

On the Waters of Nun

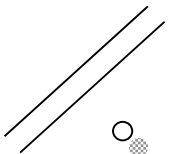
In the Dark of Onuris

Under the Glare of Ra

(A series of short stories)

By Annie McGovern

On the Waters of Nun



Sai released the pump rope and ducked down onto the floor to avoid the scurrying feet that hustled to take his place. He had five minutes before the wardens would hear of his escape and two more before they realized it was him. The room was big enough to fit four hundred boys, but the water pump in the middle reduced it to half that size. In the four corners, crude and slippery ropes hung down from the ceiling so the boys could hold onto them while they pressed on an undulating wooden plank with their naked feet, generating the electricity needed to purify seawater into freshwater. Every five minutes the water pump hissed and spat out a spray of salt-logged droplets, and the floorboards were covered in pump waste, made of everything that lived in the Sea, which burned the boys' numerous cuts and blisters. As Sai scuttled along the floor like an over-sized water beetle, there was a scream as one of the boys moved too close to the enormous water pump, and the legs became a frightened confusion as they shied away from the boy's reddened skin. Sai shook his head against the nausea wafting from the floorboards, one of salt and sweat and dirty feet, as skinny figures tripped over his limbs, cursing, and when they looked down he was gone, hidden under another group of ashy knees and blistered feet.

Sai reached a small window by the ground and kicked it open, then dropped down onto the Upper Tier, flushing the pump room air from his nose, and scurried around the corner. The alarm bell sounded as though a hurricane were about to blow through the town. Sai prided himself that his escape could elicit such a frantic response. By the time the wardens were dispatched in pursuit, Sai had already untied his canoe and pushed away from the docks on the Lower Tier. The town was made of four layers, each stacked on top of the next with one long winding pathway that wrapped around the outer edges, leading from the pump tower down to the water by the docks of the Lower Tier. Sai paddled in large, strong strokes, eyes trained on the town as it began to disappear little by little into the fog. The Lower Tier and the hundreds of boats and canoes tied around the edges turned into steam, followed by the First Tier, thick with shops, black smoke, and the incessant hustle of people. Next the Second Tier changed to foggy blue sky, taking its sea-stained laundry pinned up on clotheslines and the smell of cooked fish along with it, and finally the pump at the top of town. Sai felt adrenaline surge through body and he stood in the wobbly canoe and screamed at the silent town until he gasped for breath, then sank back down and continued to paddle away.

The pump was what kept the floating town alive, because freshwater was the only thing they lacked on the sea-covered planet of Nun, and every child under the age of eighteen was forced to work at the pump until they came of age. Unlike many of the other planets the humans discovered two years ago after the Exodus from Earth, Nun survived the cruel first years of colonization. But though it survived, it was full of sicknesses that blew in from the wild Sea and an ominous fear of the time when the pump would stop running.

By nightfall, Sai's arms were burning and his feet turning white and numb from too much salt water splashing into the tiny canoe. The pain was nothing to him, though, because he could imagine the look on Mizuki's face when he told him how far he had sailed away. Mizuki's smile was the reason why he continuously escaped and floated out into the vast unknown.

Sai stared at the canoe's edge and pulled through the pain, rippling the stagnant waters around him. He had been a lost boy and a terror before Mizuki arrived. The other boys feared him and even the gangs left him untouched. He was the only one who didn't have a home to return to at the end of the day. The only one whose days and nights were spent in the belly of the moist and steamy water pump.

The first time he saw Mizuki, the boy was being carried into the barracks on the back of one of the wardens. Tears splashed to the ground, mixing with sweat and concentrated salt that constantly leaked through rusted bolts and hinges on the water pump's surface. The other boys had already gone home and only Sai saw him enter limply through the front doors.

His own door was flung open seconds later, and the principle entered with a fish oil lamp, followed by the warden. The little boy was set down in Sai's bed.

“What are you doing?” Sai demanded of the principal.

The principal's double chin rolled with sweat and forgotten bits of food when he shifted his head to give a disgusted look at Sai, as though he were pump waste instead of his responsibility. The other boys whispered that the principal was born without eyes, and the fat

made it seem as though they were hiding. No one in the town could possibly be so fat, not even the richest man in the Northern Corner had enough to supply as much as the principal consumed to keep his secret eyes hidden. Sai never saw the barely opened slits look at him with anyone other than hatred.

“This is *my* room!” Sai shouted.

The warden’s sickly red eyes turned to the small orphaned boy, looking him up and down. The wardens were the cursed souls who couldn’t find fortune on the sea, and were forced to continue working at the water pump: the nightmare of childhood. They were shunned from the rest of the town, who feared that the wrath of the Sea Goddess Mazu would bleed onto their boats and fishing-lines, then drag them under salty waves. Mothers struggled to hide their children until they turned eighteen so they wouldn’t be exposed to the terrible wardens and water pump, but they were always found and wrenched away, for the good of the floating town. Sai knew nothing of life except the principal and the wardens, to him, they and the boys in the pump room were everything the world had to offer. If there was anything else to life, Sai couldn’t imagine what it was. The warden spat on the floor before slamming the door shut.

Sai rushed to the closed door and started to pound on it, shouting a stream of curses, threatening to kill the other boy if they didn’t take him away. The room was his only salvation from the stinking inhabitants of the water pump, and he would never allow it to be shared with anyone. He turned murderous eyes to the boy on the bed and grabbed him by the front of his shirt.

“What the fuck are you doing in my bed?”

The boy sniffled and turned his red tear-streaked eyes onto Sai’s. He was small and malnourished, with hollowed out cheeks and black-ringed eyes. Sai released him and crossed his arms. Small hands gripped the edge of the bed and pulled the rest of the frail body toward the side. The boy dragged himself over the edge, bringing part of the grimy covers with him as he fell onto the floor.

“What the hell are you doing? Stand up and get in the corner!” Sai ordered and grabbed a handful of the black salty hair.

“I can’t,” the boy gasped, trying to wrench himself out of the larger boy’s grasp.

Sai let go and stared down at the boy, noticing the way his stick-like legs jutted out in awkward angles from under his torso. His foot involuntarily stepped back from the boy, unsure of what he was feeling or supposed to do. But Sai forgot it by facing the wall, and refusing to watch the boy begin to cry from the floorboards.

The next morning he was awakened by a commotion in his room. The warden from the night before was gripping the new boy around the waist, trying to pry him away from the bed legs. The boy was howling and struggling and Sai watched silently from the bedside as the warden clapped his hand over the boy’s mouth to quiet him and carried him out of the room.

Sai glared at the other boys as he entered the pump room. He pretended he didn’t hear them whispering as he passed them by, how he was a delinquent because he had no parents, how the wardens locked him in chains at night to keep him from murdering the villagers. A small Chinese boy was running across the room, carrying a bucket of pump waste and bumped into the backs of Sai’s knees. It spilled over the side, onto the floor, and ran in globules through the drain in the center of the room. The boy was already wailing in terror before Sai had turned around and grabbed him by the shirt and threw him onto the ground, pressing his face into the pump waste and sweating floorboards. The boy whimpered and struggled but no one came to help him. When the boy became weak from the stench, Sai released him.

At his place by the pump ropes Sai pressed furiously on the seesaw planks with one dirty foot, causing the boys on the opposite end to jump in order to keep up with him. One of the wardens smacked him on the side of the head and told him to slow down.

