

WHEN STARS MOVE
& OTHER STORIES

SHANNON RAMPE

To Denise: for her love, her boundless support, and for the tireless effort she put into transforming this book from an idea into a reality.

When Stars Move

The day that Anusha discovered the automaton was the first day she had left her chambers since the storyteller had been hanged.

Mehrab, her favorite brother, came to tell her the news. “The stars moved last night,” he said. “Father received word from the astronomer-priests this morning. You are free again.”

Anusha threw her arms around Mehrab. In the months during her confinement, he had outgrown her. A soft fuzz grew on his cheeks. She knew she was supposed to feel relieved, even grateful. Instead, she felt a terrible emptiness as if she has lost something. She hugged Mehrab fiercely, relishing human contact.

“Come,” Mehrab said, taking her hand. “We are riding for our hunt today. You can join us.”

An hour later, Anusha was bathed in sunlight as she rode along with her brothers. The greenness of the grass and the glare of the azure sky nearly blinded her after months staring at a stone wall. Her pallid skin drank the sunlight. She squinted and kept her eyes on the neck of the roan that carried her, gasping in the sweet spring air. Her brothers laughed and teased one

another, ignoring her. Only Mehrab stayed back and rode alongside her. She waited for him to say something about the storyteller, but he let her have her silence, and for that she was grateful.

The storyteller had come to their kingdom to ply his trade, enchanting her father's court with tales of the Tyrosi Empire: its legends and its people. Anusha had been fascinated. Having never left the palace grounds besides once traveling in a closely guarded caravan, she knew little of the outside world, so Anusha began to sneak the storyteller into her quarters after dark. She knew an unescorted man wasn't permitted in her chambers, but she wanted to hear more—needed to hear more. Not myths or fictions, but stories about the way real people lived.

She had never comprehended the danger to the storyteller. When they were finally caught, the storyteller was sentenced to death. Anusha had begged her father for mercy, but her brother Talat convinced their father to defer to the guidance of the astronomer-priests, and their pronouncement left no room for interpretation.

After her mistake, she had vowed to herself that she would never let another come to harm because of her foolish wants. She couldn't bring the storyteller back to life—that was a shame she would carry for the rest of her days—but she could avoid hurting anyone else in the future. She merely had to behave.

Some miles from the palace, they stopped at a creek to water their horses. The brothers crowded together, discussing where they would most likely find the gazelles that danced across the grasslands at this time of year, and which of them was the best archer. Anusha was glad to hear their voices; she had missed them in her seclusion, even self-important Talat, the Crown Prince. Yet their laughter was still too much to bear, as if they didn't yet know that the world was a cruel, unjust place.

She escaped down to the muddy banks of the stream. Torrential rains early in the year had churned the earth and torn up all the vegetation along the banks, leaving a muddy flat pocked with stones and dead stalks. The stream had sunk back to its regular level in the intervening months but had left a changed landscape in its wake. Like her heart.

Anusha picked up a polished river stone when the glint of metal caught her eye. On the opposite bank, something round gleamed in the afternoon sunlight. Her brothers were still occupied in their discussion. She lifted her skirts and waded across the muddy stream.

“Anusha?” called Mehrab.

“I’ve found something,” she replied. She knelt in the dirt, ruining her skirts, and scooped aside a handful of earth. Whatever it was, it was big, a burnished metal dome like a giant tortoise shell half-buried in the mud.

She heard splashing behind her. A hand grabbed her and yanked her roughly to her feet. Talat. “You think this is any way for a princess to behave, wallowing in the dirt? Perhaps you need another six months in your chambers.”

To her dismay, tears stung the corners of her eyes. “Let go of me!”

“Hey, look at this,” her other brothers called. Mehrab and the other two were clearing away the dirt around the shell, exposing it to the sun and sky. Anusha twisted free of Talat’s grasp as he turned to stare. She returned to the dirt to help them work, pushing away tears with dirty palms and leaving muddy streaks on her face. She hated crying.

They had uncovered an automaton of iron and decayed wood, one of hundreds of war machines brought south by the Tyrosi army when they had invaded Arak nearly a century ago. Anusha knew that battles had been fought near here, but she had never imagined automatons stalking across these grasslands with their fire cannons.

The machine was nearly ten spans tall, corroded with rust. Its arrow-shaped head was packed with mud, but its ocular sensors appeared undamaged. Some emblem was stamped on the barrel-shaped torso. Anusha tore a strip of her skirts free and wiped away the grime. Most of the stamp was too rusted away to see, but there were four letters of the Tyrosi alphabet that Anusha could make out: S-T-A-N. The rest was rusted away.

In children's stories, the automatons were monsters, belching smoke and crushing everything in their wake. But this thing that lay before her wasn't frightening at all. It looked frail and alone.

"Let's be off," Talat said. "It will be time for the meal soon and the leaders of the Chidu clan are here."

"No!" Anusha cried. The thought of leaving this thing alone out here, to be picked over by the insects, to rust away under the ruthless elements, was unbearable. "I mean, this is a valuable find. Father will want to see it. Help me gather branches. We can make a litter and use the horses to drag it back."

Talat scowled, but Mehrab and the others were already moving to help. Anusha had won this engagement, but with Talat, she knew that she would pay.

#

Their father paced back and forth across the workshop, bristling with anger, while Anusha and her brothers stared at the floor. It had taken them almost four hours to drag the automaton back to the palace. They had missed the dinner with the Chidu clan. "It is an insult."

"Father," Talat began, "Anusha—"

Their father snatched Talat's scarf in his fist and yanked his head forward. "I would have expected such behavior from you least of all. You are to be Sultan one day." He shoved Talat back. "You have shamed me."

Talat's face reddened. He bowed. "Forgive me father. There was no excuse."

"Chidu had come to discuss marrying his son to Anusha. We could have made an important alliance. Now, we may have made a new enemy. This at a time when our very borders are threatened by raiders." Their father waved them off. "You have all failed me. Begone from my sight."

Anusha felt a heat creep up her neck. Was that relief? She had no desire to be married, to join some stranger's harem. She couldn't bring herself to feel ashamed, even if what father said about the raiders was true.

She realized that Talat was staring at her, his face carefully devoid of expression in a way that made Anusha very uneasy.

#

The next morning, Anusha came to the workshop, where old Master Haja spent his hours repairing stoves, reassembling broken furniture, and patching holes in the guards' armor. He had always doted on Anusha and she had little difficulty convincing him to allow her into his workshop with the remains of the automaton.

Haja had, in secret, collected a few dozen forbidden books on Tyrosi engineering, but he did not understand their language and so they remained useless to him. But Anusha could read Tyrosi, and in her hands, their secrets came to life. She read to Haja of the heresy called thermodynamics. After each chapter, they studied the mass of coils, corroded tanks, cracked pipes, and vents clogged with mud and other detritus beneath the automaton's outer hull.

“Here,” Haja said, pointing. “This must be where the steam gathers.”

“And back here is the furnace,” Anusha replied. “Look, coal residue. And over here the pistons and master cylinder.”

Haja grinned, his mouth full of gaps where teeth had long-since fallen out. “You will soon be an engineer in your own right.”

There was much work to be done. The automaton’s wooden joints had decayed and had to be carved anew. Anusha was no good with a knife, but she spoke to the cooks and found one whose son was a skilled carver. She gave him three silvers to carve the new joints. Haja fired up his furnace, melted down old pots and pans, and forged new hardware from tin and copper. Slowly, over a period of weeks, they began to repair the automaton.

Each day when Anusha put her hands on the automaton, scrubbing off rust or tightening bolts, it was like reaching into another place, another time. It connected her to a larger world, allowed her to forget, for a few hours at least, that she was a princess locked in a cage of family and culture. After returning to her apartment at night, she lay in bed, dreaming of the world beyond the palace walls.

The automaton’s head was the most challenging. Inside was mounted a small box packed with gold frames and tiny shuttles, like a loom. Bundles of wire ran from this contraption to the ocular sensors and down through a network of cabling throughout the automaton’s frame. “This must be the electrical brain,” Haja said. Their books said nothing of this. They were well outside their territory. They could only hope that everything inside still functioned.

The day came when all the repairs they could make were completed. Haja nodded. “Let us assemble it.”

Haja filled the boiler with water and packed the furnace with coal. They rigged up a harness of leather straps to sit the machine upright. Haja climbed onto the table and pressed the ignition switch. There was a hissing, a ticking, and then the firebox roared to life. The machine didn't move.

Anusha's heart sank. "It isn't working."

Haja circled around to stand next to her. "Wait a few minutes. Remember, it's powered by steam, and so the furnace needs to generate enough heat to boil the water in the boiler."

As he said this, they heard a gurgle, then a belch, and a clod of dirt shot out of one of the exhaust tubes on the automaton's shoulder. The machine began to shudder. Suddenly, its head shot up and swung around. It moved its arms from side to side, becoming entangled in the leather straps holding it upright.

"It's working," Anusha said, clapping her hands.

"Look out!" Haja said. He scurried beneath his workbench, covering his head with his hands.

The automaton staggered to its feet, twisted, and fell to its knees. At the sound of their voices, it turned its head towards them. Sounds emerged from its head as if through a metal pipe. "Where am I?" the automaton cried in thickly accented Tyrosi. "Help!"

#

The automaton had no name, just a part number, now long since worn away. Anusha took to referring to him as Stan, a fragment of the name "Standard Engineering Works," the manufactory where he was built.

It took some time for Anusha and Haja to explain to the automaton what had happened, that a century had passed. The Tyrosi army had been turned back not far from here; Stan had

fought in that battle. The Arakash cavalry, supported by regiments of alchemical cannons, had driven the invaders back. Shortly after that, the Tyrosi had withdrawn from Arak entirely, political instability forcing the army home. Within a year, new treaties had been drawn up between Arak and Tyros. They had been trading partners ever since, albeit cautious ones.

“The Tyrosi Armored Division? It is gone?” Stan asked. He had settled down from his earlier thrashing and Anusha and Haja had freed him from the leather straps.

“I’m afraid so,” Anusha said. “The alchemical cannons...”

Stan turned his head to the rafters above and Anusha had the sense that he was looking somewhere else. “It rained fire. Like burning pitch, only hotter. Our hulls were scorched. There was so much smoke, I couldn’t see anything. The wood of my joints...” he looked down, saw the still-green oak of his newly fashioned joints. “I went into the river to try to put out the flames. That’s the last thing I remember.”

Anusha couldn’t imagine what Stan was thinking, how strange it must feel to awaken after a hundred years and find the world a different place. “I’m sorry about your friends,” she said awkwardly.

Stan flexed his arms, testing his new joints. Something inside him hummed. “Friends? We were not permitted. We were made for war.” He looked up at her. “I never had a friend.”

#

The Sultan was angry with Anusha when he found out how much time she was spending in Haja’s workshop. She was supposed to be practicing sewing and learning politics and history, learning to be a princess, not whiling away hours with some tinker. Anusha panicked, afraid that she had put Haja at risk the way she had the Storyteller.

But her father was intrigued by the automaton. “This is the first thinking machine in the employ of a sultan of Arak.” The astronomer-priests warned him that such things were evil, but he ordered the automaton to be polished, cleaned, and decorated with a velvet cape with a silver chain.

“You are so fond of the thing,” the Sultan told Anusha, “you can see it every day. Automaton, you will guard my foolish daughter. See that she does not step foot outside of her apartments without an escort and that she stays out of trouble.”

Stan bowed low like a storybook knight. “It would be my greatest honor.”

Thus, began a very fine friendship. Stan and Anusha whiled away the days in Anusha’s apartments, strolling through the opulent gardens heady with the smells of star jasmine. Stan was unable to smell, but he was fascinated by the diversity of color and texture of the many hundreds of flowers. She taught him the history of her family, how the astronomer-priests had read God’s words in the stars and named her great-grandfather the Sultan of all lands west of the River Dayim. She taught him to braid her waves of hair, how to stand when in the presence of nobles, how to sew and paint.

Stan was terrible at all these activities, being too bulky to be very dextrous. However, he was inspired by the idea of making things, and he soon found a chisel and went to work on a crumbling block of granite in the corner of one of the gardens. He spent hours each day, tapping away flakes of stone while she took lessons with her tutor.

Anusha taught Stan to speak and read Arak and explained the importance of words to her people. She told him how God had made the world, by taking unformed mass and naming it. The stars were messages from God. The astronomer priests read and interpreted the movements of the stars, transcribed them into words, a new page every night, a new tome every year. They had

been keeping such records for seven hundred years, since the First Astronomer Arakash had first deciphered the language of God. These were the teachings of God, the laws of Arak, the customs and rituals of its people.

