

THE ETERNAL MACHINE

EXCERPT

CAROL RYLES

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I wish to acknowledge the custodians of the land on which I wrote this novel: the Wadjuk people of the Nyoongar nation and their Elders past, present and future. I acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to our city and surrounding regions.

PRAISE FOR THE ETERNAL MACHINE

...nicely sensory, gritty, darkly colourful... an apparently real world from the first sentences, and I very soon got caught up in it... the novel's tone, characters, and themes make it apparent that Ryles takes the genre as seriously as the best steampunk writers take it...

— JAMES P BLAYLOCK

Victoriana comes to Sydney in an alternative 19th Century, bringing dark Dickensian factories and even darker souls. Mages too, practising heart magic and skin magic, along with shapeshifters, demons and automata. Mix in a mad scientist, a touch of romance and a plot to keep you guessing—wild! What's not to love? Highly recommended.

— RICHARD HARLAND

In Loving Memory of

My Mother – Lee Morgan

*An East End Londoner taken out of school at fourteen to work in factories before
World War II took her to the Land Army and different battles.*



Jennifer Naschwitz – One amazing friend.

And these monads are the true atoms of nature and in a word the elements of things.

— GOTTFRIED WILHELM LEIBNIZ, *THE
MONADOLOGY*, 1714

1

EM

Common magic (skin magic) is absorbed by the skin directly from the atmosphere. On its own, it forms a weak echo of heart magic, producing light and a sense of wellbeing. Collectively, it will provide sufficient power to advance our industrial revolution.

~SIR AMBRUS GRINDLE, *PRODUCTIVITY AND INDUSTRY*

The line of workers stretched all the way from Rhodens Lane to the powerhouse. Here amongst the factories, there was no sunlight to warm people's faces and little hope of bringing it back. Those who made it past the door now filtered into a basement crammed with chairs.

"I'm regretting this already," Em muttered, shuffling along a row within sight of the exit. She contemplated retracing her steps, but too many people blocked her escape.

"Your first time, eh?" asked an old woman seated at the row's end.

Em paused at the chair next to her, frowned at its wooden seat and splintery backrest.

“First time’s always the worst.” The old woman chuckled. Her breath smelled of gin, and her patchwork coat cut a bright contrast against her faded hair. “Don’t fret, my dear.” The woman chuckled again. “Your magic’ll be pulled out of you in no time and then you’ll get paid and forget all about bein’ scared. As sure as my name’s Rosie J, I’ll see you next week when you’re hankerin’ for more.”

Em let out a deep, shaky breath and sat. She looked to Lucien as he sank into the chair on her other side, the pewter charms in his shoulder length hair jingling.

“So this is it,” he said, voice laced with contempt. “The worker’s gold mine?” He grimaced at the gas lamps hanging by chains from the rafters. “They look like eyes. Of automatons. Crouched and ready to chew everyone up.”

“Lucien, please,” Em said. “You didn’t have to come.”

“Yes, yes, I know. But you’re not facing this alone. Besides...” He gave a hint of a smile. “Double our coins, double our savings.”

Em swallowed, mouth dry. She wished she’d not told Lucien of her plans to spend the evening under extraction. Endangering herself was one thing. Endangering the man she loved was unforgivable.

“You two had better get your boots off,” Rosie said. “Here comes the attendant.”

Em did as asked, then rolled up her leggings. As she straightened, she noticed a previous occupant had carved the words ‘Fate Damns’ into one of the armrests. She wondered if she could get away with adding something equally subversive, such as ‘Fate Exploits’, when a lad with tobacco-stained fingers prodded her forearm. “Get a move on, missy. If you’ve changed your mind, you know where the door is.”

Em froze, part panicked and part unsure what she was supposed to do.

“Roll up your sleeves unless you want the mages to come over and make a display of you.” The attendant pointed his chin at two

men reclining in armchairs up the front. Their hands were white-gloved and gentlemanly, rumoured to be charged with enough magic to knock a room full of workers senseless.

