life forms on Earth.

"You probably realize I drugged you, back at Oak Home." She held up a small bottle with a little liquid in it. "I promise it's not addictive or harmful. It's called Somnambulol. It put you in a suggestive state, made you obey simple commands, that kind of thing."

Archon filed the name away for future use as a plot device with a convincing-sounding title. "First, the territory is called Oak Home. Second, the settlement is called Brokarro. Third, I assume you made a show of hiring me so no one would suspect I was being taken advantage of."

Shanna nodded but kept on topic. “People need you, Rulemaster. If you don’t aid them, thousands could die.”

Archon thought highly of his art, which went without saying. Rulemasters needed confidence, especially when they were in over their heads. However, he did try to keep from falling into a giant pit full of ego whenever possible. “How can my talents save so many from peril?”

Shanna stood and gestured for Archon to follow her. She led him out the door into a concrete hallway, lit by more of the illuminated ceilings. He saw that this was some kind of jail, though all the cells were empty.

They went up some stairs and through a maze of corridors, all bereft of life. Archon saw empty desks, offices that hadn’t been used in decades, and heavy doors with warnings to those not permitted to enter on them. He also noticed several dome-shaped objects on a few ceilings and upper walls. His experience told him they might be mechanical eyes for a machine that oversaw this place, or they could be said machine’s way of dealing with unwanted visitors. He knew that some weapons could fit in such small spaces, especially the kind that produced a bright flash of light followed by the sound of meat sizzling.

Anywhere they passed near windows, most of the glass was gone, though someone had taken the time to sweep away any debris. The morning breeze carried a tang of moisture along with a sweet musk the squat, crimson-skinned trees dotting the landscape exuded. Their upper branches had tendrils that snaked towards the ground, where the curling turf known as hazgrass appeared to be littered with animal bones.

A few black-needled trees held their ground among the reds, often with a good twenty paces of clearing around them. Archon didn’t care to know why the tendril-trees kept their distance, especially if there was no cause to go near them.

The source of the wet-outside smell was barely visible beyond the chaotic vegetation: A lake, its boundaries hidden, but with obvious ruined structures jutting out from the water. If it had been after sunset, it looked like it would shine with its own inner glow.

Finally, Shanna Bunsen came to some more steps leading down, putting her palm to a pad near a large metal wall. It split down the center, revealing itself to be a barrier at least a foot thick. It slid open via a hidden mechanism that screamed like an arthritic joint forced to run a marathon.

Inside, more desks stood empty, though these appeared to have seen some use. Archon’s mouth dropped open a little at the clutter. There were transparent plates inside thin frames that he knew to be Old World books, of a sort. The guild had a handful of them, kept in the most secure places they had, brought out only to be used for trying to decode any storage devices the Rulemasters brought to them. Here, they were lying about as if they were as common as scraps of paper. He would have reached out to pick one up had it not been drilled into him that only the Keepers of the Library were allowed to do so. He could feel his bruised knuckles from years ago, when the over-zealous guardian had mistook Archon’s reaching to pick his nose for a lunge at one of the precious tablets.

The charging cradles called to him. Finding a working one and turning it in to the Keepers could redeem a Rulemaster any number of sins, possibly up to murder, provided the victim wasn’t terribly well-liked.

More rectangles were lit around the room, set into the walls and into tabletops. The one that impressed him most stood in the center, like the top of a giant glowing altar. Shanna led him to it, almost having to coax him forward. “Why are you rubbing your hand like that?”

Archon immediately pretended his knuckles merely itched. “This... is impressive. Is this why you had to take me here in secret?”

She gave a small shrug. “Those were my orders.”

He had his hands up. “Miss Bunsen. Shanna. I don’t blame you. If I told a tale of a mere fraction of the treasures I see here, you’d never see a single scavenger come looking for it, because none would believe it to be true.” He looked at the table-table, large enough to allow two to sleep comfortably. “I must admit, I’ve never seen anything like this. I would be interested to know what it is.”

Shanna gave him a smile. “I get to be the storyteller now?” She pushed up her sleeves and waved a hand smoothly over the altar’s surface as if performing a magic trick. “Then watch me hocus some pocus.”

One of Archon’s many points of personal pride was being able to read, which had come in handy on several occasions, mostly dealing with Old World technology. He immediately recognized a logo and its accompanying collection of letters: NATDI. The image of a sword hanging before a wing-backed globe wasn’t unusual. Seeing it floating in the air as if it was a solid, glowing object was. It soon shrank to nothingness and was replaced with a number of tiny, angular shapes, as if a set of complicated building blocks had been given the power to hover. Small pictures were within the shapes with words beneath them. He saw “SYSTEM,” “REPORTS,” “MAIL,” “TACTICAL,” and several others that he planned on using in future games.

He tore his eyes from the display to face Shanna, who was apparently enjoying the look of astonishment he wore. “The North American Tactical Defense Initiative?” He looked around again, half expecting to see some of the legendary warriors and weapons of the fabled military organization. “It still exists? I’ve heard of some who claim its legacy, like the InTac Legion, but I’ve never seen...” He waved a hand around the room. “Is this the true Initiative?”

She touched one of the glowing icons marked “WIKI” and a glowing window appeared, about the size of six rulebooks placed edge-to-edge. She swept her fingers across it, bringing up lists of files, selecting one and touching a triangular symbol in the center of the floating rectangle.

A female face appeared, though she looked more like a sculpture than a thing of flesh and blood. It gave a disconcerting smile. “Hello, and welcome to the North American Tactical Defense Initiative’s SatDef Command facility located in McAlester, Oklahoma. I’m the Artificial NeuralPlex NATDI Installation Epsilon in charge of managing the day-to-day operations of this base, its personnel, and its mechanical assets. I can be addressed as ‘Annie.’”

As if sensing the question in Archon’s mind before he could voice it, the face gave a knowing wink. “No, I’m not given free rein to order troops to take over the world in the name of machine intelligences. I take orders just like anyone else here from the proper government authorities and military command staff. I have my directives just like any other member of NorTacDef, as we’ve nicknamed ourselves, and most of them are pretty dull.”

A series of images, some static, some in motion, spun into and out of existence. They showed an automated food-preparation machine, people interacting with mechanical devices, and technology beyond Archon’s experience that seemed to be running without supervision.

The robots were what really sent his pulse racing. They held guns, or had guns mounted on them. They were human-shaped, animal-shaped, or looked like vehicles. Many had the innocuous-looking protrusions that were often methods of inflicting pain or death using energy,

or were the “eyes” robots used to sense their quarry in ways so far beyond human perception they might as well be magic.

“I see you’re taken with our mobile technological assets. Perhaps you’ve seen too many movies about the human race being wiped out by a robot uprising or some other catastrophe caused by mechanical means.” Annie said, confirming that this was no mere recording, but something that was observing its audience. “I can assure you that there are countless safeguards to ensure it can never happen.”

The face suddenly took on a somber look, though it seemed half of it wanted to remain pleasant and comforting, as if the Annie-machine were having a stroke. Archon decided to just think of it as “her.” Her voice sounded harsher. “Except it did, didn’t it? The contamination of the NanoGel. The constructor plague. The War of the Burning Gray.”

Her face snapped back to its more pleasant form. “Forgive me. The war has unpleasant memories for my persona.” A bright line appeared, which became the edge of a map containing an aerial view of several buildings. A blinking red dot came into existence on one of them. “This is where we are.” The dot remained in the lower-left corner of the map as it expanded, revealing more buildings and shapes that it took Archon a moment to recognize. He had several adventures set in the Old World and many of them included things like airfields, barracks, guard towers, and all the other trappings of a heavily armed military installation. There were tales of bases that were like whole cities devoted to keeping the people and machines of war ready for action, though he’d never seen one personally.

A series of circles radiating out from the middle of what was now labeled “McAlester Central Command” faded in. The centermost one was bright orange, followed by yellow, blue, and green. The red dot was barely inside the green zone.

“The orange area is filled with contaminated NanoGel and the results of a Brimstone warhead.” Annie saw the look of incomprehension on Archon’s face. “They were designed to poison an area and keep it uninhabitable for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. The hope was to keep the contaminated NanoGel dormant, kill it, or at the very least, make it so it couldn’t come in contact with more living matter.”

A purple square pulsed in the left-handed part of the orange circle. Annie’s avatar head nodded towards it. “That’s where I am, my neuromechanicals sealed inside their combat-proofed bunker, powered by adaptive energy generation systems that include fusion, solar, and nuclear harvesting coils.”

An irregular shape appeared and laid itself over the map. The pulsing square was slightly north of center inside this new boundary. Archon knew instantly what it was.

Annie nodded at the area. “That’s the lake you may have seen on your way in. The Brimstone device’s detonation left a rather large crater, which eventually filled with water from rainfall and an underground spring. My bunker was touted as being waterproof, though I never thought I’d have that feature tested quite so thoroughly.”

Archon nodded. “Many great cities fell to the works of the wars, yet you endured. You are wondrous, indeed.”

Annie gave a polite smile and then a wink. “Always good to flatter the host who can toast you, right?”

Disconcertingly, she flashed to her dark visage. “You’d better know what you’re doing or maybe we’ll see how far into the blue zone someone can go before ‘things’ happen to them.” She popped back to smiles and bright eyes without seeming to realize what had just been said.

Any thought of asking about payment died on Archon's tongue. Instead, he acted as if he needed to clear his throat. "Ah-ha, yes. Well, I understand that I'm needed to somehow keep a dark fate from befalling many innocent people, yes?"

Shanna interjected. "He's very skilled. I saw his work in Broken Arrow, and it went over really well."

Broken Arrow? Archon hadn't heard that name before, though it did make sense. Many of the towns and settlements were named after Old World places, and they weren't always transcribed correctly. He filed away the Brokarro-Broken Arrow reference for the next time one of those smarty-pants "historians" jumped down his throat about inaccuracies in his games.

Annie gave a smile that was virtually genuine. "While I value your judgment, Captain Bunsen, I think a more formal test of his abilities is warranted."

By reflex, Archon started composing a list of reasonably-affordable fees for one-on-one sessions, leading with a seemingly innocent remark. "I'll need the items on my cart, and while I am flattered at being considered for this position, my sense of professionalism requires me to enquire about concerns of a more practical matter."

Annie gave a small laugh, one that bordered on being spontaneous. "I've given you Class Two-A Contractor status, Mister Darkstorm. And while I've been told that money isn't exactly what it used to be, I can still do a reasonable conversion for items we have on hand if you're agreeable."

