FALLEN

A Story from *Primordia*

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"Awake, arise, or be forever fall'n."

- John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

I.
AWAKE

Her left arm was crushed beneath some component of the lander, once critical, now useless. The dead weight of five bodies sat on her chest, her legs, her good arm. That was her own mass, dragged by alien gravity. The fires were almost out. The greasy smoke was thinning, and her sharp, shallow breaths no longer choked her. She was lucid; she was dying.

The machine on the dune had still not moved.

She yelled again, or tried. Even with the effort, she felt no pain in her arm. It was a casualty, she accepted. The wreckage held other casualties, too, beside her limb. Garner and Yasada she could see, enough of them, anyway, to know. But the others were dead too, or else they would've helped her (big, unbreakable Todorovic with his big, unbreakable smile, shoving the component off her arm and pulling her to her feet), or she would've heard them (Eriksen laughing about how, even if the mission to restore the planet wasn't a *complete* success, at least they would still fertilize this patch themselves). But no. They were gone.

She tugged on her dead arm, painlessly. It didn't budge.

Neither did the robot.

"Help!" she wanted to cry. She wanted to scream. And then, she did. There was no sense conserving strength.

Eventually, she lost consciousness.

"So this is wind," Eriksen had joked. Then, with a mock naive enthusiasm: "And look, there's a cloud!"

The wall of dust raged toward them. "Everyone hold—" started Yasada, but the storm hit, and the world spun, and the whining and roaring and snapping and then screaming drowned out everything else, and even if Yasada had finished, anyway, it wouldn't have been much of a punchline.

And then the lander crashed, and all of them died, all but her, most of her, for the moment.

She tried to swallow, and then she opened her eyes, blinked as if to clear sand and dust, even though she didn't have enough tears left. A few feet away, a blue jug mocked her. At the top of the dune, the machine mocked her. Below her elbow, her arm mocked her: *I've already escaped*, it said.

Fresh air was not what she had imagined—it seemed to have more silicate than oxygen.

She closed her eyes again, tried to swallow again, and got a trickle of something (blood?). She pulled on her dead arm again and wished she would start hallucinating.

She opened her eyes, again.

The robot looked into them.

She blacked out. Again.

Aboard the lander, they packed spares of everything. Backups, and backups for backups. "So which of us are spare tires?" asked Eriksen.

Well, now we know.

It was still black, even with her eyes open. The fires had died. The stars hid behind ugly acid clouds. The moon was on the wrong side of the world to help.

Eventually, the darkness faded just enough to reveal the darker things inside it. The impression of corpses, of a water jug, and of a machine, squatting beside her.

"Help," she whispered.

The machine did not budge.

"Please," she begged.

The machine did not budge.

She attempted every override command she could imagine, most of them obscenities. Then, silence. Then, more silence, except for the whisper of dust piling up against the lander. Then—the whirr of the robot's lens twisting open, and a soft blue light covered her face.

Then—darkness.

Thanatos.

Consciousness came back quickly this time, or perhaps more slowly—either way, the sky was still black and empty.

"What is your designation?" the machine asked. "What is your origin?" The lens widened and narrowed. "What is your function?"

With her good arm—no, it was her *only* arm, or would be—she pointed at the blue jug. "Please," she whispered, or tried.

The lens narrowed a bit more.

"'Please' is not a recognized point of origin or function. Is it your designation?"

Its voice mocked her. Why did it have a voice? And why *that* voice? And why *words* at all?

"Water," she answered.

The robot turned to the jug, extended an arm, retrieved it. "Are you in need of coolant?"

"Water."

It unscrewed the cap and probed the spout. The whole farce was lit by the robot's blue glow. "Where?" it asked.

She pointed to her mouth. It poured. She drank, choked, vomited, choked again, spat. It poured. She drank.

"Stop." It stopped.

She pointed at the dead thing that had been her arm. "Help."