The attendant wound the electrodes around Em's wrists and ankles. He fastened straps around her forehead, pinning her head to the back of the chair. "Quicker than lacing a corset, eh?" He patted her knee. "But not as titillating."

Lucien grunted. "Keep your hands on the job, lackey boy, or you'll go blind."

Old Rosie cackled. "Couldn't have said it better m'self."

"Mind your manners." The lad turned his sneer to Lucien. "An' as for you: them foreigner words aren't welcome here."

Em couldn't move her head to see Lucien, but knew he would be fuming. Foreigner indeed! He may not talk like a local, but he knew the city well enough to belong. Biting her tongue, she fixed her gaze on the two mages, hating them for docking everyone's pay merely to force them here.

She counted to thirty, willed herself to relax. All too soon an attendant announced the final seat had filled. Other attendants took their places in the aisles.

The hall quietened.

Someone hummed a dirge.

"Get it over with," Rosie grumbled. "If you take all day, I'll be wettin' me knickers."

Nervous laughter rippled from chair to chair. Em's electrodes grew cold. In a gut-churning rush, her skin magic surged through them, paralysing her limbs from wrists to shoulders, ankles to hips. The ceiling vibrated. Dust and the occasional cobweb drifted onto heads, faces, shoulders and toes. In the factory above, machines rumbled and whined as they devoured the skin magic of two hundred workers.

Minutes stretched into an hour. A dull cramp spread up Em's backbone, through her shoulders. Every little whimper, cough or sigh from those around her echoed. Even Old Rosie's barely audible groan.

There came the sound of water trickling, and the stench of freshly

voided pee. At first, Em felt sorry for the poor woman. Then she imagined a puddle spreading between the chairs and reaching her feet. Pee contained salt. Salt conducted magic. Uncontrolled magic sparked.

“Lucien,” she whispered.

“What?”

“There’s—”

“Silence,” an attendant growled.

“It’s Rosie,” Em said aloud. “I think she—”

“Silence!”

Em gritted her teeth, closed her eyes, breathed deep and slow. She longed to stretch her muscles, wriggle her toes, flex her fingers. Afternoon stretched into evening. Her discomforts became aches, and her aches pushed her into a sullen, unthinking trance.

At last, the electrodes warmed. Her arms and legs thawed. Not wanting to be pawed again, she wriggled herself free.

“Don’t you be breaking anything, missy,” said the attendant, “or the mages’ll be billing you.”

Ignoring him, she turned to Rosie. The crone should have unstrapped by now. If she were anything like Papa, she’d be keen for a post-extraction tipple.

“Rosie?”

Nothing.

For a single choked breath, Em tried to convince herself the old woman had fallen asleep, that the puddle beneath her chair meant she’d started the day with too much gin. But Rosie’s blank, staring eyes told a terrible truth.

“You drained her!” Em spat at the attendant. “You should have been watching. You knew her magic was weak so you took every last drop.”

“She was old. Gonna die anyway,” the attendant said.

Em’s voice rose. “How dare you say that!”

“Hush!” Lucien took her arm. “There’s a mage watching.”

Em pulled away. “This is their plan, isn’t it? Kill the elderly, cull the weak.”

“Not now.” Lucien drew her against him, held her tight. He was

shaking as much as she, his face clammy. “As I recall, I tried to persuade you to give this a miss.”

She ducked aside, pulled on her socks and boots, hurried to the end of the row, legs quivering. She wanted to curse and cry and rage all at once. She wanted to grab the attendant’s weedy shoulders and shake him until he saw sense.

Up at the front, the two mages remained seated, bored and complacent.

“They’re murderers,” Em said, no longer caring who heard.

“Hush.” Lucien steered her to the exit. “Don’t give them an excuse to punish you.”

ON THE STREET OUTSIDE, a night bird shrieked, irate in the slash of night between buildings. Never in her life had Em felt so tired. It was as if the electrodes had taken not only her magic but a piece of herself. As she dodged potholes, wheel ruts and other workers, she wondered if her legs would make it home. Even the shiny new coins in her pocket felt tainted. Probably cursed.