The glowing face turned to Shanna. "Captain Bunsen, get our guest some refreshment and have him back here in an hour." She saluted, and Annie's avatar vanished.

Shanna took Archon's arm and led him out of what she called "Auxiliary Command Post Five" and took him to what was left of a small cafeteria attached to the building. Whatever disaster had befallen the place, the destruction had removed the wall facing the deadly zones where Annie's mind was housed. Archon reckoned the miniature machines inside the building had managed to repair about half of the room before reaching some kind of limit about fifteen feet inside the door. The place looked as if a god had neatly sliced off a portion of the dining area and made off with it, leaving a sort of covered porch behind.

There was a counter with several metal domes on its surface. She gestured to the three that had small green lights in front of them. "Only these still work, I'm afraid. Still, eggs, sausage, and tomato soup are better than nothing."

Each dome retracted to reveal heated foods that Shanna tried to apologize for as being "not as good as the real thing," but Archon's appetite had long ago learned that abundance was rarer than gourmet dining. When she told him they refilled every twenty minutes and kept fresh indefinitely, he almost took it as a challenge.

When he'd eaten enough that he could think of things other than food, he sat at a table that had once been about three feet longer with Shanna. He almost thought he could see the tiny table-machines keeping the sliced-off end looking freshly-cut. He had been about to ask how they hadn't been bothered by the usual winged or multi-legged bugs that enjoyed seeking out meals wherever people had food when he saw two fairly large specimens quietly drop from the air before they could enter the half-room from the open outdoors.

Shanna had followed his eyes. "Bug zapper. I think it's a focused light beam. It would barely hurt you even if it was programmed to shoot at people."

She produced two metal bottles, twisting off their tops with a hissing sound of escaping gas. She let Archon choose one. "Neither one is spiked, but in case you still don't trust me, you can have first pick."

He took one, and found it filled with a marvelous bubbling liquid, slightly chilled. The sweetness of the drink was nothing like he'd ever tasted.

Captain Bunsen took a pull on hers. "It's made here, if you can believe that." She suppressed a belch. "It's one of the creature comforts that's in the green zone or can be fetched by robots from the blue zone and decontaminated. Anyway, there's a machine that mixes it, extrudes the bottles, and spits them out."

"Amazing," was all he could say before he had to discreetly let the bubbles in his stomach escape. "And it still works well."

"For now. Everything runs down, eventually."

Archon nodded to the outdoors, the flora beyond a certain distance running riot with plants that would probably be happy to make a meal of them both. "Not everything."

Shanna left her bottle largely untouched, along with the rest of her meager meal. "She'll test you, see how good you are."

Archon gave a reassuring grin he wasn't sure he felt. "I'll give her an adventure the likes of which she's never dreamed." He thought for a moment. "Does she dream?"

Shanna gave a small laugh. "I've never asked her."

"So how am I supposed to save anyone with what I do? Will they become too disillusioned with life and end themselves without me?" He meant that last one as a joke, but Shanna looked like he'd come close to the truth.

"Base Commander General Nilsson has ordered us to escort him back to McAlister. We need you for that escort."

Archon waited for more, but nothing was forthcoming. "He's threatening to attack someone? How am I little more than a distraction?"

Again that odd look crossed Shanna's face. "That's sort of what you'll be doing while the General is on the move."

"Am I some kind of demand he has for entertainment on his trip?" He couldn't recall any warlords who were so battle-mad that they required something to take their minds off of a constant desire for blood.

"We'll get to the specifics after Annie decides to hire you." She patted his hand. "I'm confident she will."

"I'll need my cart." Archon considered for a moment, and tapped the bottle he'd drained. "And about a dozen more of these."

He found himself in the control room again, with several stacks of his books on a nearby desk. His dice tower was on a rolling cart nearby, along with a handsome supply of Old World writing utensils. His list of acceptable compensation items was getting longer and longer as he luxuriated in being able to write the finest lines without needing an inkwell.

Annie's avatar appeared over the "holodesk," as Captain Bunsen had called it. She seemed to be her more pleasant self at the moment. "Are you ready to begin, Mister Darkstorm?"

Archon gave a small bow, the showman in him coming forth. "Always, madam. Are you familiar with the ways of dice and paper, of battle in miniature with glory of epic proportions?"

Annie gave a small smirk. "You're asking me if war simulations are something I've done before? Seriously?"

Captain Bunsen entered the room escorted by a human-shaped machine. It moved smoothly, carrying a final load of items from Archon's cart. Shanna deposited a tray of metal bottles on a nearby tabletop.

The robot came forward until it stood by the holodesk. Annie's face seemed to drift towards it, flowing onto the flat features of the machine's head. A uniform appeared, as did flesh and hair, until the Annie-robot looked very much like a normal human. She seemed to glow a little around the edges, and the facial expressions struck Archon as puppet-like, but it was still quite impressive.

Annie put on a pleasant smile. "I deduced you'd want me to roll physical dice instead of just generating random numbers and trusting me that they're truly random."

Putting aside the poke at his sense of fair play, he continued on his previous point. "So this is a familiar past time, then?"

She raised a hand and made a "so-so" gesture. "The soldiers played games like this, but mostly using consoles or personal media devices. I did scan most of the documents you had brought in from your transport, so while I understand the basic concepts, I suspect I don't grasp the nuances of the experience."

He had to consider for a moment the subtleties of Old World technology at its zenith. He didn't think the robot had stopped to flip through every page of his collection, so the base itself had some means of reading books that were sealed in boxes being carried from one place to another in... what, an hour? That made the energy weapons and ghostly projections of the holodesk seem almost mundane by comparison.

Together, they created a character for her. She decided on a wandering sorceress who traveled with a loyal Dwarven warrior she had saved from death at the hands of an Orcish warlord.

She wrote down the spells her character would have access to. "Magic is such an interesting concept."

"Like many things, it's likely a wish fulfillment, a desire to affect things at a distance, to have power over the universe." Archon had mused on this many times before.

"I think it's one of the reasons I was constructed." She watched Archon put miniature figures down on the holodesk. "I'm a bit like a golem or a supernatural servant summoned into existence."

"Surely there's more to you than that." He put down precious plastic tiles that had molded stone walls along their edges, showing the entrance to a lich's tomb that Annie and her companion were hoping to raid. "You are no mere automaton, and you have very little of the demonic about you." He hoped she couldn't hear his nagging inner thoughts concerning that last statement.

"Humanity created so much that these spells mimic. Telepathy, defense, command over other beings, and ways to cause death." She flickered between mood-forms. "It's probably cliché to hear it, but so much about people is reflected in their works of fiction."

"Very true. Sometimes it's easier to describe our wishes in forms that remove obstacles from our attaining them." He considered for a moment. "Though I do find that it's also done to provide obstacles to protagonists. If the heroine has a magical sword that can cut through anything, she'll need a challenge that makes having even a weapon such as hers just barely able to stave off disaster."

Annie raised an eyebrow. "That also sounds like wishful thinking for the sake of drama. I could give you military history lessons where it was hardly even a contest between combatants. The difficult part is often what happens after the first battles are over."

"Historians." Archon almost said it like a curse. He caught himself and with a wave of his hand moved some dice from his palm to the spaces between his fingers. "Shall we begin?"

The first things Annie and Pardic the Dwarf encountered were traps, and both were lightly wounded more than once. Annie objected, noting that Pardic had skills in seeing trapped stonework. Archon noted that these were very well-made traps, else the tomb would have been looted long ago.

“How do they work for so long? Surely they’ve been set for hundreds of years, and things degrade.”

Archon gave a small smile. “Weren’t we just discussing magic? This is the tomb of a lich, an undead wizard, after all.”

That seemed to satisfy her, for the moment. The next encounters were with undead servants, called from the grave to defend the home of their master.

“These are supposed to be robots?” She gave Archon a raised eyebrow. “They seem to serve the same function. I’m also detecting the use of them as a device for instilling fear of becoming an automated servant upon one’s death, but I could be over-analyzing this.”

“Many have considered this in the Rulemaster guild,” he said, recalling the numerous hand-copied volumes that went on at length about symbolism, analogy, allegory, metaphor, and any number of topics that Archon had vowed to never contribute to in his old age like so many before him. He wasn’t sure what the world did to make people bitter enough to want to bore future generations to the brink of suicide, but he hoped he’d turn to serial killing before deciding to commit any atrocities to inquisitiveness with pen and ink.

He returned his thought to the game. “If there is any symbolic significance to the things we uncover in this unholy tomb, I assure you they are coincidental on my part. At least, they’re not consciously chosen.”

Annie seemed to accept this and the adventure continued. Within the tomb, they found vaulted rooms full of once-fine furniture, dining halls that could seat an army, kitchens that could feed said army had there been any food present, and rusting racks of weapons with equally degraded armor.

“You’re sure you’re not trying to send me a message?” Annie asked. “Something to do with the state of the base?”

Archon felt a little nervous, having perhaps not realized the implications of his adventure scenario. To be fair, he’d never had to consider the feelings of a player whose mortal trappings, as it were, lay inside a tomb of sorts shrouded in death. On the other hand, he mused, he probably should have expected it to happen sooner or later.

While he disliked historian-types for intruding on his narrative, that didn’t stop their facts from coming in handy now and again. “It was tradition,” he said, hoping he didn’t sound nervous, “or so we are told, that great people would have themselves interred with the trappings of what they wanted in the afterlife. While the Emperors of Chinasia would surround themselves with statues of the armies they wanted, in our realm of imagination and fantasy, those statues may become animate and serve their undead master.”

Annie’s expression was one Archon couldn’t help seeing as patronizing. “Chinasia? I think I saw a documentary about that country. What’s around the next corner? I’m sure Pardic is ready to help me defeat whatever’s next.”

Next was a captive chimera, its serpent, lion, and goat heads working in concert to try and destroy the mechanical intellect’s sorceress. Pardic was knocked down for the next round, and only being just out of range of the monster’s chains kept him from being immediately devoured.

Archon was trying to build dramatic tension in spite of not knowing whether or not his audience could experience it. “The beast lunges over and over, its adamithrium chains snapping between slack and taut, while its draconic head rears back, ready to belch flame at the recovering Dwarven fighter!”

“I can use a minor spell, I believe it’s called a ‘cantrip,’ whenever I want, right?” She made a show of looking over her character sheet, which Archon appreciated, even though he knew it to be unnecessary.

“Indeed you may, though it can’t be used to attack something.”

“That’s kind of odd.” She tapped the pen against her virtual lower lip, and Archon prided himself on seeing her fingers deftly halting the stylus when it would impact flesh, had she possessed any. “Even with most magic systems, they try to simulate physics. I don’t see how using... what’s this cantrip called? Thaumaturgic Hand? How does using it to move a book from one place to another differ from using it to throw a grenade?”

