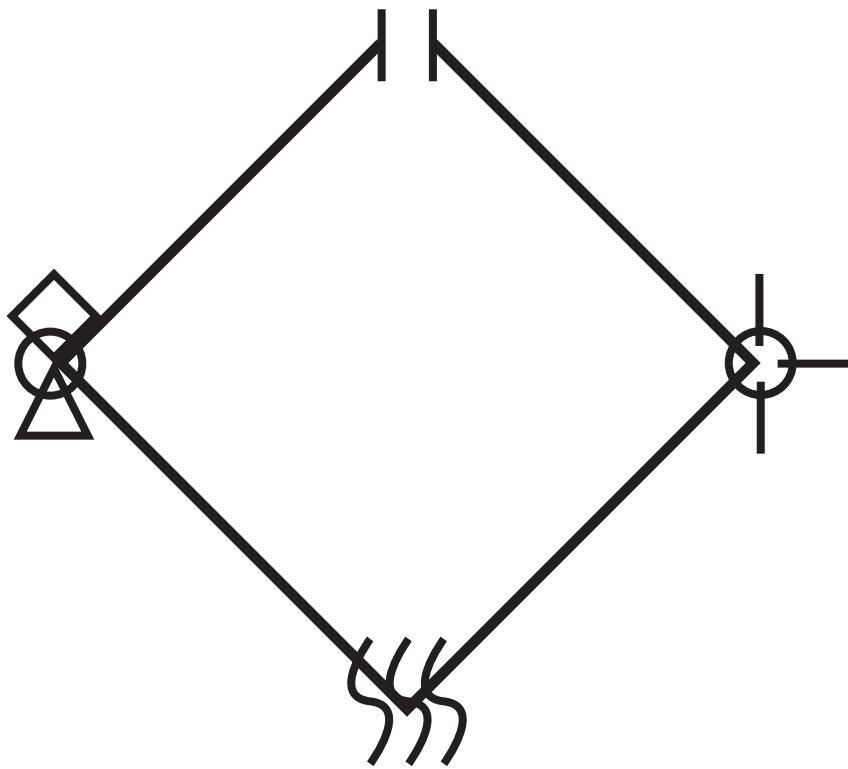


THE METROPOLIS

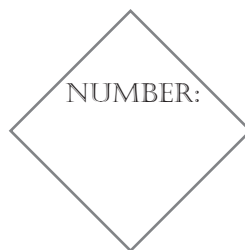


PART I:
AROUND THE
WALLS

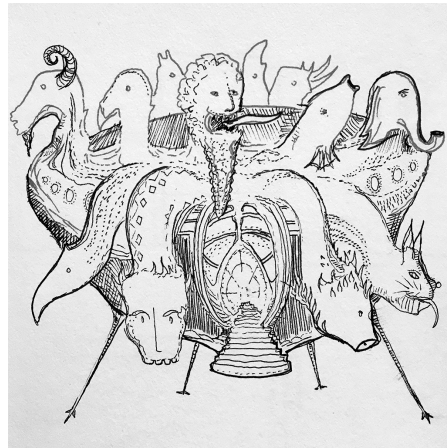
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The Metropolis Epic,
Part I: Around the Walls
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The Metropolis Epic is dedicated to Rowan.



THE METROPOLIS



PART I: AROUND THE WALLS

In a flash of golden light, the Epicurrian touched down on that wavering earth, and I looked upon this world with the eyes of one who has never looked before. Gilt stars in every grain of sand, soon lost to my vision as they became the soil that met my feet. I breathed in the air, an air of willows and notes denatured from fine soft songs, as if songs of the clouds themselves hit my ears.

She was there waiting for me, my guide, the lovely Llagalard. She was dressed in the fashion of her city, which I was now to know and meet: a curved hood and folds of foil-cloth pressed from fine silver and orichalcum wires, small stones of blackest cube and others of fiery reds and azures. Her colors were those of sunsets, and the wash of it over her skin erupted in my heart as a falcon's wind rises from a cooling lake.

“Come with me,” she said, taking my hand and leading me down the fog-stairs of the craft I had arrived in. “We will walk the city's walls, and I will tell you of its becoming.”