The air shuddered with the clunk-clunking of conveyor belts snaking down from windows six storeys above. Human-shaped automatons stood as tall as lamp posts, inspecting boxes being dropped into lorries. Smoke hissed and plumed from their neck vents, staining the mist dark.

“Nothing like a breath of sooty air to get the muscles pumping,” Lucien said dryly.

As he passed beneath a streetlight, his eyes looked sunken, deprived of sleep.

“I’m sorry,” Em said. “I had no idea it would be that bad. But how else are we going to save up for—”

A mage in white breeches and swallowtail jacket veered past them, his fingers sending ribbons of light onto the path ahead. Lucien poked his thumb towards the mage’s retreating back. “Look at him, flaunting his magic. Smells like a powerhouse owner. I’d like to see how long he’d last in electrodes.”

Footsteps of passers-by clattered on the cobbles. “My love,” Lucien began, “there’s something—”

“Em, Lucien, wait!” The voice belonged to a woman, calling out from behind them.

Em turned her head to see an acquaintance, Solly Flood, running to catch up.

“How are you keeping?” Solly asked, falling into step beside Em. “After I quit the workshop, I hadn’t meant to lose touch. Are you and Lucien still there? At Grindle’s?”

In no mood to chat, Em let Solly’s words hang between them.

“I was just passing the powerhouse when I happened to notice you leaving,” Solly said.

“You didn’t submit?”

“Tried it once. Never again. Besides, what do we get but a handful of copper? Meanwhile our magic earns mages truck-loads of gold.” She looked behind, checked both sides, lowered her voice. “What else can we do except fight them?”

Em glanced at Lucien who was now staring pointedly ahead, clearly as eager to get home as she was. “Fight mages?” he asked. “Who’d stand a chance against them?”

Solly continued on in silence. When they rounded a corner, she said, “Mages are a minority. If we workers rise up, we’d have a chance.”

Lucien sneered. “Workers untrained in magic? Facing mages who have it all?”

“Supposing mages don’t have it all,” Solly said. “Supposing some workers have the potential to be trained?”

“Trained for what? Prison?” Lucien paused, considering something.

“What is it?” Em asked, almost tripping over her own feet.

He nodded towards Solly. “You must excuse me. I have business.” He met Em’s gaze and gave a tight, twisted smile. “Sorry, I’ll explain later.”

“Lucien?” Em stared open-mouthed as his lean silhouette merged into the darkness of an alley. She huddled into her coat, thought about setting out after him but did not relish a chase

through the streets at this late hour. Instead, she continued towards home, intending to pick up her pace but couldn't find the strength.

"Remember three summers ago?" Solly asked. "That time we all went down to the park to dance? Before the powerhouses? Back when everyone had skin magic enough to light their way? I remember how you lit yourself up all over. You were the brightest one there."

"Listen," Em interrupted, "tonight I heard a woman die. I just want to go home."

Solly mumbled a curse. "That's the second I've heard of this week. We have to fight. It has to be stopped."

Em shrugged. Solly was right, but talk was cheap and actions amounted to nothing.

"*Āiyā*," Solly hissed, impatiently. "No one should be treated like we are. There are ways to avoid the powerhouses."

Given that those who refused to submit had little chance of making a decent living, Solly did look surprisingly well. Although her hand-made coat hung as shapeless as a horse blanket, the set of her shoulders and the russet shine in her bobbed hair suggested a robust constitution.

An old man approaching them stumbled. Solly steadied him.

"How am I supposed to see where I'm going without skin magic?" he growled.

"Fate protect you," Solly said.

"Fate send you home safe."

As the man continued on, Solly looked to Em. "One day, that will be all of us. First, they'll steal our skin magic, then later our very last breath. Damn mages. May their greed be the death of them."

Em raised her eyebrows but said nothing. The air thrummed with the sound of ever-churning foundries upriver. A whiff of burned lard swirled in coal smoke from the tenements and factories not yet fuelled by a powerhouse.