Anusha showed him the foods they ate and drank—fish and figs and rice and sweet white wine. Stan did not eat, he simply needed fuel to be added to his tinderbox every few days. One time, Anusha emptied a bottle of wine into his boiler. Alcoholic vapors came pouring out of his exhaust and he staggered around, laughing, and accidentally crushing a dining table.

“Are you never bored?” Anusha asked him one day, wishing she could see another city, another land. “You’re trapped here, just like me.”

Stan turned from his block of granite, now beginning to look like a roughly-hewn egg with several oddly-shaped bulges. “When I was created, I was trained for guard duty. My life was standing guard at different places around the city of Pharos. I saw many things I wished to try, but I was not permitted. And then, when I was one year old, the war began.”

“You’re only one?”

He shrugged. “Or one hundred and one. Without a family, without belonging, what does it even matter?”

Anusha pulled her shawl close. She spent so much time complaining about her lot in life, she never stopped to think about how alone Stan must feel. She took one of his iron fingers in her two hands. “You do belong.”

#

Stan became Anusha’s new storyteller. He didn’t know myths and legends, the way the storyteller had, but he remembered much of the real Tyros. He told her of the markets of Pharos, the many-colored tapestries, the spices, the booksellers, the toymakers, the fishmongers. He

could describe things down to very specific details, the weave in a certain carpet or the number of fish sold on a given day. His memory was precise, and the details brought Tyros to life for Anusha in a way she had never imagined. He told her of the people he saw and heard, repeated conversations he had heard about money, about washing laundry, about whose cousin or uncle was coming to visit or whose niece wouldn't leave.

The stories reignited a burning hunger in Anusha that she thought she had contained: a longing to experience the outside world. Stan reminded her uncomfortably of the Storyteller and she worried about what would happen to him. She tried to convince herself not to ask for his stories, to sit quietly and behave, but she couldn't help herself. His stories brought to life a world that she yearned to experience.

As they gazed up at the night sky one evening, he told her of the star-cults of Tyros, where there was not just one god, but thousands, hundreds of thousands. Every family, every soldier, every merchant or trade guild had its patron star, a god with a history and a following. As the stars shifted in the skies, so did the fortunes of those whose lives were associated with those stars. People went to the priests of the various star cults to pray that their patron would shift to a favorable position. The priests would sacrifice a chicken or a goat or burn sacred feathers depending upon the donation of the supplicant. And as the stars moved in their strange patterns, those priests would interpret the new relationship. A move from one quadrant of the sky to another might signal that a noble family had lost favor with the imperials. Two stars moving closer together could turn one-time enemies into fast allies.

Anusha laughed at this. It sounded so ridiculous. How could anyone believe such stories?

Stan shrugged. "There were no gods for the automata, such as me. The makers say that we have no souls."

The writings of God said that automata were nothing more than lifeless machines, anathema. To think that Stan was lifeless was unimaginable to her. He was her friend. She felt her face grow hot and looked away. The words of God were unquestionable, and yet...

Stan turned to her. "What does your God have to say of automata?"

Anusha heard the need in his metallic voice. Here was a creature alone in the world, taught that he had no soul. She closed her eyes and thought of another passage. "All things on heaven and earth are of the hand of God," she murmured. "All things are sacred."

Perhaps it wasn't the interpretation that the astronomer-priests had intended, but it wasn't truly a lie, either.

Stan turned back to the night sky. "Whenever I think of my maker, I think of men on an assembly line. I never thought of a god making me."

"Do men make the wood of your joints? Do they make the iron of your hull? The copper of your wiring?"

"I suppose not," Stan said.

Stan's boiler rumbled, and Anusha knew that he was smiling.

#

The annual Feast of the Astral Communion came before Anusha knew it. It was her favorite holy day, where the priesthood celebrated union with God through the passage of the stars across the sky and everyone feasted on sweet almond pastries and candied ginger.

Anusha decorated Stan with ribbons and bows and he escorted her to the feast hall. Anusha immediately noticed something was different. The women of the harem, her mother included, were secluded from the rest of the family members, priests, and guests from the feast. The women had been crowded to a small corner of the hall where they were ringed by guards.

Anusha went forward hesitantly to the front of the hall, where her father stood arguing with the new high priest. Talat stood next to the priest, a smarmy grin on his face.

Anusha moved to her traditional seat, next to her father, but Talat caught sight of her. He pushed past the priest and her father, his angular face bright with delight, and grabbed Anusha's arm.

"The women must sit apart from the men, as is according to the word of God," he snarled.

"Ow!" Anusha cried. Talat's was squeezing her hard enough to leave a bruise.

Stan stepped forward and shoved Talat to the ground as if he weighed no more than a bundle of twigs. Talat's eyes widened.

"Stan, stop!" Anusha shouted. An icy dread suffused her as she saw the terrible hate that surfaced on Talat's face. Everyone was staring.

Stan hesitated. "But he was hurting you."

Anusha grabbed Stan's arm, pulling him back. "You can't just hit people. It's not right."

Stan hunched his shoulders and shrank into himself. "I didn't know..."

Anusha pulled him away. "Return to my apartment and stay there."

Stan wouldn't look at her. "Very well." There was a cold, mechanical echo to his voice. He turned and shuffled out of the hall.

Anusha hurried over to the women's tables and sat down in their midst, careful to keep her head down. Her throat felt like it might close up. The beating of her heart thundered in her ears.

She spared a glance towards the front of the hall. Talat was arguing in a hushed voice with her father; the priest stood beside Talat, looking serene. Talat looked increasingly wild and

raised his voice. Then her father shouted, “I am still the Sultan, and in my house we will follow my rules.”

Talat turned away and marched out of the hall. The high priest bowed to her father and followed suit. Moments later, the guards were ordered to disperse. Several of the women of the harem went to other tables, but most remained in the corner. A hush had fallen over the hall. Anusha remained where she was, keeping her head down.

“You’ll bring ruin on us all,” the woman beside her hissed.

Anusha swallowed a lump of anxiety in her throat. She feared the woman might be right. She stared at the pile of sweets in front of her but had lost her appetite.

#

Anusha waited for Talat to take his revenge, but Talat left on a diplomatic visit to cousins and allies in the city of Siakh. Anusha wasn’t clear whether he went of his own accord or whether her father had sent him away, but it was as if a cloud had lifted once Talat departed. Anusha pretended to be happy, but Stan remained subdued and spoke infrequently.

One afternoon, Anusha and Stan sat in her apartments, attempting to sew an automaton-sized cloak, when Mehrab rushed into Anusha’s chambers without an invitation. “Talat is coming.”

Confusion buzzed in Anusha’s skull, followed by a painful swell of anxiety in her gut. “What do you mean? He is away in Siakh.”

“He has returned, flanked by an Imam and followed by a company of holy warriors. They’re coming for your automaton. To destroy him.”

Stan stood abruptly, overturning the table and backing against the wall.

Snakes of dread curled through Anusha's body, threatening to choke her. Talat was having his revenge at last. "Don't let them, Mehrab. Please."

Mehrab shook his head. "I can't do anything, Anusha. Talat..."

The sound of shouting voices and booted feet came from the hallways. Talat shoved Mehrab aside and strode into the room. His head was shaved, and he was dressed in the white robes of the Sultan. Her father's robes. Anusha didn't understand what was happening.

"You can't have him!" Anusha shouted. She heard herself from outside her body, felt like she was moving underwater.

"You are a stupid girl, Anusha," Talat snarled. "Worse, you commit a grave sin by protecting this abomination."

An Imam came into the room, his eyes ringed by charcoal so that the whites peered out like stars in the night sky. "The words of God are clear, child. This thing is anathema. It must be destroyed. You have committed an atrocity and you must do penance if you wish to save your soul."

Behind the Imam, four holy warriors flanked her father. They wore curved swords at their hips and their faces were covered by linen wraps, leaving only their eyes exposed. "Father," Anusha cried. "Please, don't let them do this."

Her father had been stripped of his Sultan's robe, reduced to wearing a plain tunic and trousers. His beard and hair were in disarray and there were bruises on his arms. Without the robe that he wore like armor, he looked shrunken somehow. "Talat, cease this behavior at once!"

Without looking back, Talat gestured and one of the holy warriors cuffed her father across the mouth.

Anusha was stunned. No one laid a hand on the Sultan. The punishment was death. What was happening? “Father!”

Anusha couldn’t believe her eyes, now welling with tears. Everything had been turned upside down. “Father!”

“Galdir,” Talat made a point of using their father’s given name, “has spoiled you relentlessly, given you whatever you wish, though his actions cast a shade over our family. No man who commits such blasphemy may lead our people.”

“Talat has made good his vow to God by exposing this heresy, though it brings shame on his family,” the Imam said. “It is a sign of a strong leader. He will take over in your father’s stead.”

Talat pointed at Stan. “There it is.”

“Take the abomination and place it in the dungeons,” the Imam said to the warriors. “I will consult the words of God tonight and we will best determine how to expunge its corruption from the palace.”

Everything that held Anusha’s world together broke apart and the cord of fear inside of her snapped. She flung herself at Talat. His eyes widened with surprise and fear and she felt a wicked glee at seeing him frightened for once. A part of her knew she shouldn’t feel this way, that he was her brother and she was supposed to love him unconditionally, but right now she wanted to hurt him.

Hands grabbed her roughly, pulling her away from Talat and shoving her to the floor. She struggled but the holy warriors held her fast. “Let me go!” she cried.

Talat clenched his fists and for a moment Anusha felt convinced he would murder her right there. But he must have known that the Imam would disapprove, and he wrenched his gaze away from her. “Mehrab, get her under control,” Talat ordered.

Mehrab scowled, and for a moment Anusha thought he would refuse. Then he bowed his head and hauled Anusha to her feet, holding her fast despite her struggling.

“Don’t let them take you, Stan. You can fight them!”

“I don’t want to cause any more trouble,” Stan said. He had remained frozen through all of this. “I’m sorry, Anusha.”

The holy warriors advanced. Two of them carried swords, the other two carried thick coils of rope. It should have been comical. Stan could have knocked them aside like play toys. Instead, he knelt and let them tie the ropes around his neck. They yanked as hard as they could but couldn’t budge him. Finally, he stood and allowed them to lead him out of the room.

He looked back at Anusha, but to Anusha everything was a blur.

“Don’t allow her out to leave this room,” Talat said to Mehrab. “I’ve arranged for her to be married once she’s completed her absolutions with the Imam. I don’t want to have to deal with any more of her shameful actions before then.”

Mehrab hesitated, keeping his eyes on the floor. “Very well, brother.”

She wanted to fight, to stop Talat somehow, but her body refused to cooperate. And then it was too late. Stan was gone. Talat was gone. Her father was gone. She collapsed on her bed and burst into sobs, furious at herself for being able to do nothing.

#

Anusha cried herself to sleep. When she woke, the stars were blazing, weaving new patterns in their slow parade. God was speaking.

The astronomer-priests would annotate each star's position on a chart, compare that chart against hundreds of others, interpret meanings as a collective, and then inscribe those interpretations as the words of God. Anusha didn't have time for that. She needed God to speak to her directly.

Minutes crept into hours. The stars skated around one another like the universe's slowest dancers. Anusha heard no voices, saw no answers painted across the sky. She was searching for a sign, some guidance that would make a course of action clear to her. Wasn't that how this was supposed to work? Doubt began to creep in.

What kind of God would put men such as Talat in charge? What kind of God would doom her friend? What kind of God would place this yearning ache to be free in her heart, and then deny her that freedom? Perhaps God was speaking to them, but none of them knew how to listen. Or perhaps there was no God at all, just men who used the stars as an excuse to exert their will over others. The thought left her feeling cold and empty.

No obvious answers came from the sky, but Anusha felt a coal of certainty burning at the very center of her being. She closed her eyes and spoke aloud, giving voice to the truth she knew in her heart until a fierce determination stole over her. "I am a person, not a trophy, and I deserve the freedom to choose my own life. Stan is my friend, not an abomination, and I won't let them hurt him."

She repeated these words over and over and gradually, she became convinced of what she had to do. It would not be without risk. If she failed, she knew that the punishment would be her last. She swallowed her fear.

Her door was locked from the outside. "Mehrab," Anusha hissed.

A moment later, the door opened. Mehrab was bleary-eyed and a fine stubble grew on his chin. He scowled. “What are you doing, Anusha?”