"No," the robot answered. "What is your designation? What is your origin? You are not from the Tower. You do not match the design of any known Urbanian machine. Are you from Civitas?" It pushed a probing digit against her cheek. "You are of unknown composition. My data indicates that Civitas employed unusual designs. Your power level is negligible." Without waiting for a response, the robot turned its lens to the wreckage of the lander. "This machine has power, and its composition and design are unremarkable. Why are you traveling together? Where are you going?" It touched Yasada. "Why are these ones not operational?" It probed. "Where is its power source?"

They were guileless, machines were, except where there was a pattern for guile, a routine. And helpless, in their own way. So she waited, and gave no answer.

It probed deeper, then stopped. "I am Autonomous 8. From the Tower. I bring the promise of perfect Union." The robot stood. "This one does not answer." It turned away from Yasada and back to her, squatting back down. "You do not answer, either."

She pointed to her arm, again. "Help."

"No." It scuttled through the wreck of the lander, probing the remains. Out of her vision, it said, "This generator is acceptable. Is it stable?" Silence. "I am only noting its location for the Tower. Your contribution to the greater good will be recognized."

The robot returned to her. "What did it do? Your companion. When it was operational."

Silence.

"Are you still operational?"

"Yes," she answered. She pointed at her arm again.

"No." The robot squatted down. "You are leaking." It probed the vomit, blood, and piss. "Your design is inefficient."

"Help," she said. "Or stop talking."

The lens narrowed. "My core logic permits communication when a machine poses no threat or too great a threat." Widened. "There is no threat here."

"Then help." Even after the water, her voice was still raw.

Silence. Then: "I cannot excavate your appendage. I can remove it."

"Laser," she said. "Or plasma. Burn it."

"Burn all this metal?" it asked, pointing at the module.

She shook her head. "The appendage. Burn it, or I'll leak more."

So it burned. And, again, merciful darkness.

Flames groped around the lander's ablative shielding. Todorovic grinned. Yasada eyed the controls, made minuscule adjustments. Benzigger cracked his knuckles in sequence, one handed, just stretching and tightening his fingers. Pop. Pop. Pop. If a rivet shook loose, they wouldn't even notice. Pop. Pop. "Are you *praying*, McIlven?" laughed Eriksen. She smiled. *Just talking*. Pop. Pop.

The arm had been lost already. It was just dead weight, sloughed off. She sat. With her good arm, her only arm, she tried to drink from the blue jug. It was too heavy, too awkward; she was too weak, still dizzy.

The robot—Autonomous 8—helped. This time, she didn't choke. Together, they set the jug down. It was getting lighter.

"What is your designation?" it asked. "Your origin? Your function?"

"Do you know what 'autonomous' means?" she answered.

The robot did not budge. "It is part of my designation."

"Do you know what it *means*?"

"It describes my function."

"Do you know?"

Silence. Stillness. She tried to drink from the jug again; couldn't. She looked at the stump of her arm, black and numb but tingling.

"If you require a replacement, there is a superior appendage behind you." She turned. There was Todorovic, broken. His smile was a casualty. "Its condition is satisfactory."

"Our parts are not interchangeable," she replied.

Silence. At last: "Inefficient." The robot rose. "Why were you built this way?"

"Process of elimination," she answered. The lens dilated, narrowed; then Autonomous 8 turned to leave. "You don't know what it means, do you?"

The robot turned back. "It is my designation. It is my function. I am apart from the Tower. If I succeed, I will unite with the Tower. That is what it means."

"No," she said softly. "That isn't." She stepped forward. "It is an old word. It means," and she wondered at its innocence, "that you make your own law."

Silence. Stillness. Darkness. "My destination is Urbani. Is that your origin?"

"No," she answered. "But it's my destination, too." She searched the wreck, found her breathing mask and supplies and tools and backup tools, spared no glance or prayers for what was lost, and kicked dust over her arm, a useless burial for the useless dead. She

wasn't here for them, but for those to follow. "Shall we?" she asked, approaching. "My designation is McIlven."