“Who’s the new boy?” Sai asked before the warden could leave.

The man stopped and spat by Sai’s feet. “Mizuki, from the Eastern Corner of the Second Tier, the crummiest place to live. Last night the landlord forced his way into the house cause his mother’s rent was overdue, and found her lying dead in her bed, with maggots under her skin, and seagulls picking out her eyes.”

The warden pointed his stubby finger at Sai’s face and made a jabbing motion at his eyes, gaining amusement from the horror on rest of the boys’ faces.

“That little crippled boy was in the corner of her bedroom, just sitting there staring at the landlord. Creeped the hell out of him. So he called the principle and told them to get the kid out so he could rent the place again.”

The warden grinned a black-toothed smile. “Disgusting, ain’t it?” he said, and cackled hoarsely. “Be glad you never had any parents to lose.” He gave one last jab at Sai’s eyes before clomping away in his large rubber boots, squeaking in the steamy air.

Sai left Mizuki huddled on the ground when he returned that night. His legs were so thin Sai believed he could snap them in half with just one hand, and his tiny red palms were facing the ceiling, as his fingers twitched one by one.

“Where did they take you?”

The boy craned his neck around to stare at Sai. “To work in the girls’ section.”

If the dirt was cleaned from his face and the salt in his hair washed, the boy could have been handsome. He was staring, and Sai couldn’t find the words to put him in his place; so much different than the rest of the boys. Mizuki tried to move himself but gasped when his sore hands hit the salty floor and pulled them away, clutching them to his chest.

Sai found himself bending down to lift the boy off the ground and place him in the bed. “Just be quiet, okay?”

Floating through the vast Sea, Sai lashed out at the water and harpooned one of the small fish that had gathered around his canoe. He pulled it off the wooden edge and laid it delicately in his icebox. He began to giggle violently and leaned back in his canoe to stare at the stars.

“Mizuki, this time I caught six!”

Sai leaned down over the side of his canoe so his nose was barely grazing the top of the water. The fish gathered around his shadow, unsure of whether the figure above him was a predator or prey. One of them tentatively broke the surface and opened its mouth, revealing a row of shiny teeth and Sai pulled away.

He yawned, suddenly feeling tired, and placed his straw hat over his eyes. The sun felt nice on his skin compared to the sticky air from the pump room. He allowed his mind to wander, and found it returning to his friend back home. Sai's mind used to be blank. Every night when he returned to his room, alone, with no boys and no wardens to bother him, and an entire night to dream, he couldn't find anything to dream about. Not until Mizuki came.

As the days wore on Sai found himself looking forward to the night, when he would return to his room and tell Mizuki something new. The younger boy wanted to hear everything about the pump room and the other boys and what they were like and Sai began to dream about the future when he and Mizuki would escape from the barracks.

One night Sai returned to the room after a fight with one of the older Japanese boys, with a black eye and blood running down his nose. When Mizuki saw him he sat up and gripped the edges of the bed.

“Please don't fight anymore.”

Sai was lifting himself up to peek out of the window in the room to catch a glimpse of the people below him in the town square. When Mizuki spoke to him he jumped back down and stomped over to the bed.

“You can't tell me what to do.”

Mizuki shied away and his lip began to tremble. “I just don't want to see you get hurt.”

Sai wanted to hit Mizuki, but instead he turned away.

“What do you mean?” he asked finally.

“I mean, it will make me sad to see you hurt.”

That was the moment when Sai realized that he never wanted to see Mizuki sad, or cry like he did the day he was brought to their room, ever again. He would do anything to see the other's boy's eyes grow wide in awe, and hear his voice praise him for his knowledge and strength. Suddenly there was someone in Sai's life who cared for him.

In the canoe Sai's gave a lazy smile, and wondered if this was what it was like to have a brother. As he was drifting into sleep he heard something breaking the surface of the calm water.

“Just when I thought I would make it until morning,”

He closed his eyes again, waiting for the beam of light, angry shouts, and rough hands that would bring him home and punish him until he pleaded for mercy. Instead, a low cry rumbled the water around him and he bolted upright, gripping the sides of the canoe. He peered out into the darkness, unsure of what he would find. The fog had lifted and the twin moons lit the water, revealing a spot darker than the rest of the Sea ahead. Sai watched it floating motionlessly under the water, and then dart to the left and circle back around toward the canoe. He screamed as it neared him and then disappeared.

He grabbed his paddles and started frantically moving himself. He couldn't remember which way the town was, so he simply paddled forward. The dark spot appeared again to his right. Sai wind-milled the paddles, and in his terror rocked the canoe back and forth. The spot was closing in on him with each pass. Hysterical, Sai dropped his paddles and cowered in the bottom of the canoe and covered his head with his arms.

A whistle blew and a light lit the inside of his eyelids. Sai shielded his eyes as the light came closer and he heard shouting.

“It's a boy!”

Sai was lifted, trembling, out of his canoe and onto a Ship deck. When the hands that saved him from the thing lurking in the water pulled away, Sai followed them and grabbed onto person they were attached to. The sailor hugged the boy and patted his head softly, telling him that he was safe.

“A what?” Sai asked.

Mizuki laughed. “Don't you know what a hug is?”

Sai had just been caught running away again, and this time he made it far enough for the pump to almost disappear. He returned with such an angry red face that Mizuki laughed and asked if a hug would make him feel better.

“It’s when you put your arms around another person and they do the same to you. It’s supposed to make you feel happy when you aren’t feeling good.”

“Why would I want to do that? I’m not hugging you.”

Mizuki frowned and looked at Sai with his large sad eyes, the ones that churned his insides uncomfortably every time they stared.

Sai uncrossed his arms and moved toward Mizuki, sitting on the edge of the bed. The small boy, who had gained enough weight to be considered healthy, sat up and grinned while holding his arms wide. Sai hesitated, then placed himself between the skinny outstretched arms. Mizuki hugged him tightly and Sai flushed red.

“Fine, but I’m not hugging anyone else.”

The following morning Sai couldn’t stop smiling. This time he couldn’t hear the others whispering to each other. The only one he could hear was the only one who mattered.

“Sai, why don’t you give me your lunch?”

The gang that had taken the lead in breaking down the murderous loner Sai the week before was standing in front of the empty table. But Sai had promised Mizuki that he would stop fighting, so he ignored the boys.

The skinny Chinese boy Sai remembered pressing his face to the ground while he struggled and whimpered like a girl, spat into his food and then hid behind the leader. Sai stared down at the table and the thick glob of spittle that was bubbling over his lunch.

“You’ve gone soft, Sai,” the leader continued. “It’s because of that girl you got in your room. The little he-witch put a spell on you didn’t he? Tell us what you do every night? You and your crippled boyfriend.”

Sai lunged at the boy and knocked him to the ground. The rest of the cafeteria erupted into shouts as the boys rushed toward the fight, pushing and shoving each other and congealing into a ring around the combatants. Sai attacked the older boy's face, raking his dirty fingernails across his cheeks and poking at his eyes, allowing the blood to pour onto the wet floor.

The wardens burst into the room and roughly shoved the boys out of the way. The black toothed-one who spoke to him a few days before fell on top of him, shoving him to the ground. It took two of them to lift Sai off the other and carry him out of the cafeteria.