He skipped over whether or not grenades existed in their world. Archon smiled and took on the air of a scholar who had thought long and hard on the ways and workings of fictional energies. “I prefer to think of magic as a means of altering the fate of the universe. With the right words, items, and actions, a magician can cause fire to appear, lightning to strike, or, in this case, objects to levitate. The range of results the magician can manipulate the universe into providing are, for the mere cantrip, simple and benign.”

She gave a small laugh. “Interesting. You’re basing it on the desired effect, not the triggering of the spell itself, and it makes a kind of sense in context.” Her eyes held a knowing gleam. “I suppose it’s also to do with the idea of game balance, right?”

Archon gave a small bow. “Your insights are remarkable. If only more of my other patrons were as agreeable with things got difficult for them.” He leaned in as if trading a well-kept secret. “I do, however, reward creativity. What was your planned use of the spell?”

She adopted a cagy tone. “This adamithrium chain that the chimera is held by. It’s unbreakable, right?”

“More or less.”

“And it’s light? The whole length of it would weigh about ten pounds, wouldn’t it?”

Archon nodded. “If you included the collar, perhaps.”

“Then all I want to do is lift the chain and turn it slightly when the monster is rearing back to pull on it again.”

“I think that’s do-able.”

“Could the loop just coincidentally come down around its necks?” She gave a small grin.

Archon smiled as well. Quoting rules was one thing, but a machine that could at least seem to be creative? That was something thrilling, though perhaps it should be frightening, he thought.

He spun a die between two fingers. “A dexterity check is called for, I believe. The causality of magic smiles upon your cleverness, I think.”

Two out of the three heads were caught in the loop of chain, and when the monster lunged forward to snap at the dwarf, it snapped their necks instantly. Unfortunately for the remaining head, that of the lion, the dragon head had been trying to breathe fire and, when the flame had nowhere else to go, it exploded, finishing the monster’s remaining cranium off.

To her credit, Annie saw to her companion’s wounds before breaking character again. “You let me have that. By all rights I should have still had to fight the thing, not be thrilled to see flaming guts flying everywhere.”

“You had a novel solution, and its death was a forgone conclusion at that point. Spectacle can be satisfying as well.” He juggled two twenty-sided dice with deft movements of a single hand. “Think of a Rulemaster’s guidance as another kind of magic. The outcomes we provide are bought with efforts at being inventive. The dice can propel events of the world, but the minds playing the game are what set things in motion.”

Annie rose from her seat, and robots entered the room, picking up Archon’s boxes and materials. He looked at them work, a little confused. “You want to move our game somewhere else? To that dining area, perhaps? The tables are in good shape, mostly, though I don’t think they can make shapes appear...”

She shook her head. “You passed the interview. The lich can live... or un-live... for another adventuring group to tackle, though it does perplex me a bit.”

“What does, madam?”

Annie’s eyes hadn’t left the tabletop where her character sheet still lay. “Why wouldn’t it want to end its existence? It’s got to be nightmarish for it, being little more than animated bones, even if they’re powerful ones.” She shook her head. “It makes for a better story, I’m sure.”

She stood near the holodesk, waving a map of the base into existence. It shrank, revealing the surrounding terrain. Archon saw Old World roads he was familiar with, along with ones that he’d never traversed before. Many were tagged with red, which he assumed to mark danger, impassibility, or possibly something worse. Yellow lines appeared which he soon deduced to be roads that were mostly dirt tracks worn by travelers and merchants, skirting hazardous places or heading to settlements that sprang up after the Old World fell.

A body of water was highlighted. Annie nodded at the display. “Hugo Lake. Have you heard of it?”

Archon shook his head, deciding against pointing out there was little call for his services on bodies of water.

“When the Gray War was being fought, one of the effects of rampant contamination of NanoGel was the tendency some infectees had to fuse with other infected organisms. The results were nicknamed ‘shoggoths,’ and they became one of our largest containment priorities.” Annie called forth several images that materialized over the holodesk. “These are a few of the ones we neutralized.”

The first few images were taken after the creatures had been killed. They were displayed on metal tables with various parts of their bodies cut open to display the extent of their mutations under their skin. They didn’t look that much worse than the more unfortunate genetic outcasts Archon had seen hiding in the ruins near more settled areas, but none of those had been smashed together with another. Two heads wasn’t unheard of, but the three-headed... no, he corrected himself, four-headed corpse he was seeing hadn’t been born linked together. The NanoGel had been hard at work making them into a single entity.

More pictures, and with each one, the skin started looking grayer, more translucent, and far more fluid. They were also displayed outdoors now, where they’d been brought down with weapons that appeared to burn their targets. Fire was being liberally applied to what could have been mistaken for a pile of corpses, except one couldn’t tell where a single body began or ended. Tentacles emerged from the mass of flesh, and some areas of the creature looked to have more limbs and appendages than could be accounted for from its “donors.”

Finally, a short video clip taken high above a road. Smoke trailed from vehicles that had been wrecked or cast aside. Several more were apparently abandoned by their passengers, some of them still trying to run away from the danger they faced. Military vehicles advanced on a

hulking blob that covered the road, tentacles and pseudopods whipping out to snatch a few fleeing people, pulling them into itself. The soldiers launched several weapons that exploded in huge goutts of flame, causing the creature to recoil. It lashed out at its tormentors, even going so far as to fling projectiles made of its own living body at them. One scored a hit on an open-topped vehicle, the three uniformed people within vanishing under the amorphous ooze. Archon noticed smaller shoggoth-blobs in the area, some moving towards new meals, others attempting to join with the larger creature.

Annie froze the image. "This is when I was given control over a dozen of our space-based laser defense satellites." She gave me a wry smile. "Your contractor status allows you to know about them. Also, just about anyone who might care is dead, so there's that." She turned back to the shoggoth, a target reticule appearing over its form. Numbers began scrolling past in two of the corners of the video, one a countdown, the others giving data about range to the target, atmospheric density, and other things relevant to the weapon fulfilling its function.

Archon watched as the last of the military vehicles fled the scene. For a second, a bright white dot appeared on the shoggoth's upper portion, and then the scene went white. When the image returned, the entire landscape was on fire. Annie gestured at the holodesk again, and the image zoomed out to show that the road was near a large city. Parts of it were also in ruins. Much of it was smoldering. The shoggoth was just one more fire to add to the others.

Annie stopped the video. "Just that one was responsible for killing two thousand three hundred and six people before it was neutralized. Unfortunately, the lasers were too energy-intensive and destructive to surrounding areas for use on anything much smaller than what you saw there."

She showed several other scenes of destruction, some with dead shoggoths burning brightly, others displaying its victims and the infected it left in its wake. "From what little we learned, it eats to expand and it eats to survive. We got reasonably solid intel that anyone it ate became a part of its mind, either as just additional memories and information or as a part of the creature's 'self,' if that can apply." She gave Archon a stern look. "You really don't want to know how we found out about most of that."

He suppressed a shudder. "I'm content with what you've told me, I assure you." He didn't want the answer to his next question, but he asked it anyway. "Am I to understand that you found another one?"

She flashed between her happy and dark forms briefly. "That's right, and you're going to help us contain it."

Archon got into his usual seat inside the converted van, feeling the back end grow heavier with the books the robots were returning to their rightful places. Captain Shanna Bunsen was in the passenger seat, her gear now including body armor, a sidearm, and an array of belted pouches that he was finding himself slightly envious of.

The cart started to move, the oxroach happily letting itself be led by its robotic escorts. Archon turned to the Captain. "This shoggoth creature, your General Nilsson is a part of it?"

She nodded. "We only recently found out. One of the drones we used to keep an eye on it picked up his bio-monitor. That kicked off Annie's protocols about retrieving military personnel remains, and... we made contact."

"Contact?"

"I was sent to do some recon, see if the shoggoth was active or not, and determine if the General's corpse was in any state to be retrieved." She waved a hand at Archon's incredulous

look. "I know, I know. He'd been turned into monster Jell-O decades ago, but regulations are regulations and it's not like anyone's been around to update them, so that's what I did."

Machines could be very single-minded, he knew, so he grunted sympathetically.

"It's holed up in a lake, which is why the laser can't take it out. After talking with the locals, it turns out that it mostly feeds on fish and wildlife, but it sends out 'feelers' at night, using the forest near the lake as cover. Even if we burnt the forest down, it'd still be under the water, and we would've wasted more juice that we can't replace."

"Can't replace?"

Shanna pointed skyward. "We've got a lot of neat things at McAlester, but a satellite refueling system isn't one of them."

This time, he was clear-headed as he passed through McAlister's gates, which he rather regretted. He could see where the animate vegetation was spilling out from what had once been a very large military facility. He could see the skeletal ruins and turned-up outcroppings on the horizon, like jagged fangs emerging from the deadly body of water reflecting the afternoon sun. Life, he was sure, still existed there, though in what form he'd rather not know.

And Annie herself lived under that placid, glowing surface. Somewhere in all that, a mind was trapped, possibly forever. He was wondering if that had something to do with her apparent personality switches when he felt Shanna's hand on his arm.

She looked annoyed. "Did you hear a word of what I said?"

Archon tapped his nose. "Terribly sorry. I'm probably allergic to something out there. Stops up my head a little."

"Right. So after the shoggoth let me talk to the General, or what looked like him, we came to an agreement. It comes here to stay where we can contain it, and it doesn't have to worry about us zapping it from orbit."

He nodded, seeing a far-off conifer with what looked like a deer skull in its branches. "I'm still not quite clear on what you need me for."

Shanna produced one of the base's metal bottles, turning the cap and breaking the seal before handing it over. "The shoggoths killed humans without discretion. It came as natural to them as breathing, and it probably felt as essential. It can take or leave animals and other life forms, but putting people near one was like waving raw meat in front of a wolf."

"Was? I hope that's what I heard."

She nodded. "This one's been around since the war. It may have adapted a bit over time, but for whatever reason, it was willing to communicate."

"That's a good sign, I suppose."

"An even better one is the village that fishes in the lake."

"Unharmd?"

She shook her head. "Not entirely, but given the way the world is, it's probably not the worst way to live you've ever seen." She looked at her wrist, where a display marked the time. "I've got to check on the rest of the convoy. Get some rest, the General will debrief you on your part of the mission when we arrive tonight."

With that, she left his cart. In the rear-view mirror he saw some kind of transport vehicle was moving behind him, hovering over the uneven terrain. He realized his own cart was moving more smoothly than it ever had since he'd found it rusting on the side of a road and used nearly all of his savings to find four similarly-sized wheels to support it.