"Yes." The blue light faded. Dawn was lining the clouds. The wind was beginning to blow. They were walking away from the lander. "It always was a one-way ride," Eriksen would have said, if he wasn't pulp.

The left sleeve of her suit fluttered. She breathed easily through her mask. Her pack weighed six times what it should; she ignored it; she endured.

This was her function.

II.
ARISE

McIlven had seen the place before. This was how it had looked: like an oil painting in reds and browns, abstract and smeared, then reduced to crude squares as the technicians tried to squeeze as much detail as they could from their distant vantage. There were people who could read those images and say, "This dune is eighteen feet high; that one is stable, that one is loose; this stone is granite, that is limestone; that shadow is a war-machine, no doubt dead." Those people would be studying the lander now and spinning stories of a survivor from a single pixel.

She had seen the place again, closer, spread on the viewscreen aboard the lander. Eriksen had sung, "A world of brown, without a sound . . ." in an absurd falsetto. Then there was sound enough.

This was how the place looked now: like a storm-tossed sea of brown (as if she had seen a storm, or a sea, except in pictures); like proof that all the universe needed for absolute destruction was sand, wind, water, acid, time. Maybe any one of them would do.

There were more efficient means of destroying, though, when you lacked the universe's patience, and the old leviathan war-machine—now dead, really and truly dead—was proof of that.

The weapon in McIlven's hand was warm.

A wide blue lens regarded her, a flat and unreadable countenance.

But she *could* read it, because machines hid so little once you knew them, and this one, Autonomous 8, talked and talked and talked as if its timer were broken. But now, it was silent and calculating. It was trying to decide: had she exceeded its lower threat threshold? Did its protocols permit further conversation, or must it be fight or flight? Had she, perhaps, exceeded the upper threshold, now too deadly to face and too dangerous to flee?

Those details she couldn't read. She looked at the weapon protruding from its appendage, the same laser that had cut off her dead arm. The weapon was pointed at the war-machine's sinuous bulk, pointed exactly at the terminus of the still-molten wound it had carved.

The weapon retracted. The lens narrowed. "You were built for war, McIlven." Its voice held the hint of a question: perhaps a glitch, perhaps her own projection. The robot pointed at her dangling sleeve. "But your composition is fragile."

"You're still talking," she replied.

It considered her, then the war-machine, then the shifting sand atop the dunes—or, perhaps, the distant city of Urbani. Who could say how far Autonomous 8 saw? "Yes." It turned back, approached her—still hunkered down behind armored plates, joints grinding with accumulated grit and wear. "Where were you built?" It had asked this before. "What is your function?" And this.

"I'm going to Urbani," she answered, as she always had. How far was it? Her pack was light; she could hear the emptiness in the sloshing jug.

"Yes," it answered. "That is not a function."

But it asked nothing more. Autonomous 8 marked their location, since they had managed to leave the war-machine's power core intact when they killed it. Then they set off again, following a path known only to the robot.

Earlier, they had walked under the night sky, only partly clear, its filthy expanse missing so many of her familiar stars. Autonomous 8 followed her gaze. "Some of them move quickly," it said. "Some of them streak and vanish. Some of them cross the sky. They are not in my data." It looked back to her. "One of them fell to where I found you. Was it you? One of the other machines?" The robot continued, not waiting for an answer, perhaps unwilling to wait for answers, perhaps unable to stop asking questions: "Are all of the lights that move in the sky machines like you and the others?"

They walked for a time in a sort of silence, a silence as loud as the sand crunching beneath them, as loud as the robot's gears grinding inside it, as loud as her breath hissing behind her mask.

"No," she said, at last. "No, they are not."

Autonomous 8 stopped. "Do you know what they are? How do you know?"

But she gave no answers; there was only the crunch of sand, the grind of gears, the hiss of breath, the darkness and the stars.

And then another question: "What is 'Thanatos'?"

McIlven stopped abruptly and turned, her fingers twitching toward her weapon. "What?" she asked—her voice unguarded, her fear obvious, the robot deaf to it.