"I know your magic is strong," Solly said, her voice low. "Way too strong than is lawful for a commoner."

Em kept walking, refusing to react despite how her stomach tensed.

“Think back to that festival,” Solly persisted in a voice so low that Em could barely hear. “The way you danced. So much light. Suddenly you ran to your father. Your fingers sparked.”

The back of Em’s neck prickled. “No. That wasn’t me.”

“You were lucky no one else saw.”

“It wasn’t me.”

“The truth is,” Solly added, “there are more like us than you realise. One in fifty can channel enough magic to spark. One in a hundred can light a taper. One in a thousand have enough to fight.”

Em blinked. *Us?*

“I must confess,” Solly continued. “You wouldn’t see me in a powerhouse if my life depended on it. Even so, I pass this way every week looking for people like you. It’s only a matter of time before your magic gets too strong. If you can’t hold it in, chances are you’ll do more than just spark. If you’re lucky enough to escape scalding yourself, one day the wrong person will see.”

Solly’s prying gave Em strength enough to lift her pace, determined to not show anything beyond detached endurance. As far as she knew, no one in her family had ever had that kind of magic. So why would she?

“I want to help,” Solly said. “I want to teach you how to use your power for the common good. Without hurting yourself.”

“You?”

Solly gave a barely perceptible nod.

“What about Rosie? The woman I heard die. Why couldn’t you have helped her?”

“I wish I could have. Trouble is there are too many Rosies and too few of us.”

Em checked to ensure no one lingered within earshot. “You’re a Groundist,” she whispered.

The edges of Solly’s eyes crinkled with the beginnings of a smile.

“I’m saving up for a proper apprenticeship,” Em said. “I want to run my own workshop and design automata.” Her words fell flat, unconvincing.

“Thanks to mages, the likes of us can never own workshops.

Even Lucien, with all his experience, has little chance of being anything other than a dogsbody. As for having more magic than we're supposed to: where does that get us? Even if we try not to use it?"

Em nodded in reluctant agreement. The street took them past shops, tenements and food stalls, and Em was tempted to ask exactly what Groundists planned to do.

"How's your father?" Solly asked gently. "Is he better?"

"I doubt he'll ever be that."

Em almost added, 'not since Mama died' but the memory made her throat ache.

Solly mumbled something Em did not hear and they continued in silence.

"I'm afraid this is where we must part," Solly said, pausing at a ramshackle bakery. "If you want to pursue this further, return here any day before noon and wait. I'll tell my scouts to alert me if they see anyone who matches your description. Don't speak to them, though. And not even to Lucien." She held Em's gaze. "On second thoughts, if you took up my offer would Lucien accompany you?"

"He believes magic was created to heal not fight with. To be honest, I agree."

"That's all very well." Solly's tone suggested refusal would be disastrous. "Either continue as is and risk ending your life, or put up a fight and at least have a chance to live."

Em closed her eyes. So much to think about and so much she didn't know. Fates in Hell, she was tired. If her power was as strong as Solly suggested, then why did she feel so unbearably weak? Without thinking, she looked over at Solly and blurted, "Lucien and I plan to marry. Next year."

Solly pursed her lips. "Will he take you away to Cornica?"

"I can't go. My da's too sick to spend all those weeks at sea. If I desert him now, he'll end up dead in a powerhouse."

"And so will you, if you allow it," Solly said. "Then he will follow."

Em's head spun. She wanted nothing more than to sleep.

"You need to think hard about my offer," Solly went on. "But

don't take too long." Abruptly, she turned away and disappeared into the throng of workers merging with the shadows.

Alone at last, Em could not move, could not make up her mind as to which road to take. Solly's or Lucien's? Papa's or her own? Everything Solly said had made sense despite it sounding too dangerous and too impossibly hard. Even so, the idea of joining the Groundists promised not only hope but a glimmer of excitement. The city needed change. Not the kind that mages were aiming for, but the kind that helped workers.

Tomorrow. I'll make up my mind tomorrow.