“Let me past. I won’t let Talat destroy Stan.”

Mehrab shook his head, standing in the doorway to block her passage. “You can’t stop him. Talat is in the right. He has the Imam on his side.”

“Do you really believe that Stan is an abomination meant to destroy life?”

“I know that you think this automaton is your friend, but it is only a clever machine. It isn’t worth throwing away your life.”

Anusha snatched her brother’s wrist. “I need to show you something. Please.”

Mehrab stared down at her hand on his wrist. She had never dared lay a hand on one of her brothers before. “Very well, but let’s be quick about it or Talat will have us both in chains.”

She led him to the garden. In the moonlight, beneath a high window, lay a forgotten stone carved into the shape of an automaton with a deer cradled in its arms. It was incredibly lifelike, the lines and angles suggesting power and grace at the same time.

“What is this?” Mehrab asked.

“A sculpture. Stan made it.”

Mehrab stared, his troubled face was like stone in the moonlight. “You told him to do this?

“No. He saw shape in the stone and did it himself. Do you really believe that he is only a clever machine? He is alive, Mehrab! He thinks. He feels. He has a soul, just like you and I.”

Mehrab’s nostrils flared. “But the Imam...”

“The Imam is a man, not God. He and Talat are wrong. They are using Stan as an excuse to depose father and punish me.”

Mehrab looked around, trying to avoid Anusha's gaze. "We must show them this sculpture. Perhaps they will reconsider."

Anusha grabbed his sleeve, demanded his attention. "You know they will not. They will kill him. You must help me, Mehrab. I cannot free him without you."

Mehrab looked uncomfortable and Anusha knew she had won. "There is no going back from this, Anusha. Talat will not forgive this transgression."

Anusha hardened herself. "I know."

They hurried through the back hallways of the palace to the kitchen entrance to the dungeon. Anusha could feel the weight of the granite walls around her as they descended into darkness. In a circle of torchlight, two holy warriors stood guard before a cell door. Anusha's heart pounded so loudly in her chest that she feared the warriors would hear it.

Anusha hid in an alcove while Mehrab ran ahead. "The princess is escaped!" Mehrab cried. "Come with me. We must find her immediately."

The two warriors looked at one another. "My lord," said the first, "we were given strictest orders not to leave this post."

Mehrab gnashed his teeth. "The automaton isn't going anywhere, and likely if it were, you couldn't stop it anyway. Now come with me and make yourselves useful, or I'll see you both beaten and shamed before the Imam."

The two warriors fell in behind him. Anusha held her breath as they left the dungeons. Once their footsteps had faded, she hurried to the cell door.

It was stout oak, reinforced with iron bars and locked with a clasp bigger than her fist. She could just see a hulking shadow in the corner through a slot in the door. Her heart leapt. "Stan," she said softly.

“Anusha?” The shadow shifted and Stan’s ocular sensors glittered in the torchlight. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Did they hurt you?”

“There isn’t much they can do to me with swords,” Stan said. “What are you doing here?”

“The guards are gone. I’m here to help you escape.”

Stan sat quietly.

“What’s wrong?” Anusha asked, puzzled by his silence. “Come, let’s break this door.”

“I cannot.” The flatness of his voice made Anusha’s blood run cold.

“What are you talking about? They’re going to destroy you. You’ve got to get out of here.”

“I’m only a machine, Anusha. You’re a living, breathing person. If I escape, Talat will know that it was you who helped me. You’ll be punished terribly, maybe killed. I swore to protect you. What good would I be doing if my actions got you hurt? No, it is better that they use my joints for kindling and repurpose my boiler into a cookstove. I won’t be a trouble to you any longer.”

“That’s ridiculous. I don’t want them to hurt you.”

“I don’t feel pain, my princess. I’m not alive. I don’t have a soul. I’m a thing made by men, an abomination, like your Imam says. I’m a parody of life, a tasteless joke.”

Hot tears streamed down Anusha’s cheeks but she didn’t care this time. “That’s not true. They’re wrong! They don’t know you like I do.”

“I’m sorry, Anusha. It will be better this way.”

Anusha kicked the door. “It will be better if you are melted to slag? If I am married off to some other man’s harem and kept locked away like some treasure? How is that better?”

Stan shifted but said nothing.

“You cannot protect me if you let them destroy you. I won’t live under Talat’s thumb. I refuse to be traded off for political favors like a jewel. I am fleeing the palace tonight and I don’t ever intend to return.” This was the secret flame she had fanned in her heart. It was time to leave. “Escape is risky, but so is being alive, Stan. That’s what it means to be alive, to take risks and to feel.”

“Where will you go? What will you do?”

“I don’t know, but I am leaving. I will need help. I know very little of the outside world. Will you help me, my friend?”

Stan shifted his bulk and his sensors glittered in the torchlight. Anusha wished she could reach through the doors and touch him. “Come with me, my friend.”

Stan climbed to his feet. “Stand back.”

“What?”

“Move!” There was fire in his voice. She could smell the coal burning and realized how comfortable she had become around his smell.

She stepped aside. The door exploded outwards, the lock shattering like ice, the hinges popping out of the wall. Stan shifted sideways and wiggled through the splintered doorway into the hall with her. Anusha was smiling so hard her cheeks hurt. She jumped into his arms and pressed her cheek against his cool metal head.

“We should probably go,” Stan said, placing her down gently.

They fled up the stairs and through the kitchen, Stan crushing furniture and smashing down doors when they obstructed him. In the yard beyond the kitchen, they could hear shouting and see the glow of fire coming from the granary. Dozens of figures were running in that direction, away from the stables. “Thank you, Mehrab,” she whispered. When it was all over, she knew Mehrab would be punished in her place, and that was a guilt she would forever carry. But now wasn’t the time to worry about that; she and Stan had to escape or Mehrab’s sacrifice would be meaningless.

The stables were barred from the inside, but Stan crashed through the door as if it were made of parchment. Two holy warriors stood before them, their curved swords drawn.

“Throw down your weapons,” Anusha shouted. “By the order of the Sultan!”

“We serve a higher power than your family,” said one of the warriors. His voice shook despite his bold words.

“God will grant us the strength to destroy this abomination,” shouted the other. The holy warriors charged.

Stan pushed Anusha behind him. The warriors’ steel blades clanged against his hull and bounced off, leaving dull nicks.

Stan grabbed the sword blades and yanked them from the warriors’ hands. He snapped the weapons in half and then grabbed each of the warriors, one in each arm.

“Mighty God,” cried one, “strike this abomination down with your holy meteor.”

The other man sobbed hysterically. “It’s going to kill us!”

“I’d rather not,” Stan said. He tossed the pair of them into the pen of an old mare that huffed at her intruders. Then he hefted a colossal wooden beam and propped it against the door of the pen. “That should keep them busy.”

Anusha released the other horses and sent them running in all directions. That would buy them a few hours. It would have to be enough.

She climbed atop her roan. There was no beast large enough to bear Stan, but he needed no mount. He could run for miles without tiring or slowing. Behind the stable were open pastures ringed by a stone wall that had been crumbling for decades. There were plenty of avenues through which they could escape into the wilds beyond. She'd brought a pack with some clothes, a few pieces of bread and cheese, and some coins.

“Anusha, you’re sure you want to do this?” Stan asked.

Anusha gazed back at the stone walls and towers that had been her entire life. She had friends here, like Haja. She had family that she loved and cared for. But this place was also a prison. She turned to the empty night before her, stars flickering wildly against the darkened sky of the new moon. Her roan cantered uneasily. “I don’t know what the future holds, Stan. I can’t read the answers in the stars, but I know in my heart that I can’t be here any longer. I want to be free. I want to be in the world, and I want my friend with me.”

Stan’s boiler rumbled and his ocular sensors glowed brighter. “Let’s go, then!”

Side-by-side, Stan and Anusha fled, Anusha’s roan galloping beneath her and Stan’s pistons pumping alongside. For the first time in her life, Anusha felt truly free. Behind them, the flames outside the palace lit up the night like a star skating across the sky.

Ghost Parade

I streak across a galaxy of breathless stars in a ship that should have been recycled ages ago, her hull disfigured with old scars and new wounds. I am Captain and Master of the *Hermes*, Navarch of the Macedonian Third Fleet. Elpinor, my Chief Officer, friend, confidant, and lover, stands by my side. I am on pilgrimage.

I am huddled in my captain's chair. The lights are too bright. The wheezing of the air recyclers grates on my frayed nerves. I haven't eaten in days.

The *Hermes* is gasping her dying breaths. The air in the ship tastes metallic, though atmospheric pressure remains constant. Elpinor monitors the barely-functioning life support and

propulsion systems. The bridge is otherwise deserted. The crew is gone. Many used the ejection pods during the final hours of the Pirasu's devastating counterattack. Others remain entombed in the holds.

The Hermes' engines have been running at critical for weeks. I need to know the ship can make it. Instinctively, I reach for *her* voice inside my head, my *warmind*, but she is gone. Nothing but a phantom pain remains. I touch the bandage on the back of my head, the wound where I cut her out.

Elpinor catches my furtive action. We both pretend nothing has happened, though I see his concern. I stretch out my legs and sit up straight, endeavoring to appear strong and confident. I reach for the command computer, searching, but I quickly become confused in the complex layers of menus and commands. I've never done this by myself before, without my warmind's help.

"Our fuel reserves are at nine percent," Elpinor says without my asking. "Life support could last another month or another hour. My Captain." He grins and his white teeth gleam against his black skin.

It's a joke between us, something he called me in bed. For the thousandth? millionth? time, I forgive him for his insolence. He's too beautiful to despise, too loyal. I marvel at his unshakeable equanimity.

Why are you still here? I want to ask, but don't. I need him right now. He's my only tether in this metal can pitched across an emptiness too vast to comprehend.

"I had a dream," I tell him again. "The night after we bombed Pirasu. I saw a peaceful world, carpeted in silence. It glowed against the blackness of the night sky like a jewel. I knew as soon as I saw it that I could be free there, really free."

“A place of absolution?”

“Absolution.” I repeat the word softly, a verbal talisman. I rub my palms against the cool metal arms of my chair and stare at the star chart on the view screen for a long time, searching for a world that only exists in my dreams.

There were originally seven of us—experimental warmind candidates. Two died in the first few months, their brains and nervous systems incapable of handling the crush of data. Of the five of us who lived, one was so unstable as to require permanent hospitalization. The remaining four were able to adapt to the sound of another voice inside of our heads and the program was declared a success. I remember when I first heard that voice. I found it soothing to know I wasn’t alone any longer.

I was placed in command of the Third Fleet, a strike force of a hundred ships meant for heavy assault. We wrecked the Pirasu vanguard. We pushed them out of our regions of the galaxy and drove them back into their own systems. Their fleets were scattered.

We destroyed their fringe colonies, their way stations and orbital shipyards. I wasn’t satisfied until we reached Ziss, a Pirasu core world ripe with cities.

Elpinor stood beside me on the bridge that day while the crew worked furiously around us. I ate a flavorless meal and watched our planetbusters rain down on the surface of the planet, rendering it uninhabitable for generations.

“Do you feel satisfied at having achieved vengeance?” he asked. There was no accusation in his question, just honest curiosity. Some of the crew stared, overcome by the devastation we had unleashed. Others cheered.

I stared at the satellite feed of the surface, boiling with molten rock, and searched my heart. I had struggled for years, given up everything for this moment. But I felt no elation, no

relief at having claimed “justice”. I felt no satisfaction at having my revenge, nor any absence from lacking those feelings. I tried to conceive of all the innocent dead, millions, maybe billions vaporized. I felt no guilt, no remorse at what I had done.

Elpinor placed his large, warm hand over my small, cold one. “I feel nothing at all,” I said.

The warmind was chemically regulating my emotional response to the situation, of course. I truly grasped then what I had lost by taking on the warmind. I had traded my soul for the mind of a supercomputer.

She knew everything I knew. She must have glimpsed my secret decision in that moment to kill her. And yet she remained silent. That night I dreamed of the peaceful world.

Critical warning lights startle me from the chemical soup of my memories. My warmind isn’t there to tell me what they mean, how to react. The ship is breaking down, the hull threatening to fold in on itself.

“What’s happening?” I croak. My body barely responds. “Give me a report.”

When Elpinor doesn’t reply, I turn to him, but he is gone. Was he ever even there?

I am alone on a dying ship. No crew. No Elpinor. No warmind. My breathing quickens. The backup computer is reporting total system failure. I try to bring up a status report, but the console dims and then blinks off. The lights illuminating the bridge flicker and fail. The stars in the viewfinder vanish. One pixel still glows faintly. My place of absolution?