"He started it!" Sai wailed as he was thrown against the wall.

One of the wardens held him tightly while the black-toothed one unbuckled his belt. "Whipping isn't allowed!" he protested and struggled against the sweaty grip.

The warden raised his hand and brought the leather belt down on Sai's back with a loud crack. "Who would care if it's you?" he hissed into Sai's ear. "You belong to the water pump; you belong to us."

Sai screamed through the empty corridor and the ears crowded by the doors of the cafeteria drew back one by one, fearing the cries and cracks, thanking their Sea Goddess that it wasn't their backs under the wardens' wrath.

Sai was thrown into his room and kicked in the stomach. "The next time you cause trouble we'll make you wish you were dead," the belt-less one said before slamming the door.

Mizuki had been screaming since Sai fell into their room. He pulled himself over the edge of the bed and gripped onto Sai's arm, salty tears stinging cracked hands. Sai's back was on fire and the wet floorboard cooled his burning cheeks as he waited for the pain to stop. He absently patted Mizuki's scraggly hair and tried to quiet the hysterical boy.

"Tomorrow I'll make it farther than I ever have. I'll catch a hundred fish and sell them. We'll escape the pumps and buy a house."

The sailor pressed a mug of hot water into Sai's hands. The Ship was rocking on the waves of the unknown creature, and the deck hands scrambled to the sides, harpoons and nets in hand. The Captain burst through the hatch and glanced at Sai briefly before shouting orders at the sailor manning the wheel.

"You're alright now," he said, without looking at Sai.

The town soon appeared through the fog and Sai backed away from the railings. As they neared, fish oil lamps appeared on the Lower Tier and the principal's dark eyes appeared as if floating on dusty fog.

Sai tugged lightly on the Captain's shirt sleeve. "Please don't take me back."

The captain looked down at the little salt-streaked boy, with runny nose and blistered feet. "Ship life isn't like it seems. There are horrors in Mazu's lair that you could never dream of."

The ship pulled in and the Captain took Sai's shoulders and steered him down the ramp and into the principal's outstretched arms.

"Oh, thank Mazu, Sai," he said, and motioned to the warden next to him.

The warden grabbed Sai's arm and led him to the First Tier and up the winding pathways to the water pump, pulling so hard that Sai's feet lifted from the ground.

He feared the punishment that was waiting for him behind the pump doors, but he knew that he would be safe with Mizuki afterwards, and could picture the glittering light in his large eyes when Sai told him about his great escape. He craned his neck over the edge of the dock ramps and saw two small figures hurling his canoe into the waters, upside down so it would sink under the town and into the bottomless depths of the Sea.

The warden hauled him through the dead corridors and threw him into his room. Sai scrambled to his feet and pressed himself against the wall holding his hands in front of his face. But the warden merely grinned at the boy and slammed the door shut.

Sai wiped his nose on his sleeve. "Mizuki."

The bed was empty. “Mizuki? Mizuki!”

He ripped the covers off the bed and crawled on the floor calling his friend’s name. Finding himself alone he ran at the door and began to pound it with his shoulder. “What did you do with him? Give him back! Give him back!”

No one came for him the next morning and Sai stayed curled up in his empty bed. Far too small for even one small boy, it seemed so large without Mizuki leaning against the headboard. His stomach churned painfully with hunger, and he clutched onto the walls, trying to see out of the tiny window. The sun was at its zenith but no one was lingering on the walkways. And when it fell behind the ocean’s horizon Sai began to panic and pound on the door, afraid they had forgotten he was locked in his room. He screamed, hoping someone would come to quiet him. The wet wood began to give under his poundings and the rusted hinges creaked. Sai hit it with his shoulders and continued to pound until it sprang free and fell with a thump into the corridors.

The oil lamps were snuffed out and Sai plunged into darkness. He called out Mizuki’s name and headed for the pump room. He clutched the door handle in fear despite his sore hands when he saw it was empty and ran screaming down the hallway. For as long as he could remember he was taught that the pumps were what kept the town alive. If they were ever shut down then it meant the town was going to die and return to Mazu, from whom it was allowed to spring. Through his rising madness he headed toward the cell where they placed unruly children during the day. He reached the wooden door with a barred window, and saw small fingers gripping the edges.

“Mizuki what’s happening?” Sai whimpered and grasped at his friend’s hands.

“Have you not heard? A flying Ship came out of the sky this morning, they say from our brother planet, Onuris. The village has panicked because the pilot demanded that one child must be taken away with him.”

Sai pressed his face against the bars on the window so they cut into his cheeks. “Then this is our chance to get you out and run away!”

Mizuki tugged his arm away from the other boy's frantic grasp. "Don't you see? This town was dying since the moment it was made. People cannot live in this wet world, full of undersea monsters and sicknesses. We are of the last civilizations that migrated from Earth two generations ago. All of the others have died, and now we must find another home again. This is your chance to escape, Sai. You can escape farther away than you ever hoped to go."

Sai shook his head and tried to catch Mizuki again but was pushed away by his skinny arms. "Go and come back for me."

The only reason Sai found himself running back down the hallway and out the front doors of the water pump building was because Mizuki had asked him to. He hadn't been listening closely to what Mizuki was saying to him, and didn't understand what he was running toward. All that he knew was that Mizuki had told him to go.

Sai ran through the empty streets, around and around the circular path that led down through the Tiers, having no idea where to look for this Flying Ship. On the First Tier he saw oil lamps burning in the town square and all of the villagers crowded in a circle around the boys of the town, who stood next to each other, shuffling their feet nervously. Sai ignored the group and continued through the town and down to the Bottom Tier, then stopped. He gazed up at the enormous metal machine in front of him. It was floating quietly on the waters, but it wasn't shaped like one of the Ships. The sides jutted out into blunt points and it had a shiny tail like that of a whale's. The ramp led into the interior of the ship instead of the outside, and Sai was drawn in by the light that was burning inside. Before he entered the doorway a figure blocked the entrance.

"Are you the one the village has chosen?" it asked in strangely accented English.

Sai shielded his eyes and saw a yellow haired boy staring down at him. His clothes were neat and trim, long sleeved, and a red sash hung down from his waist. His skin was the color of a fish's underbelly, whiter than even Misuki's pallid hue, as though he had never seen the sun.

"Hurry up you have already been a delay." the boy said harshly when Sai didn't reply, and swept his hand toward the interior of the ship. "Welcome to the Erlösung."

## In the Dark of Onuris

The door opened and a blast of stale city air rushed into the Garage, taking the place of purified air conditioning. Louis turned from the flight panel to see who was disturbing him, then frowned when his father's face appeared out of the shadows by the doorway. They stared at one another until an attendant approached his father, and both began talking in hushed voices. Louis turned back to the screen in front of him: black with green numbers and letters flitting across the surface.

His father hadn't visited him at the Garage since the day Louis was taken in for the first time, and he liked it that way. Whenever his father came into the room he could feel the fear wafting in infrared waves off of everyone around him. He hated how they were subservient, with mechanical minds like the space ship they had created. Out of the corner of his eyes Louis caught his father move toward the door, then leave without saying a word. One of the technicians approached him and scolded him for being negligent so close to launch; he quickly turned back toward the screen.