LUCIEN

Rotting cockles littered the alley from end to end. To make matters worse, Lucien already regretted abandoning Em in the street with Solly. Circumstances had dictated immediate action, but it would take more than bravery to fix this insufferable city. Even so, to walk away and not look back...

What would that take? A special kind of cowardice? Or strength?

A rat darted between his feet. Before he could react, it disappeared down a drain as if its sole purpose was to vex. Like the man who'd agreed to meet him at the strike of nine and was nowhere to be seen. Yet another reason to hate Forsham.

So much for a city that touted itself as progressive. In the years since Lucien had arrived, everything he'd achieved had slid backwards. Factories spanned entire neighbourhoods. Workers were used as fuel for a single, ravenous machine.

"Mr Boreau!" The trader emerged from the shadows; well dressed and amply fleshed, eyes dulled from a life of dissipation. "Apologies. I was rudely detained." Three rough-looking men accompanied him. He lit up his fingers and proffered two tickets.

“Adjoining cabins. Lockable. If they’re not to your liking, there are buyers who’ll snap them up.”

Lucien glanced at the tickets and tried not to look too eager. No doubt they’d cost more than he could comfortably afford.

“Very well,” Lucien said. “Four silvers.”

The trader whipped the tickets from his grip. “You do realise Cornica is nine thousand miles away; not nine hundred. The fare is five whole silvers. Either that or take your chances in a powerhouse.”

“When does the freighter depart?”

“First thing tomorrow.”

Lucien had expected all manner of problems, but nothing as pressing as this. “You’re having me on. I’m serious, man, when’s the next one?”

“Three months wait. Or maybe forever. Rumour has it, tomorrow’s will be the last.” The trader’s eyes flashed with as much guile as manipulation. “Times are no easier in Cornica. Your queen despises our powerhouses. Trade between our countries may well be —” He swiped a hand across his throat. “Severed.”

Feeling more hamstrung than cheated, Lucien handed over five silvers and pocketed the tickets. He had a quarter silver left.

* * *

At the workers’ district known as The Edge, the streets were half-lit, half-ruined and all stagnant. Fog wreathed the lamplights, casting oily shadows onto the rutted dirt below. Tenements sprawled either side, their limed-brick walls as soulless as warehouses.

Lucien crossed the road towards the two-roomed lodgings Em shared with her father. Its unlit window did not bode well. As he made his way up the dark, musty stairs, he tried to conjure finger-light but his skin magic was too depleted. His deeper heart magic shifted, threatening to spark. Reeling it in, he hunkered down to wait for Em in the hallway by her door.

Footsteps came and went. A breeze sighed up the stairs. From somewhere nearby, a man and woman loudly discussed a ruined meal.

What if Em had paid attention to Solly’s suggestion to take up

the fight? Nothing good would come of that. Lucien shook his head, knowing all along that a night such as this would catch up with him. He'd always admired Em's independence. Encouraged it even. Now he feared it would drive them apart.

His teeth clenched at the thought. He'd do anything for this woman. If only she'd allow him.

After what seemed an age, footsteps rattled up the stairs.

"Sweet Fate, for once let Papa be asleep," she muttered. "Don't let him be—"

She neared the landing and froze. If he were a thief, Lucien could have knocked her flat.

"You shouldn't be prattling in the gloom like that." The harshness in his words came as much from worry as fatigue.

She exhaled sharply. "You shouldn't be lurking without a light."

"Can't be helped."

"Where's your candle?"

"Same place as yours, I gather."

Any other day the two would have kept up their banter until one of them burst into laughter. Instead, their words remained clipped and angry. The thought of what he planned made his voice stick in his throat.

Em opened the door, struck a match and lit her new-fangled oil lamp. She turned and faced him, eyebrows raised.

"I'm very well, thank you," he said wryly. "How about you?"

"As good as can be expected."

She hung her cap on the nail by the closet. The kitchen with its beaten metal tub, open shelves and wooden table were as clean as always. Beyond it, the curtain that screened her bed had been left undrawn.