1. THE LADDER OF TWO SNAKES

We started in the East, which was a short walk from the place of the Epicurrian's landing. I could see, over my right shoulder, the expanses of a great ocean, grey as the beard of a hermit, whose waves played lightly on a thin strand of rocky beach. Over my left shoulder, West of my landing, the wetlands in which I stood gave way to a twisting, chthonic wood, which I knew, right away, would not beckon me ever into its folds -- it seemed a secret and impenetrable place, to both sight and footstep. And, to the North and West, the Metropolis glittered. A city like no other in the realms of men or gods or beasts, of future past or now. A hold on my heart unraveled as it rose, and I watched it emerge out of a thick mist, alive against the open sky like a twisting vine.

"It is fitting you should land here," said my guide. "We are at the edge of the swamp that divides the mariner's East from the verdant undergrowth of the South, and as you shall ascribe our story to the language of those from without, you put foot down in the land from whence the Norns once came. So to us you are stepping as the fates once stepped and that, I think, is good fortune."

I looked at her eyes, which smiled, though they did not smile particularly for me. She was looking ahead, to her great city -- the unfolding Metropolis.

We walked toward it, over and around the small boulders of the beachhead, until we were just below the great outer wall of the city, which at its Easternmost point collapsed and became a stout tower, presenting its crumbling foundation to the Dull Sea's tides. It loomed over us as a shadow, this tower, impenetrable, taught against the blue curve of the sky. And, looking close, I saw a ladder was there.

"Look down at the ladder's legs where they hit the sand," said Llagalard. "You will find they are not what they seem."

Indeed, I gazed down at the two wooden shafts of the ladder, and saw that they were, instead of feet, two snakes writing unspeakable glyphs upon the sand. I gasped - for snakes in the land from which I had traveled were a sign of ill portent.

"Here, serpents are written closely into the mesh of our time," said Llagalard of the sunset, seeming to know my thoughts. "Fear them not, at least not these little ones. These are the homogenous children of the Two Headed Serpent, who we will see in time. They are the little engines of the great poesis, churning always, and of which you are a welcome agent. They beckon you to climb. Will you?"



I looked down at the friendly earth, then up at the dark edifice of the great Metropolis, whose bell tolls resound in several worlds. Its mysteries were held within it, but they called to me. I climbed, taking not another breath of my old land, but thankful that Llagalard was just behind me.

“Look down, to the beachhead again. See there? That movement?”

I did, stopping for a moment, and saw a feline shadow pacing through the stones.

“That is the panther, kin to long-ago JanJanson. He is stalking a fallen angel, see him there?”

I looked, and saw that that the angel was lying with his back on the beach and clutching a urn between his hands. Waves of the dull sea were playing at his feet.



“The urn of truth,” said Lagallard solemnly. “He has fallen from the spire where the future is made. Here on the strand the panther stalks him.”

I wanted to ask about the spire and its angels, but Llagalard stopped me.

“And there in the waves themselves, look again.”

A dark haired woman was there, looking into a mirror -- stoic, resolute, but sad. She was too far below to see her face clearly, but her round mirror shone brightly in the sunlight, reflecting rainbows from droplets of sprayed sea.

“These dramas which you see on the beach, between the tower and the Dull Sea, they are the way we process fears of the absolute which encroaches always from the East. No bulwark of life here is strong enough to dispel the pull of the supine ocean, and the Woman of the Waves, the

Fallen Angel and the Panther, they play out the story of the end of the tangible self, forever, on these shores.”

We climbed on in silence. Soon the ladder took an odd and angled turn and this led to the beginning of the tower’s true architecture.

2. THE EASTERN TOWER

The tower was festooned with a small collection of portcullises and windows, arched at the top like raising brows of pitted eyes. Into one of these eyes the ladder passed, promising entry to the tower and the city beyond. Up above, most strangely, giant arms grew outward from the windows, unmoving, but slightly shivering in the wind, crossed as though in a state of recoil. One of these arms was holding a star in its titan

hand, another had grown into a crab claw. I found myself slightly repulsed by the akimbo limbs, which were too alive to be statues, but too morbid looking to be attached to something of sentience behind the stone. I felt a nausea gritting in my stomach as we passed at last into the tower, at last into the city's interior - quite askance to the sense of triumph I was attempting to consciously maintain during this threshold moment for my journey.