He looked out and down, marveling at what turned under the ancient panel van. He had wheels that looked solid, but were made of some kind of flexible honeycomb material. It was

shot through with hexagonal chambers, stretching and cushioning the ride over every rock and log.

“They can’t go flat,” he heard Shanna Bunsen call as she entered the hovering transport. “Pretty much bulletproof, too. Though since your cart isn’t, that’s probably not your biggest worry if someone starts shooting.”

Archon gave a theatrical flourish. “Thank you for such a fine gift, and I am glad to have use of them, even if someone someday finds them worth killing me for.” He made sure to smile, but Shanna didn’t seem to appreciate the joke.

Deciding he was probably better with groups of people who liked dice, he retired to his seat, the oxroach making good headway across the wasteland, and the hover-transport bringing up the rear of a mechanized military parade.

They’d passed near at least four settlements that Archon knew of, having only to fend off three attempts to attack the convoy. The roads they were taking were wide and open, and there was little cover. Thankfully, the raiders largely ignored the Rulemaster’s cart, as it wasn’t the vehicle that was raining death down upon them when they got too close.

The very last inhabited place was just a collection of shacks on either side of a barely-visible roadbed. A hand-lettered sign marked it as being called You-Go Lake. Those who emerged from the shacks wore deerskin clothes, some only in breeches. Archon noticed several had gill slits on their throats and webbed extremities. Some had more scales than hair.

As with many small villages that had inhuman-looking citizens, it was very likely that the ones greeting the convoy were closer to genetic-normal than ones that were out of sight. Such was the way of the New World, and such was its burden. He wondered at how harmonious the Old World might have been where people were all the same.

The sun was closing in on dusk. One of the You-Go Lake dwellers came forth and held up his hands. “We greet you in peace. Have you come to speak with the deep one again, Shanna?”

Shanna walked up to him and, to her credit, held out her hand to shake it in greeting. “We have. The man in the oxroach cart is Rulemaster Archon Darkstorm. The metal men I’ve got with me won’t hurt you or your people, I promise.”

Scaly fingers clasped hers and quickly released them. Bunsen nodded down the trail that went into a stand of trees. “We need to take our vehicles through here and get to the lake. Will that be a problem?”

The man gave a nervous laugh. “If you didn’t want trouble, you’d stay away from the lake, especially after dark. You don’t even have scales to hide you.”

Shanna addressed him respectfully, but loud enough for all to hear. “You need to evacuate your homes immediately. You should be able to return to them by morning, but the last place you want to be in the next few hours is here.”

As was expected, the residents didn’t take this at face value, even when told to them by someone surrounded by metal humanoids and a huge transport that floated over the soil. Archon watched the dance play out, its conclusion inevitable. Shanna would get her point across, and the villagers would be seen to have exercised his due diligence as a leader by not immediately acquiescing.

Archon’s arm was resting on the window sill of his cart door, and he felt a small hand tug on his sleeve. A girl with greenish skin and blue eyes so dark they were almost black was looking up at him. “You’re a Rulemaster.” She stated this as a matter of fact.

He smiled down at her. "Indeed I am, young miss..?"

"I'm Wendee," she said. "Is that lady trying to kick us out?"

"She's advising you to leave for a while. We're going to the lake, and I gather there's something down there that could decide to come up this way."

Wendee's already-wide eyes managed to get a little larger. "You're going to see the monster? On purpose? Why would anyone be stupid enough to do that?"

At last, Archon had found someone who might be able to give him some insight into what was going on from someone who didn't think they had something to hide. "I'm very interested in monsters, you know." He gestured at the side of his cart and its murals of dragons, space faring vessels, and strange creatures of legend. "I want to learn all I can about them for my stories and games."

She shook her head. "You don't want to meet the shoggoth."

Archon noted how the name of a monster had lasted since the Old World unscathed, but the names of lakes and towns were about as permanent as sand castles. "What can you tell me about it?"

Wendee became grave in a way that puts one in mind of campfire stories that one only realizes are true when it's far too late to worry about if a limb can be re-attached. "It eats and it remembers. It uses what it eats to trick people into getting near it. The kids it remembers are the worst." She gave a shudder.

"What makes them so awful, Miss Wendee?"

"They try to play with you. If you live through that, you get remembered, too. It happened to Harold." Her eyes lost focus for a moment. "He tries to get me to play with him, too. I hope he's given up." She ran a hand under one eye, and Archon pretended to not notice it came away damp. "Sometimes he throws rocks."

Archon could hear Shanna's speech winding down. "But it stays in the lake? It never comes up here?"

Wendee shook her head. "It comes out at night, but only to the trees. If you're smart, you stay away when the sun goes down."

"And if you're not?"

She shrugged. "The shoggoth will remember you, too."

The village spokesman gave a shout to his people and they reluctantly began gathering their belongings, which was mostly tools and fishing spears. Several of the shacks were cleverly designed to be quickly disassembled into crude carts. The people were muttering about "the twister hold," which he gathered was the place they sheltered when the weather became turbulent. Archon himself hadn't worried much about such things, as his cart was so heavily-laden that it was often immovable to everything but the oxroach he used to pull it. If the oxroach ever decided to stay put, he might as well declare his cart the founding of a new town.

Once the temporary evacuation was underway, Shanna waved Archon into motion. He thanked Wendee, giving her one of his remaining drinks from McAlister, twisting the cap for her before handing it over. He held up one of his own to demonstrate, taking a drink and giving a soft belch as a signal that this wasn't ordinary water. She demonstrated her eyes could become even larger than they were normally, and the smile she gave him was warm, full of tiny, pointed teeth. She ran off towards a small group of other children, holding the bottle up for them to see.

He wondered if there would be a way to get some of these beverages out of McAlester when all this was over. Perhaps the robots would be open to trade, apart from the usual

arrangement of bullets for bullets. Archon drowned the thought in sugar, water, and bubbles of carbonation, watching the darkening forest roll past his windows.

The sun was about to touch the treetops when the lake came into view. There was a lot of open ground between the trees and the shore, with few plants over a foot high in evidence. The villagers' path led to the remains of a paved area, the surface cracked and pitted, stunted weeds trying to find purchase in the artificial stone. A few parked vehicles were recognizable, though their tires were long gone, whatever color they had been was faded to a dusty gray, and significant parts of their exteriors were missing, if not pitted and scoured by the elements... hopefully.

Overlooking the ancient parking lot was a round-cornered building that still had the remains of a sign atop its walls. The shape of a fish could still be made out as well as the words "Joe" and "Fresh." The windows were as dark as empty eye sockets and the lake lazily lapped at its foundation, the slight waves flowing in and out of the front door.

Shanna handed Archon some heavy rubber boots large enough to fit over the leather ones he wore. He raised his eyebrows. "Did you not tell me about this part because it's classified or because you thought I'd refuse?"

She shrugged. "A little bit from both. Sorry."

Once he was shod, he was pointed in the direction of the building, which he took to be a restaurant. Two robots accompanied him to the former restaurant, the heavy guns they carried pointed at the water the whole way. They remained outside, guarding the entrance.

The door was open by virtue of being missing. A sign was attached to a nearby countertop that read "Crowin' Joe's Fresh Fried Fish" at the top, but the majority of the sign was just a blank space. Archon noticed several other rectangular items on the walls nearby, some with frames, some without, but all equally bereft of letters or meaning.

One of his teachers had often said, "When the Old World died, it tried to take its words with it." Archon had thought this to hold some deeper meaning about knowledge, but it was literally true. Things called "signs" were often anything but, if they came from the past. Some said the Old Worlders knew a trick to getting meaning from them that had been lost, while others said it was part of a final plan to keep the knowledge that had destroyed everything from being regained.

Archon hadn't made up his mind on the topic. Printed texts were very rare, and were often from times well before the ending of the Old World. Yet the tablets still showed text when they worked, and some signs, like many of the ones near roads, were readable by anyone. He wondered if the blank places in the world were just broken tablets in other shapes. That many of them were as thin as paper suggested they were more fragile, so perhaps they hadn't been able to weather the devastation.

His eyes finally adjusted to the gloom and the phosphorescent molds growing on the walls and fixtures let him make out the crumbling benches, tables, and unidentifiable substances that were either growing up the walls or a sludge formed by the walls slowly crumbling.

Finally, he noticed the old man sitting in a booth, reading a card marked "Menu." He was fit-looking, wearing clothes that had the sharp lines and neat edges that Archon had only seen in pictures. A single, flickering flame from a small oil lamp on the table before him lit his pleasantly smiling face. He waved Archon over, gesturing to the seat across from him.

Incredibly, the bench seats were still usable, their leathery surfaces retaining a reddish-brown hue of well-worn leather.

The man extended a hand. "I'm General Nilsson. Go ahead and take a seat. The nano-hide will be the last thing to go in this place. Kid-proofing and all that."

Archon just nodded, not quite understanding, taking the man's hand. It took an effort not to recoil at the cold, damp touch, as if he'd just shaken hands with a corpse. A closer look at the General showed him a very gray man in very gray clothes. The clothing even seemed to be a part of him, as if his skin had grown sleeves, pockets, and buttons.

He repeated a calming mantra to himself: Another experience, another detail. It helped to not only make one's eye sharp for things that could be used to enhance a gaming session, it prepared a Rulemaster for seeing the disturbing, the unsettling, and the grotesque, which was often called "the audience." It was a poor entertainer that openly showed disgust for others and, by proxy, their money.

Nilsson put the menu aside. Archon saw it was as blank as the signs on the wall, apart from the title. "So you're Annie's plan, huh? What are you, some kind of party entertainer? Do you do magic tricks?"

Archon managed to look dignified, calf-deep in water, sitting in a restaurant that likely hadn't seen a living customer since well before he'd been born. "If I am a magician, I am a conjuror of imagination. I help my audience craft roles for themselves, then give them worlds to adventure in, living out the fantasy of accomplishing great deeds, finding vast treasures, and saving the world from peril."

Nilsson looked dubious, raising a gray eyebrow that was only slightly darker than his gray forehead.

Seeing his booth companion wasn't quite getting the picture, Archon moved his hand over the table, making dice appear by sleight of hand and a specially-sewn sleeve. "Do you recognize these?"

Nilsson picked up a twenty-sided die. "Oh yeah... Role-playing stuff." He looked up at Archon, his eyes alive with memories. "My dad had a ton of that. I hope your ego won't get bruised if I tell you I mostly did my gaming on a computer. I also went in more for the squad-based tactical games, which is probably why I picked the career I did."