Somewhere far off is a wrenching sound of twisting metal. The bridge goes perfectly dark but for that single pixel swimming in my vision. The artificial gravity releases me. I search for purchase on a wall, a console, anything. I flail about wildly but I am surrounded by nothing.

From far off I hear the beating of drums, out of tempo with the fluttering of my heart.

#

Water sloshes, and I am reminded of the biotic tank in which I spent so many lost years. I open my eyes, expecting to feel the heaviness of a ten-year sleep and the panicked sense of drowning that always comes with such voyages.

But I am not in a tank. I sit in a small wooden vessel, bobbing on an empty sea below gray skies. A canvas sail snaps in the breeze. Gulls wheel and cry overhead. A wave hits the side of the boat and a spray of cool, salty mist blows across my face. I shiver.

Elpinor sits facing me, one hand on the rudder, dressed in his parade uniform. The boat is barely large enough for the two of us.

“Where are we?” I ask.

“Somewhere between where we were and where we are going.”

I try to remember how we got here. There’s a gap in my memory like the hole in my skull where the warmind used to be. “Where were you? You left me.”

“You’re unaccustomed to being alone,” he says.

It’s true. The warmind was always with me, always whispering data into my ear in her childlike voice.

My first day aboard the Hermes, she helped me through my onboarding speech, gave me confidence. The crew radiated distrust. They knew what I was, and I was surprised at how much I wanted their approval. That night, alone in my new cabin, she sang to me, bathed me in feelings of comfort and safety.

A few days later, she saw me watching Elpinor on the bridge. “You should take him as a lover,” she murmured.

It wouldn’t be appropriate, I thought. The crew would disapprove.

“Your body wants it,” she said. “Some of the crew may disapprove but they will cease to see you as different.”

She was right. Elpinor came to my bed. There was grumbling among the other officers and gossip among the enlisted crew, but they began to see me more as a person, less as a machine. They began to trust me.

Now the warmind is gone, and I don’t know whether to mourn her loss or rejoice in my freedom.

Elpinor sees my distress. I wait for him to reach out to me, to offer some words of solace, but they do not come. His face hardens. He looks down into the sea.

“You didn’t care for her,” I say.

His brows are knitted together, his nostrils flared. He rarely looks this indignant. It sets me on edge. “I never knew to whom I was speaking.”

“To me, of course. The warmind, she...” I trail off, remembering how she used my mouth to issue orders, my hands to guide our ship.

In the warm dark of my cabin, I held Elpinor in my arms, felt his comfortable weight on top of me. “I shut her off when we were together,” I lie.

Elpinor snorts, but there is no mirth in the sound, only bitterness. “You can’t turn off a warmind. It was a part of you.”

I remember Elpinor’s hot breath on my neck, electricity racing through my body, charging me like a battery. Pulling Elpinor’s face to mine and kissing him hard, our teeth colliding. Where was *she* in those moments? Was she watching? Was she modulating the chemicals that flooded my brain at Elpinor’s caress? Was she guiding my body as I rolled on top of him and ground myself against him until we both came?

Who made love to Elpinor those nights? Me or my warmind?

I have never faced this question before. Maybe she kept it hidden from me, kept me from asking it for fear of what I might find. She protected me from myself, but now that she is gone, I am faced with questions I don't know how to answer, don't want to answer.

"You never told me where you went," I say.

He stands up and the boat rocks uneasily. He can't take his eyes away from that frigid water. "I cannot always accompany you. Some voyages you must go alone." He holds up a hand, and I realize I can see the acrobatic tumbling of the clouds through his flesh.

My heart tolls loudly in my ears and my skin feels clammy. "What?" I stammer, trying to laugh, trying to make it a joke. But a part of me knows the truth.

He dives into the sea and disappears, leaving behind not even a wake.

The wind picks up and the boom shifts. I grab it before it knocks me into the chill waters. The rudder is whipping to and fro, the little craft heaving on the churning sea. A spray of water kicks up over the side. The waves are becoming choppier. The boat tilts at a crazy angle.

I scramble over to the rudder and grab the boom under one arm to steady it. I curse. I don't know how to sail. If I had my warmind, she would teach me. She would take over, suppress my anxiety and fear, calculate wave and weather patterns and guide my body in the optimal actions.

But my warmind is gone, along with Elpinor and everyone else. Once again I am alone with only my fear, clawing its way out of my throat like a threatened animal. I clamp down on my jaws. If I open my mouth, I don't know whether I will scream or vomit.

A wave buffets the boat and I slip on the wet planks. The world lurches, shifts sideways. I cough on a mouthful of salty water.

I can't control the boat. I can't do anything. A wave picks up the little craft and tips it over. The boom snaps like a breaking bone and the boat dumps me into the sea.

The chill plunges like a knife into my abdomen. I flail wildly, but I'm sinking as if my body was made of stone. I plummet downwards, limbs growing numb. I cease fighting. I expect my lungs to burn, but I find that I have no need to breathe at all.

The gray waters darken and turn black. The sea swallows me and on the inside I am screaming.

#

I huddle in a crater on a blasted wasteland, waves of heat rising off of barren rock. The sky is a murky yellow, choked with faintly glowing ash. My skin should be boiling off my body.

My mouth is dry. My stomach, clenched. I am nearing my destination, and now I feel afraid, truly afraid for perhaps the first time in my life. I want to remain here until the ash falls from the sky and blankets me.

The sound of scuffling feet, and Elpinor appears over the lip of the crater. "There you are."

I can see the horizon through his broad torso. "If you're dead, why do you keep coming around?"

He looks at me sheepishly and shrugs. "Are you so embarrassed to travel with a ghost?" "I've lived most of my life with a ghost socketed into my brain," I say. "Ghosts make good company."

This elicits a chuckle. "Come, you're nearly there." He reaches out a translucent hand. I rub my palms on the sharp rock, abrading my flesh. "I don't want to go any further." "You've come this far."

“I’m afraid.” Ashes fall from the sky and tickle my eyelashes.

Elpinor laughs, startling me. The landscape swallows the sound. “You’ve got some nerve, dragging me all the way out here and then refusing to take the final steps.”

“Is this Ziss? The planet we destroyed?”

“You know the answer to that.”

I *do* know. There aren’t even ruins left, not even bones. Nothing. Just us. Just me.

I think of the cities that had once covered Ziss, the buildings filled with families and memories. I think of those politicians and leaders who must have known in the hours before the planet was killed. Did they try to evacuate the people, warn them? Or let them go to their ends blissfully ignorant, as my family had gone. I hoped it was the latter.

Who did this? Was it me? Or was it the warmind?

There’s a drumming sound in the earth, a rhythmic quaking, and my heart beats faster, searching for synchronicity. Cracks open in the pitted earth. I scramble aside as the stone splits and yawns beneath me.

Elpinor appears unperturbed. “Would it make you feel any better if she was responsible?” he asks.

I squeeze my eyes shut, try to ignore the fact that the ground is breaking apart beneath us like calving ice. I force myself to sit with his question, to weigh it in my heart. From the time I went under for the surgery until the time I cut her out, all of my actions and decisions were mediated by her. The words of encouragement I spoke to the crew as we went into battle. The absolution I gave them afterwards. The decisions I made to unleash the planetbusters, to make Ziss uninhabitable for a millennium. Even those precious few nights Elpinor and I had spent together, *she* was there with us, mediating.

I was angry with her for interfering, furious with myself for merging with her in the first place. But I missed her, too. I missed the comfort that she gave me, the confidence and control. She made me who I was, a leader and a hero, and I didn't know who to be without her. She gave me the absolution I didn't even know I had needed, until she wasn't there any longer.

The truth is that the warmind wasn't a computer implanted into my skull. Having her implanted into my skull made *me* the warmind.

I'm not a warmind any longer, and my mind is a lonely, terrifying place. But a part of me relishes it, being allowed to truly *feel* for the first time since I was a child. I cling to this wild sensation like a capsized boat in an icy sea.

"No," I say at last. "No, it doesn't matter."

He reaches out a hand. "There is something you and you alone are responsible for," he says. "Reaching this point."

She didn't guide me here. She couldn't give me what I need now. I take Elpinor's insubstantial hand and he hauls me to my feet. I can feel him, warm and alive beside me.

The ground has ceased its violence, but the rhythmic thrumming grows louder. Fear still pulls at me like the gravity of a black hole but I have escaped the event horizon. Elpinor leads me to the ragged caldera of the crater.

I cry out when I see the parade stretched out below us. The marchers wear masks of varying shapes and sizes. Their skeletons are proudly exposed. Thousands of tiny birds march before them, their feet beating out a drum pattern on the ground. They process across the baking still landscape, calling to us, to me.

Elpinor releases my hand and moves down the slope to join them. He wears his skeleton like a uniform. A crown of black hooks sits upon his head. He looks back at me and his eyes are the light of moons. He reaches a hand towards me, beckoning.

I look down at my hands, my legs and feet. I can see through my skin to the bones beneath. My hair waterfalls out behind me, bleeding into the landscape. A dove flutters in my breast, nestled there where my heart should be. I taste my heart in my mouth, iron and meat.

I step forward, hear the music of the drums in time with a pounding inside of me. I join the procession, dead birds fluttering down from the sky to march before me.

This is my parade.

Reignition

Karma was alone in her drafty cell, studying the Hymns of Shoal, when Senior Shepherd Pristin appeared in the doorway carrying a rune-carved box. Karma glanced up, surprised, and the heavy book slid from her lap to the floor. “Mistress Pristin!”

The Shepherd’s blonde hair was pulled into a neat bun; she always wore her dignity and poise like a suit of armor but now she betrayed the tiniest of smiles. “Novice Karma. Stephen has fallen ill and I require someone to assist me with the Blessing of Uln ceremony. Are you prepared?”

Karma had been hoping for this opportunity for months. She had been half-convinced that she would never get the chance. “Yes, I’m ready. Thank you.”

Pristin offered her the brass-cornered box and Karma lifted it gingerly, terrified of dropping it. It was heavier than it looked, made of burnished walnut. It reminded her with a sudden pang of a jewelry box her mother had owned. In her first life.

The box contained Uln’s Hand, a relic that granted Shepherds the ability to record the souls of the dying for transfer and passage into Shoal, the afterlife. Uln’s flame icon was etched into the top of the box.

Karma saw the note of doubt in Pristin's face, the wrinkle lines at the corners of her eyes. Karma knew that she was young, only 14, and that the other Shepherds didn't think much of her. But Karma *wanted* this, wanted it as badly as she had ever wanted anything. She'd spent hours in study, learned the hymns and the rituals. She could do it, if she was just given the chance. "I won't fail you, mistress. I promise."

Pristin nodded. "Good. Go see Alethea in the coat room. She will provide you with appropriate garb. Meet me at the front gate in an hour."

Karma bowed to hide her grimace. Alethea tried to make Karma's life miserable at every opportunity. Karma avoided her fellow Novice at all costs. "Yes, mistress."

After Pristin left, Karma tied back her hair, a kinky mass of black curls, and hurried to the coat room. Even as her stomach danced with nervous butterflies, her skin tingled with barely-contained excitement. Not even the prospect of facing Alethea could dampen her mood today.

The halls of the Temple of Uln were busy with priests of the varying sects. The stone walls filled the vast hallways with the whisper of shuffling feet and low voices. Several priests glowered at her as she raced past.

When Karma had been reignited almost six months ago, she had found herself orphaned. Her parents had died with her in a violent autocarriage crash, but only Karma had been reignited. The priests had tried to explain to her that the Shoalwalkers and Igniters could only bring back those who really *wanted* to live, but Karma didn't believe it at first. It took running away before she realized the truth. She was truly alone.

Nobody else wanted her. To be reignited was to be shunned by everyone else, even aunts and uncles and cousins who had once cared for her. But the Order of Uln had offered to take her in. The Dusk-eaters, that's what she and her friends had called them before she'd been reignited.

Now she wanted more than anything to be one of them, to belong to their family and to have a purpose. Unfortunately, she always seemed to get into trouble and none of the other priests trusted her. The Blessing of Uln ceremony was an opportunity to prove herself, to prove that she belonged.

Karma paused and took a deep breath. Perhaps Alethea would be busy with other priests and wouldn't have time to harass her.

Inside the coat room, ordered rows of frock coats hung above cabinets filled with shoes and decorative cords. The frock coats were dyed wool with rows of brass buttons running all the way to the collar. Alethea turned from hanging an armful of coats as Karma came in. Her normally perfect porcelain face was sweaty and flushed from exertion. "What do you want?" she snapped. Karma felt herself deflate in the face of Alethea's disdain.