“As we enter, know this,” said Llagalard, taking me by the shoulder in a light grip. “The Metropolis does not wish you harm in anyway. It does not wish harm for any of us. However, there is darkness in some of its corners. I will help you through it, but if I was you, I would take heed everywhere.”

She looked up at the crossed arms of the hidden titan, and said no more.

In near total darkness we ascended the tower's spiraling, interior staircase. If there was a being attached to those arms, somewhere higher in its turns, I did not see it, and I did not try. A short while later, we were greeted again by a cast of pearly light: the mist-light of the East above the sea pouring in from the tower's skyward hatches. We exited to a small, mossy porch, surrounded with stone walls of shoulder height, and I inhaled gladly, feeling the assurance of the East's sea air in my lungs again with gladness.

“Hoy hoy!” said a voice from near me. I looked up to see, as if materializing from sunbeams, a gallant and torporous figure, clearly dressed in the wizard's garb: a purple cloak festooned with embroidered, golden threads in the pattern of upward reaching branches, each bearing upon it a small crystalline drop of various frozen metals. He was holding in his hands a long, telescoping spyglass, and his head was, like many in the Metropolis, deeply hooded.

“This is the Eastern Wizard,” said Llagalard. “I have told him of your coming.”

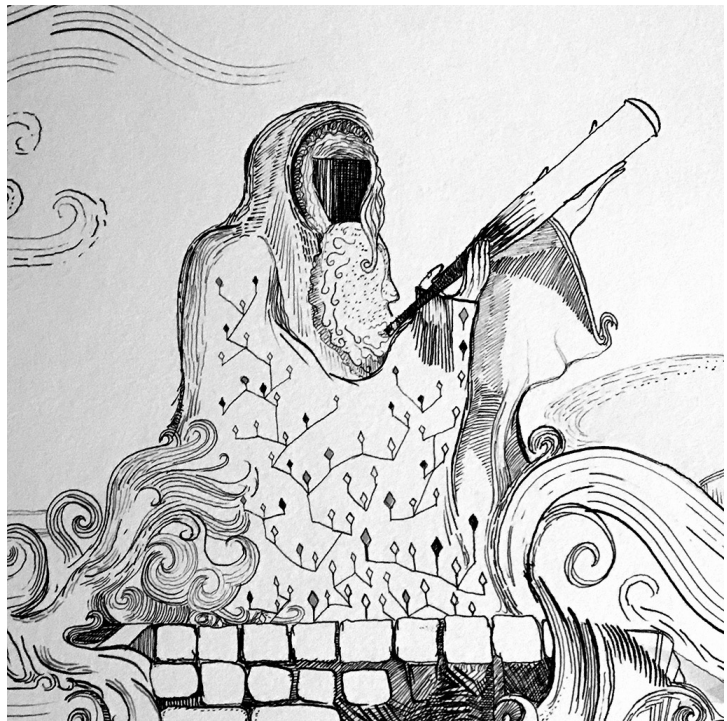
“Aha!” said the wizard, in what would be a shout to most men, but to him, it became clear, was his normal voice. He then heartily shook my hand.

“The Eastern Wizard is one of our primary connection points to worlds immaterial,” said Llagalard in introduction. “He has been stationed here since the early days after the fall of Gorice, and has done us wonders thrice times over. It is he that most clearly sees the absolute, ventilating to site complete images in that hallowed, vaporous plane above the Dull sea.”

The Wizard gave a bit of a bow, smiling in a way that reminded me of a circus performer.

“Let me show you!” he said. “Have a look out, by spyglass, and see what you will! The everlasting essence of the limitless corridors of sky! They open themselves here to the becoming of the rising sun!”

He handed me his telescope, which was heavy in my hands, and I looked through, closing one eye and squinting with the other against its lense.