Archon decided that as the sun was sinking and the warning he'd been given was rather specific, he should try to get to the truth as soon as possible. "General, if I may be direct, you're not entirely human, are you?"

The scowl that crossed his face made Archon think he'd made a grave error, but the creases softened a little. "No, of course not. I don't know how many years it's been since the war and I don't want to know. I don't know because now I'm just a part of a bigger... thing."

Nilsson reached under the table and pulled up a gray, pulsating cord, about the thickness of a human finger. It trailed off through the water towards the non-existent door.

He placed the umbilical on the table, keeping his hand on it. "I've been singled out because of the little tracking and medical monitoring wetware the Army put in me when I enlisted. One of Annie's drones was out on some random patrol and picked up the signal. She sent a squad of robots to come 'rescue' me, and managed to talk to the... thing."

"She called it a shoggoth."

He nodded. "Yeah, I know. that's what the science types started calling it. Most of what happened to me since the war was a big blank, but not completely. It was like waking up from a dream you can't quite remember. The next thing I know, I'm being spat out of this death-sleep and I come around marching out of this lake stopping right in front of some Mark-14's with

Annie talking through their comlinks about having to get me back to McAlister. You know about that place, right?”

Archon nodded, giving a smile that wasn't entirely forced. “It's a marvelous place to get a meal and a drink, among the best I've had.”

Nilsson almost barked a laugh. “Things must be more screwed up than Annie told me.” He waved the comment away. “Annie told you about the laser, right? It's why the shoggoth stays underwater most of the time, only letting small parts of itself out at night to hunt in the forest. It uses the trees as a shield as well.”

It goes out to find children to play with, Archon thought. He wondered if these beings were self-aware like the General seemed to be, or if they were just a mask this shoggoth wore to lure potential victims to it.

“Anyway, finding me here allowed Annie to exercise some... discretion about her directives. I'm still in command of McAlister, in theory, so we got to talking, and we decided that I, in whatever form I'm currently in, should return to my post, where I'd be less of a threat.”

“A threat?”

Nilsson indicated the lake. “Because it doesn't want take a hit from orbit, the shoggoth sticks to the water. Recently, the river that feeds it has started drying up, and there aren't as many fish around as it needs. Eventually, it's going to get so hungry that a laser would be preferable to starvation. There's no telling how far it'd get and how many possible victims it would take before the laser either brought it down or it found a new place to hide and eat.”

He thought of the footage he'd seen. “Why doesn't it send parts of itself out to find a new home?”

“Over time, doing that became like losing a limb. It would lose memories when it removed a part of itself to leave the lake. None of them ever returned, and it didn't want to diminish itself further, so it hunkered down and just survived as best it could.”

The Rulemaster considered. “Just how large is the shoggoth you're a part of, General?”

The man gave him a small smile and pointed out a grimy window.

At first, Archon thought the moon had come out from behind some clouds, but the pale glow outside became far too bright for Earth's nearest companion to be the source. What he saw rising out of the lake made him wonder if this job might be his last.

The convoy looked fairly normal, at least towards the front. Vehicles still ran on occasion across the altered lands and Old World roads, and their many remains had been seen by most, so machines moving under their own power weren't that startling a sight. A Rulemaster's cart, converted from one of these “dead” conveyances and lashed to an oxroach wasn't completely off the norm. The giant, faintly glowing mass behind it, its fleshy tentacles appearing to merely brush the ground rather than actually supporting it as they felt out the land, would probably be far more noteworthy.

The cab of the former van that Archon used for travel wasn't especially roomy, but General Nilsson was content to stoop between the two chairs that Archon and Captain Bunsen used. The General seemed shorter than he had in the restaurant, making Archon wonder if his body was now more adjustable as part of a gigantic, amorphous horror. He declined to ask. Instead, he chose a question more pertinent to the impromptu meeting.

“Last-minute instructions are rarely pleasant for me, though I suspect this has something to do with exactly how I'm supposed to amuse...” Archon groped for a word that wouldn't offend anyone present. “...the crowd while we're on the move?” Bunsen had promised him more

of those fizzy drinks if he didn't make a fuss. Finding his demeanor could be purchased, he held his second such beverage in one hand, an unopened one in the other.

The General nodded. "Approximately five hundred minds worth of attention will have to be held, unless you want those tentacles back there smashing things and absorbing any living creature they come across. Hell, or even leaving the transport to go hunting."

Bunsen looked grave. "While we think the settlements we had evacuated will move the bulk of their populations a safe distance from our route, they'll all leave guards and watchers behind. Those who won't want their things stolen or raided won't leave."

That was understandable. Life was seldom easy, even after all the attempts at rebuilding society. There were times it was due to ideas about rebuilding society that were the problem, especially when they involved lots of misunderstood technology or lots of people with spikes on their armor.

Archon raised a hand. "Yes, I understand why it is I need to prevent the shoggoth from consuming any innocent lives, but my question is more to do with how. Am I to stand on top of it and shout? Can it hold a pencil or roll dice for five hundred people at once?"

To his dismay, he saw yet another guilty look cross Bunsen's face. "You're going to have to join the hive mind for the trip."

Archon nearly sprayed her with sweetened carbonated water. "Join the--? As I understand it, no one who does that ever goes back to not being a part of it!"

The General's less than reassuring hand came down on his shoulder. "Calm down a minute, Mr. Darkstorm. I'm a man of my word, even if I'm also a man of a larger organism than you're comfortable being around. I'm also ready to give you a demonstration that not only can you join our happy community, you can easily leave it."

Archon's skin was crawling, even though a cloak, vest, and sturdy shirt was between Nilsson's touch and his shoulder. He reminded himself that lives were at stake, and there was one small part of him that was ready to take notes about this potentially new and useful experience, should he survive it.

The Captain replaced his empty bottle of fizz-filled drink. "Remember the lives at stake. If the shoggoth runs out of food here, it's going to go hunting. If it can't stay focused on something else while we transport it, it's going to go hunting. Even with the General's, ah, 'life' involved, Annie would be forced to use the laser on it and possibly take even more lives."

Archon could see the strategic value of the shoggoth, assuming it kept to McAlister's glowing lake and didn't wander. The base would be opening a second front on the encroaching mutated life forms. Something still seemed to be missing from this setup, as it set Archon's wariness of plot holes to tingling.

Nilsson picked up the thread, interrupting the Rulemaster's thought. "From what Annie tells me, there's more than enough biomass near McAlister to keep the shoggoth fed. It's not near any major population centers, so it should stay put. You'd be helping to save a lot of lives, Mr. Darkstorm."

Archon knew he'd agree, eventually. He found it was the anticipation of something unpleasant happening rather than it hitting him unawares was what bothered him the most. He lived with the Sword of Damocles over his lonely cart almost any time he traveled, but when you couldn't see the sword, you didn't worry about it so much.

"Very well," he said. "Please demonstrate."

The General gave him a smile. "I never did get the hang of card tricks, so this is a bit of a thrill for me. Mister Darkstorm, please reach into your left vest pocket and pull out the piece of paper you have in it."

To his surprise, Archon did, indeed, find a scrap of paper in his pocket. It was folded in quarters. He unfolded it and saw it was blank. The general appeared to think this was amusing.

"It's all part of the act, I promise." The General cleared his throat and snapped his fingers. "Hocus pocus!"

The shoggoth was once again rising out of the lake under a moonlit sky. Archon was back in the semi-submerged restaurant, sitting in the booth. He felt something wet on the back of his neck leaving its moistness behind as it broke contact. He turned in surprise, to see the General withdrawing his hand, the fingers and palm rippling like the skin of a slug until they looked like a passable simulation of gray human flesh.

Archon's hand went to the wet patch on his neck and it came away with bits of gray sludge sticking to it. He looked at the General. "What did you do?"

"I demonstrated how you're going to entertain a mind made up of over five hundred human brains, as we agreed."

"Agreed?" Archon had to work to keep his voice level.

The general pointed to the moisture-warped tabletop. Written in one of the wax crayons he kept in his various pockets were words in the Rulemaster's own handwriting:

I, Archon Darkstorm, agree to allow General Nilsson to show me the shoggoth's dream-space and to remove my memory of writing this.

He noticed he was holding the nub of crayon in his hand. "How do I know I'm not still in that... 'dream space'? Is that what you call your imagination?"

The General gave a "so-so" motion with his hand. "It's something the shoggoth can do. I think it's like when it lets me be myself again. It can call it up when it needs to. I think it might be how it remembers and communicates, if it ever found anything it wanted to talk to instead of eat. Like you."

That sounded like a fascinating topic of conversation to Archon, if it was held very far away from the shoggoth, behind several locked doors. "You'll conjure a place for me to entertain your people, as real as our walk back to my cart and a conversation with you and the Captain seemed to be, correct?"

"That's the plan. You'll sit in your cart, and I'll provide the link between your mind and ours."

"Again, how do I know I'm not still in your... it's head?"

"Because the shoggoth can't create an illusion of something it hasn't seen before. Reach into the same pocket you did in the dream-space and take a look at what you find there."

Archon pulled out the piece of scrap paper and unfolded it for what he thought was the second time. It had the legend "Lawful Good" written on it, along with a scribbled drawing of a stick-figure knight fighting a stick-figure monster holding a pitchfork. It was drawn with the same crayon he'd used on the table.

Fascination overcame fear for a moment. "So my insurance policy is to make something only I've seen and then hide it from you?"

Nilsson nodded. "If you pull it out and it's wrong, or if it's just a blank piece of paper, then you're still in the dream-space. Simple as that."

"And what guarantee do I have you'll let me go, even if I know I'm still a prisoner?"

The General pointed up, indicating the sky above the diner. "I think the threat from the laser satellite will take care of that, don't you?"

Again, though actually for the first time, Captain Bunsen, General Nilsson, and Archon sat in the cab of his cart. He drank deeply of the bottle he'd cracked open, placing it in a receptacle below the front windscreen that he'd previously thought was where people of the Old World had kept their writing utensils. Bunsen had called it a "cup holder."

She looked out at the formation of vehicles and robotic soldiers. "I think we're ready to go. Sir? Archon? Are you set?"

The Rulemaster suppressed a belch and gave an inquisitive look to the General, who patted the box next to him. "I looked at all the pieces, the funny dice, and the papers you wanted me to memorize. The shoggoth has a photographic memory, so whatever I've seen, it'll be in there." He looked over his shoulder at the crates and shelves of books. "You don't need me to scan through any of those?"