Louis had begun his training to pilot the Erlösung space ship from the first day he could speak in full sentences. The technicians whisked him away to the Garage, strapped him into a flight simulation, and told him to play with the system. His friends became the ship's knobs and dials and the high pitched noises they emitted when he flicked the switches. When he thought no one was watching he would talk to the ship as if it were a human, imagining what it would say to him in return. Every other boy his age envied him, that was what his tutor used to tell him. In the night Louis sat in his room and tried to imagine the city boys with envious faces, but couldn't, because he couldn't imagine their faces at all. He had never seen another child the same age as he.

Louis untied his red sash before stepping out into the city streets. He had left the Garage, promising the nervous technicians that he would return straight home, but veered to the right to walk the path that took him through the marketplace. It was in full swing, because everyone was rushing to buy and sell before curfew. Louis approached the edge of the square and kept himself out of the direct glare of the street lamps. Even though he removed his sash, he was afraid that

someone would recognize his face. Little boys covered in dirt were dancing to a crude banjo while their comrades quietly picked the pockets of the listeners. One of them approached Louis, and he turned and grabbed onto the boy's wrist.

“What would your mother think?” he scolded.

The boy whimpered and struggled against Louis' grasp. He flicked the boy's nose and released him, then watched him stumble away and look back once before disappearing around a corner.

The loudspeakers installed on each street corner crackled. A voice announced that curfew was approaching, and that all citizens must return to their homes before the lights were switched off. The marketplace erupted into a different type of frenzy as the stalls shoed customers away and frantically closed the lids of their candle holders, packed their meat on ice, locked their stalls, and rolled them away to corners in the surrounding stone walls. In the underground city on the planet Onuris, all feared to be stuck on the streets after curfew, when all the lights were out. Though two generations had lived in the city since its creation after the Exodus from Earth, the people had evolved to fear the darkness instead of learning to live with it. If ever the light was snuffed for good, the people would wallow in pitch black tunnels forever, because the lighted world above was riddled with the bloodthirsty predators called Surface Dwellers.

Louis reached the iron-door entrance that led down into the Privileged Quarters. The safest place to live was under the city streets, as far away from the surface as possible. This section was reserved for the very rich, and for the Hunters. Louis left the key hanging from the door, wishing he could leave it that way and continue down the streets, allowing the curfew to cover him in complete blackness, when not even his father would dare come after him. His hand clenched the large bolt on the door, the cold metal making the small hairs on his arm prickle.

All of the city dwellers would have given anything to step foot inside the Garage, to look at the shiny chrome walls, the fully lit room and the twin doors on the massive ceiling that led to the surface, to lead Louis' life. But as he grew older he learned to hate the ship, the Garage, and all the people who worked there. None of them were alive; they were simply metal equipment or heartless drones who feared his father. He was ten years old when he realized there was more to

the world than his father's cold heart and the shiny metal interior of the Garage. The first time he disobeyed his father's orders was when he took a walk in the streets alone. He felt himself change into someone completely different when he stepped onto the cold wet ground, into the dim lighted walkways, and amongst the dwellers who held more life and love in the palm of their hand than his father did in the whole of his body. Finally, he shoved open the door and climbed down the ladder into the weakly lit hallway.

“How many times have I told you not to wander the streets close to curfew?” his father demanded when he stepped through the front door.

The lights hanging from fixtures in the ceiling burned fiercely, as if trying to make up for the total darkness that had befallen the city after the loudspeaker announced curfew had been reached. He heard rumors from the commoners on the streets that the Hunters were allotted more electricity than the rest of the citizens, though it was denied by the government. The children whispered that it was because the sun on the surface made the Hunters crave the light, like junkies. The air was clean, without the smell of wet dirt and human carbon dioxide. Instead of artificial lights there was light everywhere, as if the entire sky was a single large light bulb that remained lit for half the day, then was covered by black ripped fabric that let through little circles of light. There was never total darkness on the surface, not like the darkness after curfew.

When he was five years old, Louis asked his tutor about the surface in the midst of his arithmetic lessons. The tutor, a nervous man who trembled whenever Louis' father was in the room, didn't scold the boy for not paying attention; instead he told him to place his pencil onto the table.

“The surface,” he began, “is a very dangerous place. We live underground because of the creatures that live there. When we first landed on Onuris we attempted to create a city above-ground, but everyday people were killed by the giant predators. So we fled and found the entrance to a cave and took refuge. We began to dig, and soon we turned that cave into the city we live in now. No one is allowed to the surface except the Hunters, like your father. They are very important to us, because they are the ones who brave the terrors above to bring back our food. Without them, we would starve.”

The Hunters were like heroes in the eyes of the city dwellers. They were the stuff that made up children's stories: how the Hunters would don their sturdy leather clothing, their wide brimmed hats to shield from the light of the sun, and their shot guns and knives to attack the Surface Dwellers. The most famous story was one of Louis' father when twenty years ago he was separated from the rest of the group and fought a pack of Surface Dwellers single handedly. There were no pictures of Surface Dwellers anywhere in the city, but various artists tried to depict them. Some were huge with deep dark eyes and a drooling mouth, others were small and marched in armies, and others were pink and full of feathers and lured you close then attacked with pointed teeth. Louis asked his father to tell him what they looked like, but his father refused, telling him that it would only give him nightmares.

The tutor slapped Louis' hand because he had started fiddling with the pencil and scolded him for day dreaming. "And you, little Louis, you are the son of the greatest Hunter that ever lived. It is your destiny to grow and lead our people to a new life; to fly the Erlösung and discover new worlds."

In his house Louis stared straight into his father's eyes, something even his mother could not do, and angled his head to the side as he was smacked across the face. Father and son locked gazes, similar fiery eyes staring out at each other, daring one to challenge the other. His mother appeared into the room and wrung her hands while mumbling nervously to herself, looking from her husband to her son.

"Oh dear me, my poor heart, fighting again."

Louis ripped his gaze away from his father's and placed his arms around his mother, reassuring her that they were not fighting, then released her and entered into his own room.

The next morning Louis arrived at the Garage to find four men dressed in business suits talking to the technicians in the glass observation deck. He stared up at them, trying to read their lips, then snuck over to the stairwell, climbed the stairs carefully, and pressed his ear to the door.

"...not as much power as we thought. There was a miscalculation somewhere, and instead of fourteen years it's closer to four."

The men began talking at once and Louis couldn't hear what they were arguing about. He pressed his cheek to the cold metal, and his heart thumped in echoing booms. One voice shouted, Louis recognized it as the head technician, and the rest were silent.

“We'll be expecting the power surges at any time.”

The room was silent and Louis heard a faint shuffling noise. The door opened suddenly and he fell into the room. One of the men in the business suits gasped while the head technician stomped over to Louis and clenched his fists.

“What did you hear?” he demanded.

Louis remained quiet and stared up at the man above him. The technician growled and seized him by the shirt and picked him up onto his feet.

“Sir, please,” one of the younger technicians pleaded. “It's the Hunter's boy. Don't...”

As Louis was set gently back onto the floor the men in business suits filed past him and out the door. Before they left one of them turned to the head technician, who was hanging his head and sweating through his white lab coat.

“All of this is on your shoulders.”

When they had gone Louis was ushered back into the main part of the Garage. One of the younger technicians drilled him about his mission and Louis recited it perfectly, as he had done for the past ten years.