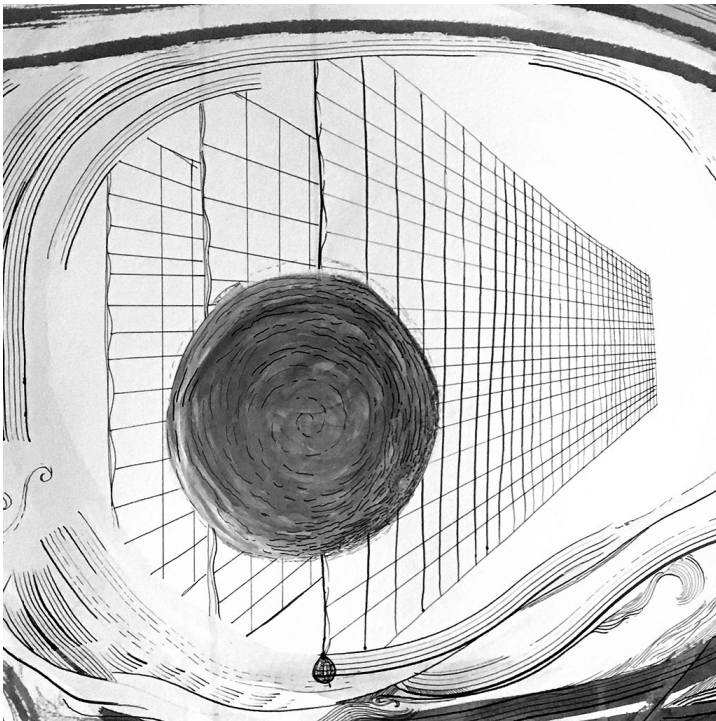
“Ba’ha, ha ha!” said the wizard. “Do not look with your eye! Nay, press your breath into its circumference by your lips! My spyglass is an instrument for site, but site that comes only through breath! Breathe into it as you would an oboe or trombone or lute, not too hard, but steady, and let the sky come to you!”

I looked at Llagalard quizzically, and she nodded.

“Indeed, the Eastern Wizard is an active wizard. He observes, through will of breath, life’s essence. He is, in seeing, materializing the needful from the absolute. He practices the Galdur way, and imparts, with technician’s accuracy, the clarity of the observer.”

Though I did not understand what this meant, I was eager to peer into that sky. So, I raised the telescope to my lips and blew a quick breath. A burst of light came to my eyes. Then, I blew another. Long and steady as I could.

When my exhalation was complete, I had received a vision. The sky became a grid of waving lines, thin as a spider’s thread, forming one grid behind the other till they disappeared in clouds. Upon these, a swirling sun, tempting my eyes to see into it. It was blue, blue as the eyes of blind whales, blue as the centers of icebergs. Taking the telescope from my lips, I was breathless, but my eyes must have shown what I had seen, like trembling diamonds reflecting the whole of a room.



“You have seen it!” said the Wizard, nearly belting me on the shoulder with a happy pat. “You have seen the blue sun, and the endless dimension of possible links from us to the empty all-forever! With practice, the sun would open specificities to you, and you would see all there is behind the wall. I have been watching that sun for the length of my long tenure here, and, with practice, you too could find the monads in its swirling.”

He pointed to the ornate embroidered structure on his cloak, tracing its lines with a finger.

“The tip of each branch here holds the essence of a blue-sun vision I was given! The second sun has given me many active signs, and I stay here long enough, I will drop them all to earth like rain!”

I marveled at the shimmering droplets on his coat, which seemed so heavy with metal that I could hardly believe he could lift his arms.

“Good sir,” I ventured. “What was that stream of green smoke that I saw passing lightly across the blue sun’s face?”

I had only seen it at the very end of my breath, but, stronger than the other visions it seemed burned into my after-sight.

“What? What!” coughed the Wizard, “Nothing crosses over the sun! Let me look! Perhaps it was the droppings of a bird seen through your own eyes after removing my telescope from your lips, nothing like that

could be seen by my glass-for-breath!”

The Wizard took the spy-glass from me with a sudden movement, the metallic bits on his shrouding cloak making like chimes against each other. I watched as he held it to his chest. In a slow way, like the dripping of wax from a wick, his face slipped from his head until it was parallel with his belly in height. From there, his breath began to play into the glass-piece. Gazing at his head still, I saw a strange, glassy substance there where his face had been, smooth and jet black, yet spangled like obsidian, with reflective mauve and cobalt sparks glinting in vertical bands.