He inclined his head towards her da's bedroom. "Is he home?"

Em folded her arms. "Can't hear him snoring, so I suppose not."

Lucien had not seen her so irritable. He knew it was tiredness, but he was tired too.

"What made you run off?" she asked.

"The powerhouse will kill you," he said, sidestepping the ques-

tion. He almost reminded her about Rosie, but her pained expression told him it was too soon for that.

“If I only had myself to support, I’d stop submitting this minute.”

“Where’s your da now? At the tavern? Plastered?”

She turned her back, added fuel to the hearth and prodded it into flames. “He’s my da.”

“You’re a grown woman. He should let you go.”

“If he wasn’t so sick, he would.”

There was so much Lucien needed to say, but how to start without ruining it? Granted, Em’s father had lost his wife nigh on a year before, and then his job soon after that. Enough to drive anyone to the bottle. Even so, dithering wouldn’t help, unless the ditherer actually planned to end up in a graveyard.

“Em,” he began, “if you’re cross about the way I left you on the street, I’m sorry. There was no time to explain. Not with Miss Flood pestering us. I had to meet someone.”

Em looked up, her eyes accusing. “Who? Criminals?”

“Almost.”

Her gaze searched his. “I’m sure you had your reasons.”

She put on the kettle, served up some bread, cheese, pickles and a bowl of stewed fruit. They talked about work, about designing and the unlikelihood of earning enough for apprenticeships. He was almost ready to bring out the tickets when familiar footsteps rose from the stairwell. Damn. Something or someone always interrupted them.

“Em?” a gravelly voice slurred. “Em, are you home? I forgot my key. Em?”

“Sweet Fate, don’t let him be too drunk,” she said.

Lucien reached the door first. He opened it to find Em’s father gripping the stair rail and smelling of things no teetotaller would want to see. Lucien caught him before he fell, then steered him to his room where he collapsed on the bed in a boneless heap.

“He’d be terribly hurt if he knew you’d seen him like this,” Em said.

“I don’t think anything could hurt him right now.”

Em sniffed. "He needs time."

"I'm sorry," Lucien said softly. "I didn't mean it like that." He wanted to smooth the worry from Em's forehead, embrace her, keep her safe. Instead, he took her hand.

"I can't leave him in this state." She pulled away, snatched up a bucket. "I'm going to clean him up."

She hurried downstairs to the boiler room; Lucien followed.

Em had half-filled the bucket before realising the gas had gone out and the water was cold. "Fate's Blue," she said, banging her fist on the tap.

Lucien plunged his hand into the bucket and jolted it softly with heart magic. It felt good to let it out. How dare mages insist he not use it! Magic was his prerogative. Not theirs.

The water fizzled. Hot, but not boiling.

"Ouch." He withdrew his hand. The skin was red, but not enough to blister.

Em lifted the bucket and tipped its contents onto the flagstones. She flinched at the rising steam. "What were you thinking? If someone comes in and sees..."

Lucien laid his fingers on her arm and plied her with as much well-wishing as he could manage, but this soon after the powerhouse, his skin magic was barely there. He hoped it would be enough to soothe her. "Get some more water and see to your da. We need to talk."

"Talk?" she said irritably. "After that session in the powerhouse? After hearing Rosie die? I need time to think, not talk."

"Em, we must leave while it's still possible. I can't protect you here, but I give you my word you'll be safe in Cornica."

She heaved a sigh, rubbed her forehead with the back of her hand. "Leave Papa? You know I can't."

"He can share my cabin. You can have the other one for yourself." He smiled. "Or else we can marry on board and he can have it."

She stared, speechless. He leaned in to kiss her.

Em stepped back. "Lucien, I'd marry you this minute, but no

good will come of fleeing.” She lifted her chin. “I’m thinking of joining the Groundists.”

Lucien fought hard to not scoff. Right now, she looked barely capable of walking let alone fighting. “The Groundists are disorganised, weak. It’s only a matter of time before they’re beaten.”

“Our survival depends on our ability to rebel.”