Archon made allowances for the General being several decades out of date. "Sir, my title is 'Rulemaster.' The books are mostly there for the benefit of my players. If I can't work without them, I don't deserve my title."

The General's hand came up, as if he were about to wave to a friend. "Then shall we begin so the convoy can get underway?"

Getting a reassuring nod from the Captain, Archon turned to face the front of his cart, bowing his head slightly to expose the back of his neck.

"All right, let's get to work." The General was now sitting where Captain Bunsen had been. She was gone. The cart was parked in what looked like a large warehouse or similar building with a very high ceiling and metal walls.

Milling about the open space was a crowd of several hundred people, most dressed in clothes from the Old World, the rest in what was obviously post-war garb. A few could have been from either era, their Old World outfits marred by hard use, having been scavenged, or perhaps being absorbed into a giant creature with tentacles. One never knew, and Archon thought it impolite to ask.

He stepped from the cart to the confused stares from many, anticipatory smiles from a few, and indifference from the rest. This, he decided, was possibly going to be a tough crowd.

"Fellow travelers! Welcome to the most unique opportunity for entertainment and spectacle we will ever see!" Archon thought he heard the van's music player start up with something inspirational. He realized he didn't recognize the tune, and a look to the General got him a smile and a shrug, which meant the composition playing was one from Nilsson's memories. It was a march with lots of flutes and what he thought the Old World called a "too-bah." It was on the inspirational side, and that was all that mattered.

Archon moved among the assembled crowds. "Today's deeds will be sung about for years to come, mark my words, for the scale and scope alone are without equal! So let us begin, see where our vision takes us, and let the world wonder at the greatness of our works!"

With a nod to the General, tables and chairs sprang from nowhere, each one with neat stacks of paper, glowing tablet displays, neatly-stacked pyramids of dice, and small booklets of general rules. In the center, next to the Rulemaster, a holodesk four times the size of the one at

McAlister rose from the floor, displaying a rotating planet above its surface. Normally, this is where Archon would call out for suggestions and desires from his audience about what they were about to do. The advantage of having the General around was that he'd been able to get the requested parameters in advance and come up with what would likely be more well-received. The list had been long and varied, so Archon decided to make the most of the situation and see if he couldn't work in practically all of them.

He waved a hand over the holodesk and the planet began to take on a more concrete form. Clouds parted and became almost invisibly transparent over a giant land mass covering half of the spinning sphere. Soon, the land separated, becoming alien continents with color spreading over them to denote different biomes and terrain.

The Rulemaster slowed the world's rotation and small dots appeared representing tribal groups. "It is the time of rising nations, where the first peoples of the world are founding cities, forging empires, and shaping the destiny of the globe! Everyone here is a part of this founding, and through trade, war, exploration, and conquest, the future of this planet will emerge! Everyone find a table to their liking and create a dynasty, a great house, or a mighty clan for your nation! Then the true tale of our world can begin."

In what could have been the blink of an eye, everyone relocated to a nearby table. A low buzz of voices and rattle of dice filled the air. Archon found himself able to "hear" what was happening at each nation-table. He marveled at what seemed to be the ability to give pointers here and clarifications there to multiple groups at once as the countries took shape. The globe began to fill in with colored areas, showing where the various populations were springing up, the names of their newly-founded nations appearing in softly glowing letters.

After a span of time that Archon would have been willing to count as either a week or half an hour, he couldn't be sure, the players had warred and allied themselves into twenty-seven major nations that spanned most of the globe's landmasses. They were still sparsely populated, held together more out of will than by sheer military might.

Archon regarded the globe and noted the latest events to happen to this newly-founded world the players had decided was called "Aeon." With the General's help, the holographic world spun, showing where volcanic activity was taking place and weather was helping or hurting nearby populations. Fronts in two wars were highlighted, as well as cities and regions that held rankings in food production, art, and military might.

"We come now to a new epoch in Aeon's history," said the Rulemaster, dice clacking in his hand. "Anything could happen, bringing fortune to the low and reducing the mighty to rubble. What hand will the fates deal us?"

The dice flew across the holographic table, coming to rest just before the opposite edge. He made a show of reading the results and consulting an impressive-looking tome that Nilsson had conjured for him, though the pages were blank. He looked up, a glitter in his eye. "It's the Age of Discovery! Cast your civilization's dice pool and consult the charts at your tables! Spend points to guide the path your nation will take!"

The General looked up at the display as the results were made official. He raised an eyebrow. "I get the paths for industry and warfare and all that, but... magic? Gods? How do those work?"

"Usually with people wearing robes and holding staffs." Archon gave a smile. "It's a valid path in this game. One can fight a war or reach the stars using magic as well as machines. There are ups and downs to each. It also makes the interactions more interesting, not just from a conflict perspective. You'll see."

Nilsson shook his head. “You’re the expert, I guess. How do you like being able to be in several places at once?”

Only then did Archon realize he’d been helping the nations of Isirica and Malvin resolve an earthquake they were both experiencing and judging the outcome of Pastoria’s transition from feudalism to an elected monarchy, all while holding a conversation with the General. “It’s astounding, I admit. Though...” He rubbed his forehead, wondering if he was doing the same thing in the real world. “...I do worry if this is taxing me in some way. How far have we gone?”

Nilsson consulted his wristwatch. “We’re only an hour past that fishing village near the lake.”

Archon’s jaw almost dropped. “Has so little time passed here?”

“It’s like how a full night’s sleep can seem like a week spent in a dream. ‘Time’ is pretty wonky in here.”

The prospect was both thrilling and troublesome to Archon, who thought he felt rivulets of sweat on his forehead even though when he touched it, inside the dream-space, it was dry.

Magic fueled the outward expansion of the Sylvestian Empire, and it was only brought to a halt when an alliance led by the metal-rich nation of Triumvic figured out that iron was key to defending themselves. A long state of on-again-off-again warfare polarized almost half the planet of Aeon around this rivalry which allowed other, lesser powers to arise.

The Lorthian Church absorbed a handful of countries to become the first to be ruled by a god-priest, his miracles and wonders allowing rapid conquest, but its power was fragile: it hinged on their pantheon of deities never removing their favor and being pleased with the Church’s devotion. Keeping what they did to maintain this conduit of supernatural power flowing was their most closely-guarded secret, lest other players figure out how to bring the church’s power crashing down.

Espionage flowered in these times of minor skirmishes and spheres of influence. Archon hadn’t really appreciated the complexity of the spy networks involved until his concentration had to focus on all of the nations at once, of which there were now nineteen.

His legs shook a bit and he looked for a place to sit down. Instantly, he was in a gaudy-looking throne near the holo-table. The general was admiring the chair, as if he’d built it himself. “How do you like the throne of the Queen of England, Archon? I don’t suppose you know if the original is still around? Or England, for that matter?”

The Rulemaster wanted something to fan himself with. “Not for certain, no. Why do I feel like this?”

Nilsson shrugged. “It’s taking us longer than we thought. The shoggoth isn’t exactly built for speed, even on a hover-transport. We’re only about halfway to the base.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“No, it doesn’t. You’re probably overheating a little. That’s another reason the shoggoth liked the lake. It helped as a heat sink.”

“Will the McAlister lake be sufficient for that? It glows, you know.” He felt as if he were glowing himself.

“It should be fine. Annie needs me there. No one else can get to where she is without radiation-proof diving equipment.”

Archon wanted to clarify why the General was “needed” by Annie, but he felt the words melt away as a wave of nausea shuddered through him. Nilsson was at his ear. “I can cover for him, but make it fast!”

Suddenly, Archon was back in the cart, drenched in sweat. His shirt and cloak were being pulled off by Captain Bunsen, and he was far too dazed to protest. He heard more of those wonderful bottles being cracked open, but only one made it to his lips. The others were being held to his forehead by attending robots, the self-generated cold of the magically clever containers wicking away his body heat.

He felt something jab into his arm. Bunsen had given him an injection, tossing the spent syringe out of the window to be lost under the tentacled beast following behind them. "That's all I can do. It'll bring your core temperature down, but I don't want to give you anything more that could interfere with... what you're doing." She looked at the General, his eyes closed in concentration.

Archon drained the bottle, feeling the blessed moisture returning to his body. "How much farther?"

Bunsen shook her head. "A little over halfway. You're doing okay in there, otherwise?"

He nodded, some strength returning. "It's truly epic in scope. You wouldn't believe--"

Shouts followed by weapons fire filled the air. Something that sounded like an earthquake crossed with a scream came from behind the cart, reverberating through the entire vehicle. Even the oxroach waved its antennae in mild interest before going back to sampling whatever was growing through the cracked pavement, along with some of the pavement for flavor.

The Captain jumped from the van, shouting orders and pulling out her own sidearm. Archon saw fire and flashes of light just as he felt the General's hand come down on his neck again, mixing shoggoth-slime with his sweat.

Aeon had changed. It had battlefronts on every continent. Flying machines and orbital weapons platforms flew over the virtual globe. General Nilsson waved a hand at it in annoyance. "Don't even think that just because I'm a military man I wanted this to happen." He folded his arms. "I hope you had a good vacation because by my estimates, this world has about another half hour of real-world time before someone turns it into a bigger wasteland than the one you live in."

Archon wanted to point back the way he'd "come," but he wasn't quite sure which direction the real world was in. "Back... er, where I was, there was fighting. Are we in danger?"

"We're walking a fine line. If we let the shoggoth cut loose, we may not get it back under control." He gestured at the gaming tables. "All this may not be enough to keep it occupied if it thinks it's going to be assaulted."

The Rulemaster considered. "Time is passing more slowly out there. Can you show me what's going on using one of your tablet devices?"

Instantly, one appeared. He saw icons representing the trucks, the robots, the shoggoth, his cart, and several red dots approaching the convoy. Archon peppered him with questions, what the shoggoth's reach was, how many minds were needed to move one of its tentacles, and so forth. Doing some quick calculations, he scooped up a handful of dice and looked at the globe. He found a desperate war in one nation's capital where the Prime Exarch was under the threat of assassination by invading forces.

"General? Does this look familiar?" He pointed out the area under assault. An armored troop carrier was trying to make its way through hostile territory, the Exarch on board.

Nilsson nodded. "It looks kind of like our convoy out in meat-space. So what?"

"Can you alter die rolls to mirror what happens outside?"

Comprehension slowly dawned on the General, and they transported themselves to the tabletop where the battle was underway. Archon greeted the players, who were surprised he'd appeared as they hadn't called for him. "Noble defenders of West Brionda, valiant soldiers of Martica Province, this is a key turning point between your nations. I must confess that dame fortune has smiled upon both of you, but with differing blessings."