“My mission, Sir, is to fly to the human colonized planets and analyze their stability and life span. If all planets are deemed unstable, I, and a representative of each planet will continue on in search of a new planet to colonize. Failure is unacceptable.”

Then he was left alone to train. Louis flew flawlessly through the simulated screen. It was the most advanced piece of technology on the planet, but it was still far from an accurate portrayal of flying an actual space ship. The technicians shooed him away whenever Louis asked how different it would be, and told him that it was exactly the same. But the real answer was that they didn't know. The men and women who had flown the ship so many years ago

were all dead, and the confusion and horror that plagued the settlers when they first landed on the surface of the planet prevented them from leaving instructions should they need to fly again. If the ship had not remained intact throughout the generations, the technicians would not have been able to rebuild it. Also, the electricity that ran through the cities was mostly leftover from what the settlers brought with them. The technicians could keep the light bulbs lit, but they couldn't fix a broken one. They had figured out how to collect power from the sun on the surface, but it wasn't enough.

Louis purposely crashed his ship into an asteroid and stared up at the observation deck. The technicians were too busy arguing to notice that he was watching them. They must have thought he was stupid because they didn't tell him to keep quiet about what he heard earlier. But he understood perfectly: their power was running out. Louis had never been in the total darkness that fell over the city after curfew, all he knew was that some people went mad, and that it was his father's only source of fear.

The day ended and Louis began his walk home. He walked through the marketplace and bought a bag of apples, ate one, then left the rest in a corner and watched it get snatched by one of the urchin boys. He reached his doorway when the loudspeaker crackled and announced the approaching curfew. Louis unlocked the door, stopped, then locked it again. His father wasn't afraid of anything except the dark. What would he think if Louis didn't come home that night, what would he say when he returned the next morning? Despite his rising fear, Louis took his hand off the door and waited.

The lights went out.

He fought back the urge to yank the door open, and throw himself into the hallways, back to his own home. But instead he stumbled backwards, then turned around and groped blindly in the blackness. When he deemed himself lost he sat down on the floor against one of the walls.

Somewhere in the distance a drain-pipe was dripping. The regular hum of the electric lights was absent, plunging Louis into an unfamiliar utter stillness, as if the world had suddenly laid down and died. Louis could hear his heart beating, thumping in rhythm to the splashing water. He searched through the gloom, willing his eyes to become accustomed to the dark as

they did in his bedroom at night. They would not. It was so complete, with not even the tiniest sliver of light for his eyes to focus on.

Feeling exposed, Louis brought his knees up to his chest and scrunched himself tighter against the wall. Images of creatures jumping out at him from in front and above flitted through his mind as he began to sweat. His nervousness projected out into the darkness and Louis' eyes followed apparitions of enormous Surface Dwellers patrolling the streets in front of him, sniffing out for the lost souls who were stuck in the dead hours. He listened, and heard a faint sobbing noise, mixed in with the dripping water.

At first he thought it was his imagination, but it rose sharply then quieted down again and he knew it was someone crying. Louis willed himself to un-curl and place one hand in front of the other, and crawl away from the wall and toward the noise. He shuffled forward, his fear threatening to render him unconscious. Walls blocked the way and the streets turned and twisted, so Louis couldn't picture where he was.

"Hello?" he called.

The sobbing stopped and the streets were silent. There were no walls within his reach, and without the noise to give him direction he felt as though he were in the middle of an infinite cavern that stretched on in all directions.

Whoever was hiding in the darkness sniffed loudly next to his ear, and Louis reached out a hand and found a smaller one clutching at the dirt on the ground. When he touched the hand, its owner leapt out and tackled him, nuzzling its face into his chest. It was a little girl.

He placed his arms around the girl, something he had done only to his mother, and felt the girl ball his shirt in her tiny fists. He found that in the darkness it didn't matter who the girl was, what she looked like, nor where she came from. It was simply good enough that she was human, terrified, and needed Louis's help.

"It's alright, just stay with me until the lights are turned back on. Then I'll bring you home," he told her.

As she slowly fell asleep Louis realized that he wasn't frightened anymore. The minute the girl had reached out to him in a desperate need his fear had vanished. The darkness seemed less menacing. It was no longer something to be feared, but something to keep away. He became a protector. Louis kept his eyes open all through the night, listening and watching, guarding the sleeping girl from whatever nightmares may be lurking through the empty city streets.

When the lights turned back on the girl shrieked at the sudden intensity of light. Louis covered her eyes with his hand and picked her up. Her clothes were dirty, and her long yellow hair hung down her back in a tangled mass.

“Where is your home?”

“Number 1024, on the floor below the surface,” the girl answered, clinging onto his shirt.

He carried her through the streets, earning wary glances from the early risers, and up the long stairwell until the actual ceiling was right above their heads. She had opened her eyes and started babbling about her friend at school who had said he loved her and then kissed her. She asked Louis a hundred questions about where he lived and what his family was like, and all fear of the night before was gone from her large blue eyes. Louis wanted to ask her how she became stuck in the streets after curfew but he didn't want to frighten her. When he knocked on the door to her apartment, her parents rushed out, sobbing, and held their daughter tightly in their arms. The girl smiled and laughed at their tears, asking why they missed her when she was standing right in front of them. The mother thanked Louis over and over, continuously inviting him inside for something to eat. But he shook his head and said he needed to return home.

“You must be an angel from heaven,” the mother said to him, before closing the door.

He then went home, and walked through the door, dirt streaked, with dark splotches on his shirt from his own sweat and the tears of the little girl who had fallen asleep in his arms. His father was waiting for him, and grabbed him by the shirt collar. It was the second Monday of the month, time for the Hunters to return to the surface and spend three days shooting and gathering all that they could. Louis held onto his father's wrist but didn't struggle.

“What in the hell did you think you were doing? People go mad staying out in the streets after curfew. If anything happened to you we’d have to wait another fifteen years until we could launch. It’s for the greater good!”

Louis stared calmly back at his father.

“I felt like it.”

At his words his father flew into a frenzied rage and dragged him to his room by the collar and threw him inside. He heard him swearing outside of the door as his mother cowered in the corner, not daring to open the door to hug her son. A few minutes later four technicians entered Louis’s room, followed by his father.

“From now on you will be escorted to and from the Garage every day until launch,” he said simply, then left the room, sweeping his jacket out behind him and disappearing through the front door.

The technicians waited for Louis to gather his things, then walked him out the door, flanking him on all sides.

Louis was halfway to the Garage when the streetlamp above his head flickered.

“Curfew is approaching. All citizens must return to their homes before the lights are switched off. Curfew is approaching. All citizens must return to their homes before the lights are switched off.”

The city dwellers stopped in their tracks as the loudspeaker stuck itself on repeat. The lamp flickered again, followed by all the others down the street leading to the marketplace.

“Curfew is approaching. All citizens must return...Greetings fellow city dwellers,” the woman’s voice on the loudspeaker was replaced by a man’s. “This is your president speaking and there is no need to worry. We are experience some technical difficulties. Just continue on with your duties and we shall have the problem fixed very soon.”

Louis stared up at the loudspeaker. The technician to his right grabbed his shoulder and began steering him forward. Louis smacked his hand away.

“What are you doing? Tell the citizens to get back in their homes!”