“Now you’re sounding like Miss Flood.”

“That’s because she’s right. I didn’t want to face it before. But after Rosie, how can I not?”

“So,” he ventured, “if I offered you a ticket to Cornica tonight, if I told you it was our last chance to leave, what would you do?”

“I’d ask if you’d lost your senses. I’d tell you to flee on your own if you must, but heart magic will be denied us wherever we go. In Cornica, would anyone teach commoners how to wield it?”

“At least if you keep it to yourself, you won’t be punished. You’ll not end up in prison, feeding it to mages from a chair.”

“At least not yet,” she countered. “Laws change. Who knows what Cornica’s future will bring?”

“Em.” He put his hands on her shoulders and it shocked him to discover how cold they felt. Beneath her coat, she’d worn the thinnest of blouses and camisoles, not at all adequate for a night as chill as this. “Fate gave us heart magic to help people, not hurt them. Using it to fight will make us as corrupt as mages.”

Em massaged her temples. “Bitter, damn Fate, my head’s throbbing. I can’t argue tonight.” She pulled away, went back to filling the bucket. “I’m going to see to my da.”

As if in sympathy, a strange fearful ache shot through the base of Lucien’s skull. “Mages are killing us,” he said. “Can’t you see?”

“It’s not just them. It’s everything.”

“Em, wait,” he called to her retreating back. “Please, listen.”

Still walking, she glanced over her shoulder. “Not if it means fleeing to Cornica.”

She closed the door none too gently behind her. He wanted to follow, but his words would be as wasted as a day spent in electrodes. Five silvers those tickets had cost! Plus more risk than a Cornican in Forsham could afford. It occurred to him that no

matter what he offered, she'd follow her own dream anyway. Even if she knew it was lost. The likes of her did not give up. Nor did they escape.

BACK IN HIS OWN tenement he felt deserted, betrayed. His head ached. Worse than earlier. He shrugged on the Cornican coat he'd not worn for years out of fear of ruining it in a city that was already ruined. Lucien packed his belongings, his mind seething with anger at Em for refusing him, at her father for being drunk, at mages for turning workers into commodities, at Fate for failing to intervene. He left without locking the door and refused to look back. As for The Edge, he'd not miss it one whit. Even its name felt like an insult, as if those who lived there considered themselves to be somewhat less than human.

Lucien boarded the freighter only minutes before it was scheduled to leave. Deckhands bantered in his native drawl. At last, the sounds of home! How much he'd missed them.

Damn this aching head. It made him feel wrong. It made everything wrong, which of course it always had been. He closed his eyes, gripped the gunwales and inhaled the thick, salty air. In a matter of weeks, he'd see his parents again. His three younger sisters would pester him to take them out. He and his cousins would swim in ponds as hot as bathtubs. Compared to Forsham, Cornica was both a paradise and a sanctuary. Despite its lack of progress, he loved it more than he cared to admit.

And yet...

And yet...

Deserting Em was as deplorable as forcing himself to fight. What in Fate's name was he thinking? If he left now, he'd be missing her every minute of every day. Life would be worse than a year in a powerhouse.

Clutching his suitcase, he ran to the gangplank to find it half raised.

"If you jump ship," a deckhand warned, "there'll be no coming back."

Lucien leapt and landed on the wharf still running, still thinking about Em.

There was a checkpoint beyond the docks before getting back into the city, and he feared the guards would hold him up there, perhaps test him for heart magic. Equally possible, they might deny him re-entry. Keeping to the shadows, he wove between warehouses only to find himself back at the wharves where he began. He paused to catch his breath and get his bearings, then struck out towards a gap between buildings, twice tripping on rickety planks.

“You! Foreigner! Freeze!”

The voice came from behind.

A path veering left promised escape, then quickly narrowed to a dead end. Lucien turned.

Two men closed in on him.

Their faces lit up in a brief wash of finger-light. One belonged to a ruffian he’d seen earlier with the trader. The other, a uniformed guard.

He took the tickets from his pocket. “Here.” He tossed them over. “They’re yours.”