When Karma had learned there was another 14-year-old in the Order, she had been overjoyed, certain that she would have a friend to face the daunting reality of having been reignited. Alethea, however, wanted nothing to do with her. Karma didn't know why Alethea disliked her so much; Karma had never done anything to her. Worse than not being her friend, Alethea seemed to see Karma as her mortal enemy.

"I need a Shepherd's frock coat," Karma said, trying to sound confident, like she belonged. "I'm going to help with the Blessing of Uln."

Alethea's eyes widened for a moment, then she laughed. "Don't be silly. No one would let you ruin something so important."

More important than hanging coats, Karma almost said, but she bit down on her lip instead. "Shepherd Pristin sent me here for a Shepherd's frock, please."

Alethea's snide grin vanished. "Pristin's a fool." She wrestled a coat from a nearby rack

and threw it at Karma. “Then again, I guess I should be happy. Once they see you completely ruin a ceremony like this, you’ll surely be extinguished.”

Karma scooped the coat from the floor and dusted it off, resisting the urge to throw something back. “No one gets extinguished for something like that. Besides, I know what to do.” The reignited were only extinguished for the most serious crimes. There was a nagging doubt, though. They wouldn’t extinguish her, but if she messed this up, they might eject her from the Order, and then she would truly be alone.

Alethea’s sneer returned. “Good luck.”

Karma pulled the coat on as she hurried out of the coat room. It fit poorly and the lining scratched her neck, but she didn’t care. For a moment, admiring the way the cream-colored wool looked against her olive skin, she stopped feeling annoyed at Alethea and stopped worrying about being expelled from the Order. For a moment, she just felt like she belonged.

#

Karma and Pristin made their way across the City of Ith to the Helion Estate. Karma had only been beyond the temple grounds a few times since being reignited, and she found that she saw the city with different eyes.

Ith was an ancient city; new layers had been built on old so many times that the bones of the city, the Lows, existed in what had become an enormous pit. This is where the Temple of Uln was located. As the daughter of a well-off family, she had only seen the Lows from the Landings, a latticework of bridges arching from one side of the city to the other. She had always believed the Lows to be a slum for criminals and vagrants.

Down here, great black cables carried power to the upper wards, hulking steam vents emitted clouds of oily gas, and a sea of people, those without the means to live in the sun above,

struggled to survive. There *were* criminals and vagrants, but most, Karma had learned, were ordinary people without the good fortune to be born into a wealthy family. Without the Order of Uln, Karma knew, she would be as lost and desperate as them.

As the groaning, iron funicular carried them to the Landings, Karma's chest began to feel tight, though she didn't understand why. *Get it together, Karma!* she berated herself. *This is no time for a case of nerves.*

At the top, she followed Pristin as they climbed out of the funicular and pushed their way through the crowd onto a landing platform. An autocarriage rattled past, vibrating the whole structure, and Karma found herself unable to move. The world was shrinking to a pinpoint of light, the light of another oncoming autocarriage. In her head, all she could hear was the scream of tearing metal. She couldn't breathe. She felt like she was falling.

And then Pristin was there, steering her away from the noise and into the relative silence of a nearby pedicab. "Are you alright, Karma?" Pristin asked as the pedicab pulled away. Her faced showed concern.

Karma swallowed, blinking back the tears that had started to gather. The panic was subsiding. She needed to be strong right now. She couldn't afford to start sobbing. Wishing Pristin would put an arm around her again wouldn't help either. "Thank you, Mistress Pristin. I'll be fine. I'm sorry."

Pristin took a deep breath and folded her hands into the opposite sleeves of her coat. She turned to look out the window and her face took on that expressionless quality of reserved calm that she always had. Karma closed her eyes and tried to focus on the details of the rite she would have to perform.

The pedicab carried them into the Highlands, a suburb of sprawling villas perched in the

highest tiers of Ith, and deposited them in front of a long, wrought-iron fence backed by untrimmed juniper bushes. Behind the bushes, an ivy-choked mansion with narrow, stained glass windows and looming turrets stood obstinately.

Pristin pulled a leather cord, ringing a low bell. Minutes crept past and Karma shivered in the damp chill. Next to her, Pristin seemed immune to the weather; her face was a mask of solemnity and Karma struggled to imitate her. At last, a man with a long, angular face and a receding hairline emerged from the mansion and opened the gate. “Yes?”

“We are Shepherds of Uln,” Pristin announced. “We have come to provide Uln’s Blessing so that Tarkellus Helion may pass peacefully into the afterlife of Shoal.”

The servant frowned and nodded. “Follow me. And don’t forget your purpose here. Take care of your business and be on your way.” Karma didn’t understand why the man was so rude, but she kept her mouth shut.

The servant led them into the mansion. From the foyer, he led them down a side hallway that opened into a chamber lined with moth-eaten tapestries and oil portraits of dour-looking men. The room felt uncomfortably warm after the chill of the evening air, and it reeked of liquor and decay. Karma began to sweat beneath her coat. A fly buzzed in lazy circles, as if waiting patiently.

In a prodigious bed in the middle of the room, so small he looked like a shriveled vegetable in a fallow field, lay a man who Karma guessed was Tarkellus Helion.

“Where is his family?” Karma asked. The thick carpet seemed to swallow her voice.

“Lord Helion’s son, Vench, is in the adjacent office. Other members of the household have been instructed to leave you to your task.”

“Oftentimes, the family and friends wish to speak to the Shepherd before the ritual,”

Pristin said.

The servant bristled. “The children of the Helion clan aren’t ignorant cobblers or mushroom farmers. If they wish to speak with you, they will.”

“Very well,” Pristin said. If the man’s rudeness offended her, she didn’t show it.

The servant backed out of the room, drawing the doors closed. The chamber was silent except for the old man’s wheezing.

“What’s wrong with him?” Karma whispered.

Pristin offered Karma a rare smile. “Some people aren’t fond of our Order’s notion that in death, all are equal. Sometimes, the wealthy make substantial gifts to the Order, expecting a reward in return.”

“He expects Tarkellus to be reignited?” Karma asked.

Pristin nodded. “Few accept that it is something we cannot control.”

Karma had often tried to remember how it had happened to her, but there was a gap in her memory, a line of demarcation between her first life and her second. On one side were her mother and father, her schooling, her friends, and the shriek of crumpling metal. On the other side, the muted halls of the Temple, Pristin’s strict guidance, and the disapproval of the older priests. In between was a void. Of Shoal, she could recall nothing, no matter how hard she tried.

Tarkellus Helion, the designated ‘Blessed of Uln,’ seemed to be unconscious, but when Pristin lifted his arm to clean his liver-spotted flesh with holy water, he swung towards Karma and his eyes sparked with sudden life. “So pretty,” he murmured. His breath smelled like ashes. He reached towards Karma, brushing her hair with gnarled fingers. Karma flinched back.

Pristin took his arm, more firmly this time. “Novice. The litany.”

The old man continued to leer at her, murmuring softly. Karma was breathing fast but she

ignored the awful, skin-crawling feeling and took her place across the bed. Pristin was watching her closely and Karma intended to do her duty.

Though she had memorized the words, she opened the Hymns of Shoal to the appropriate passage and began the litany. “Tarkellus Helion, you mortal, you child of the gods, Uln welcomes you. On the shores of Shoal, you will walk with all those loved ones who have come before, and Uln’s light will shine upon you.”

Karma withdrew Uln’s Hand from the box. The relic was metal, covered with blinking lights. On the bottom was a cap, and beneath it, sixty-four tiny needles. A murmur of hushed voices broke her concentration, and Karma glanced up.

Three teenaged girls had appeared on the landing above and were pointing and whispering. Karma felt a dizzying shock like someone had hit her on the head. One of the girls was— “Alethea!” she blurted.

Alethea’s eyes widened at the mention of her name. She turned and fled from the landing, disappearing through another doorway. The other two girls followed in a rustle of silk gowns.

Pristin’s lips tightened into a white scar. “Novice Karma, the ceremony?”

Karma stared at the empty landing, felt her mouth hanging askew like an idiot. How could Alethea be here if Karma had seen her just a few hours before at the temple? What was she doing here? “I—I saw Alethea, on the landing.” She stammered, pointing.

Pristin scowled. “Be silent.” The words cut like lashes. “I don’t care if you saw Uln himself; you will give this ceremony your undivided attention. The Blessed deserves your respect.”

There was no sign of Alethea or the other girls, just the wheeze of a dying man before her. If she and Pristin were unable to complete the ceremony before Helion died, his soul would

be lost forever in the Abyss. Any chance Karma had of being fully accepted into the Order would be dashed. For half a moment, she wondered if Alethea had arranged this to distract her so that she would ruin the ceremony and be cast out of the Order.

She took a deep breath and tried to force the explosion of questions out of her head. She managed to stumble her way through the final lines of the litany and passed Uln's Hand to Pristin.

Pristin removed the cap on the bottom of the relic and placed the needles against the Blessed's forearm. Then she pressed a series of buttons and the device emitted a high-pitched hum. Karma continued the invocation. Lights flashed and the relic beeped three times. Karma, who had hoped for this opportunity for months, barely noticed.

She was trying to puzzle out how Alethea could have gotten here before them and snuck up to the landing. And why was she dressed in a night gown? And why had she seemed surprised when Karma had called her name?

The ceremony was soon finished and Tarkellus Helion fell into a deep slumber.

Pristin dragged Karma to a corner of the room. "What is wrong with you, child? You shame yourself and embarrass the Order with your theatrics." Her voice barely rose above a whisper, but it hurt just the same.

Karma's face felt hot. She had so wanted to do this right. "I'm sorry, Mistress, but I saw Alethea on the landing!"

"You saw another teenage girl who looked like Alethea. Is that such a surprise?"

"No! I swear it was Alethea. She recognized her name when I called out. She's here!"

She pointed to the wooden door that the girls had disappeared through.

Pristin's placid countenance slipped and for a moment she looked uncertain. Karma had

never seen Pristin exhibit anything other than rigidity and strength. Seeing this side of her made Karma suddenly uneasy.

“Come, child. We must leave this place.” Her face changed back to that mask of calm so quickly that Karma wondered if she’d seen something different in the first place.

“But, Alethea is—” The balcony remained vacant.

“Come,” Pristin snapped, grabbing her arm and pulling her towards the door they had entered from.

The servant was waiting for them on the other side of the door, looking at them distastefully. “Your business here is completed.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes, thank you,” Pristin said, dragging Karma along behind her.

Karma pulled away. She needed to understand what was going on. None of this made sense. “Why is Alethea here?”

The servant’s expression didn’t change but he couldn’t stop himself from looking over his shoulder, as if expecting to see someone behind him. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Be silent, Novice.” Pristin caught her arm again and pulled her towards the front door.

Behind them, the servant snorted. “Peasant trash.”

Then they were outside. The door slammed behind them and locks tumbled into place. Karma found that she was shaking, and not from cold this time. “What’s going on, Pristin? What happened in there?”

Pristin placed her hands onto Karma’s shoulders, facing her. “You were confused. You saw another girl who looked like Alethea. That’s all.” Her voice was calm but deadly serious. “Do not speak of this again. You interrupted the ceremony with your outburst.”

“But—” Had she been confused? It had all happened so fast.

“The other priests will say you are sick and call for you to be extinguished.”

Extinguished? Karma felt panic welling inside her.

Pristin reestablished her rigid posture and calm demeanor. “Come, Novice. Remember, you must not speak of what you saw.”

Karma looked back at the Helion Mansion once more. There was a secret in there that Pristin didn’t want her to know. A secret that could get her extinguished.

#

Back at the temple, Karma asked around and learned that Alethea had been in the coat room all afternoon. She didn’t believe the other priests at first, so she sought out Alethea in the dining hall.

“Were you there trying to make me ruin the ceremony?” Karma asked.

Alethea turned to her and made a face. “Was I where?”

“At the Helion Estate.”

“What are you talking about? Are you dumb? I was in the coat room all day, ask anyone.”

Karma shook her head. “But I saw you!”

Alethea huffed and rolled her eyes. She turned back to her dinner with several other Novices, all of whom were staring at Karma. Alethea stuck out her tongue and twirled her finger around her ear. “She’s crazy.” The other Novices laughed and Karma fled the dining hall.

Karma wasn’t dumb or delusional, but it was apparent that Alethea didn’t know what Karma was talking about. And there was simply no way that Alethea could have been at the Helion Estate and here at the temple at the same time.