The technicians ignored him and grabbed him by the arms.

“Do you know what will happen if you turn out the lights? They’ll go mad! They’ll tear the city to pieces!”

He was roughly picked up by two of the technicians and dragged through the streets. The people were too busy whispering to each other about the previous announcement to hear Louis shouting and struggling against his captors. The Garage door loomed ahead of him and he was shoved inside as the door slammed closed. Louis banged on the door, refusing to abandon the city in its time of need. Through the cold metal he heard people screaming. The lights had gone out.

Louis was pulled away from the door and stared up at the fully lit Garage around him, safe from the flickering madness on the streets. The sound from the chaos without bounced against the impervious chrome walls, muffling everything as though it was simply a gang of children playing tag. He noticed then that the Garage was full of people, some dressed in white lab coats, others in business suits, and the president was behind the glass observation deck.

Louis was stripped down as the technicians placed him into his gear then hustled him over to the space ship which was lighted fiercely from the inside and pointing straight up at the ceiling.

The head technician appeared in the hatch-way. “We’re launching now.”

Louis shot his arm out into the hatch in a rage and grabbed the technician by the neck. Hands reached in and pried Louis’ away and shoved him back into his seat.

“What did you want us to do?” the technician gasped, rubbing his throat. “If we told them about the power surges they’d all sit in their apartment, drenched in fear. The city would come to a grinding halt. How are we going to save them? We’re launching now; that’s what we’re doing.”

The door slammed shut and Louis stared blankly at the console. He hated the technicians, the president, those men in the business suits, his father. He must have known about the shortage of power. Louis fought back the urge to scream and smash the delicate console in front of him to pieces.

The ceiling creaked and began to open and a small sliver of light peeked through and lit up Louis's right hand. He stared at the light; how different it looked than the lights on the city streets. In his mind he said goodbye to his mother, who he knew must have heard about the sudden launch and was crying in their home, all alone.

He told his father that he now realized why he was robbed of his childhood, friends and family, and love. Louis was going to risk his life to save the city after all, like his father decided for him at birth. But Louis was going to save all of the city, every last piece of it, down to the littlest girl living in the smallest house on the poorest level. His father was wrong about the greater good.

The space ship's gears whirred into life.

Louis could only hope that another would take his place as the resident guardian angel, as he flew away to become a larger angel of hope.

*Five, four, three, two, one...*

“First stop, brother planet Nun: city on the waves. Last known contact: five years ago. Most likely to have survived the first years of human colonization.”

The rocket shot into the sky, past the nearby Surface Dwellers who fell to the ground, ears bursting from the shattering noise, and into the sky above.

## Under the Glare of Ra

The caravan creaked through the desert. Sand spouted from wheels and dry hinges, covering the long line of fifty wagons in dust. Kamiya pulled a cloth around her mouth and nose. Even though she was safe in the interior of her own family wagon, the sand still leaked through the rips in the muslin encasing. Her tribe had left the oasis one week ago, after the small lake dried from the heat of the sun and the never-ending line of buckets the people filled with its stagnant waters. They were the tenth tribe to become nomadic that year on the desert planet of Ra. When the settlers had first landed the people moved as one, but soon they found that the small oases could hold only a few of them, so they split into tribes and each set out to find their own oasis in the vast desert lands. When the first tribe became nomadic many years ago, all were welcoming; thanking the Gods that it was not their own oasis that had been spent. But soon there were so many tribes on the move that the ones who still had a home became possessive. Kamiya's tribe, the Oma, had been turned away twice already after two weeks of travel across the relentless desert sands.

The chimes on the entrance to the wagon clinked vigorously and Kamiya lifted the muslin covering and peered out into the dust.

“Kamiya!” a boy's voice called. “Let me in.”

She hustled the older boy into the wagon and he kicked off his shoes and laid his orange dust covered wrap by the entrance.

“It's dangerous to wander while the caravans are moving, Mohinder!”

The boy coughed and Kamiya grabbed her water canteen from her sack on the floor and handed it to him. He took a small sip then gave it back to her.

“Someone is calling for your mother.”

Kamiya turned to the corner of the wagon where her mother lay sleeping. Her dark eyes were shut and her crow's feet grew and shrank as she furrowed her brows in a troubled sleep. Kamiya crawled over to her and put her face above her mother's, feeling the shallow breath on her cheeks, staring intently at the stretched and sallow skin of her face. Her mother didn't like it

when she looked at her so closely, and would laugh and say it made her feel like a specimen being examined for trade.

“She’s sleeping. I’ll go instead.”

Mohinder helped Kamiya cover herself in her red and purple wrap and tuck her loose yellow pants into the brown leather soles of her shoes. He leapt off the caravan and held his hand out to her and lifted her off the side and set her gently on the ground. They ran through the line of wagons, ducking their heads against the dust and dodging the large feet of the golden humped beasts that pulled the caravan across the desert. Since her mother had become weak, Kamiya had to take her place as the tribe’s medicine woman, and her best friend Mohinder was the apprentice of the orphanage wagon, and had lived there all his life. Together, it was their job to dispose of the dead and the lost, and bring the parent-less children to the run down cart at the end of the caravan.

They reached a small wagon near the middle of the caravan. The inside smelled of spoiled leather and sickness. Mohinder covered his nose with his orange wrap and approached a little boy who was crouching in the corner. Kamiya knelt next to a bundle in the middle of the room. The woman under the sheets was pale. A pinkish liquid made from blood and concentrated saliva was dribbling from the sides of her mouth, around her ears and down her neck to pool by the base of her skull. Kamiya wiped it away with the sleeve of her shirt and placed her hand gently on the woman’s chest and felt her fluttering heart, drowning in dust and heat and blood.

The disease had risen the third year after the first tribe began to wander. It plagued the ones who spent their days riding through the hot, dry desert. The tribes created different names for it, but in Oma it was known simply as the Sickness. It could not be passed from person to person, it simply seeped its way into the body and no one knew how. Many believe that it is an airborne plague that is inhaled then spreads from the lungs, others say that it is a slow decaying of the body from the sand and the heat and unknown gases in the planet’s air. First the skin begins to wrinkle and then turn yellow. The heart has trouble pumping the drying blood throughout the body, and the hands and feet become cold. Then the tissues on the inside begin cracking and a strangled cough reveals a pink liquid. It could take anywhere from one month to

a few years to finished someone off, and once it takes hold, no amount of water can save the victim.

Kamiya closed her eyes, remembering what her mother taught her.

“When the heart begins to flutter, you know it is too late. Then all you can do is pray that death will come quickly and lay the drowning soul to rest.”

Kamiya shook her head and Mohinder whispered in the boy’s ear and stroked him delicately on the arm. The boy bit his lip and shoved Mohinder away, then turned to the muslin covering and dropped silent tears onto desert sands. Kamiya came up beside him and stroked his cheeks.

“Every tear you drop is a bundle of seconds taken from your life, and given to the open mouth of the greedy desert. The greatest way to honor the dead and the lost is to keep your tears for yourself and live with their memory for as long as you can.”

The boy turned around and clung to Kamiya as Mohinder pulled the front flap of the tent open and spoke to the man who was driving the wagon. He was simply a friend from the cart behind the sick woman’s and offered to drive it while she rested. Mohinder took the helm as the man came into the wagon and paid his respects to then gathered everything of value. He thanked Kamiya and Mohinder then leapt off the side to re-join his family.