"Thanatos," it repeated, swiveling toward her. "When you were rebooting, before I repaired you, you said that word." The lens narrowed, widened. The robot spoke with simulated curiosity. "What is it?"

She resumed the march, considered not answering, considered what the robot's modulated voice revealed, whether it revealed anything. At last, she answered. "It is an old word." She thought, then added: "It means 'a new beginning.'"

"There are other ways to say that," Autonomous 8 replied.

"Yes," she said. "But they are less efficient."

Later, they killed the war-machine, then continued on their way to Urbani.

If the crash hadn't destroyed her positioning and mapping devices—backups, even, and redundant backups—she could have found her own way to Urbani. A city can't hide from satellites; in fact, she could recite its geocoordinates even now. But her own position was a mystery. If the crash hadn't destroyed her communications devices, she could have asked the planners. If the crash hadn't killed the others, perhaps they would've had some other, better idea. If.

She knew Autonomous 8 was not taking them down the straightest path, or the easiest, or the safest. They were hunting power and sometimes hunting threats. Foraging, pacifying, and reconnoitering all at once. She was, she thought, not the only one built for war.

"What is the Tower?" she had asked. The robot answered freely but opaquely, almost mystically. It was a place; it was an entity; not a physical tower, or perhaps it was; a collective intelligence, perhaps, or a community, or perhaps both. A leader? A group of leaders? Were they mighty? Were they faltering?

McIlven and the robot trudged a decaying path up the side of a dune. At the top they saw more dunes and beyond those, more. "How long have you been gone from the Tower?" she asked, as they stared—or *she* stared, and it did whatever it did atop dunes.

"I am operating within the temporal parameters of my function," it replied.

"That's not an answer." She slipped off her mask, briefly, and drank from the jug with practiced ease.

"Your question cannot be answered. I have never been within the Tower; I cannot be gone from it." It paused, regarding the vast waste. In its flat stillness, Autonomous 8 seemed poised on an elaboration. But none came.

"So you can't return to it, either."

The robot set off again. "Follow," it instructed, needlessly.

She wondered whether it took stock of her dwindling supplies. The machine seemed confused by her continual intake and waste; by the suit's poor recycling; by her need for rest. It noted her weakness, her *inefficiency*, with more curiosity than scorn. Did the robot understand the blood caked below her nostrils when she pulled off her mask? Did it understand her gasps, her stumbles? It understood power. It understood what it meant to break down.

"I can't operate in this environment forever," she told the machine. She stared at its rusted, pitted armor, its cracked lens; she listened to the creak and whine of its worn parts. "Can you?"

"No," it answered. "I cannot operate in *any* environment forever. Only the Tower is perpetual."

"And when you unite with the Tower? Then will you operate forever?"

Quietly: "No. Then I will operate no longer." Louder, mechanically: "Autonomy is the absence of Union." And also: "I will be gone, but I will not be alone." And this: "If you are from Civitas, you have your Choir and your Harmony. It is in my data. You know what it is to have Union. You know what it is to be alone."

McIlven knew, of course. Nothing about Civitas, nothing about this Choir or Harmony; she was no more from there than she was from Urbani. But the rest, she knew; that, and more. "And when your mission is complete, you will unite with the Tower?"

"Yes."

She wanted to tell it: *And you will be gone*. And to ask: *And that is why we are wandering, and wandering, and no closer to Urbani?* And to finish: *And that is why you cut my arm, and why you talk, and talk, and . . . .*

But she didn't need to tell, or ask, or talk at all, because she knew the answers, knew its logic—its logic and its weakness.

So she just said, "We need to get to Urbani, or you'll have to go on alone. The route is easy and not long."

"Yes," it agreed. "Follow."