Karma racked her brain to come up with an explanation.

Alethea didn't have any sisters, much less an identical twin. Unless she didn't know about it and they had been separated at birth. But if that was true, why had the mysterious girl recognized the name Alethea?

She removed her copy of the Hymns of Shoal and spent the afternoon pouring over its verses, seeking some clue. There, in Book Five:

The Igniter shall prepare a mortal vessel, grown in the Sacred Crèche. Harvest the data from Shoal as the farmer harvests the crop. The eyes, the hair, the skin, the soul.

The Order of Uln was organized into three sects: the Shepherds, whose duty it was to make sure the dying were properly Recorded so that they could pass into the afterlife of Shoal, the Shoalwalkers, who could see into the realm of the dead and find those who desired more than anything to live again, and the Igniters, who returned those souls to life.

After she'd been reignited, Pristin had explained to her that she, like all in the Order of Uln, had been reborn into a new body. It was true. The childhood scar on her hand she'd gotten from touching a hot pan was gone, but she didn't feel any different. The others in the Order were the same way. The Order only accepted among its ranks those who had been reignited. The same thing had happened, presumably, to Alethea.

Karma pressed her palms against her eyes. There was *something* there, but she couldn't quite grasp it.

She needed to figure this out on her own. When Alethea had threatened Karma with extinguishing, Karma had laughed it off, but when Pristin used the word, Karma had felt real fear. No one else could know. She had to return to the Helion estate and talk to that other girl, find out who she really was.

After dinner and vespers, when the others in the Order were preparing to sleep, Karma tied her Novice's cord around the window latch and lowered herself through the window, shimmying down to the muddy ground and escaping into the damp city.

#

The mansion loomed like a craggy peak, obscuring the moon and leaving the estate in darkness. Karma scurried around the perimeter of the building, seeking an unlocked window or an open door. The mist had turned into a light rain, gradually soaking her hair and coat.

The bark of a nearby dog had her crouching in a rose bush. The barking didn't draw any closer, and she let out a ragged breath. Her hands were shaking and she thumbed the prayer beads in her pocket, trying to calm her racing heart. If she got caught, her plan was to say that she had mistakenly left them here at the estate. It would earn her a month of scrubbing moss from the temple's foundations, but she didn't think they would remove her from the Order.

Pristin's warning about being extinguished hovered on the edge of her thoughts like a half-remembered nightmare. Surely, Pristin was overreacting. But when had she ever known Pristin to overreact to anything?

She unhooked her coat from the rosebush thorns and crept through the wet grass. On a terraced patio, she found an unlocked door and slipped inside.

She found herself in an atrium, dripping onto a hand-woven rug. The glass wall and ceiling shimmered in the light rain. Across the atrium, light leaked from beneath a pair of pocket doors and she heard voices murmuring within. On her left was a carpeted staircase and Karma crept up as quietly as possible.

The stairwell smelled of mildew. At the top of the stairs, a narrow hallway lit by a single lamp stretched out before her. She stepped forward tentatively and the floorboard groaned. She

cringed.

A doorway halfway down the hall swung open and a figure dressed in a nightgown stepped into the light of the lamp. Karma gasped. She was right. It *was* Alethea, not some girl who simply looked like her.

The girl's eyes widened and she gave a little shriek. Karma dropped into a crouch and rushed the girl, crowding them both back through the doorway that Alethea had emerged from and slamming the door shut behind them.

It was a small, windowless bedroom with a narrow, lumpy-looking bed. A vanity was stacked with jars of cosmetics and brushes. A rack of diaphanous silk gowns stood against the opposite wall. Karma remembered Tarkellus Helion pawing at her. Bile rose in the back of her throat.

“Who are you?” Alethea asked. Her pale cheeks blushed crimson.

Alethea's evident confusion caught Karma off guard. “I'm Karma. Don't you recognize me?” This Alethea's lips were painted red and her nails had been carefully manicured, but as far as Karma could tell, this girl and the other Alethea were identical twins.

The girl shook her head and took a step back, clenching her fists. She was springing to strike, Karma realized.

Karma raised her hands. “It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you. I just came to talk. Tell me, do you have a sister?”

“No!”

“And your name is Alethea, right?”

“How do you know my name?” Her voice had all of the whiny petulance of the *real* Alethea's.

“I’m a Novice in the Order of Uln. I—” Her voice sputtered out. How was she supposed to explain to this girl that there was someone else out there that looked just like her and had the same name? “I know someone who knows you.”

She grabbed a hairbrush and held it before her like a club. In other circumstances, it would have been funny. “Who? You better tell me or I’ll shout for Orvis!”

This wasn’t going at all like Karma had expected. “Listen, just tell me this. Do you remember how you got here?”

Alethea’s shoulders slumped and her expression changed like a cloud passing before the moon. “I don’t know. I don’t remember.”

“Do you remember what happened *before* you came here?”

Alethea sat on the bed and clutched the blanket to her chest. Her eyes began to well with tears.

“It was bad, wasn’t it?” Karma knew. The girl had died, some tragedy had killed her and taken her family. “Something like that happened to me.”

Alethea squeezed her eyes shut. “I was home. I remember Father talking to me before bed, telling me a story. I must have fallen asleep. When I woke, there was smoke everywhere. I couldn’t breathe. I screamed for Mother and Father. And I could hear Mother screaming, too. I was too frightened to climb out the window, so I went into the hallway. But there was fire everywhere, so I hid under my bed. The smoke was getting worse and it was hard to breathe.”

She pressed her hands over her face. Karma felt a strange kinship with this poor creature. Part of her wanted to wrap her arms around Alethea. But she needed to know more. “What happened then?”

Alethea shook her head. “I must have passed out. I remember waking and hearing voices

I didn't recognize. I was in a strange hospital. After that, the next time I woke up was here, at the mansion."

Karma offered her a handkerchief and the girl wiped her face, smearing the lip paint. "I asked about my family," Alethea continued, "about where they were. The steward, Orvis, he wouldn't tell me anything, and he won't let me leave. The other girls don't know anything, either."

Orvis. That must be the servant who had let them in. He knew what was going on. This poor girl knew nothing, and she was being kept here, apparently a prisoner to the Helion family. Like a slave. Karma forced herself to ask a question she was afraid to hear the answer to: "Do you know why you're here?"

Alethea's lower lip quivered, but she held it together. "There's an old man. I think his name is Tarkellus. Orvis makes me and some other girls go stand in front of him. We have to wear these horrible nightgowns." She picked up a sheer silk gown from the floor and hurled it in the corner. "I hate him. He's sick."

Karma felt her stomach turn. "Did he—did he hurt you?"

"No! He tried to grab me a couple of times, but he can't get out of bed and I wouldn't get close enough. He's a horrible creature!" She shivered.

"By now he's probably dead. I came here with another priest today to provide the Rite of Recording on him."

"Good." Alethea shivered and hugged herself. "I'm glad he's dead."

"Can you remember anything else after the fire? You mentioned a hospital?"

The girl sniffed and nodded. "It was strange. There were hospital tables, and tanks with greenish fluid, and all these wires and hoses that ran into this big machine in the center of the

room. It was like a giant tree, with wires like branches reaching down to all the tanks. And it was covered in screens and dials and buttons.”

Karma felt a shock of recognition. The girl was describing the Chamber of Shoal, the place where the Shoalwalkers and the Igniters did their work. Karma had only vague memories of it from her own Reignition. The column was Shoal; through some divine technology, all of the spirits of the dead lived inside. But if this Alethea had been there, that meant that she was reignited, too. As was the other Alethea.

Karma felt horrible, like she wanted to punch someone or throw up. Maybe both. Someone in the Order of Uln had used Shoal to make an extra copy of Alethea and sold her as some kind of toy to a depraved cretin. She forced herself to take a breath. “Were there any people there?”

“Yes, there were a couple of men and a woman. They called her Veronique.”

Her stomach clenched painfully. Veronique was second to the Primate. A creeping realization dawned on her like pins and needles prickling her limbs. Pristin had warned her not to talk about what she had seen not because the other priests would think she was crazy, but because *she knew* about this terrible secret. And if the second to the Primate was involved, it went deep into the Order. A secret this awful was dangerous, Karma realized. Knowing a secret like this could get her extinguished.

It was too much to make sense of. She began to shake uncontrollably and sank to her knees. All she had wanted since she had been reignited was to be a part of the Order of Uln, to belong to a family. The Shepherds had risked their own lives to offer the Blessing of Uln to her and her family, and thanks to them, her mother and father had passed safely into Shoal. She had wanted to belong to something like that, something to offer people consolation in their final

moments. But more than anything, she just didn't want to be alone.

Now, she was going to be extinguished. Killed.

"What's wrong with you?" Alethea snapped angrily. "You never told me how you know my name or who sent you. I want you to tell me what's going on, right now, or I'm calling Orvis."

Karma looked up and saw mean, stupid Alethea sitting before her. Alethea, who had been nothing but cruel to Karma since she had been reignited. Alethea, who wanted Karma to fail, who wanted Karma to be extinguished. Alethea, who had no idea what horrible thing had been done to her. For all her nastiness, for all her righteous snootiness, Alethea had never deserved this. No one deserved this.

"I don't know how to tell you this," Karma said softly. "You died that night. In the fire. You died, and, as far as I know, so did your family. But a Shepherd gave you the Blessing of Uln before you died. And then you were reignited. You were made new again, brought back from the dead and given a new life. Just like I was."

Alethea winced like Karma had poked her with a needle. "You're crazy."

"Listen to me. When you woke, that wasn't a hospital, that was where they reignite people. I was reignited there, too. It sounds mad, but it's true."

Alethea inched further back on the bed. "Orvis!" she shouted. "Orvis! Help me! There's a crazy person in my room!"

"Don't do this. I want to help you."

"Orvis, help!" Alethea flung pillows at her, then sprang off the bed and grabbed a bottle of perfume. She threw it at Karma and missed. The decanter smashed against the wall, sending glass shards and rose water everywhere.

Karma heard footsteps and voices. Her story about leaving behind prayer beads seemed idiotic now. If she was caught and Veronique or anyone else involved in this conspiracy figured out what she knew, they would extinguish her to keep her silent. She needed to get out of here.

Alethea hurled another bottle of perfume and screamed furiously. “Get out of this place!” Karma said. Then she fled the bedroom and down the hall the way she had come.

She rounded the corner, and as she bounded onto the first step, crashed into the steward, Orvis.

They tumbled down the staircase in a tangle of limbs and the smell of cloying perfume. Karma struck her head on one of the steps and the world went dark for a second. Then she was splayed out on the wood parquet floor of the atrium, trying to figure out which way was up.

From behind her came the servant’s sniveling voice. “You revolting termite!”

Karma staggered to her feet, teetering as the walls seemed to shift towards her. She lunged for the glass door, but Orvis caught her by the collar of her coat. “Let go of me!” she screamed.

“You should have stayed in the Lows with the rest of the filth!”

She kicked him in the shin.

“Contemptible bitch!” he squealed, yanking her hair. She swung her head back as hard as she could and collided with his mouth. He cried out even as she felt a sharp pain as his teeth cut her scalp.

The pocket doors slid open behind them.

“You’ll get it now!” Orvis said, wiping blood from his lip with his free hand. “Master Vench will teach you the cost of meddling.”

Two men stepped into the atrium. One of them looked like a younger version of Tarkellus

Helion. He wore a wool vest and a silk cravat at his throat. His gray-streaked hair was slicked back. Behind him, Karma recognized a priest of Uln, one of the Igniters who she didn't know well. He was balding and his neck was too thick for the collar of his teal coat, making his eyes bulge slightly and giving him the look of a man being choked.

Vench furrowed his brow. "Martin, what is the meaning of this?"

Martin looked as surprised to see her and Karma was to see him. "Where did she come from?" Martin's face was panic-stricken. He turned to Vench. "Don't worry about this. I'll take care of it."

Karma struggled towards the door, but Orvis had still had hold of her hair. Her heart tried to leap from her throat. "I'm sorry, it was an accident. I just left my prayer beads here earlier and I only meant to come back and retrieve them I didn't want to cause any trouble it was just silly of me really, I—"

Martin grabbed her jaw, cutting her off. "Did she talk to the Doll?"

"I encountered this creature fleeing from the Doll's room. But I caught her, oh yes." Orvis shook her for emphasis and Karma's neck wrenched painfully.

Martin withdrew a white cloth and a glass vial from the folds of his robe.

