

PILLARS OF TIME

I'm the first human to stand here. It beats facing the usual death by bureaucracy.

I put my hand on the bark of the gigantic tree and look upward for light. Under my hand the bark's serrations nearly gash my skin. The dimness reveals little except shades of umber and brown, russet and charcoal, occasionally streaked with dull bluish scribbles of the fungals that trace the humid striations of the bark. The fungal colonies add a ripe dry sweetness to the lignin-laced air.

Everywhere is tree. Monstrous trunks pillar upward to high boughs heavy with interlocking branches – these trees make nets of long tangled twigs to catch their own leaf-debris, hungry tendrils sucking like roots in the humid air above and around me. The nets shroud the forest floor in near-blind dark. No sound, except for a faint hiss that seems to come from all around me, echoing both near and far in the darkness.

If I were not here, I would be dead. I'll be dead anyway when they know where I've gone – it's death to enter these great woods from the scarps and arroyos of the South Fall towering north from where I stand. A little genetic test of the debris invisibly aggregating on and in me, and they'll know. So: death sub one or death sub two – which do I choose? At least this will be a more-interesting death, not like the fake trial, the long parade of liars, and the endless waiting in a City cell thousands of feet deep in rock for the always-hungry recyclers.

For murder, I would have been exiled. For a few words spoken, I am to die.

More than eight thousand years ago these same trees stood here while a few human explorers timidly poked at the forest's fringes. Now the trees are so great in girth that ten or twelve tall men, their arms outstretched, couldn't reach a ring around even the least of them. There are no younger trees here, not unless they are seeded and growing somewhere high in the knotted canopy, perhaps in some lightning-hollowed stub of one of these monsters, their roots cannibalizing one of their wounded ancestors. No, 'tree' is not a word I would use to describe this thing bulking beside me. 'Tower' or 'buttress' would still be inadequate.

I don't understand it. Wood from these trees could have built entire cities across all of Tarnus, and there would still be great forests of them left intact over much of Sirathen, right up to the South Fall. The South Fall is where Sirathen leaves off: its three-kilometer-vertical wall of rock soars to where Muathen, our northern land, begins far above. We pillaged the soil and the forests and the mines and the waters

of all the other parts of this planet – what stopped us here in Sirathen? For several thousand years there was no environmental law enforcement; now, we can't even dig a latrine without permits and fees.

My gut coils, complains about its emptiness. I don't have much food or water at all – just what I carried when I staggered in here from the river crevasse – what do I do now? The militia's best hunters and trackers, fresh from the country colls, will be waiting for me if I retrace my path. I can only hide in here and parallel the scarp of the Fall until I can find an unwatched path back out north and thread my way up the next river, if I can find one, back to Muathen.