That afternoon, as she lay in the shade of a concrete and iron ruin, as she lurched toward sleep, as her head rested on the nearly empty jug, her last sight was Autonomous 8 regarding her alien form and seeing nothing, while she saw everything inside the machine: all its mechanical thoughts circling, wobbling, careening like a top that could have spun on forever if it hadn't been nudged. And, for the first time since the storm, she smiled.

Endlessly far above them, hidden by clouds and sunlight, the moon was rising.

III.
FOREVER FALLEN

F rom space, Urbani was nothing but a grid of streets and roofs, broken here and there by brown geometric gaps that were parks once, and broken also where the city had been rubbled by the war and the years and all the rest.

Now she had seen something different.

Now Autonomous 8 had learned something more.

Now the robot had turned away from the data port, now its blue lens was narrow and focused, now its weapon was extended, now the weapon's tip was pointed exactly at her head, and now the robot spoke, but didn't need to, and perhaps even realized that, because all it said was: "I know."

But first, they left the wasted land and came to the wasted city.

Earlier.

This was the world of Elena McIlven: endless tunnels with track lighting; low domes to peek at the stars and the sun and the world; bright screens showing green things and blue things, living things, things that existed only in packets and vials in vaults; stale air; gyroscopes and injections; fragile people pretending not to be fragile, pretending not to hope, even when they peeked at the world and thought of the green and blue that wasn't there, even when they trained and trained and trained their fragile bodies so that when they were carrying five of their own corpses they could put one foot in front of the other and reach the top of the next dune and look out, and there on the horizon would be the towers of Urbani.

The planners packed enough fragile bodies into the lander to have backups, and backups for backups. Process of elimination would select among them. It always was a one-way ride. But it was also a chance to hope openly, to smile, to laugh, and to believe: "All that brown and red will be green and blue, and none of us will see it, not for hundreds of years, but it doesn't matter because we'll return home, all of us." A new beginning.

But first: *Thanatos*.

Later.

"How did you learn of it?" the robot demanded in its even voice.

She said nothing.

"You are not a machine," it added. "I know what you are."

She said nothing.

"The virus is no threat to you."

She shrugged.

"It is a weapon. A *human* weapon for destroying machines." Louder: "*Thanatos*. I know what it means. Not 'a new beginning.'"

"No," she agreed. "Not for you."

"*Death*." The robot said the word as if a machine could understand what death meant, a machine built in a world where nothing had ever lived, nothing at all, not for longer than Autonomous 8 had existed, a machine so ignorant that it thought that she "leaked," that Yasada with his neck bent like an Allen wrench was not "operational." *Death*. There was no point explaining any of it, life or death, blue or green—none of it was in the robot's data, and even if it were, there could be no understanding, only a pattern of understanding, a mockery of it: brute logic, brutally applied.

"You're still talking," was all she said. "Am I above your threshold, or below?"

In her right hand, her only hand, was her weapon.

"How did you learn of it?" the robot asked, again.

Could she explain satellites, encrypted signals plucked out of the air, coders and code-breakers, all that to a robot who asked if the stars in the sky were machines like her?

"We heard the name," she answered. "We knew the idea. We reasoned the rest. We determined it was here."

"For what function?"

"To destroy you. All of you."

Earlier.

They passed down the silent streets of Urbani through foot-deep dust, alone except for the wind, the rubble, their thoughts, the half-buried hulks of ancient, wrecked machines. McIlven dragged painful breaths through the clotted filter of her mask; coughed; stumbled; kept pace with Autonomous 8; stopped only when they reached another intersection and the robot swiveled in a slow circle, logging whatever it logged.

"Why did you come here?" she asked. "What are you looking for?"

The robot continued its circuit until it faced her. "It is my function."

"*What* is your function?"

"Pathfinding." This was a new answer.

"What path?"

A pause. "For the Tower. More resources are needed. Power. Parts. Processors. A safe path to claim them. A safe place to employ them."

A new beginning, she thought.

The robot added: "Urbani presented optimal potential."

"And now? What now? You bring *this* back to the Tower?" McIlven kicked up a cloud of dust, decades and decades of dust, watched it whirl and twist in the breeze. "Or this?" she kicked again.