Everything was happening too quickly. "Let go of me!" she cried. She struggled against Orvis but now Martin had hold of her, too.

He wrapped an arm around her neck and pressed the white cloth over her nose and mouth. It smelled sickly sweet. She began to feel dizzy. "Night time, little girl," he whispered.

She held her breath and fought against him. She had to escape. This wasn't supposed to happen.

"You idiots can't even keep track of your own," Vench said. "I'll deal with the Doll

myself.”

“No,” Martin said. “No one knows that she is here. This creature won’t be any trouble, I promise.”

Karma’s lungs burned. She struggled, but Martin held her tight from behind. Facing the stairwell, she saw Alethea crouched at the top, eyes wide with terror and her arms wrapped around her knees. *Run*, she wanted to scream, but Martin’s thick paw covered her mouth.

She choked in a lungful of sickly-sweet air. Pinpoints of light swam in her vision, like stars emerging from their hiding places. Then she plunged into darkness.

#

Karma woke to the smells of earth and pickling brine. She lay on a dirty mat in a dark cellar. Her head was pounding. Gradually, she assembled her memories into a shape that made sense. Her hands and feet weren’t working correctly, and she wondered if whatever Martin had done to her was permanent.

She started to feel panic choke her when a door swung open above her at the top of a flight of steps; blinding light poured into the cellar. Martin stood outlined in the doorway.

He descended the staircase and Karma scooted backwards until she reached an earthen wall. There was nowhere to hide and her limbs were barely working. Her legs burned with pins and needles. She bit her bottom lip to keep from crying out.

Martin placed a tin bowl filled with steaming porridge in front of her. “You’re a stupid, stupid girl.” He rubbed the back of his head, frowning as if he were considering how best to dispose of a dead rat.

Karma pulled her legs close, ignoring the prickling agony in her limbs and the squeezing sensation in her chest and mustering every ounce of grit she had. “You had better let me go.

Senior Shepherd Pristin will know I'm missing."

He shook his head. "Your record still sits within Shoal. We'll simply produce a new copy of you. It will take a few weeks, but when Pristin finds you wandering confused amid the streets of the Lows, she'll take you back in. And you won't remember any of this, because that *you* won't be the same as who you are now. We call that a Reboot."

It didn't seem real. Only after what she'd just seen with Alethea, maybe it was. A second copy?

Karma knew she should be terrified. But despite the blinding pain in her skull, being threatened by this crusty man made her angry. "You have nothing better to do than to try to scare an innocent girl? Why don't you just kill me and get it over with?" Even as the words came out of her mouth, she wanted to kick herself for saying them.

He blanched. "That's not my decision."

"I suppose you'll leave that to Veronique?"

He raised a hand to his mouth. "You should keep silent."

Karma masked her fear behind disdain. "You think I'm the only one who knows about this? You are an idiot. How many Aletheas are out there? How many copies of me?"

"You're lying. You shouldn't have said anything!" He backed up the stairs, pausing on the top step. "I don't like hurting little girls, but when Veronique hears about this, she might not leave me any other choice." He slammed the door, leaving her in darkness.

Karma's knees buckled and she collapsed onto the mat. Her hand struck the bowl, flipping it into the air and splattering her with hot porridge. She cursed and lay still, waiting to see if her arms and legs would return to life.

#

Karma drifted in and out of a hazy sleep. Sometimes she woke in the cellar, but another time she found herself lying naked on a table in the strange, antiseptic chamber where she'd been reignited, masked priests in high-collared coats working feverishly around her. Another time she'd been in her own bed—or was it her parents' bed? —in their home in the Landings, her mother's laughter just on the edge of her consciousness. She tried to stay there, certain that if she could keep from falling back asleep, her mother and father would come and that this strange new existence as a reignited girl would end. Everything would return to normal.

But the dream, for all her desperate wants and wishes, faded into gray. When she finally woke for real, her cheeks were still wet with tears.

Gradually, she tested out her arms and legs. Her limbs were stiff but worked, and her head felt clearer. There was no way to guess how long she had been here. She needed to find a way out before Martin returned.

Her prison was a root cellar. It was barren, save for a jar of pickles and two burlap sacks filled with potatoes. The walls and floor were packed earth. A tiny bit of light leaked in beneath the cellar door. She climbed the stairs and checked the door. Locked.

She returned to the mat and tried to figure out a way to escape. Provoking Martin was probably dumb, but at least she'd learned something. Maybe when he came back, she could attack him with a sack of vegetables or something. This made her smile until she remembered Martin's threats. When he next came for her, it would be to kill her.

She cursed herself for getting into this mess. She should have been frightened. Instead, she was just angry. Thinking about the situation made her stomach churn. All she had wanted was to *belong*, to have a family, and now the one she had found was rotten at the core. She swore to herself that if she got out of this, she was going to do everything she could to expose

Veronique and Martin and anyone else involved for the horrible monsters they were. She was going to stand up to them, even if no one else would, even if it cost her second life.

Karma heard someone fumbling with the lock. She snatched the porridge bowl and crouched in the corner. She had a pretty good throwing arm. If they were going to kill her, she wasn't going to sit here and let it happen.

The door opened. Karma squinted against the blinding radiance, gripping the bowl so hard her fingers ached.

Her eyes slowly adjusted to the light. It wasn't Martin on the stairs. It was Alethea, dressed in a boy's trousers and a baggy work shirt.

Alethea crept cautiously down into the cellar. "Karma? Are you okay?"

Karma dropped the bowl. "I think so. How did you find me?"

"When I saw the priest taking you away, I snuck out of the mansion and followed. We're in some dismal slum in the Lows." She cringed away from a fat white spider hanging from a wooden beam. "Disgusting!"

Karma could hardly believe that Alethea, of all people, had come to help her. "Why?"

"I still think you're crazy," Alethea said, "but you knew things that you shouldn't have known. And you never explained how you recognized me."

"You remember that I said I knew someone who knew you?"

Alethea nodded.

"The Igniters who made you a new body, who gave you life again? They did it *twice*. There's another girl, a Novice like me. Her name is Alethea, too. She's a copy of you. Or you're a copy of her—I don't know. It doesn't matter. What matters is there are *two of you*. That's why I recognized you."

Alethea stared at her, then laughed. “You *are* crazy.”

“I’m not, but I’m glad you got out of there all the same.”

“I think that priest was there to kill me,” Alethea said. “The old man was dead and they didn’t need me anymore. You’re the only one who knows about me.” Her voice cracked, and Karma saw the effort this was costing her.

Karma’s life was in danger; there was no reason that Alethea’s life had to be put at risk as well. “You should get out of here before Martin returns.”

Alethea grabbed her hands. “No! I need you to help me. I don’t have anywhere to go!”

Karma couldn’t describe the mess of feelings she found herself wrestling with. She couldn’t fix this problem. How could a problem like this even be fixed? Karma took a deep breath. “I don’t know—”

The front door opened and closed above them. The floor creaked under heavy footsteps. “Martin’s back,” Karma whispered. “Hide.”

Alethea crouched beneath the plank steps. A moment later, Martin appeared in the cellar doorway. “Dammit! How did you get this door open? You’d better still be down here.”

“Help me,” Karma said. “I hurt myself.”

“Stupid girl. It hardly matters now. Why did you have to stick your nose in where it doesn’t belong?” He was carrying a brown glass bottle and a white cloth.

“Please! It hurts.”

Time slowed. Alethea blinked at her, wide-eyed. Karma tasted the bitterness of decay in the air. A beetle wriggled across the dirt floor.

Martin took four steps and Karma flung the bowl at him. He twisted aside and the bowl spun past his head. Alethea caught his ankle and pulled it between the planks of the stairs. He

cried out and tumbled down the stairs, arms pinwheeling. His head struck the bottom step and he lay still. A trickle of blood dripped from a gash above his ear.

The glass bottle smashed against the wall and the sickly-sweet gas that he'd used on Karma before began to fill the cellar. "Hurry!" Karma cried. Alethea was already two steps ahead of her. The pair fled the hovel.

It was dawn, which in the Lows meant a sort of murky gloom. Even still, Karma found herself blinking as her eyes adjusted from the darkness of the cellar. The pungent smells of old grease and fungus were, for once, a relief.

The two girls ran through the winding streets and alleys, Karma leading Alethea towards the Temple of Uln. They paused at the edge of the courtyard before the temple. In the morning gloom, the cyclopean blocks of the facade loomed like a distant, uncaring god. The temple was ancient and resolute. The defining feature was a towering statue of Uln, his face ever hidden by a long hood. His outstretched hands, which Karma had always before seen as offering comfort, now seemed to be reaching for her, to trap her.

She bit her lip. She was one girl, barely a Novice. Veronique was second to the Primate and had dozens of priests at her command. What could she hope to achieve other than being extinguished? She looked down at her new Shepherd's coat, now streaked with mud.

Alethea stared at the temple with open-mouthed awe. "I was really reigned there?"

Karma nodded and took Alethea's hand, swallowing hard before she could cry. It felt strange to have Alethea relying on her when the Alethea that Karma knew had always hated her. Alethea had risked her life to rescue her. Karma owed it to her to try to give her a chance at having her own life. Karma had to be strong.

"Hide here. I'll go find help. If you see Martin, run."

Alethea nodded and crouched behind a rain barrel covered in a thin film of scum. Karma hurried across the courtyard. If she could just reach the Primate and bring him together with both Aletheas, then he would see what had happened.

Another Novice was polishing the etched bronze on the great entry doors. He turned as she approached. “Karma? Everyone has been looking for you.”

Karma forced a smile onto her face and hurried into the narthex, though every instinct told her to turn and flee. Enormous octagonal columns separated the narthex from the nave, and two priests were collecting water from the holy font nearby. One of them called for her. Karma ignored him and ran for the cloister. The second priest shouted for her to stop.

Priests began to flood out of hallways and rooms to see the source of the commotion. Karma dodged between them. Then someone struck her from behind and she sprawled onto the floor. She rolled onto her back and tried to scramble away.

It was Alethea—the *other* Alethea—looking triumphant. Karma tried to get to her feet but Alethea shoved her back to the floor and stood above her. “I’ve got her!” Other priests were gathering around them in a circle.

“You don’t understand. You need to come with me. I’m trying to help you!”

Alethea sneered. “You think you can do whatever you want? You’re not special. Now you’re going to be cast out of the priesthood for good.”

A woman pushed through the crowd, standing rigid in the coral frock coat of the Shoalwalkers. Veronique. “Very good, Novice Alethea. I’m sure the Primate will look favorably upon your actions.” She yanked Karma painfully to her feet; her nails dug into Karma’s wrist. “You are in a great deal of trouble, child.”

Karma twisted free and backed against a column, but she was surrounded by priests. “I

know what you did!"

Veronique pressed her lips into a hard line. Karma sensed this woman's authority, her *power*, and felt afraid. "Wild stories and accusations won't save you any longer, child. You have been nothing but disruptive since you were reignited."

"Don't listen to her," Karma said, though her voice sounded small in her own ears. "She's growing extra people in the Sacred Crèches and selling them as slaves!"

Veronique's pale cheeks flared crimson. "Blasphemer! You are not fit to walk among the reignited."

The priests gasped. Veronique grabbed Karma by the hair. "I can handle this little viper." "Who are you?" cried a shrill voice.

The priests turned and saw *one* Alethea, mud-stained and dressed in ill-fitting shirt and trousers, facing *another* Alethea, dressed in her Novice's robe. Novice Alethea's mouth fell open and she jumped back, tripping over another priest and falling on her backside.

"By Holy Uln!" one of the priests cried. "It's true!"

Veronique shoved Karma away and turned towards the Chamber of Shoal, but the hallway was blocked with a crowd of priests. "Get out of my way!" she snarled.

Karma wrapped her arms around Veronique's legs and they crashed to the floor.

"Let me go!" Veronique kicked Karma in the face and Karma fell back as the whole world tilted for a moment.

The halls were filled with shouting, pushing priests. An old man pulled Karma out of the fray and Veronique used the distraction to break through the priests.

"What is the meaning of this?" The Primate used his broad shoulders to push his way into the crowd. His crimson frock coat stuck out in the crowd of coral and cream like a smear of

blood. He stopped when he saw Alethea and her twin, his wrinkled face revealing little.

Pristin appeared behind him. "Seize Veronique," she commanded several of the other priests. Their panic and confusion broke under the duress of an order, and they clustered around Veronique, who cursed and shouted. She clawed at them and tried to push her way through, but the crowd held her back and several of them grabbed her arms and held her. Pristin barked another order and the priests dragged Veronique off to a cell where she could be confined.