Mohinder drove the cart out of the caravan and took the boy from Kamiya’s arms, who was now struggling and screaming.

“Don’t leave her here!”

The three of them waited for the last wagon to roll by and then handed the boy to a pair of waiting arms through the opening.

“That’s another one,” Kamiya said when they returned to her wagon.

Mohinder wiped the sweat from her forehead. “Don’t worry, I’ll take care of him,” he said, then smiled.

Kamiya stared down at him and thought how similar his smile looked now to the one he gave her when she first discovered that her mother had the Sickness.

One year ago, the tribe leader was visiting Kamiya and her mother's wagon. Kamiya was supposed to be out playing, but she liked to eavesdrop on the two of them whenever he came to visit. She was hiding behind the wagon, with her eye pressed to one of the small rips in the fabric. They were talking when he gasped and put a hand onto her mother's shoulders.

“My God, Sajani...it can't be.”

Her mother looked down at the napkin that she used to cover her mouth with when she coughed, and found small speckles of blood staining the white fabric. She hushed the leader, knowing that her daughter was spying on them outside the wagon. They began speaking softly and Kamiya couldn't hear what they were saying. When he left Kamiya burst through the opening.

“Why did you get sick?”

Her mother held out her arms to her daughter, whispered “My poor child,”

Kamiya backed away and ran out of the wagon, through the caravan until she found Mohinder and tried to keep in her tears.

By sunset the caravan stopped moving and Kamiya woke from her nap and wriggled her way out from her mother's sleeping arms. Children and mothers peered out from cracks in the covering tarps and the men who drove the wagons quieted their impatient beasts. Ahead there was a small patch of green and Kamiya squinted into the sunlight, unsure if she was seeing a mirage or a true oasis. When a figure exited the front wagon and began walking toward the green patch she leapt off her own and ran as fast as she could to catch up.

The tribe leader turned when he heard fast approaching footsteps and put his arm around Kamiya when she met him. She smiled up at him and shielded her eyes from red and orange of the setting sun. She was the tribe's beloved daughter. All wagons welcomed her with open arms, some with true love, and others with pity for the job she must endure, the childhood she

had lost, and the slow waning of her mother. As they neared the oasis, shadows emerged from those of the tree and came to meet Kamiya and the tribe leader.

“Greetings brother! We are the Oma tribe and have recently become nomadic. We seek your hospitality for as long as you wish to give it to us.”

One of the men lit a torch, for the sun had finally fallen beyond the horizon. He frowned at the two nomads and Kamiya clutched at her Leader’s robes, afraid they would yet again be turned away.

“I am sorry friend, but we ourselves are on the brink of losing our home. We cannot spare anything, but we are willing to trade.”

The tribe leader shooed Kamiya back toward the caravan and she ran along the sides whispering for everyone to gather their things for trade. It began an hour later and the oasis tribesmen came out to the caravan, filling the dark desert sands with talk and laughter. Kamiya smiled from the edge of her wagon.

“There is always time to smile, even when times threaten to steal the hope from our hearts.” Mohinder was standing under her, smiling. “You’re not trading?” he asked her.

Kamiya shook her head. At the last trade one week ago her mother had traded her last beaded necklace for a new water flask. Now, there was nothing left. The little boy whom they had taken to the orphanage earlier tugged on Mohinder’s pants’ leg and stared shyly at Kamiya.

“Go ahead,” Mohinder replied.

He climbed awkwardly onto the edge of the wagon and into Kamiya’s lap where he sat contentedly, looking out at the desert scene as if he owned the world.

Her mother woke in the middle of the night. Kamiya sat up and took the cold hand in hers. “There was a trade today. The people in the oasis wanted to help but they didn’t have anything they could give us. They wanted to, but they couldn’t.”

Her mother nodded and placed her sweating hand on her daughter's cheek. "You will take my place and become more skilled and beloved than I."

Kamiya turned her cheek away from the outstretched hand and jerked away when it tried to grasp her again. "Stop it," she said angrily.

"Kamiya, you're still a child on the inside. It isn't fair, but you cannot be a child anymore."

Kamiya stood from the floor, rocking the wagon, and pushed angrily through the tarp and fell out into the dark desert night. The oasis tribesmen had all returned to their homes and the ground was littered with ash and footsteps. Only a few lights blazed from the insides of the wagons, from those who were watching over the sick or too sad to fall into a sleep without dreaming restless dreams. Kamiya wanted her mother to take care of her, cook her meals, scold her when she snuck out at night to meet Mohinder. She didn't want to wander too far away from the caravan without someone calling her back, to see the numbers counting down above her mother's head, to have nightmares of the corpses of the ones she left to die in the dry and lonely desert coming back to take her away as the Sickness had taken them.

Kamiya kicked the sand, converting her threatening tears into anger, and stomped along the caravan until she reached the wagon on the end. She could hear Mohinder laughing from inside the closed tent. Most of the time at least one child would not be able to fall asleep, and Mohinder was always there to comfort them. Because of this he carried constant rings around his eyes, and a smile which could have been enough to stop a person in his or her tracks, that was slightly angled downward.

Mohinder was the same as Kamiya, both of them had been given the job nobody wanted, both of them had parents who were either dead or dying. But the village loved Kamiya more, leaving Mohinder as the forgotten child. They treated her as the resident angel, capable of no wrong. But she knew that they were mistaken, that somehow they had put the halo on the wrong baby's head. He was the true beloved child. And still he held his arms open for the false angel.

Kamiya heard a crashing sound then the wailing of a child who knew he was going to be in trouble, followed by Mohinder's soft chuckle. She wanted to leap through the opening and

demand his attention, which she knew he would give without a second thought, but instead stood alone outside of the closed flap. She glanced one last time at the lighted interior of Mohinder's wagon before turning and walking back across the caravan to her own cart. When she returned her mother was once again sleeping, and Kamiya huddled in a corner and fell asleep.

Mohinder was calling for her the next morning. The caravan had begun moving at sunrise. She buried her face into her wrap, which she used as a pillow, and ignored him. After awhile he fell silent and Kamiya sat up. She peered out of the wagon to see his figure disappear into the dust, and then silently followed after him.

She had ignored him many times before, listened to him calling, and pretending not to hear. Then she would jump out of the wagon and follow after him as he made his way to the cart with the sick one inside, and struggle to drive it away from the caravan all by himself. She hated how he let her trick him, and how he never blamed her for anything. She came close to telling him before, but didn't, afraid that he'd scorn her and never speak to her again.

Mohinder's orange wrap teased her. It flashed by her face when she came too close, then disappeared again in the dust. She coughed, realizing she had forgotten her own wrap, but decided it was too late to go back. He stopped in front of one of the larger wagons, one she knew held three children and a husband and wife. Mohinder jumped inside and Kamiya hid in the back.

The children were wailing. Kamiya saw their shadows kneeling and standing by two figures on the ground. The littlest girl threw herself over her mother and dug her nails into the flesh of her arm, refusing to let go. The parents had been sick for some time and the father had latched their wagon onto the one in front. The children were just young enough to be taken into the orphanage. Mohinder knelt to pick up the girl but the oldest brother wrenched her away.

"Please," Mohinder said. "I must."