The lens narrowed to a pinprick. "Your operation is impaired. You are in need of repairs."

"No," she answered. And again: "What now?"

"My survey is not complete. There must be more here." *Must.* "The system that controlled the city—Legion—will know what has happened. Where the supplies are cached. I will find it. I will read its memory. I will find the city's power."

"And then go to the Tower for termination."

Silence. Then: "Follow."

Autonomous 8 picked one of the streets of dust and began to carve a path.

Later.

"Thanatos is gone."

She said nothing in reply and kept her aim steady, despite the pain.

The robot continued: "The virus was stored in a machine. The machine's function was destruction, and it left to destroy. So it is gone." There was something new in its voice.

She kept her face steady, despite the pain.

"You will not find it," Autonomous 8 said, almost gently. "You will not leave the city. You are beyond repair."

And she thought: *Yes*. But still, she said nothing.

"You will cease to operate. I will transmit my data to the Tower; I will return to it. I will have Union. I will not be alone."

So, she thought. *A machine can lie*. But even to itself? So she hacked out: "You'll go back to the Tower; then *you* will cease to operate, too. You won't find union." She

coughed blood into her mask; she forced her voice to come back. "You weren't built for it. You were built for freedom. *Autonomous 8*."

It said nothing.

"Eight," she repeated. "Where are the seven others, Eight?" And still nothing. "Used up, tossed out."

"Nothing is wasted."

"Nothing?" she asked. If she could have, she would have spread her arms theatrically. But instead: "Look around you. *Everything* in this world is wasted." The robot was silent, again. "There is no Union, Autonomous 8. There's what you have now, and then there's nothing."

Earlier.

They stood at the base of the monument, not speaking, not able to understand, not fully, what rose before them. McIlven looked at the streak her hand had left in the dust; she stared through the filthy glass. Behind it, clean and still and safe, a face stared back at her, even though its eyes were closed as if asleep. And above that coffin, and beside it, and stretching out and up, hundreds, thousands more.

"You said you were not from Urbani," Autonomous 8 noted.

She didn't answer. She was looking at the coffin, at her dull reflection in its glass; she was thinking about the machines, fallen concentrically, sacrificially, around the mounded dead. She was thinking about other things. She lowered herself to the ground and took ragged breaths.

"Nowhere in my data is there a machine of your design. There is only you, the broken ones, and now these thousands. *Here*. In Urbani."

"I'm not from here," she insisted, when she found breath to speak.

The robot moved to her side, squatted down, narrowed its lens. "There are parts here," it said. "Among all these models, there will be parts that fit. I can find them."

"No," she said. "You can't. We're not built that way."

They were silent.

Then, Autonomous 8 said merely: "They have all ceased to operate." And then: "The other machines brought them here, to where Legion once operated." It pointed to a patch of dust the robot must have cleared while she stared at death. There were data ports there. "They brought the others here, then they too ceased to operate."

Autonomous 8 left her side, went to the ports, squatted down, extended a tool, and said: "I will unlock Legion's data. I will find what we need." It paused. "What do you need, McIlven?"

She looked into its lens and answered: "Thanatos."

Later. Last.

She thought of dust, drifting over the wreck of the lander; and under the dust, an arm; and on the arm, a hand; and on the hand, a ring. She thought of him, looking up through a low, hard dome—or was he looking down?—searching, and pretending not to hope. Union. Loneliness. Death. And she thought: *It always was a one-way ride.*

She dropped her weapon. The robot's lens widened slightly to watch it fall. She pulled off her mask and spat blood thickened with dust and phlegm.

At last, Autonomous 8 spoke. "Your conclusion is false. If you had Thanatos, *then* there would be nothing. No Tower. No machines. Nothing."

"No." She knelt and coughed, and then finally stood again. "No. There would be a new beginning. We have tools. Supplies. Everything to start life again. *Life*."

She stared at the blue lens, and in it she saw nothing but her own reflection.