He turned to the players trying to save their leader in the convoy. "Your people in the convoy have discovered immensely powerful short-range weapons of an experimental type hidden in a locker during your evacuation."

Before the attackers could protest, he held out a placating hand. "You, the Martican attackers, have found three technological advancement points worth of salvage from this invasion, regardless of the outcome of this battle. In fact, if they manage to kill every one of your soldiers here, you gain a bonus to patriotism and morale of all other units in the region, inspired by the bravery and sacrifice of your forces."

The General leaned in to Archon's ear. "Laying it on a little thick, aren't we?"

"Story first. Realism later." He handed out some notes about the new weapons to the convoy defenders and the players readied for a new round of fighting. Dice began to fly. "Now make it work out there, General."

Nilsson's brow furrowed, and each player that rolled to shoot one of these new guns from the convoy seemed over-emphasize their movement, rolling the dice like they were pitching a fist-sized rock. It was a credit to the way the illusory space behaved that the dice stayed on the table while not appearing to violate the laws of physics.

"Was that thunder, General?"

Nilsson's teeth were grinding. "That's the shoggoth moving. It's harder than I thought to integrate this game with moving the tentacles."

The players were getting excited, even the losing defenders. Archon didn't want to think about what was happening to those who had been foolish enough to raid a heavily-armed convoy escorting a giant, glowing blob. He wondered if he'd get the chance to ask.

A voice came from behind him that he hadn't heard before. "What the hell is this?"

For a brief moment, he saw a man with dual-pupiled eyes, a bulging forehead, and what looked like vestigial insect mandibles on either side of his mouth. He was wearing a decently-repaired suit of body armor, though the plates were from different sources. What hair he had was bright red, though it mostly clung to the rear of his skull. His hands ended in three-fingered segmented digits, posed as if he'd been holding a rifle.

Their eyes met, and the newcomer's mouth opened as if he was about to say more, when he vanished. Archon turned to the General, who seemed to be concentrating even more heavily on the fight, both inside the dream-space and out.

Anticipating Archon's question, Nilsson said one word through gritted teeth: "Telepath."

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the tabletop representation of the armored vehicle had turned from the path it had been taking, and all the players were concentrating their fire on one invader in particular.

"Why are they going after it so energetically?" Archon saw that most of the other soldiers were dead, but at least in the game, there was nothing special about their new target.

"Partly hunger, partly revenge, but mostly..." He gave Archon a strange look, between the stress of concentration and anticipation of something deeply desired. "...the shoggoth wants his powers."

All the dice came up as natural twenties. Critical hits. Extreme success. The target invader fell.

The mutated man appeared in the dream-space again, this time not looking so confused. Nearly all the players had stopped, turning to look at him. They were starting to become less distinct, fading a little from view and losing their humanoid shapes.

The General turned to Archon, more than just a little urgency in his voice. "He's part of us, but the shoggoth has tasted blood. It wants more. Do your job or this is all going to go off the rails in a few seconds."

Improvisational skills acquired over a lifetime kicked in. Archon touched a control on the holo-table, having requested very simplified buttons to invoke certain effects, and the world expanded by a third. A short fanfare of brass instrument music captured everyone's attention.

"War-ravaged Aeon has passed another milestone! Magic, gods, technology, cunning, these powers and more have wrought great devastation but also great works. Cities still bustle, factories still labor, and minds make miracles. Even in these dark times, the hands of the clock move ever forward. What wonders await us in..?" He threw an handful of dice, their clatter and tumbling echoing through the hall.

He consulted the result, again producing his blank-yet-impressive book to "find" the result. "... the Age of Open Skies!"

A split-second conference with the General let the dream-space conjure up a new image, one of a shrunken Aeon with multiple streamlined shapes entering orbit.

"Visitors from beyond the heavens have seen your world and found it of interest! Are they here to help and hurt a select few, or are their plans for all of humanity as a whole? Gather your leaders and prepare for the space-farers to arrive!"

The General didn't look impressed. "Aliens? Really?"

"Why not? The lore about such beings is rich, indeed. In fact, many stories have them hiding among humans for reasons as numerous as droplets in a spring rain. Come to think of it, it should be far easier for them to do so nowadays, given the way people often appear."

Nisson grunted in grudging agreement. "I suppose you're going to ask me about Area 51 next?"

"Of course not. Why would I want to know what's really there when I've got countless possibilities to choose from?"

"You're a strange man, Mister Darkstorm."

"I know my trade, General Nilsson." With that, he greeted the newly-arrived mutant and showed him to a table.

After the man was seated and the General assured Archon that he'd fed his memories of the game to the newcomer, he became a blur of activity. Soon, he handed Archon a tablet, material for Archon's next announcement.

"They call themselves the Kortec! They are advanced beings from a planet lost to memory, seeking out allies and a new world to call home." Archon paused for emphasis. "Or are they? This is a nation like yours but without territory apart from the lofty reaches above Aeon itself. Their advantage? Super-advanced technology, weapons, skills, and knowledge. Their disadvantage? Fewer resources at hand, fewer people, and a limited number of vessels. They may seek alliances among the countries of Aeon, or they may try to take what they want by force. You have a new ally or foe to consider, so greet them how you will and let this Age of Open Skies begin!"

Again, he felt himself pulled in many directions at once. He organized and judged diplomatic missions, attempts at espionage, quickly negotiated treaties, and messages to the Kortec fleet. Then the replies, the rebuffs, and the retaliation. A few more wars among the longest-feuding nations boiled up, but they soon found common cause in addressing the Kortec presence in orbit.

The Kortec, run by the telepath who went by the unlikely name Wep Protocol, found itself unable to satisfy all comers. The “nation” of aliens had a limited number of points in its various stockpiles to share, far too few to satisfy the desires of every faction on Aeon. Also, giving points to lesser powers gave larger bonuses in some cases, as did giving them to groups that were on the cusp of reaching a new tier of advancement.

Of course, spying and wars broke out anew along redrawn lines. Archon was pleased to see that through his machinations, even the least among the nations of Aeon now had access to space travel, even if they didn’t have the best energy weapons or production technologies.

Those that had favored the path of magic now found that Kortec technology could work with their talents, unlike most terrestrial machines. Even the Lorthian Church’s gods seemed to like the “sky chariots” their followers now had access to. If the game went on long enough, the Lorthains would discover an uptick in power for every planet they founded temples on, but that was for later.

The General was at Archon’s side again. “We’re passing the gates to McAlister now. We made it.”

“And I have done what I thought impossible. We have records of games such as this one, but only when many Rulemasters who work well in concert can be found in one place. I have to say it was a joy to be a part of it.” He thought this a politer line of reasoning than mentioning the constant fever he felt through the mental connection as well as the reservations of having his mind in the hands... or the equivalent... of something so alien.

“Then we’ll be true to our word and release you when we get to the edge of the green zone. Annie will see to you from there.”

Archon considered that. “Annie isn’t well, did you know that?”

“She’s a computer that’s been running for far longer than intended in a damaged state. I’m sure she has a few quirks.”

“You’re not very good at diversion, General. I think Annie wants to die. Am I correct?”

Nilsson’s eyes narrowed. “This is up there with asking what’s at Area 51.”

Archon shrugged. “I think that Annie wants you to kill her, and that you were her only method of doing so. The shoggoth has her former base commander as a part of its mind and it’s robust enough to survive in the environment where her mind is located.”

“That’s a good story.”

“That’s what I try to make. I’m just trying to figure out why now? Surely Annie knew you were here all these years, and she’d been happy enough to follow her orders to keep the shoggoth contained with her satellite weapons...”

He saw the General’s face twitch a little, a quirk at the edges of his mouth. Archon stroked his chin as if in thought. “Would her orders becoming meaningless cause her to despair? Is that it?”

Nilsson laughed and shook his head. “Leave it to a gamer geek to figure out one of our bigger military secrets. You were born in the wrong century, Mister Darkstorm.”

The wheels were turning in Archon's mind. "The satellite doesn't work anymore, does it? It got too old or ran out of power. Annie can't contain you, but why is her solution to bring you to her and have you end her existence?"

"I'm sure some of those games you have in your van deal with artificial intelligence, right?"

Archon nodded. "Mostly as villains, yes. They were thought to be prone to taking over missiles and other weapons, turning on humanity."

"That's what the people who built A.I. like Annie were afraid of. What they did was to make them a lot like the average human employee. I don't know what it's like in your world, but where I come from, if you didn't have a job, you might as well not be alive."

"The towns we have are something like that. Everyone pitches in or the town fails, falls to bandits, that kind of thing."

Nilsson shook his head. "That didn't happen. What would happen would be that you'd lose all of your privileges. You'd lose your home, your ability to buy things, and worst of all, you'd become obsolete. Without a job, it was really hard to improve your skills to get back to the level of prestige you'd had before, and even then, you'd live in constant fear of it happening again, which it did to a lot of people. It's one of the reasons I joined the military. There, the worst that might happen is you'd get killed."

"I'm sure there was more to it than that."

"I'm simplifying it for a civilian audience. Anyway, the brains behind artificial intelligence gave these NeuroPlex things the mental attitude of a human worker. So long as they had something to do, they were fine, occasionally finding creative ways to deal with problems, but staying on task. If they had nothing to do, instead of becoming homicidal in their spare time, the imprint they were given would kick in, and they'd get depressed."

"Like Annie did."

"She's a worse case than most, because her kill-system is damaged. It's in the same facility as her 'brain,' as you put it. It's a series of devices designed to permanently destroy vital components in her hardware. She just has to get depressed enough to set them off. Being a military A.I., she had plenty of directives to keep herself busy, but I'm sure as things broke down she eventually only had one left, keeping us in the lake."

"And now she wants everything to end."

The General nodded. "Her robots can't get to it because of the radiation, NanoGel, and the fact it's at the bottom of a crater that's become a lake. Not to mention the life forms living nearby will attack anything that moves. She's more indestructible than ever, and she doesn't want to live anymore because she has no purpose."

"It seems unfair, to bring life to something whose only possible end is suicide."

"It was that or abandon NeuroPlex technology. Nobody counted on the apocalypse happening, or at least, not like this." He thought for a moment. "At least the A.I.s didn't do it, so we got that part right."

Archon considered what would happen after he left the dream-space. Everyone seemed enthusiastic about seeing where their nations would go, once the stars were open to them. It seemed a shame that the game should stop just because the shoggoth didn't require distraction so it wouldn't eat anyone it saw.

"General, how long do you think you can keep the game going? I need to talk with someone."