“Let us go,” said Llagalard, grabbing my hand and hurrying me down the steps again.

3. THE DRAGON'S CRY

“The Wizard in the East cannot see the lingering smoke trail of the Dragon’s Cry,” said Llagalard when we had departed. “He is disposed to a particular kind of vision, and that what you saw was not meant for him.

She kicked aside some stones that had fallen from the wall.

We were walking away from the tower, toward the South and West. Our path had carried us from the tower’s top through a small series of bright parlors and galleries (the Wizard’s chambers, I was told), then to a long walkway, etched along the top of the wall as if from the passage of some great claw. Ragged it was, this path, a gash in masonry festooned with fern and pebbled rootlet. If it had been meant for walking, it was clearly seldom used.

On our right, down some ways, the interior of the Metropolis came at last to my eye. It was a bleak place from my initial view, dimly lit, with shallow penumbras casting oval and weird on glassy, marble bridges of gargantuan size. It seems that no one was there in this quarter. And probably for good reason. The bridges of marble spiralled madly, tracing a maze like path toward the tower, and then seeming to move lower into what I could only see as darkness down below. The Eastern way is one of lonesomeness, I was later told.



“What is the Dragon’ Cry?” I asked to Llagalard, after some time of further walking there upon the spine of the wall.

“That was the first manifestation of the city’s becoming,” she said. “The farthest back we can trace our history is to that sound, determination and chance rendered into sonic essence for all to hear.”

She went on to tell me the tale of the Dragon's Cry - a myth, it seemed to me, though I could not deny the true serpentine qualities of the smoke trail that lingered for me in the Wizard's glass. If it was a remnant of the Dragon's passage, perhaps there was some truth to all of this.

According to Llagalard, the Dragon passes in eternal directionality, pursuant of some goal only the Dragon knows. He is one of the primary engines of the new at a universal level, far above the city or even its angels' pinnacle, unfurling an endless story which is also at the heart of man. The Dragon, never truly in the past, is operating at a heavenly level, yet deeply tied to all the worlds' fates.

Long ago, before the first age was written to memory, the Dragon passed over the place where the Metropolis now stands. Then, it was an emptiness, a void given to possibility between neighboring dimensions ulterior, like the distant one I came from. When the Dragon saw this, he gave his cry: a wild cry from the depths of his belly, a sound loud enough to be heard in each of the four neighboring worlds.

"And, in these worlds, it was heard by the Wanderers," Llagalard said solemnly. She placed four fingers on her breast, two from each hand to make a diamond, saying their names: "Alathanar, Uluthunger, Tahnengar, Harimat."

The Wanderers, she went on, were individuals in the neighboring dimensions who angled against the primary essences of their worlds, and this allowed them to hear the cry. Hearing it, they were compelled, and journeyed to the place where the Metropolis was to be. They came by boat, by endless empty roads, by the expulsion of the earth. One came by a great serpent crowned in its belly with fire. Each brought an object, and set them there in the place the dragon had seen. These were the forms the city used as its seeds of becoming.

"What were their worlds?" I asked. "What were their bringings?"

But Llagalard did not answer. She was gazing down, across the left hand side of the wall toward the city's long, extending beard of exterior land. She looked at a weathered, round hill set up over the waves beyond where the dunes of the beach ended, and reaching back toward us to abut the wall halfway up its height.

"These basic myths of essence I will tell you later. But for now look below, there, in the folds of that hill, where young snails now crawl upon great rusting arcana. That is the ancient memory of the city in that time. There rests the particulars of a city built by the wanderers - the foundling age, a time when the walls were high and imporous. A time when the bringings shined as beacons and were all, recombinant. The details of those days have come to rest now, lost to time. I will tell you what I know of it -- but here are the feet of its history, its head lays in the Northern sands for loss."

I looked, and could see nothing but a hill. By what she said, and the way we lingered staring at it, I knew she saw more. Strange how, in the Metropolis, so much vision lives only for the seer.