The ruffian sneered. “What use are they? The ship’s departed. What else do you have?”

“Only this,” Lucien lowered his suitcase.

“Not enough. What about your wallet? Your watch?”

Lucien’s head throbbed more than ever. He’d not defended himself with heart magic before, but it was never too late to try. Heart thumping, he raised a hand, attempted a jolt, wincing as his fingertips blistered and smoked.

The guard laughed. Lifting a knife, he lunged.

RUK

The Fear whispered, piercing the shifter's consciousness like a thorn.

His name is Lucien... Save him...

There was no shutting it out. Even after a decades-long slumber. Even in the bedrock beneath the city. The whispering continued, driving the shifter up into the cold, stale streets above.

I know who you are, Ruksinubus... Listen...

The name sounded old, familiar. Ruksinubus? Hadn't it been taken from a vicar when men and shifters were not yet enemies?

Ruk... Help him, The Fear demanded.

Why?

The Fear answered with a scream so harrowing that Ruk collapsed into shapeless mist and fled along the surface of an oily, rutted track. How large Forsham had grown. How dreadful the taint of humanity.

Help him.

Why?

It's time...

Ruk cowered in a gutter, then fled over rooftops of slate, rust,

and soot. The Fear followed, as persistent as a wound refusing to heal.

Night deepened. Rain drizzled. Ruk floated between buildings, houses, hovels and taverns, watching and listening while humans talked, argued, coupled and slept.

“I’m hungry,” a child complained.

“I can’t sleep,” cried another.

“This headache will be the death of me,” said commoner after commoner after commoner.

Help him... The Fear howled.

Ruk found solitude in a wooded park. Eucalypts loomed, smelling sharply of years long past when industrialists had not yet arrived in steamships to poison the land with their city.

But still The Fear wheedled.

Go to the wharves... do not lose him...

Ruk could only head where the voice insisted, closer and closer to a place that seemed at once alien and familiar. There came a shout, angry and demanding.

“You! Foreigner! Freeze!”

Ahead, beyond a derelict pier, a young Cornican stood clutching a suitcase, his back pressed against a high blackened wall. Men blocked his escape.

Do not lose him! The Fear screeched.

The tallest – a guard – lunged at the traveller’s unprotected throat, opening it with a flash of steel.

Head thrust backwards; blood gushed. The Cornican sank to his knees. His killers bent over him. Then casually, as if no one would dare challenge them, they picked up his suitcase, rummaged through his pockets and moved on. Seeking what? Another throat to open? Another chance to steal?

The Fear remained poised, hovering at the edge of Ruk’s consciousness. *Wear him.*

Why?

Do not lose him!

The young man slumped forward, shuddered, stilled.

The Eternal Machine

Wear him! The Fear shrieked, hollered, howled, and shouted all at once. *SHIFT!*

The scent of dying wafted through the air.

Life or death? Ruk asked.

The soul answered in the way of most souls in Forsham. *Life!*

As you wish.

The shifter swooped, enveloped the traveller and pierced his soul. Mist solidified into bones, organs, arteries, veins, muscles, sinews, skin. A creature of flesh now, Ruk released the dead man's body, seeing it for what it was: a husk with a face that now mirrored his own.

Lucien. His name had been Lucien.

Water lapped the pylons beneath the wharf's bloodied planks. Grateful for the cover of darkness, Ruk undressed Lucien's remains as respectfully as the act would allow. He shrugged on the clothes, dragged the body towards the water, rolled it in and watched it sink.

Shadows hugged him like the darkest of cloaks. Lucien's memories threatened. Too much emotion. Too much knowing. Ruk knew at once he shouldn't surrender to them. Not today. Not tomorrow. Not one little bit. Through sheer force of will, he pushed them away until a single thought remained, so deeply implanted it wouldn't go.

A face. A woman's face. The one Lucien had been desperate to see.

MORE DETAILS

I hope you enjoyed this excerpt from *The Eternal Machine*.

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More information and updates at
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