Archon's legs felt like rubber on a hot day. Even the lovely fizzy drinks weren't cutting through the haze his mind was in, and he struggled to remember his purpose. "Command center..." he said. "Urgent..."

Captain Bunsen sighed. "We know, for the twelfth time, we know."

Shanna was strong, but Archon's sweat-soaked body that refused to stay upright had proven too much of a challenge for the march to the Command Center. She'd enlisted two robots to carry him, his feet barely touching the ground.

Once inside the room with the large holo-table, he was confronted with Annie's scowling face, her "depressed" form annoyed at any apparent delay to its demise. "The General won't reply to me. He just sits in your van with his eyes closed, and the monster is idle as well. What's going on?"

"We need you," Archon gasped, though he felt a little better now that he was indoors. He let his exhaustion add a touch of sincerity to his pleas. "You must contain the shoggoth, or we're all doomed!"

"I can't contain it anymore. That's why I need to be permanently deactivated. There's no more populace to protect, and I can't even begin to kill it with the resources I have. There's no point to me trying or continuing to function. I'm done. Tell the shoggoth to end me, now."

"You don't understand. It's not going to stay here unless you make it want to stay! It'll roam the countryside, absorbing everyone it finds into itself! No one will be able to stop it, and everything you've done before will be for naught!"

Annie looked at Captain Bunsen. "Is this true?"

She kept a decent poker face. "The General expressed the same concerns to me before lapsing into his current state."

The A.I. didn't seem to find this terribly convincing, but it found another tack. "How could I make it want to do anything?"

Archon allowed himself a smile that he meant to appear as hopeful, a subject convincing a merciful monarch to grant her favor. "You read all of my books, didn't you?"

Later, the General and Archon watched the shoggoth shamle off towards the distant body of highly contaminated water. Things rose from it, lashing at the giant form as it ignored or ate whatever crossed its path. Nilsson was semi-transparent, and growing fainter by the second. He was present by virtue of Wep Protocol's telepathy, but the range wasn't terribly far.

"I'm going to spend the rest of forever in a giant simulation of a galactic contest between planet-spanning empires full of aliens and magic, is that right?"

Archon shrugged. "Everyone seemed to enjoy it. And truly, who better to be in charge of that than a computer with brains that don't burn out so easily." He regarded the man he'd thought of as his captor. "Will you get to remain as yourself?"

"I think we'll get to be ourselves in shifts. I'm not sure how it'll work out, but somehow... I think the shoggoth enjoys it."

The "for now" was left unspoken, as it too often was in the unstable world the Rulemaster lived in. At least it wasn't a boring place to live.

"Take care of yourself, Archon," said the ghostly General. "Drop by sometime and maybe Annie can let you say hello for a bit." With that, General Nilsson faded away. The last visible part of the shoggoth vanished below the water's surface, though unnatural shapes that flopped and squealed were tossed from the water for some time after. Apparently, part of moving in meant asserting dominance.

A chime came from his pocket. Archon pulled out a small, clear tablet that lit up with Annie's face. It still flickered between moods, but it seemed more stable. "They're interfacing with me, though I'm not quite sure how. I theorize it's via the General's implants and the ones from the shoggoth's other victims. If they don't have at least one decent tech in their collective, I may die anyway."

"I have a feeling your new tenants will do all they can to prevent that. Have they told you about your new directive?"

Annie's face rolled its virtual eyes. "You mean turning one of the most sophisticated computer minds ever built into a giant video game console?"

"You'll enjoy the challenge, the interaction, the sheer complexity. I did and it nearly killed me."

"So there *is* an up side. I can't wait to get started."

"You mean you're looking forward to something other than ending your life? That's an improvement."

Annie's face flickered again. "You're about as qualified to be a Neuroplex psychotechnician as I am to be an organ donor." She seemed to consider. "But I take your point. I'm starting to get the upload from General Nilsson and..."

Archon watched her face seem to freeze for a moment, not in the way he'd seen technology fail, but in what appeared to be Annie forgetting to animate it.

Movement returned, and she focused on the Rulemaster. "You've got to be joking. That's the biggest mish-mash of genres and tropes I've ever seen."

"And yet they loved it. You're also left with nearly infinite possibilities. They have access to a galaxy now, full of planets that can be nearly any kind of adventuring setting you'd want. I imagine with your mind's size, you could run an individual campaign for each of them without breaking a sweat."

"I don't sweat."

Archon smiled. "Keep that sense of humor, it helps." He looked to his cart. "You've read the texts, and you saw how I handled the game, so you should have all the information you need to keep it going and help the shoggoth to not get terribly aggressive with any future neighbors."

Annie's mouth quirked up in one corner. "Or I can train it to do my bidding, right?"

"Then again, too much humor can ruin the mood."

Shanna tapped him on the shoulder as Annie's face winked, then winked out. "We need to talk about your payment."

Archon had been worried about this. "I can't take the trove of technology I'd hoped to?"

She shook her head. "Now that Annie isn't going to die and the shoggoth is here, we need all the material support we can get just to keep everything running."

"I never asked, but how did you come to be a member of this base's staff? You're far too young to have been a part of the original garrison." He thought about the ways the world had changed. "Aren't you?"

"Your security clearance allows me to reveal to you that I'm not human." She walked over to a large crate that had been set by Archon's van, lifting it as if it were made of feathers. She placed it in a space that had been cleared in the back of the cart, causing it to ride a little lower on its rear axle.

She returned to his side. "I'm an infiltration unit. Not quite mechanical, not quite alive, some of the benefits of each. I'd get activated when needed, which wasn't often at first, but lately I've been in demand." She closed the van's rear doors. "It was hard keeping my smartskin intact

while figuring out how to look the part of a starry-eyed fan of Rulemasters, let me tell you. My files on the wildlife and how people live were updating so quickly I think I know what a headache feels like now.”

“And... are you also a NeuroPlex?”

Shanna nodded. “Not as big a one as Annie, and only a few of us were made before everything went pear-shaped.”

“What would you have done if Annie succeeded in killing herself?”

The Captain looked off in the distance, towards the lake where the A.I.’s heart and a hive-mind mutation were probably trying to communicate with one another with the goal of being able dream together about rolling dice. “I would have done the same. As long as she’s functional, she’s my commanding officer. If she’s not, then I don’t have a purpose, even though I know that’s just something someone put in my head.”

“That sounds like being in a tragic love story.”

She shrugged. “It’s all I’ve ever known, so I can’t say what it’s like other than ‘it is what it is.’” Shanna crooked a thumb at his cart. “That crate I loaded up is your consolation prize, by the way.”

Archon had wondered about that, but hadn’t wanted to interrupt. “More beverages?”

“Those are in the front seat.” She smiled. “From what I gathered, you actually wanted to read all the military regulations you could find because that’s what turns your crank.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say it like that...”

She continued. “That box is full of all the manuals, training textbooks, standards and practices, and directives for being a soldier I could find. Nothing in there will let you build a tank or anything, but if you want to know what wearing a uniform is like from the most bureaucratic angle possible, you’ve got enough reading material in there to bore the butt off a bull.”

He felt his mouth go dry in anticipation of all the reading he could look forward to, the flavor he could bring to wargames, and the look on the faces of the archivists back at the Rulemaster guild when he eventually put them in the great library. “You’re sure you don’t need them?”

“I was keeping them around in case anyone needed a fire to stay warm, so probably not.”

She spied Archon fidgeting with something in his pocket. “Is your leg itching?”

He pulled out a folded piece of paper. “I’m almost afraid to look at this.”

She laughed. “Oh, that trick. I wouldn’t worry about it. What did you write down?”

He held it up for her to see. She furrowed her brow. “What does THAC0 mean?”

“It’s a term of art for Rulemasters. I suppose if we both can see it, that means I’m not in the shoggoth’s dream-space.”

Shanna shook her head. “I think that ‘guarantee’ was crap. The General proposed that idea and we went along with it just to humor him. When things were getting really bad for you, when your head was about to explode, he said he’d have to absorb you into the shoggoth so you wouldn’t die. I figured he’d try something like that when things got rough, which is why I told him I’d spiked all your drinks with a neurological antigen that was tailored to be harmless to your genetic code but would give the shoggoth mad cow disease crossed with a cattle prod enema.”

Archon wasn’t sure exactly what that last part was, but it sounded nasty. “And he believed you?”

“Why not? It’s the truth.” She grinned. “So far as anyone knows.”

She looked out at the lake again, then gave a sigh. "I've got a ton of work to do now, since we left a trail of towns that know something's out here that might be interesting to people with guns and loose ideas of property rights. I've got barricades to set up and combat bots to maintain."

Archon allowed himself to be led to his cart, his heart leaping to see the several boxes full of capped bottles in the passenger seat. He turned to Shanna. "You'll need parts and equipment, and you have food that the robots don't eat. Have you ever considered trading for things?"

She rubbed her head. "I'll have to work on that. I've still got all these protocols programmed in my brain about misappropriation of government hardware and materials to overcome." She spread her hands. "I'll try. I promise. Maybe I can get Annie or the General to order me to do it. I was made to blend in with real people, so running a shop shouldn't be all that hard. If I do, I'll give you some free refills on those sodas if you stop by again."

With that, the oxroach started the Rulemaster's cart rolling back towards the road it had come in on. He'd have to make good time, if his estimates were correct, to reach his next appointed settlement. If he was late, a few bubbly drinks from his cache would probably smooth things over nicely.

His eyes lingered on the small door on the dashboard in front of the passenger's seat. When Archon had claimed the van as his cart, the compartment behind the door held an interesting booklet detailing what the van could do, if it were functional, several intriguing road maps that had crumbled in his hands, a magnifying glass, and a flashlight that had been antique even by Old World standards. The batteries had corroded, but after some diligent cleaning, he'd found it useful as an innocuous place to have in case he needed something to hide.

He opened the compartment. The flashlight's casing was there. Inside was a rolled-up piece of paper with some words, a drawing, and a star he'd drawn without looking at the paper, hoping that maybe he'd be able to tell if it had been his hand that had made it. Archon almost pulled the metal tube out, but he hesitated.

He thought, what would it prove? Could the shoggoth truly create the illusion that he was looking at proof he was free? Could he still be in its clutches, being used as part of its dream-space or other things his brain might come in handy for?

The Rulemaster shut the compartment, deciding it didn't warrant further investigation. He pulled the reins, steering his faithful oxroach past the metal aircraft memorial he'd passed before. With luck, he'd be in the settlement of Mustgee by nightfall, reading through the crate of papers he carried until he fell asleep.

Free or not, he intended to continue making stories, which, after all, is what everyone wanted.