The middle brother picked up a frying pan and swung it at Mohinder who ducked and backed away. He continued to swing, pushing him closer to the opening, and Kamiya continued to watch. She was the one who had the ability to comfort the family members; that was her gift.

She and her mother were called medicine women, but there was no medicine to give, no cure to find. They were simply angels of death who blew icy breath into the lungs of the living, and drugged their minds into gentle submission of fate, before carrying away the dead.

The frying pan hit Mohinder's cheek and he fell backwards, and hung upside down from the side of the wagon. The boy came at him and started shoving him off the side. If he succeeded Mohinder would fall off the wagon to be crushed by the wheels and trampled by the golden beasts. Kamiya watched, clutching onto the wooden frame of the wagon until her knuckles turned white. She wanted to help Mohinder but her feet were glued to the wagon's edge. What if they came after her?

Suddenly the boy stopped, sat down on the wagon floor, and started to cry. Mohinder pulled himself up and fell back into the wagon, clutching at his bleeding nose and swollen cheek. The oldest boy didn't stop him when he staggered to the front and unhitched the cart, then drove it out of the caravan. Once it had ground to a halt, the three siblings followed him out, carrying nothing, the middle child still crying, and entered the orphanage at the end of the caravan. After they went inside Mohinder sat outside on the edge of the wagon.

As he was stemming the blood flowing from his nose, Kamiya burst out of the dust and leapt at him. She was covered in sand, which turned her dark skin a yellow-brown, and wet lines streamed down her face, making rivers through her sandy cheeks.

She had met Mohinder when they were both five years old. Kamiya was proud of her knowledge about medicine, how her mother called her a big girl and the village was just starting to place all its hopes and dreams upon her shoulders. She was running about the lush and lovely oasis when she tripped over something on the ground.

She fell on her knees and started to cry, as blood dripped in small droplets down her leg. There was a rustle from the bushes and a little boy came out and squatted down next to her. His hair was tangled, his clothes grass-stained, but he smiled a perfect white-toothed smile. From his pocket he pulled out a knife and cut a piece of cloth from his shirt and wrapped it around her knee.

“There, all better.”

Kamiya squealed and pushed him away. “You’re dirty and smelly, and now I’ll get the Sickness from your germy shirt!”

She started crying again and ran away down the dirt road, kicking up dust, and leaving the boy sitting on the ground behind her.

On the edge of the orphanage wagon Kamiya wetted the front of Mohinder’s shirt with her first tears since she was five years old. She told him she was sorry for being selfish; for ignoring him when he called because she didn’t feel like helping, for watching him get hurt because she didn’t want to get hurt herself, and for always thrusting her heart into his hands when she never offered to take his.

“You forgot your wrap, Kamiya. You must be more careful or you will catch the Sickness,” Mohinder said and placed his own orange wrap over her shoulders. “There, all better.”

She fell asleep in his lap and dreamt no dreams.

The ground beneath her began to shake, and Kamiya opened her eyes. Mohinder had brought her inside the orphanage wagon and made a spot for her on the floor. She sat up and peered out of the cart and saw something large that glinted in the sunlight, kicking up sand as it hovered above the ground. It looked like a strange bird made of the metal of her pots and pans. It was still, and didn’t seem to be breathing.

Faces peeked out of dark openings in the caravan, most of them fearful, and Kamiya heard a few muffled screams when part of the strange bird opened and two figures appeared and began moving through the desert sands. The Leader leapt out of his wagon and stood in-between the figures and the rest of the caravan, barring their way. This time Kamiya did not join, and remained safe inside the orphanage wagon.

The faces of two boys appeared. One of them was tall, with hair the color of sand and skin as pale as a ghosts’. Large blue eyes flicked across the caravan, studying it as if to remember every detail and store it away. The other was short, with black scraggly hair and skin

like a cleaned copper pot. This one stared out with small green eyes, looking at the caravan as though it was a strange animal that was going to either pounce or run away.

They approached the Leader and the pale boy began speaking, though Kamiya could not hear what was being said. They spoke for three straight hours before the boys turned away and returned to their metal bird, and the leader turned to his caravan.

“Please everyone, gather round. A blessing has arrived.”

The Leader then explained to his tribe who the strange boys were and why they had landed in the desert. They were fellow humans from other planets far away, and both of them came in search of a new home for their people. They searched many human colonized planets and found no one. Whether this is because they were hiding or dead they did not know, but were overjoyed to see that the desert planet still held life. However, it is decaying quickly.

“This planet of Ra was the last leg of the first part of their journey. Now they will continue on to search for an entirely new home, like the humans did after the great Exodus. And they request that one child from Ra be taken with them, in order to represent the last of the human race, and help them on this quest that concerns all of us.”

The circle of people from the caravan began to whisper: *Who will it be?*

Kamiya watched their faces, how they searched the children. Some were clinging to their mother’s clothes, others tried to puff out their chests to look strong. Before the eyes could begin to settle on Kamiya she quietly slipped away.

Mohinder followed after her. “They are calling for you,” he said.

Kamiya ignored him and continued walking until she reached her wagon. Mohinder had been silent the entire way but Kamiya didn’t dare look back to see if he was still there. She grabbed onto the wagon and began to hoist herself up, but hands held onto her waist and pulled her back down.

“Let go!” she said and tried to kick behind her.

“Are you going to hide from this too?” Mohinder demanded.

He hugged her waist and yanked her from the wagon and the two of them fell over onto the dry sands.

“If it’s so important than why don’t you go?” Kamiya shouted in his face as they sat on the ground. “Why don’t you go away to die alone in that unknown place?”

Mohinder tried to hug Kamiya but she slapped his cheek and he grabbed her wrist. “If I go, then who would take care of the sick when you decide to hide from them?” he asked her.

Kamiya noticed then that the rings around Mohinder’s eyes were deeper and darker. There was a large swollen bump on the side of his head from when he was hit with the frying pan. He looked nothing like his normal self. She realized then that it was her fault he became this way. Mohinder released her hand and they both knelt in the sand, staring at one another. He stood and offered her his hand, and when she did not take it he lifted her up like a child and set her on her feet. Then he took her hand and led her back to the gathering.

The two of them walked through the people of their tribe, and everyone hugged and kissed Kamiya, wishing her luck, calling her their last and only hope. They stopped in front of her mother, who was wrapped tightly in her blood-red wrap, with a drawn and tired face. She hugged her daughter, and Kamiya wished she could smile, at least for her mother, but could not, and allowed Mohinder to lead her toward the dark metal ship.

When they arrived they saw that the hatch was open and the two boys were waiting for her. She started moving toward the hatchway but Mohinder still held her hand tightly.

“I don’t want you to go either, Kamiya. But you have to.”

She stood with her back to him, not wanting to turn around, because then she wouldn’t be able to walk onto the ship. Mohinder tugged on her hand.

“Kamiya, I have something to tell you before you go.”

Kamiya took a step forward, and slipped her hand out of his grasp. “Please, don’t...if you say it I’ll never leave. Goodbye, Mohinder.”

The blonde boy held out his hand to help her inside and the black haired one had disappeared. A crashing noise sounded and the hatch began to close. Kamiya turned to look out at the desert and saw Mohinder drop to his knees, holding his face in his hands. She could hear him crying over the din of the whirring engine.