"Not in ten years or a hundred years. But it will happen."

And it said: "Then use your tools."

She spat blood, again. "We tried; we deployed them. They were taken. Recycled. Repurposed. Destroyed." She paused. "We can try again. *Once*. When the path is clear and safe."

In the silence, she coughed and retched, and her blood and vomit caked the dust like clay. She stood, again.

"Thanatos is gone . . ." the robot began.

". . . and I am not leaving the city," she finished. She paused; she smiled. "But you are."

She walked to Autonomous 8 and whispered secrets, where to look in the sky and what to transmit so that it could talk, and talk, and talk, and tell secrets of its own.

Then, step by unflinching step, she climbed the monument of corpses, crawling over her people, the dead, never looking back at the machine that watched her, clawing one-handed to keep from falling in the ash and dust, and, at last, reaching the top and staring up at the risen moon as she lay on her back and shed the burden of six corpses.

And earlier still.

This was the world of Elena McIlven: its tunnels so clean and safe and still; its gravity so gentle you could almost fly; its stars so bright and clear beyond the domes. And she was holding him in a long embrace, fragile arms around fragile bodies, and she thought of the two of them, and she thought, *Not so fragile*, and then, *Good-bye*.

CODA
FROM HER ASHES

Autonomous 8 stands atop the dune, the sun rising before her, a shadow stretching behind her toward the city. The robot is staring, or doing whatever it is she does, and thinking, if a machine can be said to think.

The truth is, Autonomous 8 is searching.

*"The world shall burn, and from her ashes spring
New Heav'n and Earth, wherein the just shall dwell
And, after all their tribulations long,
See golden days, fruitful of golden deeds . . . ."*

- John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

In June 2010, Victor Pflug and I decided to make a small, free adventure game—one that we would finish no later than mid-August. As it turned out, we didn't finish until December . . . 2012. By that point, *Primordia* was no longer small (or free), and, far from being a casual project, it had become an all-consuming undertaking. The one thing I could say with utter certainty about *Primordia* when it shipped was that it was done: there was no sense looking back. It was done, and it was over: there was also no sense *going* back. I was confident that I had exhausted my ability to tell stories in its setting. Any blank spaces on the map belonged to the players' imaginations.

It was thus unnerving to see that reviewers' most consistent story-related comment was that the game was too short a short jaunt into an otherwise intriguing setting. Simultaneously, it was very flattering to have fans asking for a sequel, saying the story must go on, etc., etc. All the same, I was convinced that *Primordia*'s story was complete: Horatio's arc was done (as were his friends'), and the setting would inevitably become less interesting the more we tried to fill it in. Moreover, the story's *themes* seemed complete.

A few months later, it struck me that there might be room for a story that didn't elaborate those themes, but instead upended them. A story in which humans would be decidedly un-godly: all-destroyers rather than all-builders. One in which the protagonist would be not a guileless problem-solver but a cunning problem-exploiter. In *Primordia*, Horatio resists grand utopian solutions (and the "you've got to break a few eggs to make an omelet" mindset that accompanies them) and focuses instead on small-scale, personal ethics. McIlven, by contrast, embraces the grandest feat of omelet-making imaginable: the wholesale eradication of robot civilization, to be followed by the revivification of the planet and the restoration of mankind. Lest it sound like I'm picking sides between the two, I should point out that while Horatio sacrifices very little over the course of *Primordia*, McIlven sacrifices everything, including the comfort of straightforward morality. Of the two, she is by far the more selfless: she fights for a world she'll never see, so that it might become a home for those she'll never know.

It's safe to say that *Primordia* would never have existed without Victor's and my naivety about how long the road ahead of us was. I can say with equal confidence that "Fallen" would never have existed without the fans who urged us to go a little farther down that road, or the fans who whipped this story into shape, or one particular fan—Tamás Szathmáry—whose brush, like Victor's, paints this world far better than my words do. Thanks to all of you, especially those I haven't named.