Alethea and her twin touched hands tentatively, each of them staring at the other like a girl who had never before seen her own reflection. "Where did you come from?" asked Novice Alethea, her voice wavering.

"I'm Alethea. Karma found me and told me about you. I didn't believe her, but I didn't know what else to do."

Novice Alethea wrapped her arms around her twin and held her. "I never knew. I thought I was alone!" Then both girls started laughing and sobbing.

Through her tears, Alethea—the girl who had been her enemy for so long—smiled at Karma. *Thank you*, she mouthed. Karma was stunned. Somehow, this simple gratitude was as surprising to her as anything else that had happened.

The grim-faced Primate pulled Karma to her feet. His eyes were cold and gray. "Come with me."

#

Everything in the Primate's office, from the desk to the heavily laden bookcases, loomed over Karma and made her feel small. The Primate's expression remained as ominously neutral as the granite face of the temple itself as she tried to explain all that had happened without backtracking or stammering.

Even after Karma finished, the Primate remained impassive, studying her and blinking slowly. Karma sat quietly, growing increasingly uneasy.

Finally, the Primate reached into a drawer of his desk and withdrew a small wooden box. He removed the lid and slid the box across the desk to Karma. Inside was a bronze medallion showing the flame icon of Uln. "You are a Novice no longer," he said. "You may now wear the badge of a Shepherd of Uln. Congratulations."

Karma felt numb, her fingers barely working as she lifted the medallion. It was heavier than it looked. This was what she had wished for ever since being reignited, but it didn't feel like she had imagined. She'd imagined a ceremony, welcoming hugs from the other Shepherds.

The Primate folded his fingers in a steeple and leaned forward. "As a Shepherd, you must serve with obedience and respect," he said, enunciating the words carefully. "You must not speak to the others of what you learned."

The Primate was supposed to know what to do, but the idea of keeping quiet about this made her feel all wrong. "But what if there are others like Alethea?"

The Primate's ancient nostrils flared. "I will handle this sordid business on behalf of the Order from here on. You may trust in the wisdom of Uln."

"But—"

"Do not give the Order cause to regret its decision today, Karma. You are dismissed. Return to your cell and gather your belongings. You are to move into the Shepherd's wing."

Karma swallowed, examining the flame symbol emblazoned on the medallion. She had expected its weight to feel comforting, the physical proof that she *belonged*. Instead, its weight felt like a burden.

She slid out of the enormous leather chair and left the Primate's offices. In the hallways

beyond, priests whispered and cast covert glances as she passed. She hurried to her cell and closed the door.

She sat quietly for a long time, listening to water dripping somewhere nearby and feet shuffling along the hallway outside. Thinking about what the Primate had told her made her heart feel like it was shriveling up inside her. She had a home here now, a family of sorts. But it was a family with secrets, secrets she wasn't to speak of.

Her mother and father, whatever their other flaws, had taught her that secrets were poisonous. There were no secrets in their little family. She had known of her mother's miscarriage, that her uncle had died from drunkenness, that her father's business was struggling. Her parents had trusted her with that knowledge and instead of making her frightened, it had taught her to trust them.

If the Primate told her she must keep secrets, how could she ever come to trust her new family?

The answer was obvious. She couldn't. Sighing, she began to pack her few belongings into a satchel. She included her copy of the Hymns of Shoal but left the medallion lying on the table.

There was a knock at her door.

“Yes?” Karma said.

Pristin entered. She took in the empty room and the medallion with a glance. “I heard that you were promoted.” She offered Karma a small smile. “Congratulations.”

Karma felt a stabbing in her chest. She had wanted so much for Pristin to like her. Pristin had been like an older sister for a little while—a tough, strict older sister, but someone who cared nonetheless. But Pristin had known about this conspiracy and had done nothing. She had tried to

hide the truth and cover it up as much as the Primate was now doing.

“You knew what was going on,” Karma said.

Pristin’s smile fell, replaced by years of worry lines around her eyes and mouth. “I suspected. I’m so sorry you found out this way.”

Karma’s anger boiled over, making her eyes sting with tears. “How could you let this go on? Why did you lie to me?”

Pristin sank to the edge of the bed, deflated. “I had seen and heard things that led me to be suspicious for some time. A year ago, I asked the Primate to conduct an investigation. However, without proof, he was afraid that an investigation would shed bad light on the Order, and he told me that more was needed.” She shook her head. “I should have stood up to him then.

“Instead, I spent the last year trying to gather evidence on my own, but Veronique was smart about covering her tracks, and the Primate wasn’t making it easy. When you spotted Alethea at the Helion Estate, I realized what had happened. I returned here to speak to the Primate about it. I thought that would be enough, but instead he forbade me to return to the Estate. It seems that Helion was a great benefactor of the Order.”

All of this was hard for Karma to understand. “But why did you lie to me? Why didn’t you tell me when I confronted you about what I had seen?”

Pristin offered her a sympathetic smile. “I knew that Martin and Veronique would do anything to protect their secret. I was afraid that if you knew more, I’d be putting you at risk. I didn’t count on you striking out on your own. You were very brave and very foolish.”

Karma mulled this over. She *wanted* it to be true. “The Primate has ordered me not to speak of it, but I think that’s wrong. What do you think I should do?”

Pristin shifted so that she was sitting cross-legged on the bed and placed a hand on

Karma's. "I can't tell you what to do, Karma. You're smart enough to make your own decisions. I know it's been your dream to become a Shepherd, and I think you would be wonderful. I chose to remain silent and that was a mistake. But you must do what is right for *you*."

Honesty. That was the answer Karma had hoped to hear. She bit her lip and took a shuddering breath. "I'm leaving the Order." Saying the words made the decision to feel more real, though the idea of being along again was terrifying.

Pristin nodded. "I came here to tell you that I obtained records of everyone reignited and found others like Alethea out there. I want to find them, help them. Alethea and her twin are coming with me; it isn't safe for them here."

"I thought, if you're leaving, perhaps you would like to join us. Though, if you don't trust me, I understand."

Karma was stunned. She had already been hardening herself to the idea of being alone. "Really?" She felt a warm surge in her chest and thought she might start crying. She didn't even care. "I would like that."

Pristin smiled. "I would too."

A lump formed in Karma's throat and her vision blurred with tears. Pristin threw her arms around her and hugged her fiercely.

Afterword

People often ask where the idea for a particular story comes from, and writers love nothing more than to talk about their work. The truth is, ideas come from everywhere – they’re all around us and within us, bubbling up as our subconscious makes invisible connections between the bits of detritus bouncing around in our brains and the limitless details of the real world. The trick is attuning yourself to listening for those connections and then taking the leap to turn an idea into a *thing*. Most of the time, those ideas fizzle out, but sometimes, they become something magical.

Reignition is the oldest of the trio of stories, having first been written in 2011 or 2012 and then refined repeatedly, up until I rewrote it for this collection. The germ of the idea for this story came from watching the Coen Brothers’ remake of the film *True Grit*. I was inspired by Hailee Steinfeld’s portrayal of young, gritty, Mattie Ross, and I endeavored to write my own story of true grit.

I was also at that time playing with a broad collection of science-fantasy-themed ideas incorporating dead gods, mutants, psychics, and stranger things, and it seemed a good opportunity to use the grounds of this story to begin to sculpt this world. The worldbuilding elements that appear in *Reignition*—the strange religion, the city, and the quasi-magical technology—remain relevant and are presently taking shape in a full-length novel I am currently working on.

The themes in this story are also reflected in other works. The most obvious is the title story in this collection, which shares the coming-of-age theme, though Karma’s journey and Anusha’s are very different. Another theme that appears in this story, and this collection, is that of recreation. This is a common theme in my stories, as I broadly like to write stories about identity, and how our identities evolve and change throughout our lives.

Ghost Parade was first written in 2014, shortly after returning to the U.S. after having lived in London for much of the year. In the summer of 2014, I had first visited the Tate Modern museum, where I was fortunate enough to stumble upon an extraordinary painting, *Reborn Sounds of Childhood Dreams I*, from the Sudanese artist Ibrahim El-Salahi. I knew nothing about the painting or the artist, only that the towering, imposing images in the painting to me were evocative and reminiscent of a strange sort of parade.

I sat down on the floor of the museum and wrote a prose poem, titled *Ghost Parade*. The poem was originally published in the July 2015 edition of *Abyss & Apex*, and is included at the end of this Afterword for your enjoyment.

El-Salahi said of his work that he seeks to ‘register and describe what I perceive through the senses while remaining tightly bound to an elusive, indecipherable, metaphysical essence’ (El-Salahi, ‘The Artist in His Own Words’, in Hassan 2013, p.89). That’s essentially what I was doing in response to El-Salahi’s work when I sat down and wrote the poem.

The imagery of the poem wouldn’t let me go, and I sensed a larger story there, which I began to write in October of that year. This story was an exercise for me in writing a story less driven by the plot, as is *Reignition*, and more driven by the emotional journey of the protagonist. I’m pleased with how it turned out.

The title story, *When Stars Move*, is actually the second story I have written about Anusha and Stan, two characters who appeared in a dream I had the same year I wrote *Ghost Parade*. (It wasn’t until 2017, however, that *When Stars Move* was written.)

That original story was a simple adventure about our empathic, passionate protagonist and her devoted friend and was set in a fantastic world inspired by ancient China. I wondered more and more about these characters and this world and soon a larger narrative began to suggest itself. I traced that narrative back to its inception and decided to write the characters’ “origin story” to learn more about the world and where these characters came from.

Though her world is not our own, Anusha’s culture is loosely influenced by the 15th and 16th century Ottoman empire and the palace in which she lives is based on Topkapi Palace in modern-day Istanbul. However, I am not a scholar and I did not attempt to create a “realistic” Ottoman culture; rather, I was interested in examining the role that familial, cultural, and religious expectations place on our lives and I thought it would be most impactful to examine that topic outside the frame of the traditional western fantasy. I hope that readers will forgive my missteps or transgressions and understand that I intend no disrespect for any real-world culture or religion.

I hope to one day continue the adventures of Anusha and Stan, either in additional short stories or in a larger work, so if you are a fan, don’t give up hope on seeing them again!

Ghost Parade

We march in shadow parades, in masks reflecting the fullness of the universe, our eyes the light of moons, our tongues frogs and snakes. Our ancestors walk behind us—ghosts of ghosts.

Our skeletons are on the outside now. We tap out the beat of our stride on our bones. At our feet, a thousand tiny birds, promenading corpses, songs vanished into the baking atmosphere of nothingness.

Your breast is scarred, upon your head a crown of black hooks holding back the world. I carry a dove in my breast, heart in my mouth. My white hair a waterfall bleeding into a sky of yellowed paper. I open my mouth to sing.

Inspired by *Reborn Sounds of Childhood Dreams I* by Ibrahim El-Salahi

Note: This poem first appeared in *Abyss & Apex*, Issue 55 in July 2015.

Acknowledgements

Writing, though it is often described as a solitary act, is actually communal. Great writing does not happen in a void, and writers hone their craft through workshopping, discussions about craft, and strong critical feedback from other writers and editors. One of the greatest joys of being a writer is being part of a community, a tribe.

My thanks go out to the very talented and dedicated writers and editors who critiqued and shared feedback on these stories, many of whom I am grateful to call friends, including: Evan Dicken, P. Djeli Clark, Mel Melcer, Benjamin Rubenstein, Kene Ezmenari, Charlotte Malerich, Sheila Cail, John Wiswell, Laurence Brothers, Peter Sursi, David Milstein, Beth Tanner, Karl Dandenell, Jaye Wells, Scott Andrews, and many more.

And a very special thanks to my incredible spouse, Denise Sammarco, who edited and assembled this collection and helped me bring it to market.

These extraordinary people helped me not just improve these stories but also helped me become a better writer and a better human.

About the Author

Shannon Rampe is a writer and project manager living in Washington, D.C. He has attended the Viable Paradise Writing Workshop, the Taos Toolbox Writing Workshop, and Paradise Lost, amongst other programs. He was a slush editor for Lightspeed Magazine from 2011-2014.

His works have appeared in Speculative City, Abyss & Apex, and on The Gallery of Curiosities podcast, amongst others. In 2015, he was a semi-finalist for the Writers of the Future award for his story, *White Bone Spirit*, which was later turned into a forthcoming novel. His hobbies include yoga and craft cocktail-making, though not (usually) at the same time.

Shannon is represented by Susan Velazquez at JABberwocky Literary Agency.